

# Pope Leo forged church's role in economy

By Father Richard P. McBrien  
Syndicated columnist

We celebrate this month the centenary of Pope Leo XIII's landmark social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, also known by its English title as "On the Condition of Workers."

(By the time this week's column appears, Pope John Paul II's own encyclical commemorating the centenary of *Rerum Novarum* will have appeared. I shall have to reserve comment on that important docu-

ment until a later time.)

*Rerum Novarum* was the first of many official Catholic teachings in modern times by popes, bishops, councils and synods on matters pertaining to social justice, human rights and peace.

The passing of a hundred years has not all diminished the encyclical's revolutionary significance.

One has to keep in mind that, prior to Leo XIII's pontificate (1878-1903), there existed a very close, and mutually benefi-

cial, alliance between the Catholic Church and the most conservative forces in 19th-century society.

The church, especially during the pontificates of Gregory XVI (1831-1846) and Pius IX (1846-1878), regarded the growing influence of secularism and anticlericalism as a direct and dangerous threat to its own interests.

The conservatives among the ruling classes and the aristocracy were delighted, in their turn, with the church's stance because



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the church's enemies were also their enemies — politically, socially, and economically.

Although Leo XIII may have been relatively more liberal than his immediate predecessors in the papal office, he shared their concern for the interests of the church.

It has been conjectured, in fact, that Leo was inspired in the writing of *Rerum Novarum* as much, perhaps even more, by the loss of the working classes to the church as by their exploited condition in the new industrial society.

When he did intervene, Leo's initiative directly attacked one of the most basic tenets of 19th-century liberal thought (and of conservative thinking today as well); namely, that the church has neither the competence nor the right to involve itself with the social, political and economic orders.

"We approach the subject with confidence, and in the exercise of the rights which manifestly appertain to us," Pope Leo XIII wrote in *Rerum Novarum*, "for no practical solution of this question will be found apart from the intervention of religion and of the Church" (n.16).

He made it clear that the church has the right and the duty not only to teach, but also to apply the teaching to the temporal order, i.e., "to point out the remedy" (n.26).

Indeed, the church cannot be "so preoccupied with the spiritual concerns of her children as to neglect their temporal and earthly interests." (n.28). And so he spoke out on behalf of the right of workers to a just wage, to proper working conditions, and to form labor unions.

Leo also conceded that the state has its own proper role to play, independently of the church but bound by its teachings pertaining to justice and human rights (nn.32-49). The church, for its part, must always stand ready to cooperate and "will intervene with all the greater effort in proportion as her liberty of action is the more unfettered" (n.63).

On these and other points, Leo XIII anticipated some of the breakthroughs of Vatican II's Pastoral Constitution, *Guadium et spes*.

"In their proper spheres," the Pastoral Constitution declared, "the political community and the church are mutually independent and self-governing. Yet, by a different title, each serves the personal and social vocation of the same human beings" (n.76).

To fulfill its own role in society, the Pastoral Constitution continued, the church asks only the freedom to preach and to teach, and to pass moral judgment even on matters that belong to the political order, "whenever basic personal rights or the salvation of souls make such judgments necessary."

On the other hand, the church "does not lodge its hope in privileges conferred by civil authority," and is even ready to renounce those which have already been granted if they raise any doubts about the sincerity of the church's witness (n.76).

## Two apostles refute charges before the council

By Cindy Bassett  
Courier columnist

"Are the other council members here for the meeting?" Caiaphas asked his father-in-law Annas as he entered the room.

Annas nodded. When Caiaphas seemed reluctant to leave his private chambers, he asked, "What is it?"

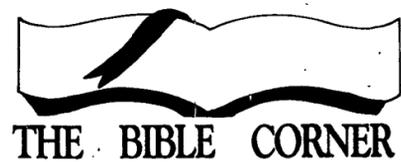
Caiaphas sighed. "I thought all of this Jesus business was behind us. And yet his followers go on with their claims of his resurrection from the dead. Did you see the crowd yesterday that gathered to hear those two men preach?"

"There's no denying that a miracle occurred outside the temple," Annas said.

"Another one of their tricks," Caiaphas retorted, his face flushed with anger. "They could have placed the man there and staged the whole drama. Where are the two tricksters now?"

"They were jailed overnight by the temple guards," Annas said.

"I suppose we might as well begin," Caiaphas said, who at last was making a motion toward the door. "I'll tell the guards to bring them in."



"Caiaphas, there is something that you should know," Annas said. "Our own priests have confirmed that the man who was healed is the same one who has begged by the temple gates for nearly all of his life."

This last statement brought no response from his son-in-law. Caiaphas' face remained emotionless as the two men were escorted into the council chambers by the temple guards. They were ordinary men, he thought. It should be relatively easy to discredit them.

"State your names, please," Caiaphas said.

"Peter," the burly, heavy-set man said, looking directly at the high priest.

"I am John," said the other.

"You have been charged with disturbing the peace," Caiaphas said. "What do you

have to say for yourselves?"

Before either of the apostles could answer, a disturbance was heard at the door of the meeting room. The temple guards tried to restrain a man there. In a few minutes, this man had succeeded in pushing past the guards and running in front of the entire assembly.

"I heard you had been arrested," he said to Peter and John. Then turning to the council, he pointed to his legs and said, "Seeing is believing. For 40 years these legs have been useless. I lived like an animal begging for a few miserable coins from passersby. All that changed yesterday."

"Well, how did you do it?" Caiaphas asked sarcastically.

"Actually, we had nothing to do with it," Peter said. "This cripple was healed through the power of Jesus Christ, the one crucified by you."

All of the council members were stunned to silence at the eloquence of Peter's witness. Even Caiaphas seemed surprised at Peter's speech. He called the temple guards and ordered: "Hold these men outside while we confer."

As soon as Peter and John had left the room, Caiaphas stood and said, "These men must be stopped! Jesus is dead and I want this movement to die with him."

"There is no denying that a miracle, for whatever reason, occurred here yesterday," one of the Council members said. "Many people saw it happen and because of it they are praising God."

"Fine," agreed Caiaphas. "We won't withhold their miracle from them, but these two tricksters must be stopped from preaching their lies. Bring them back in."

Caiaphas' voice was surprisingly calm when he spoke to Peter and John. "You are to immediately cease all talk about Jesus Christ. Do you understand?" he asked.

Peter answered with another question. "What is right — to obey you or God?"

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