

# 2011: AN ANNIVERSARY YEAR FOR CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING: A REFLECTION

David Willis OP

*David Willis completed his studies for ordination in the Catholic Church in 1971. He then went on to complete a BA at the Australian National University in Canberra (1982), a MA (Theology) at Graduate Theological Union, Berkely CA (1986), and a DTh from the Melbourne College of Divinity, Vic (1998). He was been a lecturer in philosophy and theology at the Catholic Theological Institute in Port Moresby PNG, the Melbourne College of Divinity and the Australia Catholic University. He has been president of the Catholic Theological Institute since 2008.*

This year is the 120th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical, which takes its title from its first two Latin words, *Rerum Novarum*, but is often referred to as "The Conditions of Labour", the first encyclical devoted specifically to social teaching, hereafter referred to as *RN*.<sup>1</sup> This paper, after introducing modern Catholic social teaching, investigates one major topic treated by *RN*, namely, private property.

---

<sup>1</sup> An encyclical is a letter addressed to Catholics on matters of faith and morals. Other anniversary encyclicals followed: *Quadragesimo Anno* (The 40th Year) in 1931, *Mater et Magistra* (Christianity and Social Progress) in 1961, *Laborem Exercens* (On Work) in 1981, and *Centesimus Annus* (The 100th Year) in 1991. Following *Mater et Magistra*, there were three other encyclicals devoted to social justice: *Pacem in Terris* (Peace on Earth) in 1963, *Populorum Progressio* (On the Development of Peoples) in 1967, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern) in 1987. The conciliar document on social justice of Vatican II was published in 1965, and a major apostolic letter, reflecting on social justice, was issued in 1971, the 80th anniversary of *RN*. This year, it seems there will be no such anniversary encyclical published. Thus, it can be an occasion to examine *RN*, itself, or rather, to focus on one issue raised by it.

## INTRODUCING MODERN CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

In its introductory section to the social doctrine of the church the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* commented that this doctrine was

developed in the 19th century, when the gospel encountered modern industrial society with its new structures for the production of consumer goods, its new concept of society, the state, and authority, and its new forms of labour and ownership.<sup>2</sup>

The teaching began, therefore, as an endeavour to relate the gospel to issues of justice in society at a time of major political and social change. The topics addressed over the last 120 years by social encyclicals and related writings have been wide ranging. To name a few: human rights, marriage and the family, economic matters, the political community, international organisations, globalisation, the natural environment, and war and peace. We can complement this list by drawing attention to the themes treated by the social encyclicals as found on the US Conference of Bishops' website: (1) life and dignity of the human person; (2) family; (3) community and participation; (4) rights and responsibilities; (4) options for the poor and vulnerable; (5) the dignity of work, and the rights of workers; (6) solidarity; (7) care for God's creation.<sup>3</sup>

## THE CONTEXT OF *RN*

The context of *RN* was the major political and economic upheavals of the 19th century. In that century, Europe had been marked by political revolutions. In particular, there were the revolutions of 1848 in Sicily, Paris, Berlin, and Vienna. It can also be noted that 1848 was the year of the publication of *The Communist Manifesto*, co-authored by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, a work making accessible the communist vision of history and society that was to shape much of the political and economic life of the 20th century, beginning with the communist revolution in Russia

---

<sup>2</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (New Delhi India: Theological Publications in India, 1994), p. 2421.

<sup>3</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops; available at <http://www.usccb.org/sdwp/projects/socialteaching/excerpt.shtml>.

in 1917. On the economic front, the 19th century saw the emergence of industrial capitalism, and, for many, the growing appeal of socialism. The consequences of these political and economic upheavals had far-reaching consequences for workers, which account for *RN*'s opening paragraph:

That the spirit of revolutionary change, which has long been disturbing the nations of the world, should have passed beyond the sphere of politics, and made its influence felt in the cognate sphere of practical economics is not surprising. The elements of the conflict now raging are unmistakable, in the vast expansion of industrial pursuits, and the marvellous discoveries of science; in the changed relations between masters and workmen; in the enormous fortunes of some few individuals, and the utter poverty of the masses; the increased self-reliance and closer mutual combination of the working classes; as also, finally, in the prevailing moral degeneracy.<sup>4</sup>

The general characteristics of 19th-century industrial capitalism were commonly listed as: (1) private ownership of the means of production; (2) buyers and sellers operating in unregulated markets; (3) employers and workers pursuing their own interests, either in the use of their capital, or making available their labour; (4) consumers spending their money as they pleased; (5) government's minimal role in society, defending it from foreign invasion, protecting its citizen's private property, and guaranteeing contracts. The other major influential political and economic worldview of the 19th century was socialism. Contrary to industrial capitalism, it affirmed state ownership and control of the fundamental means of production and distribution of wealth. Individual self-interest was subordinate to community well-being, and the market was regulated by government.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> *RN*, p. 1; available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/leo\\_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_15051891\\_rerum-novarum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum_en.html), [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/leo\\_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_15051891\\_rerum-novarum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum_en.html).

<sup>5</sup> This summary of both industrial capitalism and 19th-century socialism is based closely on the treatment of these found in the *Encarta* online website, now defunct.

## **RN AND THE RIGHT TO PRIVATE PROPERTY**

### **THE DISCUSSION OF PRIVATE PROPERTY AND THE SOCIALIST DENIAL OF THE RIGHT TO PRIVATE PROPERTY**

At the heart of the socialist remedy for the conditions of poverty-stricken workers was the abolition of the right to ownership of property. Property ought to be held in common, and be administered by the state.<sup>6</sup> *RN*'s response to the socialist vision was to defend the right of ownership of property, and then to set out its own agenda for improving the conditions of workers. In summary, this included the call to conversion and faith, acknowledging that the state has the responsibility to intervene in society to oversee working conditions, including the payment of a just wage; encouraging the formation of associations of employers and employees (friendly societies) and workers associations (trade unions) while affirming that the Christian community had an important role in helping workers and their families through its charitable institutions.

### **RN AND THE RIGHT TO OWN PROPERTY**

The encyclical agreed with the socialist assessment of the conditions of the worker under capitalism, namely, that "it has come to pass that working men have been surrendered, isolated, and helpless, to the hardheartedness of employers, and the greed of unchecked competition".<sup>7</sup> In particular, it stated that

the whole process of production, as well as trade in every kind of goods, has been brought almost entirely under the power of a few, so that a very few rich, and exceedingly rich, men have laid a yoke

---

<sup>6</sup> *RN* outlined its understanding of the socialist answer to the misery of so many workers: "To cure this evil the Socialists . . . contend that it is necessary to do away with private possession of goods, and, in its place, to make the goods of individuals common to all, and that the men who preside over a municipality, or who direct the entire State, should act as administrators of these goods. They hold that, by such a transfer of private goods from private individuals to the community, they can cure the present evil through dividing wealth and benefits equally among the citizens." *RN*, p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> *RN*, p. 3.

almost of slavery on the unnumbered masses of non-owning workers.<sup>8</sup>

However, *RN* immediately proceeded to defend the right of ownership of property, arguing that it was in keeping with human nature, and could not, without causing injustices, including injustices to workers, be abolished. Human beings are distinguished from animals by having self-mastery or self-determination. This characteristic includes the ability to plan for oneself and one's family. To do this, however, requires that a person owns property. The denial of the right to property, then, is a failure to respect the capacity of the person for self-determination.<sup>9</sup>

In the years since *RN*, the argument for private property in Catholic social thought has been refined: Private ownership safeguards the appropriate autonomy or independence of individuals and families; it is a condition for civil liberties; it enables people to participate in, and make their contribution to, the economy and society, and it enables people to express their personalities.<sup>10</sup>

### ***RN* AND PRIVATE PROPERTY: ITS LIMITS**

The encyclical clarified how its understanding of the right to private property differed from 19th-century capitalist thought on the matter. Drawing on the thoughts of Thomas Aquinas, *RN* distinguished between (a)

---

<sup>8</sup> *RN*, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> "The brute has no power of self-direction, but is governed by two main instincts, which keep his powers on the alert, impel him to develop them in a fitting manner, and stimulate and determine him to action without any power of choice. One of these instincts is self-preservation, the other, the propagation of the species. Both can attain their purpose by means of things, which lie within range. . . . But with man it is wholly different. . . . It is the mind, or reason, which is the predominant element in us, who are human creatures; it is this, which renders a human being human. . . . And on this very account . . . it must be within his right to possess things, not merely for temporary and momentary use . . . but to have and to hold them in stable and permanent possession." *RN*, p. 6.

<sup>10</sup> The fuller development of the reasons that ground the right to private property is found in the conciliar document of Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), p. 71. See G. Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, vol 2, *Living a Christian Life* (Quincy IL: Franciscan Press), 1992, pp. 794-795.

personal ownership of property; and (b) the use of that which is owned.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, this distinction of ownership and use is first found in the thoughts of the 4th-century BC Greek philosopher, Aristotle: “property should be private, but the use of it common”.<sup>12</sup> Ownership (me, mine) is in the context of community (us, ours).

The right of private ownership, which is to be upheld, does not mean that a person is free to use possessions, in whatever way he or she pleases. Thus, *RN* raises the question: “How ought persons use their possessions?” Again, there is the appeal to Aquinas:

But if the question were asked: How must one’s possessions be used? – the church replies without hesitation in the words of the same holy doctor [Aquinas]: “Man should not consider his material possessions as his own, but as common to all, so as to share them without hesitation when others are in need. Whence the Apostle with, “Command the rich of this world . . . to offer with no stint, to apportion largely.”<sup>13</sup>

The position regarding the use of one’s personal property “as common”, according to *RN*, is based on the relationship of humans to the natural world, as expressed in Gen 1:26:

Then God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 11-11, q. 65, a. 2. *RN*, p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, Benjamin Jowett, tran., *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Richard McKeon, ed. (New York NY: Random House, 1941), pp. 1263a, 38.

<sup>13</sup> *RN*, p. 22. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 11-11, q. 66, a. 2. Aquinas’ scripture reference is to 1 Tim 6:17-18.

<sup>14</sup> The translation is the *New Revised Standard Version*.

God gave the natural world as a gift to the whole of humanity. This scriptural vision is the basic fact that establishes the context for understanding the use private ownership.

*RN* then goes on to clarify whether a person is obliged, out of justice, or out of charity, to share his or her possessions. The duty to share with the poor arises out of justice when someone is in extreme need; otherwise the duty to share arises out of charity or alms-giving.<sup>15</sup> The encyclical pointed here to what later encyclicals refer to as the “social character”, or the “social quality”, of private property.<sup>16</sup> The case for this, as we have seen, is “that God has given the earth for the use and enjoyment of the whole human race”.<sup>17</sup> Socialists saw this as an objection to private property. *RN*’s response was that it situates private ownership in the context of community, and it accounts for responsibilities that come with ownership. Owners of property have to take into account others in difficulties, either in justice or in charity, in using what they own.

Ownership is a type of stewardship. It enables persons to fulfil their own needs, and it helps others fulfil their needs as well.<sup>18</sup> The encyclical quotes St Gregory the Great (540-604) on this point: “let him see that he hide it not; he that hath abundance, let him quicken himself to mercy and

---

<sup>15</sup> “True, no one is commanded to distribute to others that which is required for his own needs and those of his household; nor even to give away what is reasonably required to keep up, becomingly, his condition in life, “for no one ought to live other than becomingly”. (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, q. 32, a. 6.) But, when what necessity demands has been supplied, and one’s standing, fairly taken thought for, it becomes a duty to give to the indigent out of what remains over. “Of that which remaineth, give alms (Luke 11:41). It is a duty, not of justice (save in extreme cases), but of Christian charity – a duty not enforced by human law.” *RN*, p. 22.

<sup>16</sup> Pius XI refers to the “social character” of ownership. The church in the modern world of Vatican II to its “social quality” of private property, and Pope John Paul II to its “social mortgage”.

<sup>17</sup> *RN*, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> “Whoever has received from the divine bounty a large share of temporal blessings . . . has received them for the purpose of using them for the perfecting of his own nature, and, at the same time, that he may employ them, as the steward of God’s providence, for the benefit of others.” *RN*, p. 2.

generosity; he that hath art and skill, let him do his best to share the use and the utility hereof with his neighbour.”<sup>19</sup>

### **ON THE RIGHT TO PRIVATE PROPERTY BEING CONSISTENT WITH THE STATE’S RIGHT OF OWNERSHIP**

To fill out this understanding of private property further, it can be noted that it does not deny the legitimacy of some public ownership of property. This important issue can only be touched on here. Indeed, *RN* does not address this question, but later encyclicals do. Pius XI, in his anniversary encyclical of 1931, *Quadragesimo Anno*, defended the authority of the state to bring “private ownership into harmony with the needs of the common good”, but affirmed that this exercise of state authority “does not destroy private possessions, but safeguards them; and it does not weaken private property rights, but strengthens them”.<sup>20</sup> Pius XI appealed to what he calls the principle of subsidiarity to clarify the relationship of the state to the individual, or private group: “Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice . . . to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organisations can do.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, it is unjust for the state to take away from its citizens what they can do for themselves. Self-mastery, or appropriate autonomy, is to be defended.

We can sum up this section of our paper by saying that *RN* defends the right of ownership of private property, but that it did not consider that this right was identical to the capitalist’s understanding of it, because ownership, which promotes self-mastery, brings with it responsibilities in justice and/or charity. Ownership is a type of stewardship, which is meant to benefit owners and others alike.

---

<sup>19</sup> Quoted at *RN*, p. 22.

<sup>20</sup> *Quadragesimo Anno*, p. 49; available at [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/pius\\_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_19310515\\_quadragesimo-anno\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno_en.html).

<sup>21</sup> *Quadragesimo Anno*, p. 79.

## **IN CONCLUSION**

Reflection on private property does not exhaust *RN*'s content. Its treatment of it was by no means the final word on the subject, but it was an important issue to tackle, because it was fundamental to *RN*'s programme of reform, necessitated, in particular, because of the emergence of the institutions of industrial capitalism. *RN* argued that it was a reform to be carried out through the initiative and creativity of individuals and groups in society, something it saw socialism devaluing. In saying this, *RN* also affirmed the unique role of the state authority or government in promoting a just society, which went beyond its minimalist role in capitalist thought. Finally, its discussion of private property was significant, because it was part and parcel of the first steps of a dialogue with the modern world over matters of justice, which has now continued for 120 years.