



James Cardinal Gibbons

CHAPTER 18: THE CHURCH AND AMERICAN SOCIETY

TOPICS IN THE CHAPTER

1. Catholics in the Labor Movement
2. The Knights of Labor
3. *Rerum Novarum*
4. Cardinal Gibbons
5. Americanism
6. Social Work of the Church

The Church and Labor

CATHOLICS IN THE LABOR MOVEMENT. The shift from making products in the home with simple tools to manufacturing them in the factory with machinery, what is often called the Industrial Revolution, brought prosperity and new comfort for some but misery for many others. The country was in danger of becoming a nation of extremes, the very rich and the very poor. Most Catholics in the second half of the 19th century were workers in the factories and were in the ranks of the poor. Long hours, meager wages, little security, unhealthy and dangerous working conditions, and the lack of leisure time convinced many that something needed to be done for workers. We saw in the last chapter some of the measures of labor and government which were taken. It remains to

explain the role that the Church played in this struggle.

Since most American Catholic workers were poor, most priests and bishops supported the labor movement. A major example of church support for labor was Baltimore's Cardinal Gibbons' intervention in Rome on behalf of the American labor movement in 1887. It had to do with the Knights of Labor, which had become the nation's leading union in the second half of the 19th century — before the American Federation of Labor took its place soon after the turn of the century.

THE KNIGHTS OF LABOR. The Knights of Labor, organized in 1869, was a semi-secret organization set up to advance the interests of all workers—skilled and unskilled, immigrant and native-born, men and women, blacks and whites. This organization was opposed by a number of Church leaders because of its secrecy. The organization believed secrecy was necessary so that employers would not harass or fire a worker for being in the union. However, secret rituals were a common feature of many anti-Catholic organizations. Cardinal Taschereau of Canada forbade Catholics to join it. The fact that its head, Terrence V. Powderly, was a Catholic only made the situation worse.

Recognizing that the matter needed correction, Cardinal Gibbons investigated the charges against the union. In 1887, under advice from Cardinal Taschereau, Pope Leo XIII considered prohibiting all Catholics from joining this organization. Cardinal Gibbons went to Rome and successfully defended the organization. The Holy Father was persuaded that a prohibition was not necessary. Many scholars believed that Gibbons' championship of labor paved the way for Leo XIII's encyclical on labor, *Rerum Novarum*, in 1891.

RERUM NOVARUM. Pope Leo XIII is generally considered the "Father" of papal encyclicals or teaching letters on modern social concerns. In 1891, Leo XIII issued the first of these encyclicals to have a wide influence, even beyond the Church.

It was *Rerum Novarum*. In the Encyclical, Leo XIII presented the moral principles of justice and charity which should regulate the relationship of capital (managers and investors) and labor (workers). He said the laborer is entitled to a living wage (a wage that would allow a workingman and his family to live decently) and to the right to organize unions to secure better wages and to improve working conditions.

Many years passed before the teaching of *Rerum Novarum* found favor in the United States despite support of its teaching from many bishops. To speak of labor's right to organize into unions, to bargain about wages, or to discuss a living wage still seemed to many in 1891 to be dangerous ideas. Beginning in 1919, however, the American bishops began to promote more systematically *Rerum Novarum* by issuing pastoral letters which helped further its teachings. Gradually, the United States Congress enacted many ideas similar to those of *Rerum Novarum* in the first half of the twentieth century.

SECTION SURVEY

1. What was the Industrial Revolution and what were its dangers?
2. Who were the Knights of Labor?
3. Why did Cardinal Taschereau of Canada forbid Catholics to join this unions?
4. Who wrote *Rerum Novarum* and why is this writing important?

The Symbol of the Church in 19th Century America

CARDINAL GIBBONS. The Cardinal was not only a Church leader on the labor front; he came to be recognized as the primate or leader of the Catholic Church in America. From a childhood back in the days of Andrew Jackson until after World War I, James Gibbons (1834-1921) experienced the forces of growing America and observed the great increase in the Catholic part of the population. As a churchman, he believed that a good Catholic was likely to be a good American, just as he firmly

believed the American Constitution was very favorable to Catholicism.

Under his leadership, the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore was held in 1884; the one hundredth anniversary (the centenary) of the appointment of the first bishop, John Carroll, was celebrated in 1889, and in the same year, the Catholic University of America was established in Washington, D. C. He conciliated many disputes between Catholics of different nationalities, between bishops, and between American bishops and Rome.

His book, *The Faith of Our Fathers*, a simply written explanation of Catholic doctrine and practice, helped to bring thousands of converts into the Church. It became a best-selling book. Yet, his writings and actions did much to convince Protestant Americans that they had nothing to fear from Catholicism.

Cardinal Gibbons' influence reached even beyond the limits of the Church. Every President of the United States, from Rutherford Hayes to Woodrow Wilson, looked to him for counsel and advice, and some of them were among his close friends. Gibbons received this tribute from former President Theodore Roosevelt in 1917: "Taking your life as a whole, I think you are... the most respected, and venerated, and useful citizen of our country."

SECTION SURVEY

1. What book was written by Cardinal Gibbons and what effects did it produce?
2. What influence did Cardinal Gibbons have beyond the limits of the Church?
3. Did Cardinal Gibbons feel that Catholics could be good American citizens?

The Catholic Church and Americanism

In the second half of the 19th century, many non-Catholic American thinkers were giving a religious importance to the American ideals of freedom, democracy, and equality. That is, they appeared to be saying that attaining greater

freedom, democracy, and equality was more important in one's life than believing in God, worshipping Him, and hoping for eternal life with Him in heaven. Religion, indeed, was losing influence among the nation's educated and wealthy classes. And nationalism—a religious devotion to one's country, as opposed to true patriotism—began to take Christianity's place. In other words, many American nationalists believed that not only was being American more important for sons and daughters of immigrants than being of Irish or German background, but it was also more important than being a Catholic or even a Protestant.

Some Catholics did give up their faith to embrace Protestantism or American nationalism, but most did not. However, many Catholics were in danger of adopting attitudes influenced by American nationalism, which would erode the Catholic Faith over time if they were not corrected. One can be a good Catholic and love America, but one cannot be a good Catholic and think that being American is as important as one's faith.

Pope Leo XIII, sensing that some American Catholics were being lead astray, wrote an encyclical letter to the American bishops in 1899. The issues were subtle: in fact, some American Catholics have called the Pope's concern "a phantom heresy" because they missed what he was trying to say. He was concerned particularly about two errors.

The first error was the view that so-called active virtues, such as self-reliance and tolerance, were more important than the so-called passive virtues, such as humility and obedience. These active virtues were said to be better because they promoted the good citizenship and work ethic needed for greater freedom, democracy, and equality.

To correct the first error, Pope Leo XIII said that virtues such as self-reliance and tolerance, while good in themselves, can never be superior to or replace the virtues of humility and obedience in the Catholic way of life. Humility and obedience are the keys to heaven—we cannot enter heaven without them. Furthermore, self-reliance and tolerance can be taken to extremes. Too much self-

reliance, out of pride, can tempt us to not accept the charity of others and can lead us to forsake prayer, thinking we do not need God's grace. An excess of tolerance can cause us to tolerate and accept injustice and sin because we do not want to "force" our beliefs on others.

The second error was the view that being a monk or nun was outdated and even useless. According to this view, a religious vocation should be focused on helping others gain a better life, that is, on helping others gain greater freedom and equality, and on helping society achieve greater democracy.

To correct the second error, Leo XIII stated that the way of life of monks and nuns, who take the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and spend a great amount of time in prayer, is never outdated because religious life witnesses to the fact that eternal life is the supreme goal of all believers. Human life can never find its highest meaning in promoting human progress or democratic principles. These ideals and goals vanish with death. Thus, a religious vocation, and even a lay vocation, can never be *just* about helping others and society on earth. A vocation is about attaining eternal life.

These two errors have taken on the name of Americanism. Leo XIII was careful to say in his encyclical that he was not attacking patriotism nor the particular greatness of America. Instead, he was attacking ideas that are the wrong applications of American ideas to the Church. The Pope was gentle in this encyclical and, upon reading it, the American bishops thanked the Pope for it. However, many bishops thought that Americanism did not really exist.

Nevertheless, many observers of the Catholic Church in America in the 1990's, now about 100 years after Leo XIII's letter on Americanism was first published, see the wisdom of the encyclical letter. Moreover, these dangers to the Catholic Church in America still exist. Many Catholics in America today wrongly think that virtues which promote freedom, democracy, and equality are more important than fundamental Christian virtues, such as humility, obedience, and reverence, which promote faith in God. Also, many

American Catholics today falsely believe progress in this world—that is, greater freedom, democracy, and equality—is more important than gaining eternal life in heaven. These Catholics do not understand the importance of prayer and sacrifice in the Christian life.

SECTION SURVEY

1. When did American Nationalism begin its rise in popularity? Why is this idea rejected by the Church?
2. Are nationalism and patriotism the same? Why?
3. Why did Pope Leo XIII state that self-reliance and tolerance could never replace the virtues of humility and obedience in the Catholic way of life?
4. What is the second error of Americanism?

The Social Work of the Church

While the Catholic Faith is not only about helping others, helping others is an important element in the faith. The history of the Catholic Church is filled with many outstanding examples of Christian men and women who have expressed their love of God and of neighbor through serving those in need. The history of the Church in America in the latter part of the 19th century and early 20th century is no different.

In its social work, the Church has always endeavored to help the poor, the delinquent, runaways, the physically and mentally disabled, immigrants, the homeless, the sick and the neglected of God's flock. Also, the Church has always had the spread of the Gospel as part of its social work in some way. Since the end of the 19th century, some type of Catholic national or even international organization has been established to care for most people in need. Some outstanding examples are given below.

The Society of St. Vincent de Paul was founded by a Frenchman, Frederic Ozanam, and his associates in Paris in 1833. The Society was first established in America in Saint Louis in 1845. However, it grew to a major Catholic service organization in the latter part of the 19th century,

and it is still active today. This Society consists of parish units of men and women who devote their time and efforts to the visitation of the poor and distressed families in their own parish. When physical aid is necessary, families are furnished with material relief such as food, clothing, and shelter. When spiritual help is needed, the case is always referred to the pastor. Inspired by their patron, whose life was a model of Christian charity, Vincentians imitate the works of St. Vincent de Paul and become active examples of the charity of Christ.

We have already talked about Katherine Drexel and her work among blacks and Indians. Despite her involvement and that of many religious orders in these missions, it was felt that a national organization was needed in order to coordinate more efficiently the Church's activities among Indians and blacks. In 1874, the Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions was established. Later, the Bureau included assisting blacks and is now known as the Black and Indian Mission Office.

The Knights of Columbus was founded by Father Michael McGivney in 1882. It was originally founded to help working men pool their resources to help each other and their families. But soon it became involved in helping others in need. Today the Knights do a wide range of activities, such as promoting vocations and pro-life attitudes, in addition to assisting the poor and disadvantaged.

The National Society for the Propagation of the Faith was organized in this country in 1897. It is under the direction of the Holy See. It is the Church's main means of increasing awareness of the worldwide missions and of generating financial support for them. So important has the work of this organization become that each diocese has a director whose duty it is to collect funds for the foreign missions and to educate the faithful in the importance of this work.

In 1905, the Catholic Church Extension Society was organized. It supports the Church in sections where Catholics are few and where the work of the Church cannot be continued without outright charity. Chicago is its headquarters.

With the growth of our country, the need for charity grew. At the turn of the century it became increasingly evident that charity had to be more organized if it was to meet the demands of modern society. In 1910, Cardinal Gibbons organized the National Conference of Catholic Charities. Today the organization is known as Catholic Charities, U.S.A. It has grown to be the major service organization of the Church on a national level. It serves a network of more than 1,200 agencies and institutions through consultation, planning, assistance, and evaluation. Diocesan member agencies provide shelter, food, counseling, services to teens, parents, and the elderly, and many other services.

SECTION SURVEY

1. When was the Society of St. Vincent de Paul established? What works did they perform?
2. For what purpose were the Knights of Columbus originally established? With what added activities are they now involved?

CHAPTER 18 REVIEW

1. Why did the bishops in America tend to support labor in the 19th century?
2. Describe Cardinal Gibbons' important intervention on behalf of labor.
3. What famous encyclical set the Catholic pattern for social reform in the world at large?
4. What do you consider Cardinal Gibbons' most important contribution to the Church in America?
5. How is nationalism different from patriotism?
6. What are the two chief errors of Americanism?
7. Why should the Church concern herself with social problems?
8. Explain the work of the St. Vincent de Paul Society.
9. Why was the Catholic Church Extension Society organized?
10. Name at least six groups of people for whom the Church provides care.
11. In what specific way is the National Conference of Catholic Charities important?