

PAUL VI'S HOMILY AT "RERUM NOVARUM" ANNIVERSARY MASS.

On the occasion of the 80th anniversary of "Rerum Novarum", Pope Paul VI celebrated Holy Mass in the Vatican Basilica on May 16th in the presence of thousands of workers, the Holy Father delivered the following homily:

The moment of religious reflection, which the celebration of the holy rite grants us, is dedicated in the first place to defining the purpose of this simple and solemn ceremony.

The purpose, as you know, is commemorative. We wish to remember together an event that was of great importance at the time and later. We mean the publication by our venerated and great predecessor, Pope Leo XIII, of an official document of a universal character, that is, an Encyclical Letter on the social conditions of that time, eighty years ago, and more exactly the "working-class", namely the kind of economic, moral and social life that was then the lot of workers, after the first period of the industrial revolution.

CAPITAL AND LABOR

Production and wealth were multiplied on the one hand; a multitude of workers, poor and subjected were created on the other. The classes of society were delineated in a new form, divided and opposed by enormous inequalities. Polarized around two terms, capital and labour, there arose a paradoxical situation, for the sake of a common work, production, and the dissociation of minds and interests to the extent of systematic struggle between those engaged in the productive process. Thus there came into being a society forced to accept an inevitable collaboration and at the same time an inevitable conflict.

¹ *Osservatore Romano*, May 27, 1971.

The Pope then saw two striking phenomena. He saw that this spontaneous fundamental status of the new society that was being formed, a status of permanent struggle and therefore of innate aversion between the members of one and the same people, was mistaken with regard to the harmony, concord, equilibrium and peace that should make for its vitality and happiness. And he saw that this state of affairs involved for this very reason some radical injustice, and above all it not only tolerated, but often imposed on the immense class of workers inhuman living conditions, incalculable hardships and suffering, unjust inequalities with regard to common rights, a sort of condemnation to a humiliating kind of life, without freedom or hope.

THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL QUESTIONS

And so he spoke. The Church and the Pope himself had already denounced social errors on other occasions, particularly ideas that were giving rise to grave drawbacks in the new times, the industrial age. But this time the Pope's words were stronger, clearer, more direct; today we can say they were liberating and prophetic.

And here we come to the second purpose of this ceremony; it aims not only at commemorating, but also at justifying. Why did the Pope speak? Had he the right to do so? Was it within his sphere of competence? Yes, we reply, because it was his duty. Here it is a question of justifying this intervention of the Church and of the Pope in social questions, which are by their nature temporal questions, questions of this earth, which seem to fall outside the competence of one who has his *raison d'être* in Christ, whose kingdom He himself declared was not of this world. But if we look more closely we see that for the Pope it was not a question of the kingdom of this world, of politics, to put it simply. It was a question of the men who compose this kingdom, it was a question of the criteria of wisdom and justice that must inspire it. And from this point of view the voice of the Pope, raised in defence of the poor, forced to remain poor in the process of the production of the new riches, the humble and the exploited, was nothing but the echo of the voice of Christ, who gathered around him all those afflicted and oppressed to console and redeem them; the voice of Christ who proclaimed blessed the poor and those who hunger for justice, and who personified himself in every human being,

insignificant, weak, suffering, wretched, taking upon himself the debt of an enormous reward for anyone who took to heart and sought to help every kind of human misery.

This means that it is a right and a duty of the Pope, who represents Christ, of the whole Church, which is also the Mystical Body of Christ, nay more, of every authentic Christian, declared to be the brother of every other man, to be concerned with the good of his neighbour and do everything in his power for him. The graver and more pitiful is the condition of his neighbour in want, the stronger and more urgent is this duty-right.

TESTIMONY OF A GREAT DOCUMENT

It means also that the Church, in her ministers and her members, is by inborn vocation the ally of needy, long-suffering humanity. The salvation of everyone is her mission, and everyone needs to be saved; but her preference goes to those who need to be helped and defended, also in the temporal order. Human need had the first claim on her love. Normally poor herself, the Church, loving and suffering together with those who are hungry for bread and for justice, finds somehow in herself the miraculous virtue of Jesus who multiplied the loaves for the crowd and revealed the dignity of every living being, however wretched and lowly he might be. And she finds grave and sometimes threatening words, though always maternal, for the rich and the powerful, when indifference, selfishness, arrogance make them forget the fundamental equality and the universal brotherhood of men, and allow them to confiscate, for their own exclusive profit, the goods of the earth, particularly if the latter are the fruit of the sweat and the sacrifice of others.

There should be many things to say and explain in this connection about the performance or the nonfulfilment of this duty by ecclesiastics. But at the moment it is sufficient for us to accept the testimony of this great document, which has been crying out this message of social justice and human duty in modern history for eighty years, echoing it with perseverance, industry and love. It is echoed in the pages of the last Council, in which the only earthly glory that the Church claims for herself is that of serving man, whom she alone, if we observe closely, proclaims brothers, with an indisputable title.

Let us note in this way another purpose of this commemoration, that of continuing to proclaim the Church's social

teaching. The inexhaustible fecundity of the theological, philosophical and anthropological principles from which it draws its source and the validity of its teachings, the evangelical and historical imperative of its tradition, the tremendous whirlwind of theories, ideologies, social and political facts by which we are surrounded and assaulted, the persistence, in fact the recrudescence and outbreak of grave social problems, and, if for no other reason, the acceptance of pluralism of opinions and of systems with a view to the ever dynamic formation of a progressive social order, authorize the Church and oblige her Catholic sons to take part in the discussion on the basis of their own modern social doctrine.

In this light of eternal and living truths, this doctrine will interpret the experiences of the new times for the defence and advancement of man, directing him towards his real temporal and eternal destinies.

RECENT APOSTOLIC LETTER

To continue the Church's social teaching — this is what we have tried to do, listening again to what Leo XIII announced to the Church and to the world eighty years ago, with far more modest words in our Apostolic Letter, published yesterday and addressed to Cardinal Roy, the President of the Council of the Laity and of the Pontifical Commission of Justice and Peace, these new organs of the Church for the universal and apostolic diffusion of the Catholic doctrine on social matters. They are simple pages, open to your reflection especially, dear Christian workers, in order that you may have some good and well-pondered indication for your honest and legitimate progress towards the new conquests to which you aspire; in order that you may have confidence in the Church not only as the guide that sometimes intervenes in the discussion of your problems to preserve you from the lure of facile illusions or from intervals of bitterness and discouragement, but really as Mother and Teacher, to sustain you, stimulate you, defend you, and make you capable of achieving conquests of an economic character, which are at the same time really human, spiritual and religious; and finally in order that you will not deem out-of-date, inefficient or in need of equivocal integrations, the Christian name, which qualifies you and honours you. Loyalty, confidence, union, let this be our celebration of "Rerum Novarum", in the progress of work and in the joy of hope.