

Rerum Novarum, The Condition of Labor

Pope Leo XIII, May 15, 1891

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OVERVIEW

In *Rerum Novarum* Pope Leo XIII examines the situation of the poor people and workers in industrialized countries. He states several important principles that should guide the response to these people. He then articulates the role of the Church, workers and employers, and the law and public authorities in working together to build a just society. Employers are given the major role as agents for change.

HISTORICAL NOTE

The terrible exploitation and poverty of European and North American workers at the end of the nineteenth century prompted the writing of *Rerum Novarum*. The document was inspired by the work of the Fribourg Union, a Catholic Social Action movement in Germany, and by request from the hierarchy in England, Ireland, and the United States.

DOCUMENT OUTLINE

The Situation of the Poor and Workers

- Destitution of the masses and the wealth of a few (#1).
- Decline of public morality (#2).
- Workers exploited by greedy employers (#6).
- Public authorities not protecting the rights of the poor (#6).

Guiding Principles

- All have been created by, strive toward, and have been redeemed by God; divine grace and the goods of nature belong equally to all (#'s 11, 12, 38).
- Natural inequalities in talents exist among people, but God has gifted all with equal dignity (#26).
- Ability to reason is part of human nature; humans rule themselves by reason (#'s 11-12).
- Common good is the end of civil society; all have the right to participate in society (#71).
- True dignity resides in moral living; people of virtue will have eternal happiness (#'s 37, 42). "Laws are to be obeyed only insofar as they conform with right reason and the eternal law of God" (#72).
- National wealth originates from the labor of workers (#51).
- All have the right to own private property (Leo criticized socialism as inherently unjust for violating this right); private property must serve the common good (#'s 2, 9, 10, 15, 23, 36, 55).
- People have the right to the fruits of their labor but should use them to benefit all (#14).
- Labor is necessary and there will be hardships in life (#62).
- Wealth is a hindrance to eternal life (#34).
- Just ownership is distinct from just use of property (#35).

Role of the Church

- The Church has the right to speak out; social matters affect religion and morality (#24).
- Through use of Gospel principles the Church can help reconcile and unify classes (#'s 25, 33, 41).
- The Church can educate people to act justly (#'s 40, 42).



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DOCUMENT OUTLINE (continued)

Rights and Duties of Workers/Poor and Employers/Wealthy of Society (#'s 30-32)

- Workers/Poor
 - Rights: private property, poor must be cared for, possess fruits of their labor, rights of families, freedom of action, right to work, just wage (enough to support a family), join workers associations (which uphold religious values) (#'s 5, 9, 48, 55, 62, 63, 69).
 - Duties: to work well, not to harm property of employer, to refrain from violence and rioting, to be thrifty (#30).
- Employers/Wealthy
 - Rights: private property, no crushing taxes, private societies (#'s 8, 9, 36, 72).
 - Duties: not to treat workers as slaves, uphold dignity of workers, let workers attend to their religious and family obligations, not to impose more work than a person's strength can endure, pay a just wage, not to tamper with worker's savings, to give to the poor after needs have been met (#'s 31-32).

Role of Public Authority and Law in Society

- Defend and foster the rights of families (#21).
- Support the common good (#4).
- Safeguard well-being and rights of non-owning workers (#49).
- Intervene when necessary to prevent harm to individuals or the common good (#52).
- Give special consideration to the rights of the poor (#'s 51, 54).
- Uphold rights of private property and enable all to possess private property (#'s 55, 65).
- Uphold the rights of associations and the religious rights of people (#69).
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Discussion Questions

The working conditions that inspired this document reflected the images of Charles Dickens's British factories where workers toiled in horrible conditions. From your experience or knowledge, do similar conditions still exist? What principles of this encyclical still apply?

What is the condition of workers and their unions in your own country? Are their basic rights upheld? What are conditions of workers in other parts of the world?

How does the concept of human dignity relate to the rights of workers and those in poverty?

What is the Church and your government doing to improve the situation of workers and the poor? How can you or your group contribute to efforts to change unjust structures?

