

Directives of Leo John Dehon, SCJ for Social Justice

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Pope Leo XIII

This is not the time to watch events pass by and to watch the storm pass over. The danger is too great. The captain of the ship, Leo XIII, is calling us to maneuvers. Let us obey his order.
Report of Canon Dehon to the annual Assembly of the Union of Works of the Diocese, 1894 (I. 105)

It would also be essential that the clergy, following the initiative of Leo XIII, keep themselves informed on matters of social justice and that they use their great moral and doctrinal authority to combat every injustice and abuse.

“Capitalism in Modern Societies,” 1895 (I. 225)

The Service of the Church

You know that Christ regards our treatment of the poor as how he should also be treated. At some future time, he will say to us, “Come and be blessed; in the person of my beloved workers I experienced the humiliating and painful condition of the proletariat; and you lifted me up.”

“Teachings from Rome, the Proletariat,” 1899 (I. 406)

The people will be the friends of the priest and the Church when the priest makes himself the friend of the people.

“Social Role of the Church and the Priest,” 1900 (III. 350)

If the people have turned away from the Church, it is because they have sensed (and have been given too many pretexts for believing) that it was favorable to political and economic oppression.

“Lessons to be Learned from Recent Events,” 1898 (I. 346)

The Social Reign of the Sacred Heart

Christ must reign in societies, in families, in the law, in education, in mores. This is the condition of prosperity and peace, the manifestation of truth, and the law of God.

“The Timeliness of the Reign of the Sacred Heart,” 1889 (I. 1)

The union of the Church and the people in the love of Jesus Christ prepares the way for the social reign of the Sacred Heart.

"The Sacred Heart and the Question of Workers," 1889 (l. 17)

The Social Reign of the Sacred Heart and The Press

Let us get to work. In the good press, we have one of the most effective means to restore the reign of God in souls and in society.

"An Effective Means to Hasten the Coming of the Social Reign of the Sacred Heart: The Good Press," 1895 (l. 165)

Let us apply ourselves to these tasks. The good press, electoral action, and social action: such are the weapons with which we shall establish the reign of the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

"Social Virtues," 1896 (l. 236)

The Social Reign of the Sacred Heart and Social Justice

The happiness of the citizens is comprised of several elements: religious life, intellectual development, and economic prosperity. And all of these various goods require a reign of social peace and justice for their formation and legitimate growth.

"The Role of Wealth in Social Life," 1896 (l. 250)

The Social Reign of the Sacred Heart and Participation

Let us increase the number of study groups. Let us further the economic and historical knowledge of the people. Let us form corporate groupings. Let us establish and circulate genuinely popular newspapers, and the future will be ours for the reign of Christ and for the well-being of the people.

"Lessons to be Learned from Recent Events," 1898 (l. 346)

Following Christ and the Apostles

Religious freedom and economic liberation: we want no less than that for you because we are disciples of the Gospel.

"Religious Liberty, Yes; But Economic Liberation Also," 1897 (l. 304)

Above all, whether priest or devout layman, you must remind yourself that you were not made solely for the sacristy or the pew; that you are in your own right the salt of society and the light of social life; that you must reach out to men, as much and more than to women and children; that to act otherwise is to injure Christ; that your ultimate master and your model brought together the apostles and disciples and did not limit his action to a children's apostolate.

"Methods of Social Work," 1895 (l. 157)

Do not lose sight of the models: Christ and his apostles. Christ reached out to people unceasingly and without respite. He selected some of them, he taught twelve apostles and then seventy-two disciples. They became his auxiliaries. He gave them a watchword: Go and teach.

They went and sought out listeners, in groups or as individuals. The word was their only weapon. They preached the doctrine and concerned themselves with works, with the needs of the people, and with social organization. St. Paul sought out, in all the wealthy cities of Greece, the resources needed by the Christian communities in Palestine.

"Methods of Social Work," 1895 (l. 158)

Our mission is fully outlined for us by these modes: to go to the people, especially to those who do not come to us, to talk to them, to gather them together and make use of that new form of the word, the newspaper, which a St. Paul would not have failed to use, if it had been known in his time; and finally, to concern ourselves with the economic and social interests of the people.

"Methods of Social Work," 1895 (l. 158)

Work for Social Justice

Christ put a leaven, a sap of justice, compassion, and charity, into the Gospel which excites and vitalizes all priestly and Christian souls.

"Catholic Action: Old Substance, New Forms," 1898 (l. 367)

Nothing has a foundation without justice. Nothing endures except through justice.

"The Pope: Hopes and Forebodings," 1894 (l. 57)

Work for Social Justice and Economic Justice

At whatever cost, equity must be vindicated and justice must be reestablished in the economic world; if we do not want the oppressed, who are always discontented, to overthrow this society which does not protect them.

“An Ecclesiastical Social Congress,” 1895 (I. 180)

Work for Social Justice in Social Action

We must have a social effort in order to achieve all of the works of Christian charity and justice.

“A National Effort,” 1901 (I. 516)

Work for Social Justice with the Clergy

But with regard to social action, the clergy cannot remain on the sidelines. They have the primary role to play in the practical implementation of the evangelical principles of justice and charity, while being assisted by lay battalions and especially by young people.

“A National Effort,” 1901 (I. 516)

The priest must therefore intervene in the social fray, not only out of opportunism, which would be sufficient justification, but out of a strict duty of justice and charity and in order to carry out his pastoral ministry to the fullest.

“The Social Role of the Church and the Priest,” 1900 (III. 341)

Work for Social Justice with the Church

The Church must be able to demonstrate that she is not only able to prepare pious souls, but also to bring about the reign of the social justice for which people are eager. For that to happen, the priest must devote himself to new studies and new programs.

“The Social Role of the Church and the Priest,” 1900 (III. 347)

The Social Dimension of the Commandments

Undoubtedly the Decalogue provides the secret and rules for a correct and happy personal life; but thanks be to God, that is not all. It also contains all the conditions for peace and social prosperity, and that is what must constantly be remembered.

The first commandment says that society, like an ordinary individual, must honor its Creator and Master. The second points to blasphemy as a cause for divine punishment. The third asserts the right of citizens to fortify their souls and their bodily strength through Sunday rest and worship.

The fourth is the social commandment par excellence. It teaches respect, devotion, and obedience, which form the bond within large-scale societies as well as within small groups. It emphasizes all civic duties and condemns the unconcerned citizen as well as the voter who has no conscience.

If the 5th and 6th commandments had been better taught and observed, would we have seen the growth, in the factories of many materialistic and greedy industrialists, of this traffic in human strength and conscience which has embittered the people and consequently paved the way for all kinds of excesses?

Is not the seventh commandment the code of justice and the death knell of usury? Does not the eighth rule out fraud, swindles, and stock market manipulation, which are leading our societies toward an abyss?

Yes, preaching must be an eminently social form of work.

"Civil Death!" 1899 (l. 379-380)

A Call to Action

You who are reading this, listen to your hearts and examine your consciences. What have you done up until now to promote the Church's social action? In what kind of work have you participated? If you have remained apathetic and passive you have no right to say that you love the Church and this country.

"Civil Death!" 1899 (l. 380)

A Call to Action to be Active, Creative, and Beneficent

Remember these three words, which must describe your ideal. Your propaganda must be active, creative, and beneficent.

Act. God is with you. Unite in order to act. Talk among yourselves and with your priests in order to find out what you can do.

Create works, associations, and groups. Go from parish to parish in your region. Do not pass through a large village without leaving some productive creation behind.

Let your action be beneficent! Christ sowed miracles with his doctrine. The apostles created deaconries the same time as parishes. The Church has always combined works and apostolate.

"The Clerical Ideal and the Secular Ideal," 1900 (I. 440-441)

Go to the People

The priests must go to the people by assisting them with all the resources of knowledge, prudence, and charity. They will not forget that the social question is above all a moral question.

"Christian Democracy," 1901 (I. 472)

Go to the People and the Young

Our priests, our Levites, and young Catholics in the colleges and universities must undergo a new initiative so that they may become concerned about the interests of the masses, and about the rational and Christian organization of society and all of that Christian social activity which must come together in the preaching of the Gospel, in order to win nations to Christ and create a peaceful and prosperous society.

"Ten Years After the Encyclical," 1902 (I. 528)

Get to work then! In the face of the present distress, for people without faith, valiance or generosity, there remains only discouragement and pessimism; for the valiant, the noble of heart, the apostles, it is action, which is required.

"The Present Social and Economic Crisis in France and in Europe," 1900 (III. 187)

Go to the People and the Young in Political Action

What are the politics of the Gospel? What were the social goals of the Savior? He came to uplift the humble. The prophets said so. He said, "My Father sent me to deliver to the poor the good news of their uplifting."

"Christian Democracy," 1900 (III. 302)

It is not tomorrow that we must act, it is today. Political action is necessary with regard to elections and social action through charities and democratic institutions.

"The Peace and Truce of God," 1901 (I. 490)

The supreme work today is electoral work. All the other tasks must work to its benefit. The unions will bring it one of the most powerful forms of aid, and perhaps without them it will come to nothing. The ordinary ministry and even [*parish*] missions have no social impact. The people vote just as badly after a mission ends.

"The Duty of Catholics with Regard to Occupational Associations," 1896 (I. 233)

Organize the Workers

Now is the moment to dedicate ourselves to popular Catholic action, delivering the people from the servitude of excessive labor; defending their rights whenever they are violated by the great power of the capitalists; teaching them economics and thrift through the creation of those institutions and economic foresight which, by rescuing them from the voracious claws of usury will help them to assure their real well-being and which will thus render them bolder in fighting the battles of life.

"Social Action by the Clergy in Rome," 1901 (I. 498)

We must have apostles, people of action. The administrative method no longer suffices in a disorganized society. People no longer come to us so we must go to them. We must organize them in associations. We must become interested in their work, their prosperity, and their recreation. We must take the Christian spirit everywhere.

"The Social Role of the Church and the Priest," 1990 (III. 349)

Do not forget that the occupational union is the all-encompassing ideal, the integral good, in which people in the same occupation, employers and workers, in parallel groups, provide for all the needs of the group: trade union operations, insurance, mutualities, and so on.

"Occupational Unions," 1901 (I. 509)

Every worker is hired to work in a factory on the basis of an individual contract, and he submits to the conditions, which his co-workers have accepted. There is a sort of collective contract between the workers as a group and the manufacturer, and justice can only be fully safeguarded if the workers have the right to strike or the right of arbitration. Otherwise they are like a pygmy confronting a giant.

"The Strike," 1903 (I. 574)

Social Works

In concerning themselves with social works, priests and social workers are not departing from the supernatural life. They are fulfilling the duties of charity and equity, which the Gospel imposes upon them.

"Idealism in Social Works," 1900 (I. 442)

The Church must sanctify everything: law, morality, social life, international relations.

"Social Role of the Church and the Priest," 1900 (III. 337)

The Newspaper

It is the supreme work of the present day, will this not finally be understood everywhere?

"An Effective Means to Hasten the Coming of the Social Reign of the Sacred Heart: The Good Press," 1895 (I. 160)

The People

We have relied too much on the upper classes of society. They have given us some select individuals, but on the whole, they are rather insipid as a result of being so well off.

"An Ecclesiastical Social Congress at St. Quentin," 1895 (I. 218)

We must go to the people and draw the people to us. We must draw the people to us by showing that we are their friends and that our social doctrines can obtain for them the happiness which they desire.

"Lessons to be Learned from Recent Events," 1898 (I. 345)

It is impossible to say more clearly and more strongly than this that it is necessary to go to the people and to place a high value on that social force which has for so long been distained.

"An Ecclesiastical Social Congress," 1895 (I. 182)

There are reserves of strength and vitality among the lower classes. We must seek out apostles of social renewal from among them. New works, study circles, unions, and workers' congresses point up the valuable initiatives which have originated among them.

"An Ecclesiastical Social Congress at St. Quentin," 1895 (l. 218)

We have the duty to become involved in social study, social teaching, and social action.

"The Present Situation and the Causes of the Social Malaise," 1897 (l. 299)

The reform of society requires multiple and persistent efforts. More than one instrument is necessary: prayer, study, action. You who remain apathetic and unconcerned and who have not yet taken part in even one small work, stand in fear of the day of reckoning, before the friend of the poor. We are not exempted from acting because the evil is great and our capabilities limited.

"Religious Liberty, Yes: But Economic Liberation also," 1897 (l. 305)

But it is particularly the Church's social contributions, which must be stressed. People readily concede that we have the ability and the right to exert a salutary influence on private life. It is the Church's social action whose fruitfulness must be demonstrated.

"Civil Death!" 1899 (l. 379)

From the perspective of methods of action, social works are those which are carried out through associations; from the perspective of the goal to be attained, social works are those which are clearly aimed at creating an enlightened, moral, strong, and prosperous society.

"Civil Death!" 1899 (l. 379)

Economic Justice

But what is this usury? What are the new forms which it takes? The Holy Father implies clearly that he means by this large-scale contemporary speculation which usually includes a host of usurious dealings; but he leaves it up to us to identify these abuses. It is an inquiry into the affairs of the stock market, business, and industry which he is turning over to us. This inquiry must be carried out and summed up in the traditional way in order to put the findings into the hands of those who can remedy the evil through education, the press, and the guidance of consciences.

"An Ecclesiastical Social Congress," 1895 (l. 180)

This all-consuming usury is a new form, by which profit-hungry people attempt to satisfy their insatiable greed. In this sense, all unjust profits in industry and business can be considered usury.

"Modern Usury," 1895 (I. 189)

But then, what about dividends which we receive for our shares of stock in railroads, mines, refineries, distilleries, foundries, or other enterprises? Make sure that such money is free of any taint of usury. Intervene in meetings of shareholders, demand respect for the sacred rights of the worker; and, if you cannot obtain it, turn your interest over to someone else and invest your money elsewhere.

"Modern Usury," 1895 (I. 195)

The Necessary Preparation & Education

We must have scholars and we should all be scholars to a limited degree. We must study in order to know; and we must study in order to teach. We must particularly study those social questions which are regarded as new issues and which should have always been studied in the Church. We must have at our disposal a journal and up-to-date books which deal with these questions. A priest cannot rush into this new apostolate without being prepared through serious study.

"Social Role of the Church and the Priest," 1900 (III. 349)

Some Notes on the Social Reality

One of the purposes of society is precisely to assist members of the human family, through good social organization, to escape from the grip of misery.

"The Lamentable Condition," 1894 (I. 76)

Misunderstood duties and exaggerated rights: out of these come all conflicts among the various classes of society.

"An Ecclesiastical Social Congress," 1895 (I. 182)

Contemporary society has surrendered to capitalism and money fever. The Stock Exchange is becoming the center of national life in its entirety. Humble, patient work has been forsaken. The lure of easy profits turns everyone's head.

"Capitalism in Modern Societies," 1895 (I. 220)

The excesses of capitalist society must be fought.

“Capitalism in Modern Societies,” 1895 (l. 224)

But what are the main causes of this ill-regulated situation? Here are some of them.

1. There are, first, the large-scale debts incurred by governments which promote a life of leisure and furnish an enormous pasture for dealers in money. It is a new thing, and past centuries did not experience these exaggerated and unjustifiable borrowings, which impose crushing burdens on the taxpayers, all the while paving the way for the bankruptcy of governments and investors.
2. There is, secondly, the unlimited freedom from legal regulation which time transactions and speculation enjoy.

“Capitalism in Modern Societies,” 1895 (l. 224)

In removing your political economy from the noble tutelage of morality, you believe that you are making it independent, but you are placing it under abject servitude to positivism. You are forgetting the correct meaning of *economy*, the classical and traditional meaning, which is “knowledge of the laws of good government of the family and society,” and you are reducing it to the rank of a very secondary science, statistics, which deals with the creation of material wealth and its apportionment.

“The Role of Wealth in Social Life,” 1896 (l. 242)

Wealth is now the only thing being studied. It is the dominant, if not the only, end of social life; and political economy in its entirety has been reduced to three elements: production, distribution, and consumption of wealth.

“The Role of Wealth in Social Life,” 1896 (l. 239)

A blind democracy is the most brutal and disastrous of governments. We must have an enlightened democracy. Let us provide the example. Let us study all the conditions for good political and communal administration.

“A Communal Program,” 1902 (l. 546-547)

Many intelligent people, experienced in all the difficulties of the social question, are seeing profit sharing as an essential innovation and the only one capable of preventing a social revolution.

“The Partnership Between Capital and Labor,” 1895 (l. 135)

In summary, it can be said that the State has as its principle mission the reign of peace and justice; that it has, secondly, an economic role in the broad sense; that it will lend useful help to the religious and intellectual development of its subjects; and, let us add, even to their physical and material well-being, through measures of hygiene and assistance.

"The Role of Wealth in Social Life," 1896 (l. 251)

Domestic virtues pave the way for civic virtues. If order and discipline prevail at home, they will be found in the nation as well.

"The Role of Wealth in Social Life," 1896 (l. 259)

One of the principle sources of a nation's wealth is its population. Is it numerous, active, fertile? If so, that represents unlimited wealth. If it is sparse, sterile, and static, it produces a very poor and powerless nation.

"The Role of Wealth in Social Life," 1896 (l. 264)

Our present society thus seems to be stained with usury from top to bottom; and that is the principle cause of the present social malaise.

"Some Thoughts on Usury," 1895 (l. 206)