

while the guilds were required to find work or relief for their members. Although the workers enjoyed as a whole less individual freedom than they do today, their economic position was more secure, and their future less uncertain. There was no proletariat in the modern sense, that is, no considerable number of persons for whose welfare no person or agency was held socially responsible. As to the content of the livelihood obtained by the average labourer of that period, any attempt at a precise statement would be misleading. Nor is it possible to institute any general comparison that would be of value between the welfare of the labourer then and now. **This much, however, may be asserted with confidence: the poorest one-tenth of the labouring population were probably better fed and better clothed, if not better housed, than is the poorest one-tenth today; for the grinding and hopeless poverty, just above the verge of actual starvation, so often prevalent in the present time, did not belong to medieval life** (Gibbins, *Industry in England*, 177); the labouring class (meaning all persons who got their living as wage-earners or through self-employment, and not by employing others) received a larger share per capita of the wealth then created than our wage-earners obtain from the wealth produced in our time; and, finally, the guild system which governed town industry did for a time, and in large measure, succeed in reconciling the interests of consumers and producers (Ashley, *English Economic History*, II, 168).

LEARN MORE

tradistae.com/easy-essay-list



The Working-Class in Christendom

Catholic Encyclopedia (1913)

The following passages are excerpted from the Catholic Encyclopedia (1913). The original article was titled "Labour and Labour Legislation". Emphasis and headings are our own.

The Church Fathers and the Working-Class in Pagan Rome

Despite the teaching and influence of Christianity, the laws and institutions, the ruling classes and public opinion, the intellectual classes, and, indeed, the bulk of the people were still pagan. A few years later, Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the empire, but he did not thereby make the people Christian. The majority were still dominated by selfishness, dislike and contempt for labour, and by the desire to exploit their fellows, especially through usurious practices. The language employed by Ambrose, Augustine, Basil, Chrysostom, and Jerome against the rich of their time, is at once a proof that the powerful classes were not imbued with the Christian spirit, that the labouring classes were suffering great hardships, and that the Christian teachers were the truest friends of the poor and the toilers. **The doctrine laid down by these Fathers, sometimes in very radical terms, that the earth was intended by God for all the children of men, and that the surplus goods of the rich belonged of right to the needy has been the most fruitful principle of human rights, and the most effective protection for labour that ever fell from the lips of men.** It is, in fact, although not always so recognized, the historical and ethical basis of the now universally accepted conviction among Christian peoples that the labourer has a right to a living wage, and that the owner of property may not do all that he likes with his own.

The Medieval Abolition of Slavery

In the second and third centuries the slaves obtained certain legal rights, such as a partial recognition of their marriages and domestic relations, and redress in the courts for injuries suffered from the master. A considerable proportion of them were gradually transformed into serfs...

From the beginning of [Charlemagne's] reign the lot of the slaves rapidly improved and their numbers rapidly decreased, so that by the middle of the tenth century they had almost been transformed into serfs throughout the Holy Roman Empire. One hundred years later, about seven per cent of the inhabitants of England were slaves, but the institution had practically disappeared in that country by the middle of the twelfth century. In the year 1170 the last remnant of it in Ireland was abolished by St. Lawrence O'Toole.



(Ade de Bethune)

[...] Politically, [feudal lords] were not only the military defenders of their territory, but to a great extent legislators, administrators, and judges... Serfdom differed very much in its degrees at different times and in different

places, but it always assumed that the serf, while not owned like a slave, belonged in a general sense to the lord, was obliged to expend a certain portion of his labour for the benefit of the latter, and was bound to the soil. Very often he was compelled to make other contributions to the lord, such as a fine on the occasion of his own or his son's marriage. In the course of time the serf was relieved of these less regular burdens, his labour services were definitely fixed by custom, and his tenure of the land that he cultivated on his own account was made secure by custom, if not by law... The condition of the labouring class seems to have been on the whole better than at any previous time. The fact that the great majority of the workers were no longer slaves, and that they were enabled to till on their own account land of which their possession was fairly secure, represented a large measure of progress.

The Late Middle Ages in England

The condition of the labouring classes both in town and country during this time was much better than it had ever been before. In the first place, the worker enjoyed considerable security of position, either on the land that he tilled or in the craft that he pursued. According to the theories of the time, the members of every class performed a social function which gave them a social claim to a livelihood in conformity with their needs and customs. Hence the feudal lord and the monastery were charged with the care of all the inhabitants of their estates,