



Catholic Social Thought and Unions

During the Industrial Revolution, Pope Leo XIII laid out the Church’s position on labor unions in his encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*,¹ in the context of “a cry of protest against the exploitation of poor workers.”² The pope solemnly rejected a then-dominant economic tenet, “that labor is a commodity to be bought at market prices determined by the law of supply and demand rather than by the human needs of the worker.”³

Pope Leo set the foundation in human dignity and the related belief that work is not just a commodity to be bought and sold. From these he developed specific rights belonging to workers—rights typical of union advocacy: reasonable hours, rest periods, health safeguards, and humane working conditions; special provisions for women and children, including minimum age requirements [59, 60, and 64]⁴; a wage sufficient to support a worker who is “thrifty and upright” and, by implication, his or her family [63]; and the right to form workers’ associations—unions [69-72].

Eighty years later, in *Laborem Exercens*,⁵ St. Pope John Paul II focused on work as “the essential key, to the whole social question” [3]. John Paul argued that, through the *Genesis* work-mandate “to subdue the earth,” humans image their Creator and share God’s creative action. This insight into work “implies a more equitable redistribution not only of income and wealth, but also of work itself in such a way that there may be employment for all.”⁶ Thus, the Pope reaffirmed worker and union rights, urging “worker solidarity” for social justice, an essential mission of the “church of the poor” [8].

Pope John Paul also called for “suitable employment for all who are capable of it,” and, when unavailable, unemployment benefits provided by employers or, upon their failure, the state [18]; just remuneration for work by a family head sufficient “for establishing and properly maintaining a family and for providing security for its future” [19], including a family wage or social measures such as family allowances for child-raising mothers; provision of health care, coverage of work accidents, inexpensive or free medical assistance for workers and families, old age pensions and insurance; and appropriate vacations and holidays [19]. Trade and professional unions are necessary, he maintained, and retain the right to organize, act politically, and to strike “within just limits” [20].

More recently, in *Caritas in Veritate*,⁷ Pope Benedict reiterated certain traditional particulars about human work: that it be freely chosen; not subject to discrimination; enable a family to meet their needs and

the educational needs of children; not rely on child labor; allow organization of workers (unions) and their voices to be heard; and support a decent retirement [63]. He underscored the importance of labor unions and their need to be open to defending the rights of others besides their own members and the interests of “workers in developing countries where social rights are often violated” [64].

Recognizing that union rights and negotiating capacity often are now more limited by governments and economic forces—increasing the powerlessness of citizens in the public sector and the economy—the pope wrote that the traditional promotion of workers’ associations must “be honored today even more than in the past, as a prompt and far-sighted response to the urgent need for new forms of cooperation at the international level, as well as the local level” [25].

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum (On the Condition of Labor)*, May 15, 1891.
- 2 Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Vatican Social Teaching* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983).
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- 4 Numbers in brackets refer to numbers in the document texts..
- 5 Pope St. John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens (On Human Work)*, September 14, 1981.
- 6 Vatican Congregation for Catholic Education, *Guidelines for the Study and Teaching of the Church’s Social Doctrine in the Formation of Priests*, December 30, 1988, in *Origins*, Vol. 19, No. 11, August 3, 1989, pp. 169-92, No. 26.
- 7 Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate (Charity in Truth)*, June 29, 2009.