



Graves De Communi Re

Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII on Christian Democracy

January 18, 1901

To Our Venerable Brethren the Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, Bishops, and other Ordinaries in Peace and Communion with the Apostolic See.

1. The grave discussions on economical questions which for some time past have disturbed the peace of several countries of the world are growing in frequency and intensity to such a degree that the minds of thoughtful men are filled, and rightly so, with worry and alarm. These discussions take their rise in the bad philosophical and ethical teaching which is now widespread among the people. The changes, also, which the mechanical inventions of the age have introduced, the rapidity of communication between places, and the devices of every kind for diminishing labor and increasing gain, all add bitterness to the strife; and, lastly, matters have been brought to such a pass by the struggle between capital and labor, fomented as it is by professional agitators, that the countries where these disturbances most frequently occur find themselves confronted with ruin and disaster.

2. At the very beginning of Our pontificate We clearly pointed out what the peril was which confronted society on this head, and We deemed it Our duty to warn Catholics, in unmistakable language,[1] how great the error was which was lurking in the utterances of socialism, and how great the danger was that threatened not only their temporal possessions, but also their morality and religion. That was the purpose of Our encyclical letter *Quod Apostolici Muneris* which We published on the 28th of December in the year 1878; but, as these dangers day by day threatened still greater disaster, both to individuals and the commonwealth, We strove with all the more energy to avert them. This was the object of Our encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of the 15th of May, 1891, in which we dwelt at length on the rights and duties which both classes of society—those namely, who control capital,

and those who contribute labor-are bound in relation to each other; and at the same time, We made it evident that the remedies which are most useful to protect the cause of religion, and to terminate the contest between the different classes of society, were to be found in the precepts of the Gospel.

3. Nor, with God's grace, were Our hopes entirely frustrated. Even those who are not Catholics, moved by the power of truth, avowed that the Church must be credited with a watchful care over all classes of society, and especially those whom fortune had least favored. Catholics, of course, profited abundantly by these letters, for they not only received encouragement and strength for the excellent undertakings in which they were engaged, but also obtained the light which they needed in order to study this order of problems with great sureness and success. Hence it happened that the differences of opinion which prevailed among them were either removed or lessened. In the order of action, much has been done in favor of the proletariat, especially in those places where poverty was at its worst. Many new institutions were set on foot, those which were already established were increased, and all reaped the benefit of a greater stability. Such are, for instance, the popular bureaus which supply information to the uneducated; the rural banks which make loans to small farmers; the societies for mutual help or relief; the unions of working men and other associations or institutions of the same kind. Thus, under the auspices of the Church, a measure of united action among Catholics was secured, as well as some planning in the setting up of agencies for the protection of the masses which, in fact, are as often oppressed by guile and exploitation of their necessities as by their own indigence and toil.

4. This work of popular aid had, at first, no name of its own. The name of Christian Socialism, with its derivatives, which was adopted by some was very properly allowed to fall into disuse. Afterwards, some asked to have it called the popular Christian Movement. In the countries most concerned with this matter, there are some who are known as Social Christians. Elsewhere, the movement is described as Christian Democracy and its partisans as Christian Democrats, in opposition to what the socialists call Social Democracy. Not much exception is taken to the first of these two names, i.e., Social Christians, but many excellent men find the term Christian Democracy objectionable. They hold it to be very ambiguous and for this reason open to two objections. It seems by implication covertly to favor popular government and to disparage other methods of political administration. Secondly, it appears to belittle religion by restricting its scope to the care of the poor, as if the other sections of society were not of its concern. More than that, under the shadow of its name there might easily lurk a design to attack all legitimate power, either civil or sacred. Wherefore, since this discussion is now so widespread, and so bitter, the consciousness of duty warns Us to put a check on this controversy and to define what Catholics are to think on this matter. We also propose to describe how the movement may extend its scope and be made more useful to the commonwealth.

5. What Social Democracy is and what Christian Democracy ought to be, assuredly

no one can doubt. The first, with due consideration to the greater or less intemperance of its utterance, is carried to such an excess by many as to maintain that there is really nothing existing above the natural order of things, and that the acquirement and enjoyment of corporal and external goods constitute man's happiness. It aims at putting all government in the hands of the masses, reducing all ranks to the same level, abolishing all distinction of class, and finally introducing community of goods. Hence, the right to own private property is to be abrogated, and whatever property a man possesses, or whatever means of livelihood he has, is to be common to all.

6. As against this, Christian Democracy, by the fact that it is Christian, is built, and necessarily so, on the basic principles of divine faith, and it must provide better conditions for the masses, with the ulterior object of promoting the perfection of souls made for things eternal. Hence, for Christian Democracy, justice is sacred; it must maintain that the right of acquiring and possessing property cannot be impugned, and it must safeguard the various distinctions and degrees which are indispensable in every wellordered commonwealth. Finally, it must endeavor to preserve in every human society the form and the character which God ever impresses on it. It is clear, therefore, that there is nothing in common between Social and Christian Democracy. They differ from each other as much as the sect of socialism differs from the profession of Christianity.

7. Moreover, it would be a crime to distort this name of Christian Democracy to politics, for, although democracy, both in its philological and philosophical significations, implies popular government, yet in its present application it must be employed without any political significance, so as to mean nothing else than this beneficent Christian action in behalf of the people. For, the laws of nature and of the Gospel, which by right are superior to all human contingencies, are necessarily independent of all particular forms of civil government, while at the same time they are in harmony with everything that is not repugnant to morality and justice. They are, therefore, and they must remain absolutely free from the passions and the vicissitudes of parties, so that, under whatever political constitution, the citizens may and ought to abide by those laws which command them to love God above all things, and their neighbors as themselves. This has always been the policy of the Church. The Roman Pontiffs acted upon this principle, whenever they dealt with different countries, no matter what might be the character of their governments. Hence, the mind and the action of Catholics devoted to promoting the welfare of the working classes can never be actuated with the purpose of favoring and introducing one government in place of another.

8. In the same manner, we must remove from Christian Democracy another possible subject of reproach, namely, that while looking after the advantage of the working people it should seem to overlook the upper classes of society, for they also are of the greatest use in preserving and perfecting the commonwealth. The Christian law of charity, which has just been mentioned, will prevent us from so doing. For it embraces all men, irrespective of ranks, as members of one and the

same family, children of the same most beneficent Father, redeemed by the same Saviour, and called to the same eternal heritage. Hence the doctrine of the Apostle, who warns us that "We are one body and one spirit called to the one hope in our vocation; one Lord, one faith and one baptism; one God and the Father of all who is above all, and through all, and in us all." [2] Wherefore, on account of the union established by nature between the common people and the other classes of society, and which Christian brotherhood makes still closer, whatever diligence we devote to assisting the people will certainly profit also the other classes, the more so since, as will be thereafter shown, their co-operation is proper and necessary for the success of this undertaking.

9. Let there be no question of fostering under this name of Christian Democracy any intention of diminishing the spirit of obedience, or of withdrawing people from their lawful rulers. Both the natural and the Christian law command us to revere those who in their various grades are shown above us in the State, and to submit ourselves to their just commands. It is quite in keeping with our dignity as men and Christians to obey, not only exteriorly, but from the heart, as the Apostle expresses it, "for conscience' sake," when he commands us to keep our soul subject to the higher powers. [3] It is abhorrent to the profession of Christianity that any one should feel unwilling to be subject and obedient to those who rule in the Church, and first of all to the bishops whom (without prejudice to the universal power of the Roman Pontiff) "the Holy Spirit has placed to rule the Church of God which Christ has purchased by His Blood." [4] He who thinks or acts otherwise is guilty of ignoring the grave precept of the Apostle who bids us to obey our rulers and to be subject to them, for they watch as having to give an account of our souls. [5] Let the faithful everywhere implant these principles deep in their souls, and put them in practice in their daily life, and let the ministers of the Gospel meditate them profoundly, and incessantly labor, not merely by exhortation but especially by example, to teach them to others.

10. We have recalled these principles, which on other occasions We had already elucidated, in the hope that all dispute about the name of Christian Democracy will cease and that all suspicion of any danger coming from what the name signifies will be put at rest. And with reason do We hope so; for, neglecting the opinions of certain men whose views on the nature and efficacy of this kind of Christian Democracy are not free from exaggeration and from error, let no one condemn that zeal which, in accordance with the natural and divine laws, aims to make the condition of those who toil more tolerable; to enable them to obtain, little by little, those means by which they may provide for the future; to help them to practice in public and in private the duties which morality and religion inculcate; to aid them to feel that they are not animals but men, not heathens but Christians, and so to enable them to strive more zealously and more eagerly for the one thing which is necessary; viz., that ultimate good for which we are born into this world. This is the intention; this is the work of those who wish that the people should be animated by Christian sentiments and should be protected from the contamination of socialism which threatens them.

11. We have designedly made mention here of virtue and religion. For, it is the opinion of some, and the error is already very common, that the social question is merely an economic one, whereas in point of fact it is, above all, a moral and religious matter, and for that reason must be settled by the principles of morality and according to the dictates of religion. For, even though wages are doubled and the hours of labor are shortened and food is cheapened, yet, if the working man hearkens to the doctrines that are taught on this subject, as he is prone to do, and is prompted by the examples set before him to throw off respect for God and to enter upon a life of immorality, his labors and his gain will avail him naught.

12. Trial and experience have made it abundantly clear that many a workman lives in cramped and miserable quarters, in spite of his shorter hours and larger wages, simply because he has cast aside the restraints of morality and religion. Take away the instinct which Christian wisdom has planted and nurtured in men's hearts, take away foresight, temperance, frugality, patience, and other rightful, natural habits, no matter how much he may strive, he will never achieve prosperity. That is the reason why We have incessantly exhorted Catholics to enter these associations for bettering the condition of the laboring classes, and to organize other undertakings with the same object in view; but We have likewise warned them that all this should be done under the auspices of religion, with its help and under its guidance.

13. The zeal of Catholics on behalf of the masses is especially praiseworthy because it is engaged in the very same field in which, under the benign inspiration of the Church the active industry of charity has always labored, adapting itself in all cases to the varying exigencies of the times. For the law of mutual charity perfects, as it were, the law of justice, not merely by giving each man his due and in not impeding him in the exercise of his rights, but also by befriending him, "not with the word alone, or the lips, but in deed and in truth";[6] being mindful of what Christ so lovingly said to His own: "A new commandment I give unto you, that you love one another, as I have loved you, that you love also one another. By this shall all men know that you are My disciples, if you have love one for the other."[7] This zeal in coming to the rescue of our fellow men should, of course, be solicitous, first for the eternal good of souls, but it must not neglect what is good and helpful for this life.

14. We should remember what Christ said to the disciple of the Baptist who asked him: "Art thou he that art to come or look we for another?"[8] He invoked, as proof of the mission given to Him among men, His exercise of charity, quoting for them the text of Isaias: "The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead rise again, the poor have the Gospel preached to them."[9] And speaking also of the last judgment and of the rewards and punishments He will assign, He declared that He would take special account of the charity men exercised toward each other. And in that discourse there is one thing that especially excites our surprise, viz., that Christ omits those works of mercy which comfort the soul and referring only to those which comfort the body, He regards them as being done to Himself: "For I was hungry and you gave Me to eat; I was

thirsty and you gave Me to drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; naked and you covered Me; sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me."[10]

15. To the teachings which enjoin the twofold charity of spiritual and corporal works Christ adds His own example, so that no one may fail to recognize the importance which He attaches to it. In the present instance we recall the sweet words that came from His paternal heart: "I have pity on the multitude,"[11] as well as the desire He had to assist them even if it were necessary to invoke His miraculous power. Of His tender compassion we have the proclamation made in holy Writ, viz., that "He went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil."[12] This law of charity which He imposed upon His Apostles, they in the most holy and zealous way put into practice; and after them those who embraced Christianity originated that wonderful variety of institutions for alleviating all the miseries by which mankind is afflicted. And these institutions carried on and continually increased their powers of relief and were the especial glories of Christianity and of the civilization of which it was the source, so that right-minded men never fail to admire those foundations, aware as they are of the proneness of men to concern themselves about their own and neglect the needs of others.

16. Nor are we to eliminate from the list of good works the giving of money for charity, in pursuance of what Christ has said: "But yet that which remaineth, give alms."[13] Against this, the socialist cries out and demands its abolition as injurious to the native dignity of man. But, if it is done in the manner which the Scripture enjoins,[14] and in conformity with the true Christian spirit, it neither connotes pride in the giver nor inflicts shame upon the one who receives. Far from being dishonorable for man, it draws closer the bonds of human society of augmenting the force of the obligation of the duties which men are under with regard to each other. No one is so rich that he does not need another's help; no one so poor as not to be useful in some way to his fellow man; and the disposition to ask assistance from others with confidence and to grant it with kindness is part of our very nature. Thus, justice and charity are so linked with each other, under the equable and sweet law of Christ, as to form an admirable cohesive power in human society and to lead all of its members to exercise a sort of providence in looking after their own and in seeking the common good as well.

17. As regards not merely the temporary aid given to the laboring classes, but the establishment of permanent institutions in their behalf, it is most commendable for charity to undertake them. It will thus see that more certain and more reliable means of assistance will be afforded to the necessitous. That kind of help is especially worthy of recognition which forms the minds of mechanics and laborers to thrift and foresight, so that in course of time they may be able, in part at least, to look out for themselves. To aim at that is not only to dignify the duty of the rich toward the poor, but to elevate the poor themselves, for, while it urges them to work in order to improve their condition, it preserves them meantime from danger, it refrains immoderation in their desires, and acts as a spur in the practice of

virtue. Since, therefore, this is of such great avail and so much in keeping with the spirit of the times, it is a worthy object for the charity of righteous men to undertake with prudence and zeal.

18. Let it be understood, therefore, that this devotion of Catholics to comfort and elevate the mass of the people is in keeping with the spirit of the Church and is most conformable to the examples which the Church has always held up for imitation. It matters very little whether it goes under the name of the Popular Christian Movement or Christian Democracy, if the instructions that have been given by Us be fully carried out with fitting obedience. But it is of the greatest importance that Catholics should be one in mind, will, and action in a matter of such great moment. And it is also of importance that the influence of these undertakings should be extended by the multiplication of men and means devoted to the same object.

19. Especially must there be appeals to the kindly assistance of those whose rank, wealth, and intellectual as well as spiritual culture give them a certain standing in the community. If their help is not extended, scarcely anything can be done which will help in promoting the wellbeing of the people. Assuredly, the more earnestly many of those who are prominent citizens conspire effectively to attain that object, the quicker and surer will the end be reached. We would, however, have them understand that they are not at all free to look after or neglect those who happen to be beneath them, but that it is a strict duty which binds them. For, no one lives only for his personal advantage in a community; he lives for the common good as well, so that, when others cannot contribute their share for the general good, those who can do so are obliged to make up the deficiency. The very extent of the benefits they have received increases the burden of their responsibility, and a stricter account will have to be rendered to God who bestowed those blessings upon them. What should also urge all to the fulfillment of their duty in this regard is the widespread disaster which will eventually fall upon all classes of society if his assistance does not arrive in time; and therefore is it that he who neglects the cause of the distressed masses is disregarding his own interest as well as that of the community.

20. If this action, which is social in the Christian sense of the term develops and grows in accordance with its own nature, there will be no danger, as is feared, that those other institutions, which the piety of our ancestors have established and which are now flourishing, will decline or be absorbed by new foundations. Both of them spring from the same root of charity and religion, and not only do not conflict with each other, but can easily be made to coalesce and combine so perfectly as to provide, all the better by the pooling of their beneficent efforts, for the needs of the masses and for the daily increasing perils to which they are exposed.

21. The condition of things at present proclaims, and proclaims vehemently, that there is need for a union of brave minds with all the resources they can command. The harvest of misery is before our eyes, and the dreadful projects of the most

disastrous national upheavals are threatening us from the growing power of the socialistic movement. They have insidiously worked their way into the very heart of the community, and in the darkness of their secret gatherings, and in the open light of day, in their writings and their harangues, they are urging the masses onward to sedition; they fling aside religious discipline; they scorn duties; they clamor only for rights; they are working incessantly on the multitudes of the needy which daily grow greater, and which, because of their poverty are easily deluded and led into error. It is equally the concern of the State and of religion, and all good men should deem it a sacred duty to preserve and guard both in the honor which is their due.

22. That this most desirable agreement of wills should be maintained, it is essential that all refrain from giving any cause of dissension which hurt and divide minds. Hence, in newspapers and in speeches to the people, let them avoid subtle and practically useless questions which are neither easy to solve nor easy to understand except by minds of unusual ability and after the most serious study. It is quite natural for people to hesitate on doubtful subjects, and that different men should hold different opinions, but those who sincerely seek after truth will preserve equanimity, modesty, and courtesy in matters of dispute. They will not let differences of opinion deteriorate into conflicts of wills. Besides, to whatever opinion a man's judgment may incline, if the matter is yet open to discussion, let him keep it, provided he be always disposed to listen with religious obedience to what the Holy See may decide on the question.

23. The action of Catholics, of whatever description it may be, will work with greater effect if all of the various associations, while preserving their individual rights, move together under one primary and directive force. In Italy, We desire that this directive force should emanate from the Institute of Catholic Congresses and Reunions so often praised by Us, to which Our predecessor and We Ourselves have committed the charge of controlling the common action of Catholics under the authority and direction of the bishops of the country. So let it be for other nations, in case there be any leading organization of this description to which this matter has been legitimately entrusted.

24. Now, in all questions of this sort where the interests of the Church and the Christian people are so closely allied, it is evident what they who are in the sacred ministry should do, and it is clear how industrious they should be in inculcating right doctrine and in teaching the duties of prudence and charity. To go out and move among the people, to exert a healthy influence on them by adapting themselves to the present condition of things, is what more than once in addressing the clergy We have advised. More frequently, also, in writing to the bishops and other dignitaries of the Church, and especially of late,[15] We have lauded this affectionate solicitude for the people and declared it to be the special duty of both the secular and regular clergy. But in the fulfillment of this obligation let there be the greatest caution and prudence exerted, and let it be done after the fashion of the saints. Francis, who was poor and humble, Vincent of Paul, the father

of the afflicted classes, and very many others whom the Church keeps ever in her memory were wont to lavish their care upon the people, but in such wise as not to be engrossed overmuch or to be unmindful of themselves or to let it prevent them from laboring with the same assiduity in the perfection of their own soul and the cultivation of virtue.

25. There remains one thing upon which We desire to insist very strongly, in which not only the ministers of the Gospel, but also all those who are devoting themselves to the cause of the people, can with very little difficulty bring about a most commendable result. That is to inculcate in the minds of the people, in a brotherly way and whenever the opportunity presents itself, the following principles; viz.: to keep aloof on all occasions from seditious acts and seditious men; to hold inviolate the rights of others; to show a proper respect to superiors; to willingly perform the work in which they are employed; not to grow weary of the restraint of family life which in many ways is so advantageous; to keep to their religious practices above all, and in their hardships and trials to have recourse to the Church for consolation. In the furtherance of all this, it is of great help to propose the splendid example of the Holy Family of Nazareth, and to advise the invocation of its protection, and it also helps to remind the people of the examples of sanctity which have shone in the midst of poverty, and to hold up before them the reward that awaits them in the better life to come.

26. Finally, We recur again to what We have already declared and We insist upon it most solemnly; viz., that whatever projects individuals or associations form in this matter should be formed under episcopal authority. Let them not be led astray by an excessive zeal in the cause of charity. If it leads them to be wanting in proper submission, it is not a sincere zeal; it will not have any useful result and cannot be acceptable to God. God delights in the souls of those who put aside their own designs and obey the rulers of His Church as if they were obeying Him; He assists them even when they attempt difficult things and benignly leads them to their desired end. Let them show, also, examples of virtue, so as to prove that a Christian is a hater of idleness and self-indulgence, that he stands firm and unconquered in the midst of adversity. Examples of that kind have a power of moving people to dispositions of soul that make for salvation, and have all the greater force as the condition of those who give them is higher in the social scale.

27. We exhort you, venerable brethren, to provide for all this, as the necessities of men and of places may require, according to your prudence and your zeal, meeting as usual in council to combine with each other in your plans for the furtherance of these projects. Let your solicitude watch and let your authority be effective in controlling, compelling, and also in preventing, lest any one under the pretext of good should cause the vigor of sacred discipline to be relaxed or the order which Christ has established in His Church to be disturbed. Thus, by the rightful, harmonious and ever-increasing labor of all Catholics, let it become more and more evident that the tranquility of order and the true prosperity flourish especially among those peoples whom the Church controls and influences; and that she holds

it as her sacred duty to admonish every one of what the law of God enjoins, to unite the rich and the poor in the bonds of fraternal charity, and to lift up and strengthen men's souls in the times when adversity presses heavily upon them.

28. Let Our commands and Our wishes be confirmed by the words so full of apostolic charity which the blessed Paul addressed to the Romans: "I beseech you therefore brethren, be reformed in the newness of your mind; he that giveth, with simplicity; he that ruleth, with carefulness; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness. Let love be without dissimulation. Hating that which is evil; cleaving to that which is good; loving one another with the charity of brotherhood; with honor preventing one another; in carefulness, not slothful; rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; instant in prayer. Communicating to the necessities of the saints. Pursuing hospitality. Rejoice with them that rejoice; weep with them that weep; being of one mind to one another; to no man rendering evil for evil; providing good things not only in the sight of God but also in the sight of men."[16]

29. As a pledge of these benefits receive the apostolic benediction which, venerable brethren, We grant most lovingly in the Lord to you and your clergy and people.

Given at St. Peter's in Rome, the eighteenth day of January, 1901, the thirteenth year of Our pontificate.

Endnotes

1. See above, Quod Apostolici Muneris, no. 79: Rerum novarum, no. 115.
2. Eph. 4:4-6.
3. Rom. 13:1, 5.
4. Acts 20:28.
5. Heb. 13:11.
6. 1 John 3:18.
7. John 13:34-35.
8. Matt. 11:3.
9. Matt. 11:4 5.
10. Matt. 25:35-36.
11. Mark 8:2.
12. Acts 10:38.
13. Luke 11:41.
14. Matt. 6:2-4.
15. Letter to the Minister General of the Minorites, November 25, 1898. In this letter, the Pope recalled the instructions given in Aeterni Patris concerning the way to be followed in higher studies; the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas should be followed by all the religious who wish truly to philosophize (qui vere philosophari volunt); paramount importance of the study of holy Scripture; how to preach the word of God; forceful exhortation addressed to the Franciscans to go out of their monasteries and, following the example of St. Francis, devote themselves to the salvation of the masses; importance of the Third Order of St. Francis with regard to

this work.

16. Rom. 12:1, 2, 8-13, 15-17.