

*Quod Apostolici
Muneris*

Encyclical Of Pope
Leo XIII On Socialism

Pope Leo XIII

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Document text ·

To the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, and Bishops of the Catholic World in Grace and Communion with the Apostolic See.

At the very beginning of Our pontificate, as the nature of Our apostolic office demanded, we hastened to point out in an encyclical letter addressed to you, venerable brethren, the deadly plague that is creeping into the very fibres of human society and leading it on to the verge of destruction; at the same time We pointed out also the most effectual remedies by which society might be restored and might escape from the very serious dangers which threaten it. But the evils which We then deplored have so rapidly increased that We are again compelled to address you, as though we heard the voice of the prophet ringing in Our ears: “Cry, cease not, lift up thy voice like a trumpet.” You understand, venerable brethren, that We speak of that sect of men who, under various and almost barbarous names, are called socialists, communists, or nihilists, and who, spread over all the world, and bound together by the closest ties in a wicked confederacy, no longer seek the shelter of secret meetings, but, openly and boldly marching forth in the light of day, strive to bring to a head what they have long been planning—the overthrow of all civil society whatsoever.

Surely these are they who, as the sacred Scriptures testify, “Defile the flesh, despise dominion and blaspheme majesty.”² They leave nothing untouched or whole which by both human and divine laws has been wisely decreed for the health and beauty of life. They refuse obedience to the higher powers, to whom, according to the admonition of the Apostle, every soul ought to be subject, and who derive the right of governing from God; and they proclaim the absolute equality of all men in rights and duties. They debase the natural union of man and woman, which is held sacred even among barbarous peoples; and its bond, by which the family is chiefly held together, they weaken, or even deliver up to lust. Lured, in fine, by the greed of present goods, which is “the root of all evils, which some coveting have erred from the faith,”³ they assail the right of property sanctioned by natural law; and

1: Isa. 58:1.

2: Jude 8.

3: 1 Tim. 6:10.

by a scheme of horrible wickedness, while they seem desirous of caring for the needs and satisfying the desires of all men, they strive to seize and hold in common whatever has been acquired either by title of lawful inheritance, or by labor of brain and hands, or by thrift in one's mode of life. These are the startling theories they utter in their meetings, set forth in their pamphlets, and scatter abroad in a cloud of journals and tracts. Wherefore, the revered majesty and power of kings has won such fierce hatred from their seditious people that disloyal traitors, impatient of all restraint, have more than once within a short period raised their arms in impious attempt against the lives of their own sovereigns.

2. But the boldness of these bad men, which day by day more and more threatens civil society with destruction, and strikes the souls of all with anxiety and fear, finds its cause and origin in those poisonous doctrines which, spread abroad in former times among the people, like evil seed bore in due time such fatal fruit. For you know, venerable brethren, that that most deadly war which from the sixteenth century down has been waged by innovators against the Catholic faith, and which has grown in intensity up to today, had for its object to subvert all revelation, and overthrow the supernatural order, that thus the way might be opened for the discoveries, or rather the hallucinations, of reason alone. This kind of error, which falsely usurps to itself the name of reason, as it lures and whets the natural appetite that is in man of excelling, and gives loose rein to unlawful desires of every kind, has easily penetrated not only the minds of a great multitude of men but to a wide extent civil society, also. Hence, by a new species of impiety, unheard of even among the heathen nations, states have been constituted without any count at all of God or of the order established by him; it has been given out that public authority neither derives its principles, nor its majesty, nor its power of governing from God, but rather from the multitude, which, thinking itself absolved from all divine sanction, bows only to such laws as it shall have made at its own will. The supernatural truths of faith having been assailed and cast out as though hostile to reason, the very Author and Redeemer of the human race has been slowly and little by little banished from the universities, the lyceums and gymnasia-in a word, from every public institution. In fine, the rewards and punishments of a future and eternal life having been handed over to oblivion, the ardent desire of happiness

has been limited to the bounds of the present. Such doctrines as these having been scattered far and wide, so great a license of thought and action having sprung up on all sides, it is no matter for surprise that men of the lowest class, weary of their wretched home or workshop, are eager to attack the homes and fortunes of the rich; it is no matter for surprise that already there exists no sense of security either in public or private life, and that the human race should have advanced to the very verge of final dissolution.

3. But the supreme pastors of the Church, on whom the duty falls of guarding the Lord's flock from the snares of the enemy, have striven in time to ward off the danger and provide for the safety of the faithful. For, as soon as the secret societies began to be formed, in whose bosom the seeds of the errors which we have already mentioned were even then being nourished, the Roman Pontiffs Clement XII and Benedict XIV did not fail to unmask the evil counsels of the sects, and to warn the faithful of the whole globe against the ruin which would be wrought. Later on again, when a licentious sort of liberty was attributed to man by a set of men who gloried in the name of philosophers,⁴ and a new right, as they call it, against the natural and divine law began to be framed and sanctioned, Pope Pius VI, of happy memory, at once exposed in public documents the guile and falsehood of their doctrines, and at the same time foretold with apostolic foresight the ruin into which the people so miserably deceived would be dragged. But, as no adequate precaution was taken to prevent their evil teachings from leading the people more and more astray, and lest they should be allowed to escape in the public statutes of States, Popes Pius VII and Leo XII condemned by anathema the secret sects,⁵ and again warned society of the danger which threatened them. Finally, all have witnessed with what solemn words and great firmness and constancy of soul our glorious predecessor, Pius IX, of happy memory, both in his allocutions and in his encyclical letters addressed to the bishops of all the world, fought now against the wicked attempts of the sects, now openly by name against the pest of socialism, which was already making headway.

4: See above, p. 155, note 2.

5: On Freemasonry, *Humanum genus*.

4. But it is to be lamented that those to whom has been committed the guardianship of the public weal, deceived by the wiles of wicked men and terrified by their threats, have looked upon the Church with a suspicious and even hostile eye, not perceiving that the attempts of the sects would be vain if the doctrine of the Catholic Church and the authority of the Roman Pontiffs had always survived, with the honor that belongs to them, among princes and peoples. For, “the church of the living God, which is the pillar and ground of truth,”⁶ hands down those doctrines and precepts whose special object is the safety and peace of society and the uprooting of the evil growth of socialism.

5. For, indeed, although the socialists, stealing the very Gospel itself with a view to deceive more easily the unwary, have been accustomed to distort it so as to suit their own purposes, nevertheless so great is the difference between their depraved teachings and the most pure doctrine of Christ that none greater could exist: “for what participation bath justice with injustice or what fellowship bath light with darkness?”⁷ Their habit, as we have intimated, is always to maintain that nature has made all men equal, and that, therefore, neither honor nor respect is due to majesty, nor obedience to laws, unless, perhaps, to those sanctioned by their own good pleasure. But, on the contrary, in accordance with the teachings of the Gospel, the equality of men consists in this: that all, having inherited the same nature, are called to the same most high dignity of the sons of God, and that, as one and the same end is set before all, each one is to be judged by the same law and will receive punishment or reward according to his deserts. The inequality of rights and of power proceeds from the very Author of nature, “from whom all paternity in heaven and earth is named.”⁸ But the minds of princes and their subjects are, according to Catholic doctrine and precepts, bound up one with the other in such a manner, by mutual duties and rights, that the thirst for power is restrained and the rational ground of obedience made easy, firm, and noble.

6. Assuredly, the Church wisely inculcates the apostolic precept on the mass of men: “There is no power but from God; and those that are, are ordained of God. Therefore he that resisteth the power resisteth the ordinance of God. And they

6: 1 Tim. 3:15.

7: 2 Cor. 6:14.

8: Eph. 3:15.

that resist purchase to themselves damnation.” And again she admonishes those “subject by necessity” to be so “not only for wrath but also for conscience’ sake,” and to render “to all men their dues; tribute to whom tribute is due, custom to whom custom, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.”⁹ For, He who created and governs all things has, in His wise providence, appointed that the things which are lowest should attain their ends by those which are intermediate, and these again by the highest. Thus, as even in the kingdom of heaven He bath willed that the choirs of angels be distinct and some subject to others, and also in the Church has instituted various orders and a diversity of offices, so that all are not apostles or doctors or pastors,¹⁰ so also has He appointed that there should be various orders in civil society, differing indignity, rights, and power, whereby the State, like the Church, should be one body, consisting of many members, some nobler than others, but all necessary to each other and solicitous for the common good.

7. But that rulers may use the power conceded to them to save and not to destroy, the Church of Christ seasonably warns even princes that the sentence of the Supreme Judge overhangs them, and, adopting the words of divine wisdom, calls upon all in the name of God: “Give ear, you that rule the people, and that please yourselves in multitudes of nations; for power is given you by the Lord, and strength by the Most High, who will examine your works, and search out your thoughts.... For a most severe judgment shall be for them that bear rule.... For God will not except any man’s person, neither will he stand in awe of any man’s greatness, for he bath made the little and the great; and he bath equally care of all. But a greater punishment is ready for the more mighty.”¹¹ And if at any time it happen that the power of the State is rashly and tyrannically wielded by princes, the teaching of the Catholic church does not allow an insurrection on private authority against them, lest public order be only the more disturbed, and lest society take greater hurt therefrom. And when affairs come to such a pass that there is no other hope of safety, she teaches that relief may be hastened by the merits of Christian patience and by earnest prayers to God. But, if the will of

9: Rom. 13a, 7.

10: 1 Cor. 12:28.

11: Wisd. 6:3-4, 8-9.

legislators and princes shall have sanctioned or commanded anything repugnant to the divine or natural law, the dignity and duty of the Christian name, as well as the judgment of the Apostle, urge that “God is to be obeyed rather than man.”¹²

8. Even family life itself, which is the cornerstone of all society and government, necessarily feels and experiences the salutary power of the Church, which redounds to the right ordering and preservation of every State and kingdom. For you know, venerable brethren, that the foundation of this society rests first of all in the indissoluble union of man and wife according to the necessity of natural law, and is completed in the mutual rights and duties of parents and children, masters and servants. You know also that the doctrines of socialism strive almost completely to dissolve this union; since, that stability which is imparted to it by religious wedlock being lost, it follows that the power of the father over his own children, and the duties of the children toward their parents, must be greatly weakened. But the Church, on the contrary, teaches that “marriage, honorable in all,”¹³ which God himself instituted in the very beginning of the world, and made indissoluble for the propagation and preservation of the human species, has become still more binding and more holy through Christ, who raised it to the dignity of a sacrament, and chose to use it as the figure of His own union with the Church.

Wherefore, as the Apostle has it,¹⁴ as Christ is the head of the Church, so is the man the head of the woman; and as the Church is subject to Christ, who embraces her with a most chaste and undying love, so also should wives be subject to their husbands, and be loved by them in turn with a faithful and constant affection. In like manner does the Church temper the use of parental and domestic authority, that it may tend to hold children and servants to their duty, without going beyond bounds. For, according to Catholic teaching, the authority of our heavenly Father and Lord is imparted to parents and masters, whose authority, therefore, not only takes its origin and force from Him, but also borrows its nature and character. Hence, the Apostle exhorts children to “obey their parents in the Lord, and honor their father and mother, which is the first commandment with promise”;¹⁵ and he

12: Acts 5:29.

13: Heb. 13:4.

14: Eph. 5:23.

15: Eph. 6:1-2.

admonishes parents: "And you, fathers, provoke not your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and correction of the Lord."¹⁶ Again, the apostle enjoins the divine precept on servants and masters, exhorting the former to be "obedient to their lords according to the flesh of Christ... with a good will serving, as to the Lord"; and the latter, to "forbear threatenings, knowing that the Lord of all is in heaven, and there is no respect of persons with God."¹⁷ If only all these matters were faithfully observed according to the divine will by all on whom they are enjoined, most assuredly every family would be a figure of the heavenly home, and the wonderful blessings there begotten would not confine themselves to the households alone, but would scatter their riches abroad through the nations."

9. But Catholic wisdom, sustained by the precepts of natural and divine law, provides with especial care for public and private tranquility in its doctrines and teachings regarding the duty of government and the distribution of the goods which are necessary for life and use. For, while the socialists would destroy the "right" of property, alleging it to be a human invention altogether opposed to the inborn equality of man, and, claiming a community of goods, argue that poverty should not be peaceably endured, and that the property and privileges of the rich may be rightly invaded, the Church, with much greater wisdom and good sense, recognizes the inequality among men, who are born with different powers of body and mind, inequality in actual possession, also, and holds that the right of property and of ownership, which springs from nature itself, must not be touched and stands inviolate. For she knows that stealing and robbery were forbidden in so special a manner by God, the Author and Defender of right, that He would not allow man even to desire what belonged to another, and that thieves and despoilers, no less than adulterers and idolaters, are shut out from the Kingdom of Heaven. But not the less on this account does our holy Mother not neglect the care of the poor or omit to provide for their necessities; but, rather, drawing them to her with a mother's embrace, and knowing that they bear the person of Christ Himself, who regards the smallest gift to the poor as a benefit conferred on Himself, holds them in great honor. She does all she can to help them; she provides homes and hospi-

16: Eph. 6:4.

17: Eph.6:5-9.

tals where they may be received, nourished, and cared for all the world over and watches over these. She is constantly pressing on the rich that most grave precept to give what remains to the poor; and she holds over their heads the divine sentence that unless they succor the needy they will be repaid by eternal torments. In fine, she does all she can to relieve and comfort the poor, either by holding up to them the example of Christ, "who being rich became poor for our sake,"¹⁸ or by reminding them of his own words, wherein he pronounced the poor blessed and bade them hope for the reward of eternal bliss. But who does not see that this is the best method of arranging the old struggle between the rich and poor? For, as the very evidence of facts and events shows, if this method is rejected or disregarded, one of two things must occur: either the greater portion of the human race will fall back into the vile condition of slavery which so long prevailed among the pagan nations, or human society must continue to be disturbed by constant eruptions, to be disgraced by rapine and strife, as we have had sad witness even in recent times.

10. These things being so, then, venerable brethren, as at the beginning of Our pontificate We, on whom the guidance of the whole Church now lies, pointed out a place of refuge to the peoples and the princes tossed about by the fury of the tempest, so now, moved by the extreme peril that is on them, We again lift up Our voice, and beseech them again and again for their own safety's sake as well as that of their people to welcome and give ear to the Church which has had such wonderful influence on the public prosperity of kingdoms, and to recognize that political and religious affairs are so closely united that what is taken from the spiritual weakens the loyalty of subjects and the majesty of the government. And since they know that the Church of Christ has such power to ward off the plague of socialism as cannot be found in human laws, in the mandates of magistrates, or in the force of armies, let them restore that Church to the condition and liberty in which she may exert her healing force for the benefit of all society.

11. But you, venerable brethren, who know the origin and the drift of these gathering evils, strive with all your force of soul to implant the Catholic teaching deep in the minds of all. Strive that all may have the habit of clinging to God with filial love and revering His divinity from their tenderest years; that they may

18: 2 Cor. 8:9.

respect the majesty of princes and of laws; that they may restrain their passions and stand fast by the order which God has established in civil and domestic society. Moreover, labor hard that the children of the Catholic Church neither join nor favor in any way whatsoever this abominable sect; let them show, on the contrary, by noble deeds and right dealing in all things, how well and happily human society would hold together were each member to shine as an example of right doing and of virtue. In fine, as the recruits of socialism are especially sought among artisans and workmen, who, tired, perhaps, of labor, are more easily allured by the hope of riches and the promise of wealth, it is well to encourage societies of artisans and workmen which, constituted under the guardianship of religion, may tend to make all associates contented with their lot and move them to a quiet and peaceful life.

12. Venerable brethren, may He who is the beginning and end of every good work inspire your and Our endeavors. And, indeed, the very thought of these days, in which the anniversary of our Lord's birth is solemnly observed, moves us to hope for speedy help. For the new life which Christ at His birth brought to a world already aging and steeped in the very depths of wickedness He bids us also to hope for, and the peace which He then announced by the angels to men He has promised to us also. For the Lord's "hand is not shortened that he cannot save, neither is his ear heavy that he cannot hear."¹⁹ In these most auspicious days, then, venerable brethren, wishing all joy and happiness to you and to the faithful of your churches, We earnestly pray the Giver of all good that again "there may appear unto men the goodness and kindness of God our Saviour,"²⁰ who brought us out of the power of our most deadly enemy into the most noble dignity of the sons of God. And that We may the sooner and more fully gain our wish, do you, venerable brethren, join with Us in lifting up your fervent prayers to God and beg the intercession of the Blessed and Immaculate Virgin Mary, and of Joseph her spouse, and of the blessed Apostles Peter and Paul, in whose prayers We have the greatest confidence. And in the meanwhile We impart to you, with the inmost affection of the heart, and to your clergy and faithful people, the apostolic benediction as an augury of the divine gifts.

19: Isa. 59:1.

20: Titus 3:4.

Given at St. Peter's, in Rome, on the twenty-eighth day of December, 1878,
in the first year of Our pontificate.

LEO XIII

Notes