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EDITORIAL

THE ENCYCLICAL.

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WITH the tall conceit that sets in relief his small stature, Henry George imagines that he was the particular devil in the Pope's mind when the latter drew up his Encyclical.¹ The Pope, in fact, never for a moment considered the single tax, any more than he considered protection or free trade, or any other narrow issue between capitalists, in which some workingmen here may still be simple enough to take sides. Living in Europe, aware of the progress of Socialism on that populous continent, and realizing its inevitable influence upon more distant countries, he knows, far better even than does Corrigan, the full meaning of the word which alone truly expresses the aims and tendencies of the great international labor movement. For instance, he knows the land question far better than George does, or at least is more honest in his treatment of it than our single tax apostle and Democratic turn coat. He knows that the working class, which has now neither land nor capital, does not demand that the State as it is *tax* the landowner and exempt the capitalist, but demands that the State, transformed from a political agency of capitalistic oppression into an industrial agency of economic freedom, *take* both capital and the land, thereby suppressing capitalists and landowners alike, therefore rent and profit, and freeing the workers from taxation—that is, from robbery—in any form.

Knowing, then, as he does, that the single tax theory, or any such nostrum more or less ancient, could not if applied have any more effect upon the modern condition and unmistakable tendencies of the working class than would the application of a porous plaster on a wooden leg, the Pope does not waste his Latin upon George, who could not anyhow understand it. Nor does Corrigan himself, whose views are necessarily

¹ [Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (On Capital and Labor), issued May 15, 1891.]

contracted by his comparatively narrow field of operations, and whose interpretation of the Pope's Encyclical is expected by the Roman Pontiff to fit the special circumstances of his diocese, deliver himself of any utterance that may, without a torture of its meaning, be construed as a direct or indirect allusion to the single tax theory of his present associate in Democratic politics. Naturally, Corrigan lays greater stress upon the land question than upon others of equal Socialistic magnitude referred to also in the Encyclical; firstly, because it would be impossible to treat of any other without considering this, and, secondly, because it happened that the consideration of this question caused much disturbance in his diocese. But he considers it as the Pope does; not in relation to the single tax, which he knows to have been abandoned by the workingmen themselves as a false solution and taken up by free trade capitalists for their own purposes, but in relation to the evident progress, among the working class, of the thoroughly socialistic idea that the private ownership of land must be entirely abolished.

Enough of this. In ignoring George absolutely the Pope at least gave us an example that we may well follow.

Let us now revert to the Encyclical pure and simple. It is a very plain document, which needs no interpretation by bishops and is hardly liable to misinterpretation by any sane or candid layman. It can, moreover, be summarized in a very few words.

The Pope, it must be observed, does not speak *ex cathedra*. He admits that there is a social problem, evolved from the conditions of modern industry. He does not solve it, does not pretend that he can solve it, and contends only, 1—that it cannot be solved without the assistance of the Church, and 2—that it should not be solved by the abolition of private property in land and in the instruments of production. Having thus reserved for the Church and denied to socialism the right to seek a solution, he merely suggests a direction in which he believes that a *modus vivendi* could be found, which, if accepted by Capital and Labor in deference to the Church, might be considered a good enough solution in this temporal world.

Briefly stated, his proposition is that the Catholic Church shall act as supreme arbiter between the capitalistic class and the working class whenever civil authority may prove inadequate to the peaceful settlement of differences between the two classes; and

he thus reasserts the historical claim of his Church to superior wisdom in temporal affairs; a wisdom that all men should recognize and submit to, in view of the perfect happiness that no one can enjoy in Heaven without having shown such submission on Earth.

To facilitate the recognition of this claim and the general acceptance of church arbitration under the new and ever-changing conditions of modern industry and society, the Pope makes promises to both classes.

To the capitalistic class he promises that the Church will uphold the rights of private property, so long, at least, as the institution of private property may last. Mark the reservation: it is not only implied but plainly stated in the Encyclical; for, having upheld private property as a “natural right,” and thus shown the value of church arbitration to that class under present conditions, he points out the growing “evils” which, from a lack of observance of the corresponding “duty,” may finally destroy the institution of private property. The danger is imminent: “Every one must put his hand to the work which falls to his share, and that at once and immediately, lest the evil, which is already so great, may become absolutely beyond remedy. * * * As regards the Church, its assistance will never be wanting, *be the time or the occasion what it may.*” In other words, if the evil grows beyond remedy and private property is abolished, the Church will assist mankind—and itself—in the way suggested by the changed conditions. This, again, is consistent with the history of the Catholic Church. She upheld Feudalism, then Monarchism, warning them of growing evils and possible revolutions. In the same manner and under the same reservations she now upholds Capitalism; but, above all things and forever, she upholds the Catholic Church.

On the other hand, and in exactly the same line of policy, the Pope promises to the working class that the Church will so arbitrate as to improve the condition of Labor, by curbing the insolence of godless employers whose greed and inhumanity he denounces in vigorous language; by reducing the hours of work; and, finally, by so increasing the rate of wages, or the share of Labor in its product, that industrious and frugal workingmen may “save money” and become capitalists themselves. To both classes he shows how the threatened institution of private property would be strengthened by the admission of large numbers of the proletariat into the ranks of property owners.

Recognizing the irresistible tendency of the workingmen to combine for mutual protection, he does not attempt to dissuade them from adopting this course; on the contrary, he praises their efforts in this direction, but advises them to place their organizations under the guidance of the Church. For aught we know, the Pope may be dreaming of a new Roman Catholic Empire, in which the trades would be organized—as they were by Constantine and his successors, but with due regard for the changed conditions of production—under the direction of the Supreme Pontiff. Such was, indeed, the proposition made in 1848 by a highly religious economist; and not only the Vatican received it with favor, but the priests blessed the “trees of liberty” planted in Paris by the “Social Republic!”

The Pope evidently believes that if the institution of private property should come to grief in spite of the efforts of the Church to save it, all property should be vested in the Church itself.

Transcribed and edited by Robert Bills for the official Web site of the Socialist Labor Party of America.
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