

Moral discourse calls for input of all

By Dr. Patricia Schoelles, SSJ
Courier columnist

In 1891 Pope Leo XIII initiated something truly new in Catholicism. He issued what we now call a "social encyclical" — a letter to the church with important teachings about social ethics. Prior to this letter, there simply did not exist a body of formal papal teachings dealing with social issues.

The primary issue that Pope Leo addressed in this letter — called *Rerum Novarum* in Latin or "On the Condition of Labor" in English — was the degrading and inhuman working conditions laborers were being forced to endure as a result of the Industrial Revolution in Europe.

The pope instructed the church to work on behalf of improved working conditions for workers. He encouraged the formation of labor unions by workers, and instructed owners and employers to move toward paying a just living wage to their employees.

Many interesting factors relate to Pope Leo's action in introducing the "social encyclical." As we look back over the years since 1891, we see that Pope Leo founded an important tradition carried on by the popes who have succeeded him — the tradition of "Catholic Social Teaching" formalized in a series of papal encyclicals dealing with important social issues of the day.

Another interesting aspect of this first "social encyclical" is the process by which it came into being. A study of the events surrounding the issuance of this letter contradicts an image that I, for one, once held about the development of papal teachings.

I once assumed that popes compose their teachings and letters in soli-



THE MORAL LIFE

tude. I pictured an individual pope thinking and praying in isolation and almost "creating" his teachings. I suppose I thought that papal teachings are the product of exclusive insights popes experience through God's inspiration while blessedly separated from the rest of us.

But the history of *Rerum Novarum* gives a different picture of how papal teachings come to be. Actually, Pope Leo's letter follows the activity and thinking countless other "ordinary" Catholics who became aware of industrial workers' plight through their ordinary daily lives and contacts. These working Catholics and their pastoral leaders were the first ones to begin to worry about what implications the Gospel might have for 19th-century labor conditions.

Catholic history reveals that in France, Germany, Italy and the United States, ordinary working Catholics had begun to organize for the purposes of industrial reform even earlier

than 1850 — 40 years before Pope Leo's encyclical.

As Catholics and others began to respond to the terrible suffering of workers, their local priests were drawn into the problem because of their contact with struggling parishioners. And several bishops and theologians, too, began to think about working conditions and even to write about these problems.

For example, Bishop Von Ketteler of Mainz, Germany, who died in 1877, had already written several works on the conditions of laborers — including *A Christian Labour Catechism* — a generation before Pope Leo's work. Other lay people, priests and bishops also were active in the movement all across Europe and in the United States.

In fact, as I review the history of just this one important Catholic document, I see a very different picture of how papal teachings come about from my original vision of the pope sitting alone and initiating the process of papal moral teaching. The new and truer picture illustrated by *Rerum Novarum* is one of the pope is actually responding to what is already underway in the church.

Through his regular visits with bishops and the general knowledge that he picks up among his contacts with those he meets, the pope becomes aware of what concerns the church. He comes to see what areas are occupying the attention and concern of Catholics. Then, with his advisers and those from whom he takes counsel, the pope must sift through the many emerging concerns and ongoing problems, and select those issues he thinks warrant papal attention.

Instead of picturing the pope alone

in his study and chapel creating papal moral teaching (though I imagine that he does spend much time in both places!), I now picture him hearing what ordinary Catholics are struggling with; trying to figure out what theologians, parish ministers and bishops are thinking about it all; and then deciding what the church needs to hear from him on the issue. As was the case with *Rerum Novarum*, a gap of years — even decades — may occur between people's initial experiences on an issue and what the pope eventually says about it.

Thus, papal moral teachings are the result of an active partnership — and a lot of conversation — among the pope, ordinary Catholics, parish leaders, bishops and perhaps even theologians! What is crucial is that the conversation among all these "partners" takes place well, so that the best views are heard and attended to. The danger to the church and its beautiful moral tradition would be the failure of any of us to be a good partner in the dialogue — to fail to listen, or to fail to speak up if we think something is important for the life of the church.

People sometimes use the expression "the community of moral discourse." I like that phrase because it captures the best of how our Catholic moral teachings come to be. We need to be a community that talks to each other and that listens to each other so that the official teachings of our church capture the best experience and wisdom available in the whole church. We need to have confidence that God acts "indirectly" through the community of moral discourse to let moral truth be known by all of us together.

ARE YOU BEING CALLED?

A first step to discerning your religious vocation is to visit various communities to see if, indeed, religious life draws you to it.



Come visit with us—
Vocation Weeks
May 1-8 or July 24-31
(RESERVATIONS REQUIRED
CALL OR RETURN COUPON BELOW)

Dominican Sisters of Hawthorne

...A vibrant congregation with a strong spiritual and community life. Our apostolate: nursing incurable cancer patients in our seven free homes. We come from all walks of life. No prior nursing experience is required.

Contact: Sr. Marie Edward, O.P.
Formation Directress
HAWTHORNE DOMINICANS
600 Linda Ave. Hawthorne, NY 10532
(914) 769-4794

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Home Telephone () _____

I would like to make a reservation to visit during one of your vocation weeks.
MAY 1-8 or JULY 24-31
 I cannot visit now, but would like additional information about your community.

NX NEW HOPE ADULT SERVICES, INC.

- Housekeeping • Senior Sitters
- Laundry Service • Companionship
- Heavy Cleaning • Shopping Services

336-9770

It pays to advertise in the Catholic Courier.

LOGOS BOOKS + MORE

MUSIC • GIFTS • CARDS
"Your Partners in Ministry"
JULY IS

VIDEO MONTH AT LOGOS

20% OFF ALL IN-STOCK VIDEOS
MUSIC • CHILDREN'S • EXERCISE • EDUCATIONAL
Includes titles like *McGee and Me* and *SUPERBOOK* from Tyndale.

VIDEO RENTALS FREE
One Day Rental for Video Club Members Only

STOP IN TODAY & PICKUP YOUR COPY OF THE NEW CATHOLIC CATECHISM

1600 Ridge Rd. W.
Rochester, NY 14615
716-663-5085 • 800-755-6467

DiMaria Travel

1521 MONROE AVE.

271-0100

BRANSON, MO.

Great Fall Foliage Trip
(Escorted From Rochester)
OCT. 26-30
\$829.00 p.p./dbl includes:

Round trip Airfare; Hotel Accommodations; 4 Breakfasts and 4 Dinners; 7 Shows; Sightseeing Tour of Branson; All Taxes and gratuities.

OUR SEPT. TOUR WAS A QUICK SELLOUT
GET YOUR RESERVATIONS IN NOW!

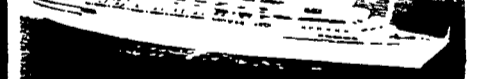
Mid Winter Cruise

on the S/S Norway

February 18-25

\$1259 pp/do-inside cabin
\$1349 pp/do-outside cabin

7 DAY EASTERN CARIBBEAN CRUISE



Take advantage of our special group rates. Don't delay. Call Today!

COBBLESTONE COUNTRY



July Feature: Americana Folk Art

Limited edition Amish Folk prints by artists
Mohn, N.A. Noël,
Linda Kriederer

Visit our "Christmas in July" Corner for Great Bargains.

352-9600
5346 W. Ridge Rd.
in the Cobblestone Schoolhouse at Trimmer Rd.

HRS: Thurs.-Sat., 10-5; Sun. 12-5; Mon.-Wed. by chance or appt.