

Rerum Novarum  
*Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor*  
By Pope Leo XIII  
Paragraph by paragraph summary.  
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**INTRODUCTION:**

1. The spirit of revolution in the field of capital and labor is on everyone's mind.
2. As We have discussed other topics, "truth and justice" demand that We address these topics of rights and duties so that further revolution can be avoided.
3. What is absolutely clear is that
  - a. something must be done for the workers who are suffering
  - b. guilds, which have disappeared, cannot protect the worker
  - c. states and "public institutions" have rejected the faith
  - d. wealth is in the hands of the few, which creates a new kind of slavery.

**I. SOCIALISM'S ANSWER**

4. Socialists offer an answer by removing private property. This is wrong and would cause the workers to suffer first.
5. Property, or capital, is simply wages in another form. Thus socialism strikes at the heart of what labor is for, i.e. the free use of what one has earned.
6. This socialist principle against private property is against the virtue of justice. Private property is a natural right. Indeed permanent possession of things is part of what humans require for life.
7. Furthermore, man's needs extend into the future, which means he requires planning, which means he requires long-term *possession* of capital. Nature provides man's needs through the earth and its fruits. Man, therefore, does not need the State. Man "precedes the State, and possesses, prior to the formation of any State, the right of providing for the substance of his body."
8. God allows for private property. Still, we are not allowed to use it however we want. There are limits which are "fixed by man's own industry, and by the law of the individual races."
9. Another proof of the right to private property is that man "leaves, as it were, the impress of his personality" on that on which he labors. Thus, he must be allowed ownership of the thing.
10. This is all so obvious it is odd that the socialist answer cannot see this truth. The fruit of a one's labor belongs to them.
11. The respect for private property is, in fact, "the most unmistakable manner to the peace and tranquility of human existence." Divine law even confirms this in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> commandments.

12. The need to provide for a family further make this right to private property necessary. Since man is called to raise families, and families are “older than any State.” Man has a right to provide for his society, the family.

13. The right to private property becomes firmer with the increased size of the family. And looking to the future, if the father cannot own property how can he pass on capital to his family? “The family must necessarily have rights and duties which are prior to those of the community.”

14. The State, therefore, cannot have control over the family. This is a “great and pernicious error.” Certainly public aid for needy families ought to be in place. The State may step in with regard to certain abuses. “But the rulers of the commonwealth must go no further.” The socialist answer results in the destruction of the “structure of the home.”

15. This main tenet of socialism, the “community of goods,” can only result in envy, a dis-incentivizing of labor, and nothing else but equal misery.

16. Thus, “no practical solution of this question will be found apart from the intervention of religion and of the Church.” The Church is the keeper of the Gospel, which provides the key to solving the conflict between men. The Gospel not only “enlightens the mind” but also gives practical directives for daily life. Furthermore, the Church does already improve the working conditions of laborers around the world “by means of numerous organizations.”

## **II. THE ROLE OF THE CHURCH**

17. The first thing to note is the reality of the situation. Absolute, material equality is not possible or even beneficial to society.

18. All human existence on this earth involves suffering and sacrifice. Those who give to the suffering “the boon of freedom from pain and trouble, an undisturbed repose, and constant enjoyment – they delude the people and impose upon them, and their lying promises will only one day bring forth evils worse than the present.” For real answers, seek outside of this earthly existence.

19. One of the greatest mistakes to avoid is presuming class warfare is necessary. Each needs the other: “capital cannot do without labor, nor labor without capital.” The Church is particularly good at bringing “the rich and the working class together” by reminding each of their respective duties.

20. These are the duties of the “proletarian and the worker.”
- a. to do the work agreed upon well
  - b. never to injure the property or person of the employer
  - c. never to engage in violence or disorder to defend one’s cause
  - d. do not associate with hucksters

The following are the duties of the “wealthy owner and the employer.”

- a. view every worker with dignity and not as a “bondsmen.”
- b. to know that working for gain is “creditable”

- c. to know that to misuse men, to view them as means to an end is “truly shameful and inhuman.”
- d. in dealing with workers, their religion and soul ought to be kept in mind
  - i. make sure they have time to fulfill religious duties
  - ii. protect them from corruption and “dangerous occasions”
  - iii. do not lead him away from his family
  - iv. encourage him away from squandering his earnings
- e. do not overly tax employees
- f. do not employ people to labor “unsuited to their sex and age.”
- g. give them a just wage
  - i. to gather profit from the need of others – i.e. the indigent or destitute – is against human/divine law.
  - ii. to defraud someone of just wage is a crime that calls for vengeance from Heaven
  - iii. the employer may not cut the wages by force, fraud, or usury

21. The Church “aims higher still,” however. The Christian is driven by thoughts of everlasting life in determining how best to live. Without “the idea of futurity” there is no right or wrong. Riches are not the end, only “to use them aright.”

22. Those who do have riches ought to be warned about their danger, for riches are an obstacle to “eternal happiness” and thus to freedom. These are some fundamental truths about ownership:

- a. As the ancients taught, the right to own is different from “a right to use money as one wills.”
- b. The Church teaches that our possessions are not ours but really God’s and so must be used “without hesitation when others are in need.”
- c. We are not required to distribute what we need to live or to maintain what is “becoming,” but from what remains we ought to give. This is charity.
- d. “To sum up, then, what has been said: Whoever has received from the divine bounty a large share of temporal blessings, whether they be external and material, or gifts of the mind, 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.”

23. We also know from Christ that poverty is no disgrace.

24. This shows us that the true value of a man is not wealth but rather “virtue, and virtue alone, wherever found.”

25. With this Christian perspective, then, a true equality can be sought because class warfare is removed.

26. The Church, furthermore, provides the opportunities and the training in virtue necessary for bringing about this true equality within society.

27. Indeed a look at history demonstrates the help which the Church has offered over time bringing “from death to life” previously dying societies. By bringing societies back to their basic principles, the Church can heal. The current situation really cannot be healed without the aid of the Church.

28. This is not to say, however, that the Church is only concerned with the spiritual needs of the people. She does care for the poor, but also recognizes that when a society is morally upright this “leads itself to temporal prosperity, for it merits the blessing of that God who is the source of all blessing.”

29. In fact the Church has and does and will continue to do charity work. She has a reputation for it.

30. Some argue that the State ought to take over the work which the Church does, but no one can make up for the “self sacrifice of Christian charity.”

31. At the same time this does not mean that the State has no role. “It is sufficient, therefore, to inquire what part the State should play in the work of remedy and relief.”

### III. THE ROLE OF THE STATE

32. As I wrote in *On the Christian Constitution of the State* the State’s laws must be enacted for the common good and for “private prosperity.” By giving particular care for the needs of the working class, there will be less need to give them special help. The general welfare is met through:

- a. moral rule
- b. well-regulated family life
- c. respect for religion and justice
- d. moderate and fair public taxes
- e. the progress of arts and trades
- f. fruitful harvests
- g. essentially, anything “which makes the citizens better and happier.”

33. Since the working class are largely in the majority, and since the State has the obligation to maintain the common good, it only makes sense that the State focus on the needs of the working class first so as to be able to meet the needs of all the other classes. This is called “distributive” justice.

34. There will always be differences between classes. All contribute to the common good, just not in the same way. For those who are more directly in charge of the common good, i.e. politicians, they need to keep in mind the following: since “the end of society is to make men better,” then public life ought to be structured so as to make it easier for “virtuous action.” The chief condition for such a public life is the working conditions of the working class. Justice for the worker is in the best interest of the State for “it is only by the labor of working men that States grow rich.”

35. Though the State cannot absorb the family into itself, there is still a role for it to care for the safety of the community.

36. This is mind, when there are violations of the common good by families, employers, workers, etc. the State has a role in correcting the wrong, “the principle being that the law must not undertake more, nor proceed further, than is required for the remedy of the evil or the removal of the mischief.”

37. In this effort, then, the State ought to give special care to the poor and the working class who “have no resources of their own to fall back upon.”

38. The State must also protect the private property of the workers from those who would take advantage of them through thievery, from greedy employers, and from revolutionaries who “stir up disorder and incite their fellows to acts of violence.”

39. Strikes are usually the result of too much labor, excessively hard labor, or insufficient wages. If the State addresses these things, then, it can keep the peace.

40. The State too should protect men’s souls. Life on earth is not “the final purpose for which man is created.” To be an obstacle in man’s pursuit of eternal life is to violate God’s rights, not just man’s, for their soul is God’s.

41. Therefore, the State ought to help allow workers to keep holy the Sabbath, which doesn’t mean idleness or spending money “for vicious indulgence.”

42. The State ought also try to secure proper working conditions for the workers. This involves the number of hours worked, where one works, the nature of the work, and the health and strength of the workman. The time, place, and nature of the work ought to account for the sex and age of the workers as well. Furthermore, the employer and the worker cannot agree to give up on the duties the worker owes to God and to himself. Man is not free to harm himself.

43. Now we come to the question of a just wage. What is generally said is that if the worker and the employer both agree to a wage, then it must be a just wage. Violations are regulated, then, to when the employer doesn’t pay or the worker doesn’t work.

44. This is not a complete analysis however. Labor has two realities to it. It is personal, i.e. bound up with his personality. It is also *necessary*, i.e. required for the maintenance of life of those things which keep us alive. If it were just personal, then the current view of just wage would be fine, but since it is *necessary*, the current view fails, for the worker has the right to pursue that which guarantees his life. These two aspects are inseparable. “It necessarily follows that each one has a natural right to procure what is required in order to live, and the poor can procure that in no other way than by what they can earn through their work.”

45. A just wage ought to be able to support a frugal worker, but injustices do occur. When they do, “in order to supersede undue interference on the part of the State,” recourse ought to be sought from associations about which we will soon talk.

46. For now, if the wage is sufficient the worker can support himself and the family. With frugality he can save, and with time perhaps become an owner, which is highly encouraged.

47. With more ownership of land or capital, greater equality can be attained amongst the various classes. This helps to close the wide gap between the wealthy and the poor. Another advantage to ownership is that men tend to work harder for that which they own. This would also help get rid of the problem of emigration, for the worker would wish to stay in his own nation if he were invested in the capital of his homeland. Of course this all requires that the State enact a just taxation system that does not “deprive the private owner of more than is fair.”

48. Employers and workers can do much to affect the condition of workers by participating in associations that can bring the two classes together.

49. Unions are key to such an effort. They, like the guilds of old, were in the past of great use for workers as well as their craft. Some of these unions already exist. So let us address them and their rights and duties.

#### **IV. ROLE OF THE UNIONS/ASSOCIATIONS**

50. Mankind knows that our own weaknesses require the community of others for help. This is how civil societies are formed and thus associations like these as well.

51. These associations are distinct from the State in that they have different ends. The State is concerned with the general welfare, the common good. The association, however, is concerned with the private good of the members of the association. Since their end meets the natural need of men to associate with each other for aid, they cannot be prohibited by the State, since they, again, precede the State.

52. Now, of course, if the association exists to harm the common good and or attack the State, the State can take measures to protect itself and society.

53. There has been a long history in the Church of “confraternities, societies, and religious orders” over the centuries, and they have done good things. The State ought not have any control over them. When constitutions claim that association is free to all, but Catholic associations are attacked and hampered, we must point out that States have not held up their end recently, and we decry the double standard that has been used against the Church.

54. There are actually some associations, some secret societies, that exist to harm men’s souls and speak out against the Church. Obviously, Christian working men ought to avoid such associations and perhaps start their own.

55. Great praise ought to be given to many of those Catholics who have worked to better the condition of workers. Bishops ought to support such work. The State should foster such associations but not involve itself too deeply for fear of spoiling it.

56. Associations should be wisely administered.

57. They ought to be allowed to exist in societies in order to help in the growth of the humanity of the worker in the areas of body, soul, and property. The chief of these is the soul, because it does not profit a man to have property but lose his soul.

58. The associations ought to be structured according to the betterment of its members. It should have good and prudent leaders, a fair administration of common funds, it should keep the rights and duties of the workers *and* the employees in mind. When there are labor disputes, it should set up committees to help come to an equitable agreement. At all times, work should be found for its members, and a fund should be set up for the needs of the workers and their families.

59. In ancient times Christians were looked down upon for being poor, but their charity eventually won society over.

60. If Christians create these associations, then despite the obvious prejudice today, they will win over their fellow citizens.

61. With so many of the working class who have lost hope in the despair of injustice, Christian associations can provide not just the practical answers to the problems, but also balm to the heart, “by helping them out of their difficulties, inviting them to companionship and receiving the returning wanderers to a haven where they can securely find repose.”

## V. CONCLUSION

62. All of this being said, again, the main thing is the need for religion, for only the Gospel can destroy evil at its root.

63. The Church will always be found available to help society. For this reason the bishops need to promote true charity, that law of the Gospel, the “surest antidote against worldly pride and immoderate love of self.”

64. Blessings.