

# OCCASIONAL PAPER

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## SONS AND HEIRS: THE LEGACY OF LEO XIII

This past summer a noteworthy anniversary occurred which seems to have passed quite unnoticed. It was and is, however, one that has significance in several ways for our Community. July 10, 2003, marked the centenary of the death of Pope Leo XIII. For us Basilians this anniversary serves to recall some important aspects of his long and fruitful pontificate which have guided and encouraged us in our own mission.

Vicenzo Cardinal Pecci was elected pope in 1878. Like John XXIII he was intended to be an “interim” pope after the thirty-two year reign of Pope Pius IX. But there was nothing interim about Pope Leo. In God’s providence he had twenty-five years ahead of him. He lived them with great vitality, courage and wisdom, transforming the Church and touching the world. Among the many achievements of Leo, two which have affected the Basilians in a special way are his encouragement of thomistic studies, principally with his encyclical, *Aeterni Patris* (1878); and his awakening of the Church to the cause of social justice, by an even more momentous document, *Rerum Novarum* (1891).

Neither of these areas of interest and concern was new to the pope at the time of his election. The encyclical on thomistic studies, published only four months into his pontificate, was the culmination of his thought over previous years. As Bishop of Perugia, and with the cooperation of his brother Joseph, a Jesuit priest and professor at the

diocesan seminary, he had founded an Academy of Saint Thomas (1859). When elected pope, his concern for the sound education of priests led to the encyclical on the philosophy and theology of St Thomas, *Aeterni Patris*. A decade after the publication of this document, he found in the person of a young Belgian priest, Désiré Mercier, one who would realize his dream of a school of philosophy inspired chiefly by the teaching of St Thomas, a school which would have an influence worldwide.

Social concerns as well had been part of Leo’s thinking and activity. Before he became a bishop, as a representative of the pope in the papal states, particularly Perugia, he had done much to ameliorate the condition of the working class, by way of improving living conditions and the founding of a bank for farmers. Later, as nuncio to Belgium (1843-6) he learned a good deal about the conditions of workers in a liberal society. The king of Belgium demanded his recall when he sided with the bishops of Belgium and the Catholic politicians to defeat a bill which proposed “University Juries,” which he saw as undue influence of the state in education.

Inspired by Leo’s encyclical on thomistic studies, and under the aegis of the pope, who honoured and promoted him, Mercier founded the Institut supérieur de philosophie at Louvain in Belgium.

(1889).<sup>1</sup> His disciple and successor as head of that institution, Maurice de Wulf, came to Saint Michael's in Toronto at the invitation of Father Henry Carr, during the 1920's to lecture on Thomistic philosophy. Other Louvain professors were to follow. At the same time, Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain, likewise inspired by *Aeterni Patris*, also came into the Basilian orbit and contributed in no small way to the founding of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies in Toronto (1929), and to the teaching of St Thomas to Basilians and to others in Basilian institutions. The Thomistic Institute at the University of Saint Thomas in Houston bears witness to the continuity of this impulse.

Running parallel to this academic effort there has been attention on the part of Basilians to the importance of *Rerum Novarum*, the clarion call to social justice and to consciousness of the conditions of the workers with the need for radical change in the social order. Here, the work of our Community in heeding and implementing, while less spectacular, perhaps, than the academic initiatives, is equally important and admirable. Without examining in detail the programmes of study in our schools during the twentieth century, but from personal experience and from comment of others in the Community, I think it is true to say that the questions of social justice and knowledge of *Rerum Novarum* were put before our students. In the practical order there were outstanding initiatives on the part of Basilians, such as those of Father Edwin Garvey in Windsor and Detroit, of Father Michael Oliver at Marylake, of Father Eugene Cullinane in the Yukon and in the Catholic Worker movement, of Father Joseph Dillon among the Hispanics in the Houston area, of Gerry McGuigan in Africa. We might mention here as well, the great work of a former Basilian, Father Charles E. Coughlin, in the area of social justice.

Pope Leo's vision was broad and comprehensive. He could and did give clear guidance in academics as well as in matters of social justice. This twofold vision has been ours as well and, far from being incompatible, the two areas of endeavour have been mutually beneficial. At times a certain malaise in the Community is expressed to the effect that we are jeopardizing our traditional academic mission by our intensifying preoccupation with social issues. But it seems to me that many who have contributed to the advancement of social justice in the Community have been at the same time notable academics. It would, moreover, be difficult to justify social justice commentary, teaching and activity which is not based on study and learning.

Perhaps the leonine centenary could be fittingly observed by a symposium on Leo's two great encyclicals and the two "echoes" of *Rerum Novarum*, namely Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) and John Paul II's *Centesimo Anno* (1991). In any case, the event calls for our gratitude for this teaching, and for our prayer and efforts that our Community continue to promote the fullness of learning and teaching, which is neither out of date nor esoteric, but crucial for our times.

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<sup>1</sup> Mercier subsequently was named Archbishop of Malines-Brussels, the primatial see in Belgium, in 1906 and created a cardinal in 1907. With Lord Halifax he inaugurated the Malines Conversations (1921-25), an early attempt at reconciliation between the Church of England and the Roman Catholic Church. Cardinal Mercier died in 1926.