

ACSJJC SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION GUIDE: Quadragesimo Anno (On Reconstruction of the Social Order)

In 1931, forty years after the promulgation of Pope Leo's landmark encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Pius XI released his encyclical *On Reconstruction of the Social Order*. In the midst of the Great Depression, which plunged the world into economic and social turmoil from 1929 to the late 1930s, he restated and developed the message of Leo XIII.

Where Pope Leo voiced concerns over the rise of socialism and the excesses of capitalism, Pius XI highlighted how socialism had 'sunk into Communism', seen in the establishment of the Soviet Union, and how free market capitalism had expanded globally (# 112), affecting vulnerable people and the working poor in undeveloped regions (# 59).

Themes developed in the encyclical include:

- the ownership and right to property
- social justice and social charity
- subsidiarity and civil society.

Pope Pius maintained that society cannot be founded on socialism's notion of class warfare or capitalism's free competition of forces.

The ownership and right to property

Pope Pius emphasised Leo XIII's call for a proper balance between labour and capital when he spoke of ownership and wealth:

... the Creator Himself has given man the right of private ownership not only that individuals may be able to provide for themselves and their families but also that the goods which the Creator destined for the entire family of mankind may through this institution truly serve this purpose. (# 45)

... the right of property itself or its use ... is circumscribed by the necessities of social living. On the other hand, those who seek to restrict the individual character of ownership to such a degree that in fact they destroy it are mistaken and in error. (# 48)

Steering a careful path between the excesses of unregulated capitalism and the command economy of communism, he emphasised how ownership has both an individual and a social nature. Individuals must have the means to acquire wealth and provide for their families without undue interference from the state. But the distribution of wealth must ensure the common good and prevent extreme disparities of wealth (#58).

As with Pope Leo XIII forty years earlier, Pope Pius XI held up the conditions of work and adequacy of wages as a requirement for harmony between capital and labour and the measure of justice.

Social justice calls for:

- negotiations of contracts characterised by justice and partnership (# 64)
- workers sharing in the management and profit of enterprises (# 65)
- just wages calculated according to family need and respecting the non-economic responsibilities of workers and their families (# 66, 71)
- the support of the public authority in negotiations and crises (# 73)
- consideration of the common good and, in extreme situations, the viability of businesses when setting wages (# 72, 74).

For only then will the social economy be rightly established and attain its purposes when all and each are supplied with all the goods that the wealth and resources of nature, technical achievement, and the social organisation of economic life can furnish. (# 75)



Social justice and social charity

Pope Pius was particularly concerned about the effects of 'individualist economic teaching'. He mentioned the following consequences of unrestrained capitalism around the world:

- the exploitation of the 'working poor' by manufacturing and industry in regions of the new world (# 59)
- the impoverishment of rural workers with little hope of ever acquiring land (# 59)
- unemployment and disparity of wealth resulting from 'the excessive lowering of wages, or their increase beyond due measure' (# 74, 125)
- economic dictatorship where a few run investment funds 'according to their own arbitrary will and pleasure', monopolising economic life whereby 'only the strongest survive' (# 105–107, 132)
- the fight to gain supremacy over the state to use its resources and authority in economic struggles and the internationalisation of finance 'whose country is where profit is' (# 108–109)

Pope Pius called for a 'redemption of the non-owning workers' by addressing huge disparities of wealth. He said that when the state brings private ownership into harmony with the need of the common good, 'it does not commit a hostile act against private owners but rather does them a friendly service'. (# 49)

Calling the market into account to the common wealth ensures the health and prosperity of all elements of society.

Ultimately, social charity – not just social justice – must be the characterising feature of modern society.

Social charity ... ought to be as the soul of this order, an order which public authority ought to be ever ready effectively to protect and defend. (#88)

For justice alone can, if faithfully observed, remove the causes of social conflict but can never bring about the union of minds and hearts ... If this bond is lacking, the best of regulations come to naught ... (# 137)

Subsidiarity and civil society

The weakening of civil structures that ensure community participation in decision making was evident both under communist control and uncontrolled capitalism. Where one centralised ownership and power through the command economy, the other undermined solidarity through a weakening of the state and the promotion of 'economic individualism'.

Here, Pope Pius restated Leo XIII's emphasis on subsidiarity. He said the 'supreme authority' of the state was to let local communities handle matters appropriate to them.

For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them. (# 79)

He called for the constitution of organisations representing industries and professions, as well the founding of associations representing local groups and interests that promoted the common good. (# 82–87)

He also called for our engagement in the reconstruction of the social order – to develop a keen sense of justice, to exercise judgement that avoids extremes, and to bring the charity of Christ to our times.

Upon this road so often tried by happy experience, there is no reason why we should not hesitate to go forward with all speed. (# 142)

For reflection and discussion

Where do you see the struggle between the right to property and the responsibility to the common good in today's society? What are examples of business, government and the community working together for the common good?

Pope Pius XI regarded 'social charity' as having the aim of a single common good – promoting the dignity of the individual and membership of 'one great family and children of the same Heavenly Father' (# 137). Where can social charity lend itself to change based in solidarity?

Where do you see community and church organisations or movements seeking to foster development and change in our society? What can we do to strengthen civil society in Australia?

The encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno* can be found at:

http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno_en.html