

# 125 Years *Rerum novarum*—The Theological Perspective

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## 1 The Man—Created to Receive God’s Love

125 years ago, Pope Leo XIII published his encyclical letter *Rerum novarum*<sup>1</sup> which marks the beginning of dealing with the social question in the Catholic Church. One background of this issue for the Catholic Church was the famine in Ireland in 1846/47. Important questions in Ireland were the right of ownership and the freedom of association. In the background stand the questions of decent life for the workers and the natural rights of man. Pope Leo XIII refers to this in his encyclical letter and strengthens the idea that there are natural rights of man, in general independent of faith and church. After the school of Salamanca, which introduced rights for the indigenous people in Africa and America, individual rights were mentioned in the catholic tradition for the first time. They build the anthropological background of the social question. Besides the impression of the Irish famine the Pope was influenced by the American bishops, who cooperates with the knights of labour and feel religious reservations not that important in the situation when the poor workers needed help. In the United States the poor workers were mostly catholic due to the fact, that they were immigrants from Ireland, Italy and Germany (Schratz 2011, 48–51).

So the social question was highly important for the church, because workers were the basis of the Catholic Church in the USA still in the 20th century: “It became preeminently the church of laborer and city dweller, of ghetto and slum, and kept that image until the post World War II flight to the suburbs” (Hennesey 1981, 175; Schratz 2011, 51). By that the interest of the Pope and the curia for the

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<sup>1</sup>German Text Edition see Leo XIII (1891).

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social question was evoked. Not the argument with Marx and Engels but with Henry George and the worker priest Edward McGlynn were central for the evolution of social teaching in the 19th century (Arnold 2011, 258). The question of the right of coalition was first discussed about the Knights of Labour, which were found in the USA in the 1830s. The knights dealt with the exploitation of the workers and were organized as a brotherhood according to the Freemason. This provoked the intervention of Sanctum Offizium, because Pope Leo XII forbid in 1825 this kind of organization with *excommunicatio latae sententiae* for his catholic members. But in the 1840s the US-American bishops reached a *modus vivendi* with the knights of labour and a kind of toleration by the church, which was fixed by the Baltimore council in 1866. Because it was seen by the church that the knights of labour, influenced by the catholic Henry George wanted in the first place help the workers. In these circumstances the idea of the natural law came again in the theological discussion. The core idea of this is that every man has dignity because of this nature. Nature is necessary to receive God's mercy as a person. You cannot neglect the natural condition of man as a basis also for a Christian anthropology. But Christian anthropology goes further and stresses, that man is creation of God and as ruler of the world responsible of the creation. Man is participating in creation by his ratio. This anthropology is important for social teaching of the church as it is established in *Rerum novarum*. Its biblical dimension is expressed in psalm 8: "What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?" Here the question of man is expressed and related to the idea of responsibility of man to fulfill God's will of all-bracing love. This is relevant in *Rerum novarum* by the mentioned responsibility to organize the working conditions and societal life. Leo XIII, denies not only the actual socialism of his time but also the idea of Ernst Bloch in his book "the principal of hope" (Bloch 1985), that every problem will be solved in the future, when the world as a whole has been turned into an socialist state: In the contrary the Pope stresses the responsibility of every person, to make God's love visible in the world and account to God for his life. This thought builds a strong tradition in Catholic Social teaching to this day, as it is also the core issue of the encyclical letter *Caritas in veritate* (Beretta et al. 2009; Cordes 2009, 324–332; Kruij 2009, 388–392; Küppers 2009, 419–427; Nothelle-Wildfeuer 2009, 3–9, written by Pope Benedikt XVI. on June 29th 2009. This encyclical is not only about social issues but a survey of catholic theology of history and anthropology explicitly on Augustinian priming. That means, economic and social policies and politics in general are viewed from a metaphysical point of view. Politics and economy are not only dealing with the adequate in the current situation but with the good for the life for every human being. The core question is: how can Christian love influence political and economical structures, how can mercy influence structural questions of justice? This question is not only reflected in both encyclical mentioned, but was a core question in the theology of Joseph Ratzinger and so Benedikt XVI. Is there a clear path from the Augustinian inwardness of human conscience to inner and outer justice in state and economy? For it is a strong confidence in catholic theology, that all systems in the world (and politics and economy are such systems producing aims as justice and solidarity) should conduct

the human as God's image with an immortal soul to God and his eternal love. The moral frame of reference is important for this. "On this subject the Church's social doctrine can make a specific contribution, since it is based on man's creation "in the image of God" (Gen 1:27), a datum which gives rise to the inviolable dignity of the human person and the transcendent value of natural moral norms."<sup>2</sup> This was expressed in former times perfectly in the first question of Catholic Catechism: "What for is man on earth? Man is on earth to serve God, to love him and by that come to heaven." That is continued by: "The desire to God is written in the man's heart, because man is created by and for God. "The central point of this spirituality is Love. So the Catechism of 1993 starts the first chapter "The life of man—to know and love God" with the words: "God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life. For this reason, at every time and in every place, God draws close to man". When this is correct and should be true, it is the best for every man to get the gift of endless love. The human being has a right for this love which can of course only be demanded of God, but of no court on earth. Then it is decisive that every man can find this love at least partially in his life and become so God's image (*imago dei*) (Pieper 2014). At the same time the way of virtue can be called Love which is explained broadly in the revelation of the New Testament and developed as an ethical system by the fathers of the church. Pleased through another person be allowed to acknowledge the happiness of the own life: this is exactly what is meant by the idea of creation as gift and offering of the own life. Here nature is thought completed and opened in the space of mercy. Nature and its randomness is interpreted as creation and divine necessity.

As mentioned above, man with his ratio is a specific issue in the world, because he can plan the future and overlook more than just the present. This is the starting point of natural law. As Joseph Ratzinger stresses: In modern times the only still existing idea of the natural law are the human rights, which come to man just because he is member of humanity (Ratzinger 2005, 35). By this you can also see the core issue of the encyclical *Caritas in veritate*: development. Not any development, but development in progress on the vocation of man by God to eternal life.

## 2 The Duties of Theological and Secular Institutions

For that in many social encyclicals as in *Rerum novarum* and *Caritas in veritate*, the background of institutions is mentioned as vocation and person, love and justice, truth and gift, freedom and ratio. So the basis of societal life is in question: what is the last meaning of our economic and social frame/order? Why do such orders and systems exist? From the point of view of Catholic social teaching the answer is clear: all societal systems and institutions, may they be theological (visible church with visible sacraments) or secular (state, laws and visible separation of powers)

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<sup>2</sup>Caritas in veritate, no. 45.

should support the man's vocation to receive love and to give love. This serves from the Christian perspective as instrument to reach the aim of man, which is not to accumulate material quantities but to enjoy spiritual qualities, according to the Augustinian "frui" in contradiction to "uti", which expresses only the useful aspect of basic commodities.<sup>3</sup> Everything is serving to fulfill man's vocation, to receive spiritual gifts of which love is the most important. As it is mentioned in *Caritas in veritate* love is the best truth about man, over which nothing bigger and better can be thought, to use and slightly modify a word of Anselm of Canterbury.<sup>4</sup> *Caritas in veritate* is in fact the principal and core issue of Christian anthropology and the social teaching of the church. Justice (and also social justice), which is a central question of social teaching, is the first and necessary, but not sufficient step of realizing love, which is only partially possible outside the paradise. I cannot give a gift to a person, when I didn't give him before the things he has a right to (see *Caritas in veritate*, no. 6). First the basic needs must be fulfilled to give the chance of surviving to man. But remaining on the level of basic goods estranges man from his vocation of receive and give love. As Pope John Paul II said in his social encyclical *Centesimus annus*, one hundred years after *Rerum novarum*, this evokes an alienation of man by losing his meaning of life.<sup>5</sup> This is accelerated extremely in every day's consumption, when artificial needs are fulfilled, which distract man of this core issue on earth and does not help man to a true experience of this person or personality (see *Centesimus annus* no. 43). In the view of Christian anthropology it is the most important issue of state as welfare state and state founded on the rule of law, to prevent this development. To explain it by the parable of the Samaritan: it is the state's duty to prevent man of laying in the street, hurt by alienation which makes it necessary to wait for the helping Samaritan. Just the opposite: man should participate in the creation of a civilization of love, which is close to the *civitas Dei* of Augustine.<sup>6</sup> Here it is important to remember the duality of *civitas Dei* and *civitas terrena* by Augustine: the *civitas terrena* is secularized and statutorily regulated just to ensure the fulfillment of the basic needs of man. The *civitas Dei* means the good life of bliss. The state secures the base for peaceful und tolerant living together, i.e. law and justice. The *civitas Dei* is not simply congruent with the visible church but can be found in the forum internum in the eternal soul which has to decide between "uti" and "frui", i.e. between egocentric utility and give and receive of selfless love. This choice can be judged in the forum externum. The difference between the spiritual quality and the quantity of life is a cornerstone of European metaphysics and anthropology as it is mentioned in Plato's *Gorgias*: "Better suffer injustice than commit it." When just surviving is replacing good and meaningful life, the ethical consent is lost. This happens more and more in western

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<sup>3</sup>See Benedikt XVI (2009).

<sup>4</sup>See Anselm of Canterbury (2005, 21). "Et quidem credimus te esse aliquid quo nihil maius cogitari possit".

<sup>5</sup>See Johannes Paul (1991).

<sup>6</sup>See Augustinus (2007).

postmodern society by relinquishing the metaphysical question and ban religion strictly in privacy.

### 3 The Eschatological Dimension of Social Ethics

The parable of the Samaritan in the gospel of Luke implicitly shows that love is more than justice although love assumes justice. That also means God's mercy assumes man's nature and is going to make it perfect. "Gratia non destruit sed supponit et perfectit naturam".<sup>7</sup> Man's redemption by God's mercy make it possible for man to recognition and realization of real love in the inner attitude of faith (to God's revelation in the church and the sacraments) and hope (on fulfillment of the personal pursuit of happiness). Thus Hans Urs von Balthasar mentioned that life according to nature is only a life with fulfillment of basic needs, but a Christian life is life in plenty and so life with thanks to God: Eucharist (von Balthasar 1960, 179). Such a life is incarnated in Christ and is revealed to man by the sacraments. So it creates the second nature of man. Because the state is able to prevent man of being robbed or alienated but cannot prevent man of losing the meaning of personal life. The welfare state is grounded on fundamentals which it cannot guarantee by itself: the personal gifted and received love, which it only can make possible and hope for it. This is "the logic of give and forgive", which is certificated in the prologue of John's Gospel as the beginning of the whole creation and so being the nature of God, who creates by the logic of love man.

Of course this logic cannot deliver economic rules directly: there is no direct line from God's existence to rules for the market, this would be a naturalistic and economic wrong conclusion. But the rules of the market and its mathematical basis are only one side of the medal of economy. Social ethics will just concentrate on human capital; man as person in the economic system. That was also meant in the encyclical *Rerum novarum*, where no ideology, whether capitalism nor socialism is in favor, but man's dignity as God's creature. In the economic sphere the church has not technical solutions to offer, because it misses specialized competence. But it is the church's duty and competence to judge what helps concretely man's dignity and is promoting the common good, which is not only the best possible of most people but the absolute best for every person.

How should this be possible in a world that is missing the metaphysical perspective and feels completed in pure materialism? So social ethics has always to keep in mind the eschatological view. The just development of the person is the core issue of social ethics.

This issue is in danger by two historical philosophical traditions: the one of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the one of Auguste Comte. While Comte sets absolutely on technical development and progress, Rousseau's philosophy is the return

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<sup>7</sup>For the background see Goertz (2010, 221–243).

to nature of mankind. Both ideas split progress and development from moral judgment and so from man's responsibility. Theologically expressed it means: to see progress only in measurable steps of *forum externum* does not match with human person in Christian understanding because man possesses an eternal soul. Man is not only a mechanistic machine. Although man is oriented to the good out of nature—for the catholic teaching also after the original sin—without the revelation and the knowing of God the good becomes more and more unclear materially. Although by nature the man owns the pursuit of happiness, without faith the good tends to be mixed up with the pleasant or the just technical right. The frankness for the supernatural gift of love may exist in man by nature, but without faith it may fail. Between the natural state of Rousseau and the original state of Christianity there may be formal similarities. Also for Rousseau the original sin is the use of the ratio, but he expects human and finite redemption, not redemption by God or sacrament. His idea is autonomy against theological heteronomy. Rousseau agrees with Christian faith in the idea of the original good nature of man. As Ernst Cassirer mentioned the man is good of nature as long as the nature does not express itself by natural impulses but is open to reach the idea of freedom, because the difference between human beings and all other beings is its perfectibility (Cassirer 2012, 45).

#### 4 Reciprocity of Personal Freedom and Social Justice

The encyclical *Caritas in veritate* culminates in the small sentence: “God is the guaranty of true development of man” (*Caritas in veritate* no. 29). Behind this background the encyclical is in favor of social market economy as an institution that makes encounters of men possible. The social market economy is the third way between pure capitalism and socialism already mentioned in *Rerum novarum*. This shows the long and strong tradition of the ideas of *Rerum novarum* although it is always conformed to actual challenges. That market of encounter is impeded, when enterprises feel answerable only to investors and shareholders but forget the common good of society. For banks, which are necessary for modern economy, this is valid in a special way. The aim of the institution of social market economy is retributive justice and solidarity with actual living and also with coming generations. This is also the deeper meaning of acting as entrepreneur: it is not the meaning of accumulating profits but to create jobs, gaining profits by that and enabling others to gain profits. Only with that the development of a civilization of love is possible, as it is aimed in Catholic social teaching from *Rerum novarum* to *Caritas in veritate* and beyond. This civilization should enable man to live a globally successful life. Here you can see the difference of an Augustinian natural law and the scholastically natural law. In the tradition of Augustine man is understood as a person who is free and has the right of progress to reach the fulfillment of his personal aim while the scholastically view only gives the right to a special and individual being. Man has the right to develop himself to recognize his inner meaning. So in the Christian anthropology you need a legal system who stresses the

personal freedom of man. This could be found in the social market economy, when *iustitia socialis*, as all-round social justice, is implemented by an institutional *caritas*. Social justice as participative equity with the elements of participation and contribution aims at surmounting social exclusion and missing participation and can be understood as social love, i.e. *caritas*. Inclusion, not exclusion is the societal program of Catholic social teaching. Participatory equity in this understanding includes solidarity and at the same time subsidiarity, which means responsibility of those able to take it. This is ethically required to fulfill the ideas of Christian anthropology. An Ordoliberalism means that exactly as personal freedom is embedded in strong just order in this kind of liberalism. And Ordoliberalism is the background of social market economy.

## 5 Promoting Human Freedom to the Good

The human freedom must be understood as well as freedom of thinking. As in *Caritas in veritate* mentioned the world seems to be ill, because “thoughts are missing”.<sup>8</sup> Thoughts are the decisive point, because when you think something you open the possibility to act according to the thought. So thoughts are important for the decision to act just to fulfill your basic needs or to act in aiming at the life in all-round love and happiness as it describes God’s plan with mankind. Thoughts are by this important for moral freedom because you can choose between these two opportunities. But although man decides in favor of the good he must be understood as a creature of deficiency. Man as God’s creation, called to give and receive love is also limited by his natural capacity to fail and, in theological language, to sin. To sin means to live as if God does not exist, to eliminate him from day to day life, to doubt of the own necessity of existence and to feel dispensable as individual. Against that the freedom to the good must be promoted, although it can fail. God’s good thought was the creation of man and his destination to eternal life. If you leave that anthropological base of economy and social ethics, economic and social acting is reduced to technocratic pragmatism, because the last meaning of life is missed. Of course as mentioned in *Rerum novarum* as a reaction of the situation of the poor workers in the USA, catholic social teaching has its duty in helping improving the situation of the poor. But the background of his duty is man’s creation as image of God with his own dignity. So it is important to introduce that Christian anthropology also in the public sphere and the legal order of a society. So far there is no difference between the challenge of Catholic social teaching at the time of *Rerum novarum* and today. The anthropology is the background of catholic social teaching to all times. Its promotion is still necessary in a democratic state founded on the rule of law. This is the distinguished challenge and duty of the church.

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<sup>8</sup>See *caritas in veritate* no. 53, citing the encyclical *populorum progressio* of Paul VI, no. 85.

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