

The incipient collapse of the UK economy ... extracts barely a peep from bishops



In a sense the entire history of Catholic Social Teaching can be attributed to cocaine. It's probable that Pope Leo XIII would have taught the same in his encyclicals without his daily aperitif of cocaine-laced Vin Mariani; it's implausible he would have written quite so many of them. Eighty-eight dropped from the papal quill in Leo's quarter-century reign. Among them was *Rerum Novarum*, the magna carta of Catholic social teaching.

Rerum inaugurated a revolution in Catholic political thought, a kind of ecclesiastical Great Leap Forward. Overnight, the Church went from being five centuries behind the times to a mere two. Trade unions were licit, even recommended; capital had obligations to labour as well as vice versa; starving a man through bad wages, it was intimated, might be as bad as doing the deed directly. Hot stuff for 1891.

And the spiritual ghostwriter of the encyclical was, it was rumoured, a Brit. Cardinal Manning of Westminster – a splice of “patriarch, prophet, and demagogue” in Lytton Strachey's phrase – brought the great London Dock Strike of 1888 to a victorious, and peaceful, resolution. “The Church should always be found on the side of the multitude who compose the body of the human family,” Manning said. He won the contempt of polite society. And the respect and admiration of London's working classes, who mourned his passing in tens of thousands.

It's been downhill ever since. Today's episcopacy aren't, *Laus Deo*, the rabid right-wingers that replaced Manning, but they've taken the dictum that “God's first language is silence” to extreme lengths. The incipient collapse of the UK economy – with 16 million entering poverty this winter, one third of them children – extracts barely a peep from bishops who burst into a racket of eulogies on the death of the Queen.

Suggesting – as the bishops did in their briefing paper on the cost of living crisis – that it is not within their competence to comment on the technical detail of how to resolve or ease the problems doesn't wash. Catholics aren't consequentialists, as the Catechism notes: we can't do evil so that good can come. Even if cruelty in the present led to prosperity in the future, it

wouldn't be any more morally permissible. The question isn't, as R.H. Tawney put it in *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, why economic questions should concern Christianity, but why on Earth they wouldn't.

Philip Booth, one of the bishops' senior viziers and a small-state neo-liberal made the reasonable point – in this journal's august pages – that a healthy suspicion of the state isn't peculiar to his rightish Catholic politics. Leftish Catholics such as Dorothy Day, he said, would agree. As one of the pinko Catholic Worker types so cited, I have a proposal to the hierarchy that will hopefully satisfy all sides. The Church can respond to the crisis by a return to first principles: the care of souls and the repentance of sin.

By sin, we can include, as the Church does, wages set below what's needed to raise a family; working conditions that make domestic life impossible; hours that disrespect the sanctity of the sabbath and the need for rest, prayer and contemplation; and the hoarding of property, possessions and wealth in the face of homelessness and poverty. Oppression of the poor is a sin that cries out to heaven. Justice comes before charity. The preferential option for the poor isn't a vague humanitarian impulse but a concrete theological claim: a recognition that God takes sides. So should His Church.

We should look to Manning for inspiration, and support the strikes spreading across the country. UK wages have stagnated since the 1970s, due in no small part to the emasculation of labour since then. In-work poverty, it was reported earlier this year, has never been higher. Nor has the number of British billionaires.

Given high public approval of the strikes, the bishops' support would be politically safe. The disputes almost universally involve ultra-rich executives of profitable companies trying to slash the wages of low-paid workers – theologically rock-solid, I'd have thought. And given that unions are decentralised civil-society organisations – often opposed by the state – Professor Booth will surely approve.

Failing that, we could slip some Vin Mariani to the bishops over dinner, and trust in the God of Surprises.

