The Troubled Origins of the Italian Catholic Labor Movement, 1878-1914

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The Right to Property
Sanctioned by Natural Law

The Defense of Private Property
Thomistic social philosophy was based upon the theological concept of *caritas*, Christian love. “The mistress and queen of virtues,” according to Leo XIII, charity was for Aquinas man’s way of sharing God’s essence, His very nature, which is love. Charity was the bond that united man with God and with his fellow men. For Aquinas *caritas* was the bond that made society a unit; it was the lifeblood of the social body, an indispensable means to social solidarity.1

Thomistic theology distinguished between spiritual and material expressions of charity. Spiritual forms, such as making an erring brother aware of his sins, were considered more important than acts of material charity, such as giving alms. Despite this, Aquinas stressed the need for both forms of charity in virtuous Christian life. The giving of alms was thus essential, and those Catholics who systematically avoided helping the “poor” with alms were committing a grave sin.3

The notion of charity as an instrument of social solidarity was supported in Neo-Thomistic theology by the concept of the “social function of property,” which reaffirmed the traditional Christian principle of ownership as stewardship. This notion implied that the owners of wealth were “administrators” appointed by God to manage and dispense the bounty of earth, which was given by God to the whole of mankind. With property thus belonging in a sense to the community, all men were perceived to have the right to the basic necessities of life.4

Aquinas certainly would have been horrified at the sight of men hanged during the heyday of old-style liberalism because they stole a loaf of bread to save themselves from starvation. The English Car-
dinal Henry Edward Manning expressed the spirit of the *Summa* when he declared that “the natural right of every man to life and to the food necessary for the sustenance of life prevails overall positive laws,” and “a starving man has a right to his neighbor’s bread.” For Aquinas indeed made it clear that in dire need for physical survival, taking someone else’s property was not even stealing, but an exercise of “natural” rights.\(^5\)

True as they may have been to the spirit of Saint Thomas, Manning’s remarks apparently did not receive a wide response from Italian Thomists, whose writings came to be characterized by numerous references to another “natural” right: that of holding property as a private possession. Cardinal Alfonso Capecelatro (1824–1912), a leading member of the Italian episcopate and a very popular writer, stated that Aquinas “demonstrated” that “private property derived from man’s very nature.” But an intense and rather emotional debate among Thomists later turned up evidence to suggest that the Angelic Doctor was far from being as unequivocal as Capecelatro suggested. If he accepted private property as a “natural” right at all, Aquinas apparently qualified his acceptance. Statements have even been found in the *Summa* that suggest an outright rejection of the principle of private property as a “natural” right. And if private property did not derive from nature, then it would have to be included in some Thomistic category other than “natural law.”\(^6\)

We have here the explanation of the emotional intensity of the debate among Neo-Thomists, for in Aquinas’s philosophy, “natural” law and “natural” rights imply permanence and immutability, as handiworks of God. “Civic” laws that could have provided an alternative category for property were enacted by states. If we concede that civic laws are relevant to private property, then as J. B. McLaughlin, one of the debaters, was to state, “We are to be prepared to accept schemes of social reorganization which abolish private property.” And that would have been just as unacceptable to Italian Neo-Thomists as it was to McLaughlin, their conservative Irish counterpart. Since Aquinas said unequivocally that private property did not fall under the category of “natural law” and “civic” law was conceived of as representing a threat to private property, conservative Neo-Thomists took refuge in another category that
Aquinas also connected with property. According to the Angelic Doctor, this category, *jus gentium*, was established by human reason, but was not formally promulgated as were civic laws. Since reason was “natural,” Neo-Thomists considered the particular *jus gentium* about property “natural” as well, which in turn led to the conclusion that private property could not be abolished without violating “nature.” As proof of the indispensability of private property, they usually referred to a passage in the *Summa* that argued that man should possess things as his own:

First because every man is more careful to procure what is for himself alone than that which is common to many or to all: since each one would shirk the labour and leave to another that which concerns the community, as happens where there is a great number of servants. Secondly, because human affairs are conducted in more orderly fashion if each man is charged with taking care of some particular thing himself, whereas there would be confusion if everyone had to look after any one thing indeterminately. Thirdly, because a more peaceful state is ensured to man if each one is contented with his own. Hence it is to be observed that quarrels arise more frequently where there is no division of the things possessed.

The Italian Bishop Geremia Bonomelli (1831–1914), like Capecelatro a prolific and popular writer and a major figure in the Italian church hierarchy, followed a pattern adopted by Catholic sociological treatises by referring to this passage and interpreting it as well. He stated that “not only nature, but the interests of society” too “demanded” the private ownership of property, since it was an incentive for work and, as such, promoted productivity and was thus instrumental in providing goods in abundance to fulfill human needs. A related argument presented private property as an “instrument of social peace.” This was somewhat ironic in view of the fact that a Catholic handbill distributed in very large numbers in 1910 seems to have agreed with the Socialists in indicating “mine and thine” as a source of stress and contention, rather than of peace. Ironic or not, arguing that private property was a source of social peace was not contrary to the *Summa*. The same could hardly be
said about another conclusion reached by Thomists at the turn of the century, namely, that society as such would not survive without private property, since, without it, men would degenerate into a pack of lazy savages, abandoning the path of virtue and salvation.\(^9\)

This interpretation came to be questioned later,\(^10\) however, as some Thomists argued that Aquinas did not declare private ownership absolutely necessary. According to some interpreters, the Angelic Doctor’s preference for private property was conditional and valid only for societies in which the three reasons held valid. Although Aquinas might have been convinced that the common ownership of property was not practical, the impracticality of the ownership of property by governments did not necessarily follow. Furthermore, perceiving government ownership as the only alternative to private property was a rather one-sided, if not altogether forced, interpretation of Aquinas’s arguments, since he usually spoke not of governments but of communities in connection with the social functions of property. It was a measure of the strength of a growing cult of the state that state property would be perceived by the leadership of the church at the turn of the century as the only possible alternative to private property. As opponents of the cult of the state, both Leo XIII and Pius X consistently argued in favor of private property. In fact, Catholic writers faithfully followed papal leads in presenting private ownership as something “natural” and as a civilizing influence.\(^11\)

**The Social Functions of Property**

With its unhesitating acceptance of the principle of private ownership, arguing its necessity for the survival of society except in the state of perfection, such as man’s condition was before the Fall, official Catholic social doctrine gave aid and comfort to the embattled liberals who defended private property against revolutionary socialists bent on its destruction. Although Neo-Thomist arguments seemed to coincide with the liberal conviction that private property was the universal sustaining principle of healthy social life, important differences on the subject of property remained between liberals
and Thomistic Catholics. Unlike the liberals, Neo-Thomists saw in property only a means, not an end, in the life of society. For Catholics this was an important aspect of the principle of the social functions of property. By becoming instrumental in the practice of *caritas*, private property helped secure for its owner the most important gain of human life, salvation.

Traditions even older than Aquinas’s thought came into play in connection with the social functions of property. In discussing these, Aquinas quoted patristic sources. Saint Augustine provided especially dramatic arguments: “Find out how much God has given you and take from it what is sufficient for yourself; the rest, which is superfluous, is necessary for others. The superfluities of the rich are the necessities of the poor; to possess what is superfluous is to possess what belongs to others.”

12 *Quod superest date eleemosynam* led to the very core of Christian doctrine, to the concept of *caritas*. In defining what constituted the superfluous wealth destined to be given by the “rich” to their “poor” brothers, Aquinas, and Catholic theology after him, recognized a threefold division among man’s earthly possessions: goods necessary for one’s physical survival, those necessary for properly maintaining one’s social status, and finally the “superfluous.” A fellow man’s “extreme” material need, his lack of the bare necessities of life, obligated Catholics to share with him all their possessions but those necessary for their own physical survival. Thus the “common” need of a fellow citizen justified a share of the “superfluous” wealth of the rich.

13 Modern popes repeatedly confirmed the importance of the diligent use of the “superfluous” in Christian life, and Catholic writers followed their lead in pointing out that the wealthy who kept their superfluous “robbed the poor.” A Catholic handbill warned the rich that their possessions were not theirs alone but, through the charitable use of the superfluous, belonged as a birthright to the poor also.

14 An emphatic warning, no doubt, but could the neatly defined medieval principles of charity fulfill the needs of twentieth-century society? The Italian upper classes were notorious for their *dolce vita*, their conspicuous consumption involving a massive waste of food, extravagant housing, and large staffs of servants as status symbols.
With their category of goods necessary for the proper maintenance of one's social status, the Neo-Thomist champions of charity thus provided the rich with the theological and moral equivalent of the tax loopholes of which the wealthy so conveniently serve themselves while living within the confines of the modern state. Moreover, according to Thomistic theology, the rich had no obligation to give all of their superfluity away. Some of it could be held back to “further improve” their status. Besides, what constituted the superfluity of a modern businessman caught in fierce economic competition which forced him to assure the growth of his enterprise or go bankrupt?

Eventually Thomists generated a discussion about the productive development of the wealth one possessed: this was a way of talking about economic growth in general and the expansion of business in particular, an expansion sustained by using a part of the superfluous. So long as such practice served the interests of the community, it was to be perceived within the confines of Thomism.¹⁶

Arguments of this nature did appear in some Catholic treatises published in Italy during the papacy of Pius X. One of these, in fact, emphasized that “it was better to give work than it was to give alms, since people could have felt humiliated by alms, which often also led to laziness.”¹⁷ Characteristically, this pamphlet was a translation of a work from abroad: the reasoning it represented did not begin to prevail among Italian Catholics until after World War II. At the end of the nineteenth century, the typical Italian commentary about Aquinas's relevant arguments pointed not to providing jobs but to almmsgiving as the way of fulfilling the obligations involved in the principle of the social functions of property.

Despite its emphasis on alms as the expression of the wealthy man’s responsibility to his less fortunate brothers, Catholic social doctrine remained rather elastic insofar as the disposal of the superfluous was concerned. If there was a lack of precision in the law of caritas as it applied to property, it apparently originated with Aquinas. Turn-of-the-century Catholics were not alone in appearing somewhat elusive when discussing the superfluous. In fact, Thomists have continued to argue up to the present that it is impossible to “formulate precise rules for determining the magnitude of the obligations” connected with the disposal of the superfluous;¹⁸ it all
depends upon the circumstances. There are still no hard-and-fast rules, and there were certainly none at the turn of the century, save for such remarks as, “not every want obliges under strict obligation, but only that want which, if it were not relieved, the sufferer could not live. In such a case what happens is what St. Ambrose says, ‘Feed him who is dying of hunger, if you do not you will kill him.’ ”

In speaking of the social obligations that went with property, Bishop Bonomelli referred to these obligations as “voluntary socialism, daughter of Christian charity.” If, in everyday practice, the disposal of the superfluous represented anything but socialism, voluntary it certainly was! Thomistic theology left it to the wealthy man to decide not only what he was to give away as superfluous but also to whom he would give it. “The Gospel did not tell the poor to take from the rich, but the rich to give to the poor,” warned the Jesuit Luigi Taparelli d’Azelio. So much for socialism!

The extreme individualism manifest in Taparelli’s related arguments was to draw the attention of historians later as they tried to explain a strange twist in the outlooks of some Neo-Thomists who, showing the influence of liberal economic theory, emphasized individualism and tended to pay lip service to, if not to neglect altogether, the social functions of property. Somewhat paradoxically Taparelli, a lifelong fighter against liberalism, as well as Matteo Liberatore, a fellow Jesuit from the Civiltà Cattolica, appear to have prepared the ground several decades earlier for those Neo-Thomists who, driven by an obsessive fear of socialism at the turn of the nineteenth century, truncated Thomistic doctrine by giving it a liberal twist. But Aquinas’s thought, it appears, could be all things to all men; and those who, like Taparelli, argued in favor of a “complete freedom” for the property owners in disposing of their superfluous could for once rely on Aquinas to provide support for their arguments, since he did state that “as there are many suffering wants, and it is impossible to relieve all with the same thing, so it is left to the good will of everyone, the distribution of his own to relieve with it those who suffer want.”

The “good will” manifest in the alms of the wealthy constituted part of the conceptual framework of nineteenth-century paternalism that was a world-wide phenomenon. But having developed in Italy
under the sponsorship of Aquinas, paternalism acquired special, somewhat old-fashioned, tones. A perception of social reality according to which God had delegated some of His authority to the rich to run the lives of the working classes in the name of the Heavenly Father was part and parcel of paternalism everywhere. Yet in the writings of conservative Catholics in Italy, this notion took the form of an echo from the Middle Ages: the landlords as “kings” “ruling” over their “subjects,” the people who worked their lands, became an idea much favored by Italian writers. After Marquis Achille Sassoli de’ Bianchi presented this view at a Catholic congress in 1879, the image rapidly gained popularity. Even the unusually forward-looking Bishop Bonomelli could not resist using it in a pastoral letter:

In a large village located in a diocese near ours, a very wealthy gentleman lives with his family. Having worn the uniform with honors and after participating in hard-fought battles, he decided to leave his native town for the freedom of the fields. On holidays he is always on his bench in church, attending the mass and listening to the sermon. As for the peasants of the village, he makes sure they always have work. He visits the homes of the poor every month, and his hands reach out to those in need. He is a real father to the poor; that village loves him, adores him: we might say he is its king. Do you think that village would touch his property if a socialist wave ever washed over our countryside? Surely not, for the entire population would rise like a single man in his defense, his peasants were heard saying that! And here, my beloved, is the only efficacious way to counter subversive ideas, the way to arrest the socialist tide that rises menacingly in some countries! Here is a man who knows how to fight! If all the gentlemen would do as he does, socialism would not be possible.

The Tutelage Extended to Working People by the Upper Classes

As Bonomelli’s little parable shows, aside from lording over the workers as their “king,” there was yet another role for country squires to take on: that of the “father” to their employees. The noble landowners were not alone in fancying themselves in this role and, in
return, expecting gratitude and obedience from their “children.” Capitalists, those “divine instruments for the people,” were also proclaimed by some of the Catholic writers as “fathers” to the workers they employed.24 This was also done under the auspices of Aquinas, who had suggested that servants should be considered members of their employer’s family. Indeed, he perceived not only servants but all the citizens of the state as members of a family. Thus writers could claim with some justice to be within the magic circle of Thomism by presenting society as nothing but a large family under the paternal care and “tutelage” of the upper classes.25

It was this attitude shared by many members of the church hierarchy that drew the angriest protest from young Catholic activists, who argued that “the people will refuse to remain the brute anonymous, gray force of society” as well as “the eternal child in perpetual need of guidance, unable to reach the age of majority, become sui juris and govern itself.” These words were written by Alessandro Cantono in 1902, during the last full year of the papacy of Leo XIII. They expressed the outlook of many of the young Christian Democratic activists. Emerging as their leader, Romolo Murri (1870–1944) wrote an approving introduction to Cantono’s volume. Several others had also been pressing similar arguments for years. By 1906 even Bishop Bonomelli compared the “people” to a “youth who becomes convinced that he does not need tutelage any more and demands to be recognized as of age and able to act under his own responsibility.”26

Bonomelli thus clearly broke ranks and took the side of the Christian Democratic activists in a conflict between them and the conservatively inclined majority within the church hierarchy. This conflict, already smoldering during the last years of Leo’s papacy, flared up after Pius X became pope. The new pontiff insisted on following his predecessor’s directives to the letter, and therefore declared that Christian Democracy must remain actio benefica in populum, “a form of charity,” which effectively confined the role of Christian Democratic activists to a social action coming from above, a “tutelage” of the interests of the working people by the “superior” classes.27
Frustrated by this limitation, the activists might have cited the biblical tale involving the rich, the camel, the needle, and the Kingdom of Heaven. Pointing out that the rich tended to evade the responsibilities of charity was not only admissible from the point of view of orthodoxy but became an almost obligatory part of related arguments in Catholic sociological literature. Thus a conservative pamphlet reflected the extreme difficulties of convincing the padroni that they had “obligations toward the workers in their employ.”\(^{28}\) Yet to draw the logical conclusion from this and then question charity’s viability was to invite the ire of Pius X.

When he was a young priest, Giuseppe Sarto chose as his model Saint Vincenzo de’ Paoli, whose acts of charity reached heroic dimensions. It was a model he followed faithfully, for Sarto’s biographies abound with episodes demonstrating this. Eyewitnesses told how his firewood was not locked up so that those who needed it could help themselves; how his granary was almost always empty when he was a village priest; how his treasury was always open to the poor when he became a bishop and a prince of the church. As his testament stated, he always “lived poor” and reputedly had to borrow money for the train ride that took him to Rome and the papal throne. He is quoted as saying that his money was not his but belonged to the “poor.” In another moving statement to his flock, he pleaded: “O rich, help the charity of your patriarch, give to his poor children. You will be giving to him. Nay, you will be giving to Christ.”\(^{29}\)

Sarto began his pastoral work in 1858 in Tombolo, a small northern Italian village where the misery of the few poor could be mitigated by the community. And it was; Sarto, the parish priest, made certain of that. This is one of the reasons the faithful venerate him today as a saint. However, his difficulty in coming to terms with the twentieth century adds a tragic tint to the saintly halo of Pope Pius X.

It seems the nineteenth century, or perhaps even the eighteenth, captured Sarto’s mind. Or was it, as some of his biographers have suggested, that he remained throughout his whole life in a way a prete di campagna, a village priest? Whatever the reasons for his
ways, the man who was to follow Leo XIII to the papal throne seemed tragically behind in his understanding of society. He failed to realize that the social world of the modern city was not the old-fashioned rural Gemeinschaft of Tombolo and Salzano, the villages that saw his first pastoral activities. A thorough conservative, he failed to see that there was a difference between eighteenth-century pauperism and twentieth-century social ills.30

Only a few years before he became pope, Sarto was reminiscing about his youth in mid-nineteenth-century Padua. He said that people complained even then about the ever-increasing number of poor and beggars in this town. A learned and saintly teacher who was a young boy during the eighteenth century repeatedly told us in school that there was no reason for such complaints in those times because without the luxury of public assistance … charity took care of all…. The substitution of official alms for private alms amounts to the destruction of Christianity, and it is an attempt on the principle of property…. If aid comes [to the poor] through laws and alms are not motivated by the heart because they are not free any more, they lose their merit before God; alms [then] cease to be channels of grace and safe instruments of health; right is substituted for alms and work; the tie of love that alone can unite the poor and the rich is broken, the sentiments of gratitude and of recognition vanish, and poverty becomes a public function, a public office, a public occupation.31

This argument against public welfare measures must have drawn some astonished looks from the audience, for Sarto was speaking to a gathering of Catholic social scientists. At least some of them must already have been enough attuned to modern reality to break with the intellectual traditions established by the Neo-Thomists of the Civiltà Cattolica, especially by Taparelli, who argued in favor of the property owners’ rights to dispense their superfluous as they saw fit, and who linked these arguments with broadsides against welfare measures by public authorities.

By 1896 even some of the conservatively inclined Catholics, Salvatore Talamo among them, came to understand the need for public welfare measures. In arguing in favor of them, they would point to
the *Rerum novarum* of Leo XIII. In a few years’time, even Cardinal Capecelatro, though he agreed with Sarto that “without alms there was no Christianity” and that a “pact of charity” tied the rich and poor within society into a single community, was driven into admitting that more often than not the rich “evaded” the obligations of charity. The logical solution to this dilemma was to call upon the public authorities to assume the “tutelage” of the interests of the poor, and Capecelatro eventually reached that conclusion. In turn, this solution led to the need for extra taxes, and consequently the state had to violate the sacrosanct realm of the superfluous, which was to be profanely called profit and therefore taxed. But because of their mistrust of the post-Unification state, which, they felt, threatened the very existence of the church, such a suggestion was not easy for Italian Catholic conservatives to accept.\(^{32}\)

Cardinal Sarto’s objection to public welfare measures was certainly sustained by this mistrust. But there was more to it: his rejection of “official alms,” like that of Taparelli decades before, was motivated by a strict adherence to the Neo-Thomistic principle of charity as a means of social solidarity. By creating a system of mutual dependence among different social strata, charity and alms became vital in establishing unity among the faithful. The poor depended upon alms for their physical survival; and the very existence of the rich as Christians (and their salvation) was conditioned by their providing the poor with at least the basic necessities of life. This symbiosis that united the rich and the poor within the fold apparently came to be seen by Sarto as an essential condition for a Christian community and hence indispensable to the survival of the church as an institution.\(^{33}\)