

Calming Anxiety:
Ex Corde Ecclesiae and the Catholic Social Encyclicals

Since the publication of *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII, the Church has been a vocal participant in the field of social thought. Addressed to a Europe marred by a bitter, and sometimes bloody, struggle between the Marxists and *laissez-faire* Capitalists for political and economic control, *Rerum Novarum* offers a new diagnosis of society's ailment. Despite great scientific and technological advancement, Leo XIII sees Europe in the grip of a "desperate anxiety." This anxiety is caused by a pervasive hope for cultural advancement, which is negatively manifested in doubt, uncertainty, and even horror, concerning its own realization. In the tradition of Catholic social encyclicals which follows *Rerum Novarum*, the theme of anxiety appears again and again, further developed and defined through such documents as *Gaudium et Spes*, *Laborem Exercens*, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, and *Centesimus Annus*. Through an examination of these documents, it can be seen that the essence of the anxiety Leo XIII referred to is self-forgetfulness. The society that experiences anxiety is the one where proper self-understanding has disappeared. What it is to be human has been forgotten, which results in social and cultural structures that are not fit for humans, treating persons as commodities and ignoring their inherent dignity.

This forgetfulness that pervades modern society reveals the pedagogical failings of secularism. Secular society does not know or seek to understand the nature of the human person; and what it does not know or seek, it cannot teach. The pedagogical mishap that underlies the social disorder of anxiety highlights the deep need for sound education in the Catholic tradition. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* outlines the features of Catholic higher-education and scholarship that make it a fitting antidote for the social ills that spring up in an anxiety-ridden culture: "[A] Catholic University is distinguished by its free search for the whole truth about nature, man and God. The present age is in urgent need of this kind of disinterested service, namely of *proclaiming the meaning of truth*, that fundamental value without which freedom, justice and human dignity are extinguished." Freedom, justice and human dignity are precisely those necessary goods which Leo XIII saw undermined in the anxious atmosphere of 19th century Europe, and precisely the goods that all Catholic social teaching to the present has aimed to rehabilitate and preserve. This cannot be done without proper education, however, and so it is in the sphere of education that the church can supply the remedy to anxiety.