

SACBC SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE STATEMENT ON THE: WORKERS' CHARTER – 100 YEARS OF NEW IDEAS (12/3/91)

1991 is the centenary of The Workers' Charter from the Encyclical Letter of Pope Leo XIII *Rerum Novarum*, which, to those of us who are not Latin scholars translates as, 'Of new ideas'.

These remarkable writings have a pertinancy today. Here is the Holy Father's discourse on the duties of the workingman and employer written in 1891.

Class war is wrong: duties of employee and employer

The great mistake is to assume that class is naturally hostile to class, and that the wealthy and the working men are intended by nature to live in mutual conflict. So irrational and so false in this view, that the direct opposite is the truth. Just as the symmetry of the human frame is the result of the suitable arrangement of the different parts of the body, so in a country it is ordained by nature that these two classes should dwell in harmony and agreement, so as to maintain the balance of the body politic. Each needs the other: Capital cannot do without Labour, nor Labour without Capital. The mutual agreement results in the beauty of good order; while perpetual conflict necessarily produces confusion and savage barbarity.

Now, in preventing strife like this, and in uprooting it, the efficacy of Christian institutions is marvellous and manifold. First of all, there is no intermediary more powerful than Religion (whereof the Church is the interpreter and guardian) in drawing the rich and the working class together, by reminding each of its duties to the other, and especially of the obligations of justice. Of these duties, the following bind the proletariat and the worker: fully and faithfully to perform the work which has been freely and equitably agreed upon; never to injure the property, nor to outrage the person, of an employer; never to resort to violence in defending their own cause, nor to engage in riot or disorder; and to have nothing to do with men of evil principles, who work upon the people with artful promises of great results, and excite foolish hopes which usually end in useless regrets and grievous loss.

The following duties bind the wealthy owner and the employer: not to look upon their employees as their bondsmen but to respect in every man his dignity and worth as a man and as a Christian. They are reminded that, according to natural reason and Christian philosophy, working for gain is creditable, not shameful, to a man, since it enables him to earn an honourable livelihood; but to misuse men as though they were things in the pursuit of gain, or to value them solely for their physical powers – that is truly shameful and inhuman. Again, justice demands that, in dealing with the workman, religion and the good of his soul must be kept in mind. Hence the employer is bound to see that the worker has time for his religious duties; that he is not exposed to corrupting influences and dangerous occasions; and that he is not led astray to neglect his home and family, or to squander his earnings. Furthermore, the employer must never tax his employees beyond their strength, or employ them in work unsuited to their sex and age.

His great and principal duty is to give everyone what is just. Doubtless before deciding whether wages are fair, many things have to be considered; but wealthy owners and all masters of labour should be mindful of this – that to exercise pressure upon the indigent and the destitute for the sake of gain, and to gather one's profit out of the need of another, is condemned by all laws human and divine. To defraud anyone of wages that are his due is a crime., which cries to the avenging anger of Heaven. 'Behold, the hire of the labourers...which by fraud has been kept back by you crieth; and the cry of them hath entered into the ears of the lord of Sabbath' (James 5:4). Lastly, the rich must religiously refrain from cutting down the workmen's earning, whether by force, by fraud, or by usurious dealing; and with all the greater reason because the labouring man is, as a rule, weak and unprotected, and because his slender means should be accounted sacred in proportion to their scantiness.

Were these precepts carefully obeyed and followed out, would they not be sufficient of themselves to keep under all strife and all its causes?