

## Leo XIII, Excerpts from the Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum*, 1891

The first portion of these excerpts is taken from Sections 35 and 37 and deals with the duties of the state or commonwealth. At the time that Leo made these statements about the state, the poor were not well represented, even in the democratic nations of western Europe. Laws about care for the poor, or about the rights of employees, were virtually nonexistent. The second portion below is taken from Sections 43-45 and deals with justice in establishing wages. In this section, Leo is responding to conventional free market theory about what makes a contract just. In 1967, Pope Paul VI, in the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, cited Pope Leo's reasoning in 43-45 as being of historic importance for understanding the relations of rich and poor. The italics, in Section 44 below, are Leo's.

**35.** There is another thing to be considered which touches the human condition more deeply. The state has one universal standard for all, for the high and the low. Undoubtedly the workers are equal to the property owners with respect to rights. The lower classes are true parts of the body of the commonwealth, living their life as families intermingling with the life of the entire commonwealth. And it hardly needs to be added that in every city they constitute by far the largest part of the population. Since it would be most absurd to take steps favoring one part of the population and neglecting another, it follows that in the everyday administration of the state, it is necessary to care for the health and welfare of the working classes. If this is not done, the law of justice, ordaining that to each must be given his due, would be violated.

**37.** Certain rights, wherever they may be, must be religiously guarded. It is the duty of the state to protect each individual in his possession, using the law to prevent injuries and punish injuries. Nevertheless, in protecting the rights of private citizens, it is especially necessary to have a method of protecting the lowest citizens, those without means.

For those of the upper class, their wealth is their protection, and so they have less need of public protection. Since the wretched masses have no resources to support them, they depend most greatly upon the commonwealth's protection. Therefore the state ought to exercise care and foresight for every individual.

**43.** Now we touch upon a question of great importance. It is necessary to understand this matter rightly so that we do not fall into a grave error. We are clearly told that the level of a person's wages is defined by free consent. Therefore the master of a business,

once he has paid the agreed-upon wage, is freed from any further obligation and seems not to owe anything further. The only way, then, that there would [by this reasoning] be injustice would be if the owner refused to pay the agreed-upon price or the laborer refused to complete the agreed-upon tasks. In such cases (but not in any others) it would be right for the political authority to intervene, to see that each party receives what is his.

**44.** With this argument a fair judge cannot easily agree. The argument is not complete, and a matter of greatest weight has been left out of the reasoning altogether. . .

Undoubtedly a human being's labor has two essential characters. First, labor is *personal* because the force which accomplishes any task adheres to the person, and is his own altogether. Further, he exercises his skills for his own advantage. Secondly, a man's labor is *necessary*, for this reason: He works to support himself. Indeed, it is a law of nature, which must be obeyed: A person must preserve his own life.

Now, if we thought about labor strictly in terms of how labor appears to be *personal*, a worker without a doubt would be free to accept whatever wage he wished, or accept no contract at all. But things must be judged far differently when we consider that labor is not just personal but *necessary*. These two characters of labor can be separated in thought, but these are inseparable in reality. To preserve one's life is the common duty of every single person. To be lacking what is necessary for life is a crime. Therefore each person has a right of procuring those things which are necessary for sustaining life. The people of the lower classes cannot obtain those necessary things unless they work for wages.

**45.** Let the working man and the employer enter freely into agreements and let them freely consent as to wages in particular. Nevertheless all that they do falls under a law of natural justice, a law more ancient than the ideal of striking a bargain by free will: that it is necessary for wages to be sufficient to support the life of a frugal and well behaved worker. If the worker is compelled by necessity or by fear of a worse evil into accepting harsher terms because an employer imposes an arrangement upon him, the worker becomes a victim of force. Justice itself cries out against any such arrangement.