



THE SOCIAL ENCYCLICALS /1/ OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH – AN INTERPRETATION OF REALITY

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ABSTRACT

The 19th century was characterized by rapid industrialization, urbanization, growing exploitation of the poor by the wealthy few, as well as moral decay. The exploitation was cruel; it suffices to open a classical literature book set during this period to confirm this. We can all recall the staggering cruelty of the stories told in the works of Charles Dickens and Gerhart Hauptmann. The fall of the state and the destruction of the church were purposeful models followed by the disciples of Marx and Engels in their attempt to take over the Old Continent.

The first official response of the Christian Church was given by the Holy See. Pope Leo XIII /1878-1903/ promulgated on May 15, 1891 at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome his encyclical "Rerum Novarum", which can be translated as "Of New Things". This was the first social encyclical of the Catholic Church, regarded by many church historians as revolutionary. The 256th Pope of the Roman Catholic Church categorically denounced socialism, defended the right to private property and expressed concern for the workers of the world suffering repression and exploitation, and living without the protection of society and state. The Bishop of Rome criticized "the enormous fortunes of some few individuals and the utter poverty of the masses." /4/ He also reminded the people that the Holy Bible regards avarice and the thirst for immense wealth as sinful.

In this document we can also find the first ideas to establish Christian syndicates. Pope Leo XIII viewed the unjust distribution of wealth and the removal of religion from school education as the main problems of the time. The rejection of God deprives the human being of his true nature and thus forces man to reorganize the social order with no regard for dignity and personal responsibility. /5/ 100 years later, his successor at the Holy See, Pope John Paul II defined Rerum Novarum as "a date of extreme

importance in the modern history of the Church". /5/

"Quadragesimo anno"/1931/ is the second social encyclical issued by Pope Pius XI /1922-1939/, who signed the Lateran Treaty between the Kingdom of Italy and the Vatican resulting in the establishment of Vatican state. The document was issued in observance of the 40th anniversary since the proclamation of Rerum Novarum and coincided with a period of rapid economic development followed by the great economic crisis in Europe which began in 1929 and continued until 1931. In this document Pope Pius XI defended private property and criticized the radical idealism that belittled the social and moral dimensions of economic activity. /6/

The author of the third encyclical "Mater et Magistra" /1961/, which can be translated as "Mother and Teacher", was Pope John XXIII, one of the most prominent leaders of the Catholic Church. He is known in our country as the Bulgarian Pope because of his stay in Bulgaria between 1925 and 1934 in the capacity of delegate of the Vatican. The document is characterized by a more ordinary writing style, it is not as philosophical and theological as its predecessors. The Pope states that the social teachings of the church are directed with benevolence and good will to all people in the world. He also proposes several solutions –

assistance with qualification, education and investment of capital. Pope John XXIII issued another encyclical “*Pacem in Terris*”, translated as “Peace on Earth”, which discusses peace, justice, love and freedom. It was written during the first year of the revolutionary Second Vatican Council /1962-1965/ summoned by Pope John XXIII. In this encyclical we can find the description of 38 rights divided into three groups: human; moral and cultural; and economic. /7/ The papal document, presenting new ideals and freshly formulated theses with original language and an argumentative style, gradually became a new foundation, paving the way for the Church to become directly engaged in the social issues of the future. The main topic of the fifth encyclical “*Populorum Progressio*” /1967/, issued by Pope Paul VI /1963-1978/, was the development of man and mankind. This Holy Father was also the first Pope to visit the five continents and in October 1965 he presented a report to the UN on this topic.

In one of his first statements, on October 22, 1979, the first Roman Catholic Pope of Slavic origin Pope John Paul II /1979-2005/ uttered the famous words: “Open wide the doors for Christ. To his saving power open the boundaries of States, economic and political systems...Christ knows what is in man”. These words mark the start of his religious and social mission around the world as a defender of human rights and freedoms. As a politician and statesman Pope John Paul II lived through the fall of the Berlin Wall and the beginning of the eastern enlargement of the European Union. He is the author of the sixth social encyclical “*Laborem Exercens*”, which is primarily focused on human work. “Man shows himself a true disciple of Christ by carrying the cross in his turn every day in the activity that he is called upon to perform” stated the Pope. That is why the Encyclical was published on September 14, 1981 when the Feast of the Cross is celebrated. The second social encyclical promulgated by Pope John Paul II and seventh overall bears the title “*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*” /1987/, translated as “Concern about Social Things”. It is directed at the poor and the persecuted. In this document he appeals for reformation of the international organizations. Pope John Paul II is also the author of the eighth encyclical issued in observance of the hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* and titled “*Centesimus Annus*” meaning “one hundred years”. In this document he outlined the new

social issues. As a politician and statesman Pope John Paul II lived through the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the beginning of the eastern enlargement of the European Union. Being extremely concerned with individual freedom, he opened up the Catholic Church to the world, embarked on 104 trips around the world and devoted himself to the protection of the socially vulnerable, the poor, and those devoid of political or economic rights. In the process, he became a living legend, exemplifying true spiritual leadership – a person who performed his duty to his followers and kept his vows despite all his physical ailments. Pope John Paul II was canonized on April 27, 2014.

The ninth encyclical “*Deus Caritas Est*”, translated as “God is Love”, the first encyclical issued by Pope Benedict XVI, was promulgated on Christmas Day - December 25, 2005. Its subject is the love of God and in his second encyclical the Pope urges the Church to reform and modernize its service in its name. The latest, tenth encyclical entitled “*Caritas in Veritate*” /Charity in Truth/, issued in 2009 by Pope Benedict XVI, discusses the possibilities for charity. The study ends with the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis to the bishops, clergy, consecrated persons and the lay faithful on the proclamation of the Gospel in today’s world. The date it was promulgated was November 24, 2013 and once again the venue was St. Peter’s Basilica.

CONCLUSIONS

The ten social encyclicals of the Catholic Church issued during the last century are founded upon the principles of human dignity and equality as an integral part of the Christian church. As papal documents they present a system of socio-philosophical and socio-theological understanding of the nature and structure of human society, and they also shape ethical principles and criteria. In these documents the successors of St. Peter remind us that we are all equal in the eyes of God and He regards us all as brothers and sisters. They urge for solidarity among people and states irrespective of time and place.

The development of the Catholic social doctrine is inseparably tied to the socio-economic situation. It offers novel, modern ideas opposing archaic superstitions and religious views, and it also demonstrates readiness for radical change.

And modern societies are in dire and urgent need of firm social foundations.

The social encyclicals promulgated by the Bishops of Rome secure the status of the Catholic Church as the world's moral arbiter.

REFERENCES

1. Encyclical (letter)— an official papal document, an open letter to all Christians in the world. Usually the title of the document is derived from the first Latin words in it.
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3. Same as above, p. 7
4. Leo XIII, Katolicheskata tsarkva i rabotnicheskia vapros (The Catholic Church and the Question of the Workers), Burgas, Printing house N.V Velchev, 1931, translation by priest T. Yanev, pp.5,6,7/
5. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Centesimus Annus, Editio 'Novissima Verba', Universitas Burgas, 1992, p. 5, translation from the original by priest Dr. Kupa Mihaylov/
6. Tsvirkal, Petar, SDP, Sotsialno uchenie na Katolicheskata tsarkva (Social teachings of the Catholic Church), Karitas, 2006, p. 15/.
7. Same as above, p. 20