

“Labor... cannot be bought and sold like a commodity.”

—Pope Pius XI

Quadragesimo Anno § 83

“... the first thing of all to secure is to save unfortunate working people from the cruelty of men of greed, who use human beings as mere instruments for money-making. It is neither just nor human so to grind men down with excessive labor as to stupefy their minds and wear out their bodies”

—Pope Leo XIII

Rerum Novarum § 42



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The Papal Condemnation of Capitalism

What the Catholic Church says about private property and the common good.

In the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Magisterium restates the Church's condemnation of capitalism:

She has likewise refused to accept, in the practice of "capitalism," individualism and the absolute primacy of the law of the marketplace over human labor... regulating [the economy] solely by the law of the marketplace fails social justice, for "there are many human needs which cannot be satisfied by the market." (CCC 2425)

This teaching is discussed at length in Saint Pope John Paul II's Encyclical *Laborem Exercens*. The Pope warns against "a one-sidedly materialistic civilization", stating that "in every social situation of this type, there is a confusion or even a reversal of the order laid down from the beginning by the words of the Book of Genesis: *man is treated as an instrument of production*" (§ 7, ¶ 3). In reality, "work is 'for man' and not man 'for work'" (§ 6, ¶ 5).

He goes on to define what he means by the fundamental error of "capitalism":

Precisely this reversal of order, whatever the programme or name under which it occurs, **should rightly be called "capitalism"**—in the sense more fully explained below.

Everybody knows that capitalism has a definite historical meaning as a system... But in the light of the analysis of the fundamental reality of the whole economic process—first and foremost of the production structure that work is—**it should be recognized that the error of early capitalism can be repeated wherever man is in a way treated on the same level as the whole complex of the material means of production, as an instrument and not in accordance with the true dignity of his work**—that is to say, where he is not treated as subject and maker, and for this very reason as the true purpose of the whole process of production. (§ 7, ¶ 3)

Later, he considers the history of the conflict "in which *labour was separated from capital and set up in opposition to it*" and states:

It was this practical error that *struck a blow* first and foremost against human labour, against *the working man*, and caused the ethically just



(Ade de Bethune)

social reaction [the labor movement] already spoken of above. The same error, which is now part of history, and which was connected with the period of primitive capitalism and liberalism, can nevertheless be repeated... if people's thinking starts from the same theoretical or practical premises. (§ 13, ¶ 5)

The Pope affirms that the Church's teaching "differs from the programme of *capitalism* practised by liberalism and by the political systems inspired by it" because of how She understands the "right to ownership or property":

Christian tradition has never upheld this right as absolute and untouchable. On the contrary, it has always understood this right within the broader context of the right common to all to use the goods of the whole of creation: *the right to private property is subordinated to the right to common use*, to the fact that goods are meant for everyone. (§ 14, ¶ 2)

He concludes that "from this point of view the position of 'rigid' capitalism continues to remain unacceptable, namely the position that defends the exclusive right to private ownership of the means of production as an untouchable 'dogma' of economic life." (§ 14, ¶ 6)