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A Catholic Response to Henry George's Critique of Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*

By J. BRIAN BENESTAD*

ABSTRACT. In *Rerum Novarum*, the first of the modern social encyclicals, Pope Leo XIII argued that there is a right to the possession of property, but there are limits on the use of wealth. Christians have an obligation to use their property and talents for the good of others. Private ownership must serve not only the interests of the individual but also the public welfare. The disadvantages of private ownership are not to be corrected by socialism, communism, or the free market, but by the teaching of the Church on faith and morals, the laws of the State, and the action of private associations. Efforts to solve the problems of poverty and unjust working conditions will be in vain unless principles of Christian living drawn from the Gospel are taught to people in all ranks of society.

George's Philosophical Differences with Leo XIII

In the spring of 1891, Pope Leo XIII issued the first of the modern social encyclicals, *Rerum Novarum*. (Leo XIII's encyclical was made public on May 15, 1891. All references will be to the numbers in this translation, which has been authorized by the Holy See. The text used by Henry George was an unauthorized translation and contains different paragraph numbers.)

Toward the end of the summer (carrying the date of September 11, 1891), Henry George (1953: 1–105) wrote a long critique of that encyclical in the form of an open letter to the pope. George takes Leo XIII to task for defending a limited right to own land, and for limiting the right of private ownership of things produced by labor. While recognizing the right of all to possess (and use) land, George holds that there is no right to own land. He also argues that there is an unlimited right to ownership of things produced by labor. The basis of

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this unlimited right lies in “the right of the individual to himself” (George 1953: 5). George echoes the teaching of John Locke (1764: 27) that man has a property in his person and, therefore, has a right to the fruits of his personal labor. George (1953: 6) defends the exclusive possession of land only in order to secure “the exclusive ownership of the products of labor.”

George’s (1953: 8) distinction between possession and ownership of land is meant to serve the common good: “To combine the advantages of private possession with the justice of common ownership it is only necessary therefore to take for common uses what value attaches to land irrespective of any labor on it.” George (1953: 12) proposes that government levy a tax on all land equal to its worth, annualized, “irrespective of the use made of it or the improvements on it.” As this tax would provide sufficient revenue for the operation of government, George recommends the repeal of all taxes levied on the products and processes of industry. Taxes on the fruits of labor, according to George, violate the moral law, including the right to property.

George’s defense of a Single Tax on land is meant to secure equal opportunity to all. Equality of mutual opportunity is the most important of all natural rights (George 1953: 17). George goes so far as to say that his proposals are in conformity with the will of God. More precisely, God intended public revenues to be raised solely by taxing land (George 1953: 15): “That God has intended the State to obtain the revenues it needs by the taxation of land values is shown by the same order and degree of evidence that shows that God has intended the milk of the mothers for the nourishment of the babe.” George further believes that his views on economics correspond to Christ’s teaching in the Sermon on the Mount:

We see that Christ was not a mere dreamer when he told men that if the world would seek the kingdom of God and its right-doing they might no more worry about material things than do the lilies of the field about their raiment; but that he was only declaring what political economy in the light of modern discovery shows to be a sober truth. (George 1953: 21)

That “sober truth” is, of course, to abolish all taxes on the fruits of labor and tax land values irrespective of improvement. These two

steps are decisive in the quest for justice. George thus puts forth his two-pronged proposal not only as a sound economic policy but as good ethics as well.

George contends that Leo XIII really did not understand the nature of private property. The pontiff supposedly confused property in things produced by labor with property in land created by God. His argument against Leo's defense of property in land can be briefly summarized. Purchase can only give a right to own things that would become rightful property. To justify private property in land is no different from justifying private property in slaves, or the seizure of a spring in the desert to which one would allow access only upon payment. To justify ownership of the earth is to debar some from satisfying their daily needs. George (1953: 34) characterizes as naive Leo's statement that "the earth though divided among private owners ceases not thereby to minister to the needs of all." Why? Some people hoard up land and cause scarcity and thus poverty and destitution. A study of history reveals that land ownership led to lawsuits, maldistribution of goods, slavery, and war. For example, "to the parceling out of land in great tracts is due the backwardness and turbulence of Spanish Americans; that to the large plantations of the Southern States of the Union was due the persistence of slavery there" (George 1953: 42). Furthermore, a study of Scripture, contrary to Leo's assertion, shows that there is not the slightest justification "for the attaching to land of the same right of property that justly attaches to the things produced by labor" (George 1953: 44).

Abolishing taxes on the processes and products of labor in favor of taxes on land values would promote equality of opportunity, thrift, industry, commerce, and "the largest production and the fairest distribution of wealth" by managing individual freedom; it would also reduce the size of government, dispense with oaths, and do away with temptation to bribery, tax evasion, and corruption (George 1953: 48). George further believes that universal affluence would be possible if his ideas were accepted. "But in the state of society we strive for where the monopoly and waste of God's bounty would be done away with and the fruits of labor would go to the laborer, it would be within the ability of all to make more than a comfortable living with reasonable labor." Those unable to work because of disability would receive

from the wealth of the state, which would always be sufficient for every need provided the land was taxed.

In brief, George believes that adoption of his land policy would eliminate scarcity, which is the real cause of greed. Land reform, leading to prosperity, would produce moral reform. The following passages from George's major work, *Progress and Poverty*, confirm without a doubt the author's hopes and expectations (George 1942: 373, 382, 387):

It seems to me that in a condition of society in which no one need fear poverty, no one would desire great wealth at least no one would take the trouble to strive and to strain for it as men do now. . . .

The rise of wages, the opening of opportunities for all to make an easy and comfortable living would at once lessen and would soon eliminate from society the thieves, swindlers and other classes of criminals who spring from the unequal distribution of wealth. . . .

With this abolition of want and the fear of want, the admiration of riches would decay, and men would seek the respect and approbation of their fellows in other modes than by acquisition and display of wealth.

That greed would disappear if scarcity were overcome is a most optimistic view of human nature, not shared by either the classical or Christian tradition and not supported by the results of contemporary social-science research.

George's Critique of Leo XIII's Practical Proposals

George (1953: 70) summarizes Leo's proposals for improving the condition of labor under three headings.

1. That the State should step in to prevent overwork, to restrict the employment of women and children, to secure in workshops conditions not unfavorable to health and morals, and, at least where there is danger of insufficient wages provoking strikes, to regulate wages.
2. That it should encourage the acquisition of property (in land) by workingmen.
3. That workingmen's associations should be formed.

George broadly characterizes all of Leo's proposals as socialistic, though an extremely moderate form of socialism. George does not

believe any of Leo's suggestions can be effective. Limiting the hours of labor and the employment of women and children is futile as long as people are living in a penurious condition. Nor can the State cure poverty by regulating wages. According to George (1953: 73), the level of wages depends on the "ease or difficulty with which labor can obtain access to land." The only way the State could override the effect of market tendencies on wages is to provide employment to all who wish it, or to sanction strikes and to support them with government funds.

Furthermore, all efforts by the State to promote ownership of land by working people will prove futile. With the advent of material progress, "land becomes more valuable" and, when this increasing value is left to private owners, "land must pass from the ownership of the poor into the ownership of the rich" (George 1953: 76). The only way to prevent this from occurring is to allow possession but not ownership of land—that is to say, to take the profits of land ownership for the community.

Thirdly, George (1953: 78) takes issue with Leo's endorsement of labor unions. George believes that unions are necessarily selfish; they must attempt to hurt nonunion workers by limiting or even obliterating their natural right to work:

By the law of their being they must fight for their own hand, regardless of who is hurt, they ignore and must ignore the teaching of Christ that we should do to others as we would have them to do to us, which a true political economy shows is the only way to the full emancipation of the masses.

George (1953: 80) admits that unions may improve the lot of some workers by the use of force or the threat of force. They are in his mind a palliative, not a remedy for poverty amidst plenty. Surely, he says to Leo, true unionism does not have "that moral character which could alone justify one in the position of your Holiness in urging it as good in itself." George believes that Leo had no other alternatives because he insists on justifying property in land.

Another mistake Pope Leo is seen as making is to assume that the labor question concerns the relation between wage workers and their employers. As a matter of fact, says George, most people work for themselves and not for an employer. George contends that the rem-

edies proposed by Leo do not take the self-employed into consideration. Furthermore, Leo assumes that all employers are rich. In fact, says George, many are struggling against their competitors to stay in business.

George also questions Leo's assumption that humanity will always be divided into two classes, the rich and the poor. In George's mind the division of classes into rich and poor stems from a violation of the natural law, from force and fraud perpetrated by some on others. If everyone had access to land, there would no longer be any poverty.

George also chides Leo XIII for seeming to direct his sympathy exclusively toward the poor. George (1953: 85) asks: "Are not the rich, the idlers to be pitied also? By the word of the gospel it is the rich rather than the poor who call for pity, for the presumption is that they will share the fate of Dives." George then proceeds to describe the vices from which the rich often suffer on this earth, implying that they need more spiritual help than the poor. George (1953: 86) refers to the story of the rich young man in the gospel in order to show that Jesus showed concern for the rich: "When Christ told the rich young man who sought him to sell all he had and to give it to the poor, he was not thinking of the poor, but of the young man."

George (1953: 87) further argues that it is "a violation of Christian charity to speak of the rich as though they individually were responsible for the sufferings of the poor." The cause of "monstrous wealth" and "degrading poverty," says George, stems primarily from the existence of private property in land. The answer to the social questions, then, lies not in taxing the rich, no matter how rich they might be. George, like John Locke, even argues that the honest acquisition of wealth necessarily adds to the wealth of the world and thus contributes to the well-being of all.

George (1953: 90) also criticizes Leo for asserting the right of workers to employment and the right to receive from employers "a certain indefinite wage": "No such rights exist." Leo invents these two false rights, according to George, because he defends private property in land, thereby severely threatening the well-being of many people. "The natural right which each man has is not that of demanding employment or wages from another but that of employing himself—

that of applying by his own labor to the inexhaustible storehouse which the Creator has in the land provided for all men." The only way to open up the land to all is by restricting the right of land ownership to the community by means of the "single tax."

As for requiring employers to pay a certain wage to workers, George objects on two grounds: employers should not be obliged to pay any more than the market requires, and workers should never be satisfied with any rate of wage since it is human nature to desire more and more of the comforts of life. George couples a faith in the free market with a skepticism that man's desires for more things can ever be moderated. In another context, George does argue that the abolition of insecurity would moderate people's pursuit of wealth.

George also chides Pope Leo for stressing the role of charity in improving conditions of labor. The stress must be on justice, says George. He further implies that Leo XIII is really commending charity as a substitute for justice with the following results. First, while charity may mitigate somewhat the effects of injustice, it can never get to the root cause. Charity, which does not build on justice, leaves intact an unjust status quo. Secondly, charity "demoralizes its recipients," turning them into beggars and paupers. Thirdly, charity soothes the consciences of those who profit from unjust political and social conditions.

Worst of all, writes George (1953: 93), substituting charity for justice is an occasion for teachers of the Christian religion to "placate mammon" while "persuading themselves that they are serving God." For example, George implies that if American Christians had condemned slavery as unjust instead of preaching kindness to slave owners, there would not have been a civil war. In short, George believes that "stressing the clear-cut demands of justice" rather than "the vague injunctions of charity" will improve the condition of labor and help preserve the integrity of Christian faith and morals. George does not believe that charity requires Christians to address seriously the social and philosophical problems of the day.

George (1953: 96) further argues that the rich can do little or nothing to improve the conditions of labor by acts of largesse. George specifically rules out the utility of: giving money to the poor; building churches, schools, colleges, hospitals, tenements, workshops for

scientific experiments; refusing rent for land or lowering rentals; or beautifying cities. The rich man “can do nothing at all except to use his strength for the abolition of the great primary wrong that robs men of their birthright.” That wrong, of course, is the State-sanctioned private ownership of land.

George (1953: 96–97) argues that in applying moral teaching to society “the question, What is wise? may always safely be subordinated to the question, What is right?” George means that people should not rest content with stating wise principles, but advocate measures that will indeed be effective in eradicating unjust situations. For example, George admits that Leo wisely says that “God owes to man an inexhaustible storehouse which he finds only in the land.” The pope, however, George believes, does not draw the right conclusion from that principle, *viz.*, that the Catholic Church should no longer defend the right to private property in land. George (1953: 98) applauds Leo’s statement that all men are children of God, have the same last end, and are redeemed by Jesus Christ, but criticizes him for justifying the possession of private property in land by a few: “you give us equal rights in heaven but deny us equal rights on earth? It is thus that your encyclical gives the gospel to laborers and the earth to the landlords.”

George suggests to Leo XIII that people are turning away from organized religion because it doesn’t offer solutions to the problems the world is facing. In particular, organized religion has failed to say clearly what is wrong with the conditions of labor and, of course, has failed to provide satisfactory answers.

George (1953: 100) concedes that Leo XIII has correctly discerned the problem labor is facing: “Reduced to its lowest expression it is the poverty of men willing to work.” Workers lack bread. George then argues that Leo XIII has not explained why people lack bread. It is not God’s fault, says George. He has provided all the bread people need for life. Some people have thwarted the Creator’s benevolent intentions by legalizing private property in land. The solution to the problem of labor is very simple; disallow private ownership of land (George 1953:101): “Any other answer than that, no matter how it may be shrouded in the mere form of religion, is practically an atheistical answer.”

George is arguing that one structural change will be sufficient to bring about a just society. He implies that the sins of men, whatever their nature or gravity, cannot pose a new obstacle to the realization of that goal.

A Summary of Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*

Leo XIII's position on the ownership of property has more nuances than George's letter reveals. The pope does indeed argue that nature gives a *right* to the ownership of land and the fruits of one's labor. In arguing that people have a right (*ius*) to property, the pope departs from the thought of Thomas Aquinas (1946: II, II, Q. 66, Art. 2), who simply said that it is necessary to possess property. Leo's stress on the natural right to property sounds more like Locke than Aquinas. By asserting that the right to property must be regarded as sacred, Leo XIII invests the ownership of property with more importance and dignity than it had in the mind of Aquinas, who nevertheless contended that ownership serves three important purposes in society: it promotes industry, order, and peace. Aquinas (1946: II, II, Q. 66, Art. 2, Reply Obj. 1) did argue, however, that "the division of possessions is not according to natural right, but rather arose from human agreement . . . Hence the ownership of possessions is not contrary to natural right, but an addition thereto devised by human reason."

Leo's stress on the sacredness of property is balanced by comments on the use of wealth, inspired by the Bible and Thomas Aquinas. Unlike Locke, Leo (1891: #36) holds that there are limits on the use of wealth. Citing Thomas Aquinas, the pontiff writes, ". . . man ought not regard external goods as his own, but as common so that, in fact, a person should readily share them when he sees others in need. Wherefore the Apostle says: 'Charge the rich of this world . . . to give readily, to share with others.'" According to Leo, then, there is no absolute right to the ownership of land or the fruits of one's labor. Christians have an obligation to use their property and talents for the good of others:

[W]hoever has received from the bounty of God a greater share of goods, whether corporeal and external, or of the soul, has received them for this purpose, namely, that he employ them for his own perfection and, likewise, as a servant of Divine Providence, for the benefit of others.

Leo is not arguing that law should enforce the generous use of property and talent, except in cases of extreme need. These are duties of charity to which all Christians are bound in order to be faithful to God's will. Given these duties of charity, education to virtue or character formation takes on great importance. Without the proper formation, people will not be inclined to share their property or use their intellectual and spiritual talents for the benefit of others.

George does not advert to the limits Leo places on the use of property. This omission is partially understandable because George is intent on maintaining the inviolability of the fruits of one's labor. Since George places limits on the ownership of land, it is surprising that he doesn't point out the similarity between his position and Leo's. George desires to facilitate the access to the possession of land by all through a tax on land; Leo desires to assure access to all goods of the earth by teaching that charity requires Christians to share their wealth and talent. But this is far from all that he teaches on the possession and use of property.

Leo's teaching on the role of the State, as we will presently see, indicates that property in land is not an absolute right of the individual. The pope clearly implies that the State may lay down laws regulating the use and possession of property for the sake of the common good. Pius XI (1957) in *Quadragesimo Anno* (originally published in 1931) is more explicit in asserting the authority of the State over property. He lays down as a principle that property has both an individual and a social character. Private ownership must serve not only the interests of the individual but also the public welfare (Leo XIII 1891: 49): "Therefore, public authority always under the guiding light of the natural and divine law can determine more accurately upon considerations of the true requirements of the common good what is permitted and what is not permitted to owners in the use of their property." By moderating the possession and use of private property for the sake of the common good, the State does no injury to private owners. On the contrary, the State's action is really a friendly service since it "effectively prevents the private possession of goods . . . from causing intolerable evils and thus rushing to its own destruction." By taking property, the State will, ironically, preserve property rights. Without State intervention,

Pius XI implies, the needs of many people would not be met, thereby threatening the stability of the political and social order.

The private ownership of land and other property is admittedly an imperfect social arrangement. The disadvantages of private ownership, in Leo's mind, are not to be corrected by socialism, communism, or the free market, but by the teaching of the Church on faith and morals, the laws of the State and the action of private associations. This teaching is not peculiar to Catholicism but has striking similarities with classical political philosophy. For example, Aristotle (1984: 1263a) clearly prefers private property to a system of community of property, but only in conjunction with the right kind of laws and the proper character formation: "and it will be through virtue 'that the things of friends are common,' as the proverb has it, with a view to use." The education to moral virtue will produce apposite customs in the citizens that together with legislation will serve to obviate the disadvantages of private property.

From this brief summary of Leo XIII'S teaching on property, it should be evident that the pope puts the social problem of the poverty and unjust working conditions of laborers in a much broader context than Henry George. This section of my essay will explain Leo's view that resolution of the social problem hinges on the contribution of religion and the church, the government, and individuals, together with voluntary associations.

Leo (1891: #82) believes that all efforts to solve the problems of poverty and unjust working conditions will be in vain unless principles of Christian living drawn from the Gospel are taught to people in all ranks of society:

And since religion alone as we said in the beginning can remove the evil, root and branch let all reflect upon this: First and foremost Christian morals must be reestablished, without which even the weapons of prudence, which are considered especially effective, will be of no avail to secure well being.

To be reestablished, Christian morals must be presented clearly and energetically by the ministers of the Gospel.

The Church improves the social order not only by regulating the life and morals of individuals but by instructing the mind (Leo XIII 1891: #40): "she strives to enter into men's minds and to bend their wills so

that they may suffer themselves to be ruled and governed by the discipline of the divine precepts." Leo's examples of that instruction, while by no means intended to be complete, are sufficient to be indicative. He first mentions the ineluctability of inequality and the inevitability of evil. Leo teaches that inequality will always be a characteristic of civil society because there are great and many natural differences among men. Inequality is beneficial to society, Leo continues, because of the varied aptitudes that living in community requires. Because of sin there will always be injustice in society. No action by the Church, the government, or voluntary association will be able to remove all tribulations from human life. While moral progress is possible, it is not inevitable. Leo further holds that the belief in the eradicability of evil and the social consequences of sin will eventually lead to greater evils.

The Church also teaches, says Leo, that one class of society is not by nature hostile to another. Through its teaching, the Church always attempts to moderate conflict between any antagonists, especially the rich and the poor. "But for putting an end to conflict and for cutting away its very roots, there is wondrous and multiple power in Christian institutions" (Leo XIII 1891: #28). Leo then goes on to list the duties of the poor and workers, as well as those of rich men and employers. For example, workers are enjoined to perform their work thoroughly and conscientiously. Employers are told that one of their important duties is to pay a just wage. If workers and employers performed their duties, the bitterness and curse of conflict between them would cease.

Leo (1891: #33) then introduces the Church's teaching on eternal life: "We cannot understand and evaluate mortal things rightly unless the mind reflects upon the other life, the life which is immortal." Leo clearly implies that workers and employers will not understand their respective duties unless they see this life as a preparation for eternal life. Only then will both classes have the proper perspectives on riches, deprivation, and earthly sorrows.

Leo (1891: #36) next reminds the rich of the words of Jesus about the obstacles posed by wealth for the attainment of eternal happiness. The pope explains the Catholic position on the use of material goods and the goods of the soul. After satisfying the demands of necessity and propriety, "it is a duty to give to the poor out of that which

remains." This duty rests on belief in the social nature of man. Because man is a political or social animal, he has duties toward his neighbors. If he were by nature a radical individual with no natural ties to the community, then it would be reasonable to speak simply of the rights of man, of rights to property. According to Leo XIII, the duty to use property and talents well takes precedence over rights. Any right to property or anything else is derivative from duties.

Catholic teaching not only requires generosity from those who have, but also calls for friendship and brotherly love between the rich and the poor. If the economy of duties and rights according to Christian teaching were widely accepted, then it seems, says Leo, that all conflict would cease.

The purpose of the State is to cause both private and public well-being through its institutions and laws. States achieve well-being through the following (Leo XIII 1891: #48): "wholesome morality, properly ordered family life, protection of religion and justice, moderate imposition and equitable distribution of public burdens, progressive development of industry and trade, thriving agriculture, and by all other things of this nature." Still other factors contributing to the private and public welfare are, of course, peace and good order, punishment for crime, strong citizens capable of supporting and protecting the State, competent, sustained work for the dignity of all people, and a moral and healthy atmosphere in one's place of work. In any case, where these elements of a flourishing State are threatened, "the power and authority of the law, but of course within certain limits, manifestly ought to be employed." The law ought not to attempt more than the remedy of the evil requires. Since the use of material goods is an element of a well constituted State and necessary for virtue, the State must make sure that there is an adequate supply and a just distribution. It is the State's responsibility to protect all citizens "maintaining inviolate that justice especially which is called distributive" (Leo XIII 1891: #49). For example, the State must see to it that workers have adequate housing, clothing, and security, and the State must give special consideration to the poor and the weak.

Other duties of the State are as follows: restrain those who stir up disorder and incite workers to violence; anticipate and prevent the evil of strikes by removing early the causes of discontent; protect the

goods of the soul; limit the hours of work so that people will not be crushed in spirit or body; shield women and especially children from physical labor beyond their capacity; intervene, if necessary, to make sure that wages are sufficient to support a thrifty worker and his family, and safeguard the sacred right to private property.

From the protection of the right to property by the State will flow the following benefits: a more equitable distribution of goods, a greater abundance of national wealth, and, as a consequence, a strong incentive to remain in the country of one's birth. Leo explains that the opportunity to possess private property will stir the workers to be more productive, thus making a significant contribution to national wealth. The pope also suggests that the eagerness to acquire property will at length remove the difference between extreme wealth and extreme poverty (Leo XIII 1891: #66, 67).

Not only the Church and government can make a significant contribution to the resolution of the social question but also the employers and workers themselves. In other words individuals can form various kinds of associations in order to promote the well-being of various groups, especially those who cannot help themselves. The pope first praises associations for giving mutual aid, that is those caring for children, adolescents, and the aged and those providing for the families of workers who die prematurely or become incapacitated through sickness or accidents.

Leo ascribes the most importance to associations of workers, either alone or of workers with employers. The purpose of these workers' associations should be to procure for individual members "an increase in the goods of body, of soul, and of prosperity" (Leo 1891: #76). Their principal goal, says Leo XIII, should, be moral and religious perfection. To accomplish this goal, Leo suggests that associations provide opportunity for religious instruction so that workers may understand clearly their duties to God, neighbor, and self. For example, workers must be taught that the sacraments "are the divine means for purifying the soul from the stains of sin and for attaining sanctity" (#47).

Among the most important services to be provided by workers' associations are the following (Leo XIII 1891 #79):

that the workers at no time be without sufficient work, and that the monies paid into the treasury of the association furnish the means of assisting

individual members in need, not only during sudden and unforeseen changes in industry, but also wherever anyone is stricken by sicknesses, old age, or by misfortune.

So, even though Leo stresses the spiritual role of workers' associations, he expects them to deliver adequate financial help to needy members.

Leo thinks that the existence of associations is very important for the well-being of society. In fact as "man is permitted by his right of nature to form associations, the State does not have the authority to forbid them" (Leo XIII 1891 #72). The State may, of course, regulate or even oppose associations if their objectives are clearly at variance "with good morals, with justice or with the welfare of the State." The pope's position on associations follows from the well-established principle that man is a social animal (Leo XIII 1891 #70): "Just as man is drawn by this natural propensity into civil union and association, so also he seeks with his fellow citizens to form other societies, admittedly small and not perfect, but societies none the less. Without associations, including the commonwealth, people could neither provide for their physical needs nor develop their intellectual and spiritual lives."

Thus we see that there are two bases to Catholic social thought. One, established by theological reflection and philosophical inquiry, is the truth that each individual human person is of unique worth in the economy of all Creation. But every person has an obligation of stewardship *vis à vis* every aspect of Creation. The biblical writer described our relationship to things in the term "stewardship." We have a duty to use our material resources and our talents for the benefit of others.

A Response to George Based on Catholic Political Principles

In the first of the modern social encyclicals expressing the mind of the church on societal problems and in the letter of reply to the pontiff by the American social philosopher, Pope Leo XIII and Henry George really do not communicate with one another. Leo XIII's approach to political reform draws heavily on classical and medieval political philosophy. Henry George, on the contrary, belongs to the tradition of modern political philosophy, with close ties to the thought of John Locke. Following Locke, George argues that one has a property in his

or her person and, therefore, is entitled to all the fruits of one's labor. Both Locke and George further contend that there is an unlimited right to wealth one produces or acquires by exchange, and defend unlimited acquisition by one's labor as socially beneficial. George differs from Locke in denying the right to own land. George's denial of the right to own land stems from the instincts of a generous heart, even from a strong moral fervor. If land rent were to accrue to the State by means of the Single Tax, he believed, there would never again be poverty amidst progress. Not only scarcity would be overcome, but also unjust behavior. Wilson Carey McWilliams (1973: 387) explains, "George believed that an abundant love for his fellows would emerge in man were economic scarcity once banished from the earth."

From Pope Leo XIII's perspective on people and society, George's expectations from restrictions on land ownership, coupled with the unlimited right to accumulate all other kinds of wealth, are utopian to say the least. George believes that these two reforms would abolish scarcity and thus injustice and render unnecessary Leo's stress on the role of religion, voluntary associations, and the State in solving social problems. In Leo's mind the problem of social reform is much more complex and intractable than George ever suspected. It requires conversion to virtue, many kinds of public and private initiatives, and the continuous exercise of prudence by leaders in the various sectors of society.

George's defense of the unlimited right to acquire wealth by one's labor rests on a principle that the Catholic Church could never accept. This is the Lockean view that one has a property in one's person. According to Catholic teaching the human being is created in God's image, redeemed by Jesus Christ, and is a temple of the Holy Spirit. No one owns one's person or body but rather receives them as a gift from God. People do not have a right to dispose of themselves as they see fit. Rather they have a duty to have reverence for their person and body, to live their lives in accordance with God's will. No one is allowed to commit suicide, or mutilate oneself, which actions would be permitted if one enjoyed a property in one's person.

George's defense of unlimited acquisition through one's labor or in exchange for one's product further flies in the face of the biblical and Catholic teaching on the proper attitude toward money. Avarice has

always been condemned in the Catholic tradition. Jesus said you can not serve God and mammon; Paul argued that love of money is the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6: 10). As a result of these teachings and others, the Catholic Church has always stressed the duty to limit one's desires for material goods as well as the duty to share with others.

Furthermore, George's defense of unlimited accumulation of property other than land would, according to Catholic Social Thought (CST), increase the amount of injustice in society. Classical and medieval political philosophies would argue in a similar vein. The only possible justification for George's defense of unlimited accumulation is found in the philosophy of John Locke and Adam Smith. They hold that private vice by an invisible hand produces the public good. If this principle were true, then George could not be criticized for failing to elaborate ethical and political principles that would limit the acquisition of wealth.

There is no real contradiction between Pope Leo's political principles and George's recommendation for land policy. A Single Tax on land, while not required by CST, is surely compatible with it. Whether George's land policy should be adopted by a State is a judgment of political prudence that could vary according to time and circumstances.

In the late 19th century, a priest of the New York Archdiocese, Dr. Edward McGlynn, ran afoul of his religious superiors for advocating George's ideas on land reform and for refusing to submit to discipline. In fact he was excommunicated for a period of six years. On December 23, 1892, Msgr. Francisco Satolli, Pope Leo XIII's ablegate, reinstated Father McGlynn after he and a commission of theologians and canon lawyers examined a doctrinal statement prepared by the priest. About that statement they said, "there was nothing in the land philosophy preached by Father McGlynn that was contrary to Christian faith or to Catholic doctrine" (Bell 1937: 232).

I would accept the judgment of Msgr. Satolli and the commission in this regard. Neither Christian faith nor Catholic doctrine prohibits a Catholic from accepting George's approach to land policy. A Catholic is free to argue that the State should allow possession of land but restrict ownership. Father McGlynn, however, is surely mistaken in arguing that there must only be one right way of raising revenue for

the State, a Single Tax on land values. Reasonable Catholics can surely legitimately argue that there are other equally good or better ways of raising revenue. Will not the best method of taxation vary from age to age and from country to country?

On the other hand, George's contention that a Single Tax on land is really the only moral way of raising revenue for the State would be rejected by Catholic political thought as an improper mixing of religion and politics. George's position reminds me of the contemporary tendency of Catholics, both on the left and the right of the political spectrum, to equate their political opinions with Gospel truth. Catholic political principles may suggest in many cases a certain kind of policy, but in others any number of policy options could be chosen. In Pope John Paul II's (1980: 255) words: "In her social doctrine the Church does not propose a concrete political or economic model, but indicates the way, presents principles." Furthermore, George's claim that a Single Tax on land would do away with scarcity and thus injustice in society and produce love in the heart of man could never be reconciled with Catholic doctrine. According to that doctrine, human beings cannot overcome selfishness and learn to love one another without divine grace. Society can never overcome injustice until, at the very least, individuals undergo a conversion. The traditional Catholic view is succinctly and even humorously stated by Thomas More (1955: 34–35) in his *Utopia*: "But you should try and strive obliquely to settle everything as best you may, and what you cannot turn to good, you should make as little evil as possible. For it is not possible for everything to be good unless all men are good, and I do not expect that will come about for many years."

George does have a point, even on Catholic grounds, in objecting to Pope Leo XIII's strong defense of the right to property; the Pope characterizes that right as sacred. While George does accept the sacred right to the fruits of one's labor, he strongly objects to making sacred the right to own land. Leo's defense of all ownership is somewhat exaggerated in comparison with the treatment of Thomas Aquinas. As mentioned, unlike Thomas, Pope Leo XIII argues that nature has conferred on human beings a right to property. Furthermore, Leo (1891: #14) seems to expect great benefits from private ownership:

“however the earth may be apportioned among private owners, it does not cease to serve the common interest of all.” Surely, this far-reaching claim is not true. Some property arrangements will not be conducive to the common good.

Msgr. John A. Ryan attempts to state the longstanding Catholic position on the ownership of property in these terms. He argues that the Christian tradition does not uphold an absolute right to land (Ryan 1916: 23): “Ownership, understood as the right to do what one pleases with one’s possessions is due . . . chiefly to modern theories of individualism.” The natural right to land is not an end in itself (1916: 35–37): “It has validity only insofar as it promotes individual and social welfare. . . . To interpret man’s natural right to land by any other standard than human welfare, is to make of it a fetish, not a thing of reason.” Ryan candidly admits that the private ownership of land does not secure perfect justice because it is an imperfect social arrangement. Despite his intemperate praise of private property, Leo also recognizes the limits of this institution. Otherwise, he would not have devoted so much of *Rerum Novarum* to explaining how religion and the Church, the State, and voluntary associations contribute to the resolution of the social problem. Nevertheless, George is correct in noting the extraordinary praise Leo bestows on private ownership of land.

What George and Leo XIII Had in Common

Because of Henry George’s respect for virtue, patriotism, and love of God, it is ironic that he and Pope Leo XIII had such different approaches to political and social reform. There is no doubt that George wrote his works in order to promote respect for everything decent and sublime. The words honor, duty, sympathy, virtue, justice, love of God, public spirit and respect for law meant much to George. It pained him to see vice and injustice in the United States. He wrote with great passion and eloquence in order to combat these evils. In their respect for the Christian faith, love of virtue, and hatred of vice, Henry George and Pope Leo XIII had much in common; both men also rejected the materialism and individualism of John Locke.

The reason for the great differences between George and papal social teaching was the former's belief that virtue is not possible until scarcity is overcome. George believed that against temptations to greed, power, and prestige, which appealed to the strongest impulses of our nature, "the sanctions of law and the precepts of religion can effect but little." (Subsequent papal encyclicals came to analyze political and socioeconomic issues from an international perspective.) The only solution for George was to effect reforms in society that would make possible doing away with scarcity by one's labor. Once fear of want was overcome by adoption of his land policy, George believed that virtue and love of God would once again be possible. People would not be vicious, George thought, if they did not fear deprivation. In the Single Tax on land, George felt he had found the solution to society's ills. Convinced that his land policy would lead to prosperity and virtue, George wrote with a passionate moral fervor.

In opting for a certain land policy as a cure-all and in justifying the unlimited acquisition of wealth George revealed himself to be an unwitting disciple of modern political philosophy. I say unwitting because George did not share the low view of human life held by Machiavelli, Hobbes, or Locke. These philosophers did not believe that virtue and love of God perfect the human soul, as George did. Nevertheless, in my judgment, George compromised his Christian beliefs by espousing a political philosophy that promised a solution to political and social problems without prior conversion to virtue. George differs from Hobbes and Locke in arguing that genuine moral conversion and belief in God would flourish if scarcity were overcome.

Where does all this leave George's ideas on land reform? I think the greatest service one could render to the memory of George and his genuine effort to show compassion for the poor would be to separate his ideas on land reform from their philosophical and theological underpinnings. Even if George's land policy would not overcome scarcity, and eliminate vice and produce love of God, it might indeed contribute to bringing about a more just society. George's idea of creating access to the land for all and of promoting the fruitful use of land are surely admirable goals. It is up to economists, political

philosophers, and other citizens to decide whether the Single Tax on land values or some variation thereof will indeed contribute to a more just distribution of material goods.

Natural Rights and the Common Good in Catholic Social Thought

Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891) proved to be a decisive catalyst for Catholic social thought and action. Subsequent papal encyclicals on political and socioeconomic issues constantly refer to *Rerum Novarum*, mention its great impact, and substantially follow its general outlines (John Paul II 1981: #14). For example, Pope John Paul II (1981: #14) in *Laborem Exercens* explains the Catholic teaching on the possession and use of property in the same framework and in almost the same words as Leo XIII:

The Church's teaching . . . diverges radically from the program of collectivism as proclaimed by Marxism and put into practice in various countries in the decades following the time of Leo XIII's encyclical [that is, *Rerum Novarum*]. At the same time it differs from the program of capitalism practiced by liberalism and by the political systems inspired by it. In the latter case, the difference consists in the way the right to ownership or property is understood. Christian tradition has never upheld this right as absolute and untouchable. On the contrary, it has always understood this right within the broader context of the right common to all to use the goods of the whole of creation; *the right to private property is subordinated to the right to common use.*

John Paul II perhaps makes it more clear than Leo XIII that all goods of the earth have a universal destination. Everyone is entitled "to use the goods of the whole creation." At the same time he upholds the right to private property. He is really saying that society should find a way to ensure universal access to material goods, including land, without abolishing private ownership. The popes since Leo XIII have agreed in principle with George's dictum that "we must make land common property." They differ from George in arguing that all external goods should in a sense be common and unlike George they do not endorse one specific mode of making land common.

Henry George and the modern popes have shared a passion for bringing about a more equitable distribution of property. Reading

Henry George and the papal social encyclicals together serves to remind us how important some notion of the common good is for society. In a time when contemporary moral theory is built upon individualistic premises, whether in the form of utilitarianism or deontological liberalism, there is a great need to resurrect thinkers with thoughts out of season.

George rightly sensed that Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* was an important document, worthy of commentary. I suspect that few others, if any, realized how important it would be for the development of modern CST in the 20th and 21st centuries. The strengths and weaknesses of that thought depend to a large extent on *Rerum Novarum*. Hence, a reading of that encyclical and the authors who shaped Leo XIII's thought may provide an important key to improving CST. Now that the Vatican archives of Leo XIII's papacy are available for public inspection, the task of unearthing and assessing the origins of Leo XIII's thought will be much easier.

Even without the archives it is possible to shed some more light on CST by extrapolating some of George's criticisms of Leo XIII. While George did not thoroughly examine *Rerum Novarum*, he did make a few remarks that point in the direction of a fruitful analysis. George accuses Leo of inventing both the right to employment and the right to "a certain indefinite wage." George also vehemently objects to Leo XIII's strong defense of the right to property in land. I believe, as already mentioned, that Leo XIII expects too much from the results of private ownership.

Leo XIII's emphasis on the right to property as well as other rights has been reinforced by later popes, especially Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II. As there is no doctrine of rights in the thought of Aquinas and Augustine or the Bible, what then is the origin of the Catholic teaching on rights? The question is whether Catholic rights teaching evolved from Catholic thinkers, or from the natural-rights teaching of Hobbes and Locke, or from the philosophy of Kant or from some other source.

This question is very important because CST has focused on rights either to the detriment, or even neglect of duties and the common good. This is understandable because of the stress on rights in philosophical circles and in political discourse and activity.

In its best form, Catholic teaching on rights, while preserving a traditional understanding of duties and the common good, as in the papal social encyclicals, is not widely known nor adequately presented to Catholics, not to mention non-Catholics. Nearly everyone today is educated to think about society and the State in Lockean, Kantian, or egalitarian terms. In its inferior forms, Catholic teaching on rights loses a balanced perspective and adopts one or the other aforementioned philosophical views.

Both Leo XIII and John Paul II properly subordinate rights to duties. In other words, persons are entitled to rights because they have God-given duties to fulfill. Both Leo XIII and John Paul II accept the primacy of the common good over rights. Still, both popes lay more stress on rights than on the common good.

Pope John XXIII's (1963) *Pacem in Terris* has become the classic statement of Catholic teaching on natural rights. While John XXIII also accepts the primacy of the common good and duties over rights, it should be noted that the subordination of rights to duties is not very clearly stated in *Pacem in Terris*. Pope John lays such stress on the rights of man that his comments on duties are hardly noticed. Paragraphs 11 to 27 indicate man's rights. Paragraph 28 says that man has as many duties as rights, and paragraph 29 gives three examples of duties—to preserve life, to live becomingly, and to seek the truth. Paragraphs 30 to 38 mention in general terms the duty to work for the rights of others. This one-sided emphasis on rights could very easily lead people to believe that Pope John's teaching on rights is not essentially different from the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, the Declaration of Independence, or the French Declaration on the Rights of Man. *Pacem in Terris* makes the Church sound like a proponent of a teaching on rights that is divorced from a teaching on duties.

The advantage of a stress on rights is that most people tend to think about justice and the public interest in terms of rights—political and/or socioeconomic. Respect for rights, enforced by national laws and international covenants, is one of the few barriers against various kinds of injustice. Talking the language of rights provides the Catholic Church with an entry into public discourse and into scholarly debate, and enables the church to promote justice in the world.

While the advantages of rights teachings should not be underestimated, their disadvantages should not be overlooked. There is a profound disagreement about the foundation of rights. Some scholars think there are no solid philosophical grounds for respecting rights. Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), in his widely read book, *After Virtue*, makes that argument with considerable persuasiveness:

The best reason for asserting so bluntly that there are no such rights is indeed of precisely the same type as the best reason which we possess for asserting that there are no witches and the best reason which we possess for asserting that there are no unicorns, every attempt to give good reasons for believing that there *are* such rights has failed.

Given the pervasive relativism and even nihilism of the present age, widespread societal doubt of the existence of rights could cause considerable disruption. The bonds of society are fragile enough without losing respect for rights. A teaching without foundation, however, will not last indefinitely. Nietzsche's comment about Christian morality is pertinent. He argued that if God is dead in the hearts of people Christian morality is without foundation and would eventually be abandoned. Respect for human rights is subject to the same fate.

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