



Introduction: A Prophetic Document for Our Time

Some documents mark a before and after. *Rerum Novarum*, published by Pope Leo XIII on May 15, 1891, is one of them. In a world shaken by the Industrial Revolution, labor exploitation, the rise of socialism, and widespread poverty, the Church raised its voice. And it did so without timidity. This text was — and still is — a prophetic act of pastoral courage and a cry for justice rooted in the Gospel.

Today, more than 130 years later, humanity faces similar social challenges, though with different faces: job insecurity, extreme inequality, structural unemployment, a culture of discard... That is why *Rerum Novarum* is not a fossil of Catholic social thought. It is a compass. A living guide that urges us to look at the world with eyes of faith and Christian commitment.

1. Historical Context: The World of 1891

The 19th century witnessed a radical transformation: the Industrial Revolution. Huge factories rose in the cities, but with them came inhuman working hours, miserable wages, unhealthy housing, and a growing marginalization of the working class.

The prevailing economic liberalism defended a “laissez-faire” attitude that left workers at the mercy of employers. At the other extreme, Marxist socialism called for class struggle and the abolition of private property as a path to justice.

In this climate, Leo XIII decided to intervene. *Rerum Novarum* is not a political manifesto. It is a doctrinal document that seeks to rescue human dignity and highlight the central role of the Church as both mother and teacher—even in social matters.

2. Rerum Novarum: A Synthesis of Catholic Social Thought

The title *Rerum Novarum* means “Of New Things.” And indeed, the realities the pope faced were new. But the most surprising thing about the text is not its accurate diagnosis, but its supernatural balance. Leo XIII sides neither with individualist liberalism nor with socialist



collectivism. He proposes a third way—deeply Christian—where the dignity of the person, the common good, and social charity intertwine.

a) The Dignity of Labor and the Worker

The pope affirms that labor is not a commodity. It is a human vocation and, therefore, a participation in God's creative work. The worker is not a cog in the machinery of capital. He is a person, made in the image of God, with inalienable rights.

"The working man is not to be treated as a slave; in the marketplace he is not simply merchandise" (RN, 45).

b) The Right to Private Property

Against those who wanted to abolish private property, Leo XIII defends its legitimacy as a natural right. But he adds that property has a social function. It is not an end in itself but a means for the integral development of the person and solidarity with others.

"Each one has the right to possess what is his; but with regard to the use of this possession, he must take into account the needs of others" (RN, 19).

c) The Role of the State

The encyclical does not propose an omnipresent State but does recognize its role as the guarantor of the common good. It must protect the weakest, ensure justice, and restrain the abuses of economic power.

d) The Role of the Church

The Church does not confine herself to the temples. She enters history and redeems it from within. She has the mission to form consciences, promote justice, comfort the oppressed, and remind the rich of their responsibility.



3. Theological Relevance: A Preferential Option for Justice

Rerum Novarum was not only a social critique. It was a theological proclamation. By defending the worker, Leo XIII was defending the face of Christ in the poor.

“Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me” (Matthew 25:40).

Every labor injustice is not just an economic issue. It is a wound in the Body of Christ. That is why this encyclical became the cornerstone of the Church’s Social Doctrine. From it were born other major encyclicals such as *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), *Populorum Progressio* (1967), *Centesimus Annus* (1991), and *Fratelli Tutti* (2020), all daughters of the same spirit.

4. Practical Applications: How to Live Rerum Novarum Today

Although published in 1891, its message has not aged. On the contrary, it remains a practical guide for Christians committed to the Kingdom of God in the midst of the world.

a) In the Workplace

- **Defend justice in your workplace.** Fight for fair wages, humane hours, and work-life balance.
- **Respect and value your employees or colleagues.** See not just their productivity, but their humanity.
- **Avoid participating in systems that exploit, marginalize, or dehumanize others,** even indirectly.



b) In Economic Life

- **Practice responsible consumption.** Choose products that respect labor rights.
- **Do not turn money into an idol.** Use your resources to serve, not to dominate.
- **Support local and solidarity-based initiatives:** cooperatives, fair trade, family-owned small businesses.

c) In Community and Parish Life

- **Promote social works: parish charities, soup kitchens, legal aid for migrants or the unemployed.**
- **Educate youth, workers, and businesspeople in Catholic Social Teaching.**
- **Make your parish a place of welcome for those excluded from the system.**

5. Spiritual and Pastoral Guide: Living Justice Through the Gospel

Living *Rerum Novarum* is not an empty activism. It is an embodied spirituality. A way to live the Gospel daily. Here are some keys to embody this doctrine:

1. Prayer and Discernment

Before acting, we must contemplate. Listen to the cry of the poor in prayer. Ask the Lord: What do You want from me in the face of this injustice?

2. Formation

We cannot transform the world if we do not understand its dynamics. Study the Church's Social Doctrine. Read *Rerum Novarum*. Deepen your understanding of the Magisterium's teachings.

3. Personal Commitment

Each Christian is called to be leaven in the dough. Don't wait for the system to change. Be the change in your environment.



4. Structural Charity

Giving alms is not enough. We must transform unjust structures. Christian charity is also political when it seeks to establish God's Kingdom in society.

6. Rerum Novarum and the Future: A Challenge for the New Evangelization

In times of liquid postmodernity, ecological crisis, mass migrations, and labor digitalization, the message of *Rerum Novarum* must be updated and boldly proclaimed.

The new evangelization cannot be limited to the spiritual realm. It must touch the roots of inequality. A credible Church is one that stands by the poor, defends workers, denounces injustices, and announces the hope of a Kingdom where "there will be no more mourning or crying or pain" (Revelation 21:4).

Conclusion: "Rerum Novarum" as an Examination of Conscience

This encyclical is not only to be read. It is to be lived. It is a call to examine our attitudes toward money, labor, and our neighbor. How do we treat those who serve our table? What value do we place on our own work and that of others? How do we use the goods God has entrusted to us?

Leo XIII still cries out to us today:

| *"There is no true solution to the social question apart from the Gospel" (RN, 24).*

May *Rerum Novarum* inspire us to be artisans of justice, witnesses of charity, and prophets of a new economy where Christ reigns—not money. Where work is a path to holiness, not



slavery. Where all may sit at the table of Bread and labor with the dignity of children of God.