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An Analysis of Rerum Novarum and Centesimus Annus
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The encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (*Rerum*), written by Pope Leo XIII, and the encyclical *Centesimus Annus* (*Centesimus*), written by Pope St. John Paul II, are two very important magisterial documents within the Church’s Catholic Social Doctrine canon. Published 100 years apart (1891 and 1991, respectively), the two encyclicals share common themes despite the changes that had occurred in the world and the different matters at issue.

**Overview of *Rerum Novarum* and *Centesimus Annus***

*Rerum Novarum*

The main overarching theme of *Rerum* was the confrontation between capital and labor. Due to the industrial revolution, a large gulf had materialized between capital and labor (cf. *Rerum*, §47). Those who owned the means of production had become very wealthy, whereas the employees and members of the working class were suffering from poverty and degrading working conditions (cf. *Rerum*, §2–3). Socialism and the elimination of private property, especially as a response and proposed remedy to the plight of the working class, is of particular concern in the encyclical (e.g., *Rerum*, §4–6). In *Rerum* it is recognized that there will always be inequalities (*Rerum*, §17, 34), but nevertheless equality is something that should be striven for (cf. *Rerum*, §47). However, the equality envisioned by socialism and the method of attaining that equality “would be in reality the levelling down of all to a like condition of misery and degradation” (*Rerum*, §15).

In addition to the primary themes that are analyzed in more detail below, additional themes that are touched upon in the encyclical include the universal brotherhood of man (e.g., *Rerum*, §25), the need for just and humane working hours (*Rerum*, §42; cf. *Centesimus*, §7), the
right to rest from work (Rerum, §41; cf. Centesimus, §7), that the differences among and between men, women, and children should be respected with regard to the work they are expected to perform (Rerum, §42; cf. Centesimus, §7), and the right to and importance of exercising one’s religious duties (Rerum, §20, 36, 40–41, 57; cf. Centesimus, §9). It should also be highlighted that the Church’s strong concern for the poor and the working class can be seen throughout the encyclical.

Centesimus Annus

The first major theme in Centesimus is a review and analysis of Rerum. This is followed by a critique of socialism (Centesimus, §13). In addition, John Paul II conducted a historical summary and assessment of the intervening years, events, and developments between the publication of Rerum and the writing of Centesimus (Centesimus, §17–25). In addition to the primary themes examined in detail below, John Paul II touched upon the reality and influence of original sin, as well as the unbridgeable chasm between earthly nations and the establishment of the Kingdom of God here on earth (i.e., prior to “the Lord’s second coming” and “the final judgment”) (Centesimus, §25, 62). The right to freely follow one’s conscience, especially with regard to seeking the truth and the exercise of religion, is another significant theme discussed in Centesimus (§29, 47). John Paul II also highlights the importance of the family (Centesimus, §39). Moreover, John Paul II critiques consumerism (Centesimus, §36, 41, 55), and he calls attention to environmental concerns (Centesimus, §37–38; cf. §40).

Analysis and Comparison of Rerum Novarum and Centesimus Annus

The competence and jurisdiction of the Church on economic and civil matters

The competence and jurisdiction of the Church on economic and civil matters is an
important theme in both *Rerum* and *Centesimus*, although this theme is presented in a different way in each of the two encyclicals. In *Centesimus* this theme was directly addressed by John Paul II; whereas in *Rerum* the theme was not addressed in as clear and direct manner when compared to *Centesimus*.

In *Rerum*, Leo XIII situates his encyclical within the traditional practice of the Church “to refute false teaching” (§2). Further on in the encyclical, Leo XIII established the Church’s interest in social justice as being founded upon, and an outgrowth of, the virtue of charity inherent in the Church (*Rerum*, §30). The roots of the Church’s concern regarding the issues concerning labor and capital (and thus the roots of Catholic Social Doctrine) is the Church’s historical concern for the poor, which can be found at the very beginning of the Church and seen throughout the ages (cf. *Rerum*, §28–30). Christ has redeemed the world, and His Church renewed and reformed society (cf. *Rerum*, §27). Through her social teachings, the Church is forming, guiding, teaching, and training mankind on how to apply and fulfill the commandments of God (cf. *Rerum*, §26). Moreover, from a practical perspective, the ills of society will not and cannot be healed without the intervention and guidance of the Church, and therefore the social teachings of the Church are necessary for the health of society (cf. *Rerum*, §16, 27).

In *Centesimus*, John Paul II taught that the social doctrine of the Church is the application of “the Church’s Tradition” to new and current issues and events (§3). The Church’s Tradition is founded upon Jesus Christ and His Apostle, and furthermore the Tradition of the Church is “ever living and vital” and builds upon itself (cf. *Centesimus*, §3). The competence of the Church to develop and articulate her social teachings is based upon her teaching authority (cf. *Centesimus*, §3). Moreover, “to teach and to spread” the social doctrine of the Church is part of the Church’s
mission of evangelization and “is an essential part of the Christian message” (Centesimus, §5).

The social doctrine is the application of the Christian message to everyday life (Centesimus, §5).

Similar to Leo XIII in Rerum, John Paul II likewise mentioned the practical need for the Church’s intervention and guidance: “there can be no genuine solution to the ‘social question’ apart from the Gospel” (Centesimus, §5). The Church has been entrusted by Christ with the “care and responsibility for man,” and this then is the purpose behind the development and articulation of the social doctrine of the Church (cf. Centesimus, §53). Overall, the Church’s “social teaching is aimed at helping man on the path of salvation” (Centesimus, §54).

**Justice**

Another important theme in both Rerum and Centesimus is that of justice. At the beginning of Rerum, Leo XIII positions the encyclical as an application of “the principles of truth and justice” to the issues concerning capital and labor (§2). A prominent feature of the encyclical is his critique of socialism, and this critique is grounded in justice, in that socialism contravenes justice because it violates the right to private property (Rerum, §6) and infringes upon the integrity of the family (Rerum, §14). It is the fulfillment of the duties and “obligations of justice” that will lead to harmony among the different classes in society (Rerum, §19–20). Leo XIII taught that “the law of justice . . . ordains that each man shall have his due” (Rerum, §33). This law of justice does not only apply to individuals and social classes. The State is also obligated to follow and carry out the law of justice, and in particular the State is tasked with administering distributive justice (Rerum, §33; cf. 34). It is justice that calls for the protection of the working class by the State (Rerum, §34), the protection of private property rights by the State (Rerum, §38), and the worker to be paid a just wage and the State’s intervention to ensure a just
John Paul II echoed many of Leo XIII’s teachings, including that justice calls for (1) a just wage, (2) the protection of the worker by the State, and (3) the administration of distributive justice by the State, (*Centesimus*, §8, 10). John Paul II also carried Leo XIII’s teachings forward with regard to the preferential treatment of the most vulnerable. Leo XIII wrote that “when there is question of defending the rights of individuals, the poor and badly off have a claim to especial consideration. . . . And . . . wage-earners, since they mostly belong in the mass of the needy, should be specially cared for and protected by the government” (*Rerum*, §37). In discussing this passage, John Paul II stated that it was still “relevant today”, explained that it comes under the “law of justice”, and identified the “elementary principle” at work: “the more that individuals are defenceless within a given society, the more they require the care and concern of others, and in particular the intervention of governmental authority” (*Centesimus*, §10).

John Paul II also pointed out that although the free market is beneficial, it must be regulated pursuant to justice. He wrote that “it would appear that . . . the free market is the most efficient instrument for utilizing resources and effectively responding to needs . . . But there are many human needs which find no place on the market. It is a strict duty of justice and truth not to allow fundamental human needs to remain unsatisfied, and not to allow those burdened by such needs to perish” (*Centesimus*, §34). John Paul II also made it clear that love and justice are directly tied together. “Love for others, and in the first place love for the poor, in whom the Church sees Christ himself, is made concrete in the promotion of justice” (*Centesimus*, §58).

Furthermore, justice cannot be achieved without grace (*Centesimus*, §59).

**Socialism**
The Church’s concerns regarding socialism figure prominently in both *Rerum* and *Centesimus*. In no uncertain terms, both Leo XIII and John Paul II condemned socialism as being unjust and incompatible with Catholic doctrine. Leo XIII pointed out that socialism attempts “to do away with private property” and put into place a system where property is held in common and “administered by the [government]” (*Centesimus*, §4). Leo XIII held that such an arrangement would not only hurt the working class, but is “moreover, emphatically unjust for they would rob the lawful possessor, distort the functions of the State, and create utter confusion in the community” (*Rerum*, §4). This critique of socialism was later adopted by John Paul II in *Centesimus* (§12). Leo XIII emphasizes this point again later on in the encyclical: “it is clear that the main tenet of socialism, community of goods, must be utterly rejected, since it only injures those whom it would seem meant to benefit, is directly contrary to the natural rights of mankind, and would introduce confusion and disorder into the commonweal” (*Rerum*, §15). In addition, socialism infringes upon the integrity of the family (*Rerum*, §14).

John Paul II observed that the evils of socialism that Leo XIII had prophetically warned about ended up materializing (cf. *Centesimus*, §12). John Paul II also added his own critique of socialism, explaining that “that the fundamental error of socialism is anthropological in nature” (*Centesimus*, §13). Socialism misconceives “the individual person simply” as a component “within the social organism, so that the good of the individual is completely subordinated to the functioning of the socio-economic mechanism”, and it wrongly holds “that the good of the individual can be realized without reference to his free choice” (*Centesimus*, §13). Rather than viewing society as a group of unique autonomous individuals with free will, socialism conceives of human beings as being subordinate components of society. All of this is an affront to the
human dignity of the person (cf. Centesimus, §13). This “mistaken concept of the nature of the person” comes from atheism, as does socialism’s chosen method of change, that is, unrestrained “class struggle” (Centesimus, §13–14).

Despite their condemnation of socialism, Leo XIII and John Paul II were not unreserved supporters of capitalism/free markets. John Paul II noted that, despite the “defeat” of communism/socialism, that defeat did not mean that “capitalism [is] the only model of economic organization” (Centesimus, §35). Leo XIII observed that unregulated capitalism and freedom of contract would result in evil and unjust conditions (Rerum, §43–45). John Paul II was critical of “unbridled capitalism” (Centesimus, §8), and taught that human rights must be protected (e.g., the right to a just wage, Centesimus, §8) and that “the market [should] be appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the State” (Centesimus, §35).

Private Property

Leo XIII taught that it is an inherent human right to own and possess private property. For example, Leo XIII stated that “every man has by nature the right to possess property as his own” (Rerum, §6). Leo XIII’s strong defense of this right to private property plays a prominent role in Rerum (e.g., §4–13, 15, 22, 46–47). However, there are limits to the right to private property. “It is one thing to have a right to the possession of [property] and another to have a right to use [property] as one wills” (Rerum, §22). Leo XIII further recognized that the State has the authority to intervene in one’s control and use of goods (Rerum, §47). John Paul II took up this theme as well, noting that Leo XIII had recognized that the right to private property is not absolute (Centesimus, §6). John Paul II also builds on the teachings of Leo XIII, pointing out that although “the type of private property which Leo XIII mainly considers is land ownership”,

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the right to private property extends beyond just land ownership and also includes other forms of private property (*Centesimus*, §6). John Paul II further taught that the right to private property is linked to and supports the dignity of the human person. The right to private property enables one to make a living, and infringing on one’s right to private property and ability to earn a living makes one reliant upon the State, which “makes it much more difficult for him to recognize his dignity as a person” (*Centesimus*, §13). John Paul II also taught that the right to private property is also linked to the Catholic Social Teaching principle of ‘the universal destination of goods’ (cf. *Centesimus*, §30; *Rerum*, §8). John Paul II starts with Leo XIII’s teaching that the right to private property is not absolute, and that there are limits to the human right to private property (*Centesimus*, §30). This teaching of Leo XIII contains the seed for the principle of the universal destination of goods (*Centesimus*, §30). John Paul II recognized that the “primary factor” in the production of goods and wealth is shifting from being land and/or capital, to instead “man himself” and “human work”, especially human “work with others and work for others”, and “know-how, technology and skill” are increasingly prominent features of human work (*Centesimus*, §31–32). Then, applying the principle of the universal destination of goods to his current time, John Paul II taught that this principle presently encompasses the right to work, and that all human beings must be afforded “opportunities for . . . human growth” and meaningful participation in the economy (*Centesimus*, §30–35, 43).

**Private Associations**

Leo XIII called for an increase in private associations and praised the benefits of such associations (*Rerum*, §48–50, 55, 57, 60–61). Leo XIII recognized that associations such as “workingmen’s unions” provide aid for workers and their families in times of hardship and
misfortune, and in addition these associations can “draw . . . more closely together” people of different social classes (Rerum, §48–50). Private associations are vehicles of solidarity, in that they are rooted in and build up solidarity among men and women (cf. Rerum, §48–50).

Moreover, entering into such private associations is a natural human right (Rerum, §50–51). Leo XIII also taught that these private associations should have a religious bent, in that they should “look first and before all things to God” and “religious instruction” should occupy “the foremost place” in such associations (Rerum, §57–58).

John Paul II noted the importance Leo XIII attached to the right to establish private associations, and John Paul II himself taught that “the right of association is a natural right of the human being” (Centesimus, §7). Similar to Leo XIII, John Paul II further taught that this right to establish and join private associations is the foundation for the Church’s support of unions (Centesimus, §7). While acknowledging the crucial role of the State, John Paul II also noted that it is private associations (and individuals) that are primarily responsible for ensuring economic human rights, rather than the State; especially with regard to the right to work (Centesimus, §48; cf. §35), to a just wage, and to just working hours (Centesimus, §15), and thus highlighted the importance of unions in the economic system.

International Associations

In Rerum, Leo XIII primarily focused on the individual level, the level of private associations, and the level of the State. In contrast, John Paul II in Centesimus also focused on the international level (cf. §21, 33, 58), and in addition recognized, highlighted the need for, and promoted the strengthening of international organizations (e.g., the United Nations). For example, John Paul II wrote that “what is needed are concrete steps to create or consolidate
international structures capable of intervening through appropriate arbitration in the conflicts which arise between nations” (Centesimus, §27; cf. §52, 57). Given the “increasing internationalization of the economy”, he also called for “international agencies which will oversee and direct the economy to the common good” (Centesimus, §58).

**Reflection on the Principles of Catholic Social Teaching in Rerum and Centesimus**

Aside from the underlying foundational precept of the dignity of the human person, the primary principles of Catholic Social Teaching are the common good, subsidiarity, and solidarity (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, §160). Two other important principles include the universal destination of goods (which is a corollary to the principle of the common good, Compendium, §171), and participation (which is a corollary to the principle of subsidiarity, Compendium, §189).

In Rerum, Leo XIII taught that one of the purposes of the State is “to serve the common good” (§32–35). Moreover, Leo XIII taught that “civil society [itself] exists for the common good” (Rerum, §51). However, the common good is not only the concern of the State and civil society, but also of each individual, although the ability of individuals to contribute and promote the common good will naturally vary (Rerum, §34). John Paul II noted that Leo XIII recognized that “the State has the duty of watching over the common good” (Centesimus, §11), and furthermore adopted this teaching his own (Centesimus, §40). Then, John Paul II further developed these teachings on the common good, holding that not only is contributing to the

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1 “The permanent principles of the Church’s social doctrine constitute the very heart of Catholic social teaching. These are the principles of: the dignity of the human person . . . which is the foundation of all the other principles and content of the Church’s social doctrine” (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, §160).
common good a duty of each individual (cf. *Rerum*, §34), but it is also a human right (*Centesimus*, §34). Associated with the principle of the common good is the principle of the universal destination of goods. The treatment of the principle of the universal destination of goods in *Rerum* and *Centesimus* was reviewed in the prior section on private property (above).

The principle of solidarity, and the principle subsidiarity and its corollary principle of participation, were not formally and explicitly identified in *Rerum*, but they were addressed in *Centesimus*. These principles were developed indirectly in *Rerum*, including through Leo XIII’s teachings on private associations (solidarity and participation), and his critique of socialism and defense of the right to private property (subsidiarity). Leo XIII also developed the principle of solidarity through his teachings on “the bonds of friendship” and “brotherly love” between social classes (*Rerum*, §25; cf. *Centesimus*, §10), and the obligation of the State to protect “the poor and badly off” (*Rerum*, §37; cf. *Centesimus*, §10). In *Centesimus*, John Paul II taught that the State must operate according to the principles of subsidiarity (§15, 48) and solidarity (§15). Moreover, John Paul II provided a clear definition of the principle of subsidiarity: “a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good” (*Centesimus*, §48). Solidarity entails the mutual support between and among people (cf. *Centesimus*, §49). John Paul II taught that operating according to the principle of solidarity means protecting the weak, promoting and ensuring humane working conditions, and supporting “the unemployed worker” (*Centesimus*, §15). With regard to the principle of participation, John Paul II highlights and stresses participation in the form of political participation by the common
man, especially as realized in democratic systems of government (Centesimus, §19, 22, 46–47; cf. §35).

**Place in the Wider Body of Teachings in Catholic Social Thought (for each)**

The encyclical Rerum Novarum is often depicted as the Church’s founding document that marks the beginning of what is now considered Catholic Social Doctrine (Compendium, §87). The Church has always been concerned for society and her social teachings did not begin with Rerum, but Rerum is the first document in a corpus of works that explicitly articulate the Church’s social teachings (Compendium, §87). Rerum established a framework on which further Catholic Social Teaching could be built and set the direction for its subsequent development. This can be seen by the fact that the major principles of the Church’s social doctrine “are present or anticipated in Rerum.” For example, the objection made by Leo XIII in Rerum to the State intruding into and exerting control over the family (§13–14) is an initial articulation of what is later identified by Pius XI in Quadragesimo Anno (1931) as the ‘principle of subsidiarity’ (§80). The directional influence of Rerum can also be seen in how it set the example for applying theory “to particular social questions of the day”, rather than remaining strictly at the theoretical level, and in how it “analyze[d] the inadequacies of certain systems.”

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3 Boyle, “Rerum Novarum (1891),” 69; Murphy, “In the Beginning: Rerum Novarum (1891),” 1.

4 cf. Murphy, “In the Beginning: Rerum Novarum (1891),” 25.

5 Boyle, “Rerum Novarum (1891),” 69.

6 Boyle, “Rerum Novarum (1891),” 76.

7 Murphy, “In the Beginning: Rerum Novarum (1891),” 25–27.
In *Centesimus*, John Paul II reviewed and reaffirmed *Rerum*, and continued the development of Catholic Social Teaching.\(^8\) For example, *Centesimus* demonstrated the consistency and continuity of Catholic Social Teaching in its treatment of the principle of solidarity (*Compendium*, §103). John Paul II recognized how the principle can be seen in the teachings of prior Popes Leo XIII, Pius XI, and Paul VI (*Centesimus*, §10; *Compendium*, §103), and then he advanced the development of the principle of solidarity by connecting it to the issue of unemployment (*Centesimus*, §15).\(^9\) John Paul II also advanced Catholic Social Teaching through his emphasis on the primacy of principles over models (*Centesimus*, §43),\(^10\) support for the free market system,\(^11\) his “‘thickening’ the concept of ‘rights’” through his “linking rights to obligations and to truth”,\(^12\) and his “criticism of the welfare state”.\(^13\) Overall, the popes in both *Rerum* and *Centesimus* drew on the past Tradition of the Church and then continued to develop that Tradition in light of the “new things” currently confronting society,\(^14\) and thus demonstrated the *living* tradition of the Church.

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\(^12\) Weigel, “The Virtues of Freedom: *Centesimus Annus* (1991),” 211.


References


