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Hermeneutical Shift from Leo XIII to Leo XIV: *Rerum Novarum* and the "*New Things*" of The Present Age

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Abstract

This article rereads Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* not only as the foundational document of modern Catholic social teaching, but as a theological text of human formation. While the encyclical is commonly interpreted through labour, wages, private property, socialism, and workers' rights, this study argues that its deeper concern is anthropological: the kind of human person formed or deformed by social, economic, familial, and political structures. Through a qualitative, theological, and interpretive method, the article examines the worker as person rather than instrument, the family as the first place of formation, work as moral and spiritual activity, property as stewardship and responsibility, and associations as schools of solidarity and participation. It also situates *Rerum Novarum* within the broader Christian inheritance, including Eastern patristic theology, especially its vision of the human person as *imago Dei*, its critique of hoarding, its concern for the poor, and its sacramental view of creation and social responsibility. By placing Leo XIII in dialogue with Leo XIV and the "new things" of the present age, the article addresses technological acceleration, social fragmentation, economic precarity, and renewed dehumanization. It concludes that Catholic social teaching judges every social order by its capacity to form persons in dignity, moral agency, relational responsibility, spiritual vocation, and participation in the common good, rather than functions of production, consumption, ideology, or technological control.

Keywords: Rerum Novarum; Catholic social teaching; theological anthropology; human dignity; dehumanization

Introduction

Rerum Novarum is most often read as a social, political, and economic document. Such reading is necessary, yet incomplete if the encyclical is confined to questions of labour, wages, private property, capital, socialism, class conflict, or the rights of workers. Beneath Leo XIII's treatment of the industrial question stands a deeper theological and anthropological concern: what kind of human person is formed by a society of new technologies in which labour, property, family, religion, justice, and community are either rightly ordered or gravely disordered? In this sense, Rerum Novarum should be approached not only as the foundational document of modern Catholic social teaching, but also as a text of human formation. Its central concern is not simply how economic life should be organized, but how social structures either protect or deform the dignity, freedom, moral agency, relational responsibility, spiritual vocation, and participation of the human person in the common good. Having stated the aforesaid, while anthropological themes have

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been recognized in CST scholarship, they have not been sufficiently foregrounded as the organizing principle of *Rerum Novarum*.

Leo XIII wrote *Rerum Novarum* in response to the transformations produced by industrial modernity. The expansion of industry, the concentration of capital, the vulnerability of workers, and the rise of socialist responses to inequality created a new social condition requiring moral and theological discernment (Leo XIII, 1891). Yet the encyclical's concern is not reducible to economic efficiency or political stability. Its primary concern is the human person, especially the worker who risks being reduced to an instrument of production within an impersonal economic order. The worker is not merely a unit of labour, a wage earner, or a function within industrial society. The worker is a person created by God, endowed with dignity, capable of moral agency, situated within family and community, called to religious freedom, and ordered toward the common good and eternal life. Therefore, Leo XIII's defense of workers is simultaneously a defense of the human person against every form of reductionism.

This anthropological theology reading prevents Catholic social teaching from being reduced to a set of political or economic positions. The social doctrine of the Church is rooted in a theological vision of the human person created in the image of God, called to communion, and ordered toward truth, goodness, and the common good. The social question is therefore also an anthropological and spiritual question. A society's treatment of labour, property, family, community, and the vulnerable reveals its understanding of the human person. John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus*, written on the hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, reinforces this interpretation by insisting that no authentic solution to social problems can be separated from a true understanding of the person (John Paul II, 1991). Although Leo XIII addressed the industrial world of the nineteenth century, his principles remain applicable wherever the human person is threatened by systems that reduce human life to production, consumption, technology, ideology, utility, or power.

Methodology and Scope

This article adopts a qualitative, theological, and interpretive methodology appropriate to a conceptual study in Catholic social teaching. It does not employ empirical fieldwork, statistical analysis, or sociological data collection. Rather, it proceeds through close textual analysis, historical-theological interpretation, and constructive theological reflection. Texts were selected according to their direct relevance to the article’s central research question: how Catholic social teaching understands the formation of the human person within changing social, economic, cultural, and technological conditions. The interpretation follows a thematic and hermeneutical approach, identifying recurring anthropological categories such as dignity, labour, family, property, participation, solidarity, the common good, and dehumanization. Continuity is assessed by tracing how later magisterial texts preserve and deepen the core anthropological principles already present in *Rerum Novarum*, especially the dignity of the worker, the social function of property, the priority of the family, and the moral purpose of social life. Discontinuity is assessed not as doctrinal rupture, but as historical development: each later text responds to new social circumstances, vocabulary, and ethical challenges while remaining rooted in the same theological concern for the human person. Thus, the article evaluates continuity at the level of theological anthropology and moral principles, and discontinuity at the level of context, emphasis, and application. Its primary purpose is to reread Leo XIII's Rerum Novarum not only as a social, economic, or political document, but as a theological text of human formation. The study therefore asks how the encyclical understands the human person and how its treatment of labour, family, property, associations, justice, and religion contributes to a broader anthropology of formation.

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The article's primary source is *Rerum Novarum*, interpreted within the wider development of Catholic social doctrine. Attention is given to later magisterial texts that deepen or extend Leo XIII's anthropological concerns, including *Gaudium et Spes*, *Labourem Exercens*, *Centesimus Annus, Caritas in Veritate, Laudato Si', Fratelli Tutti, Dignitas Infinita, the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, and Leo XIV's *Magnifica Humanitas*. These sources are selected because they address the dignity of the person, the meaning of work, the family, property, participation, solidarity, integral human development, technological transformation, and the danger of dehumanization. The study also engages theological, philosophical, and social-ethical authors whose work illuminates personhood, community, social responsibility, and the common good.

The original contribution of this article lies in its rereading of Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* not only as the foundational document of modern Catholic social teaching, but as a theological text of human formation. While much scholarship rightly interprets *Rerum Novarum* through the categories of labour, wages, private property, socialism, class conflict, and workers' rights, this article argues that the encyclical contains a deeper and underdeveloped anthropological logic. A further contribution is the article's development of a theological bridge from Leo XIII to Leo XIV. Rather than treating Leo XIV's reception of the Leonine legacy as a symbolic return to *Rerum Novarum*, the study interprets it as a renewed discernment of the same human question in a new historical moment. The "new things" of the nineteenth century were industrial labour, capital concentration, worker vulnerability, and socialist responses to inequality. The "new things" of the present age include technological acceleration, artificial intelligence, social fragmentation, economic precarity, ecological vulnerability, migration, and new forms of dehumanization.

The method proceeds in three movements. First, the article undertakes a close reading of *Rerum Novarum*, identifying its central themes: the worker as a person, the moral meaning of work, the priority of the family, the formative role of property, and the importance of associations. Second, it interprets these themes through theological anthropology, asking how each contributes to the formation or deformation of the human person. Third, it places Leo XIII's teaching in dialogue with later Catholic social doctrine, especially the renewed reception of the Leonine legacy in Leo XIV. This movement is not treated as a simple comparison between pontificates, but as a continuity of theological discernment before changing social conditions.

The Worker as Imago Dei: Leo XIII's Personalist Anthropology of Labour

A central contribution of *Rerum Novarum* is Leo XIII's rejection of every social, political, or economic system that reduces the worker to a mere instrument of production. Although the encyclical addresses wages, private property, labour relations, social conflict, and the rights and duties of employers and workers, its deeper logic is anthropological. Leo XIII does not defend the worker simply because labour is necessary for economic activity, but because the worker is a person endowed with dignity, rights, duties, family obligations, religious destiny, and moral agency. The worker is not merely a labouring body or productive function within industrial society. He is a person whose labour must be understood in relation to the whole human vocation: bodily life, moral responsibility, family stability, social participation, worship, and the final end in God.
Leo XIII's anthropological foundation appears clearly in his instructions to employers. He insists that employers must respect in every worker "his dignity as a person ennobled by Christian character" and condemns the treatment of workers "as though they were things in the pursuit of gain" (Leo XIII, 1891, no. 20). This passage is decisive. Leo XIII does not begin with the absolute claims of capital, nor with the ideological claims of class conflict. He begins with the dignity of the person who works. The economic disorder addressed by Rerum Novarum is therefore, at its root,

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an anthropological disorder. When the worker is treated as an object, society forgets the truth of the person.

This is why *Rerum Novarum* cannot be reduced to a labour document in the narrow sense. It is a theological judgment on social formation. Leo XIII rejects both economic exploitation and ideological reductionism. On one side, he condemns an unrestrained economic mentality that subordinates the worker to profit. On the other, he rejects a socialist interpretation of society as a necessary conflict between classes. His claim that capital and labour need each other expresses more than economic cooperation; it expresses a moral anthropology of reciprocity. Human life is not properly formed through domination, resentment, or antagonism, but through justice, cooperation, and ordered relationships (Leo XIII, 1891, no. 19).

The Second Vatican Council provides a broader theological context for this judgment. *Gaudium et Spes* teaches that the human person is "the source, the center, and the purpose of all economic and social life" (Second Vatican Council, 1965b, no. 63). This principle expresses the anthropological criterion already present in Leo XIII. Economic life is not autonomous from moral truth; it must be ordered toward the integral vocation of the person. The worker cannot be understood adequately as a productive unit, because the worker is called to truth, freedom, communion, worship, and eternal destiny.

John Paul II gives this insight into its most explicit formulation in *Labourem Exercens*. He teaches that work is a fundamental dimension of human existence and that the value of work is rooted first in the person who performs it, not in the kind of work done (John Paul II, 1981b, nos. 4, 6). The distinction between the objective and subjective dimensions of work is essential. The objective dimension refers to production, tools, techniques, and outcomes. The subjective dimension refers to the person who works. Catholic social teaching gives priority to the subjective dimension because the person is the subject of work, never its object. *Centesimus Annus* confirms that the continuing relevance of *Rerum Novarum* lies in its defense of the person within changing historical conditions (John Paul II, 1991).

Leo XIII already anticipates this integral view when he insists that work must not destroy the worker's body, moral life, family responsibilities, or spiritual vocation. Workers must have time for religious duties and must not be exposed to conditions that corrupt the soul or lead them to neglect home and family (Leo XIII, 1891, no. 20). Labour must not exceed the worker's strength, and work must allow sufficient rest for body and soul (Leo XIII, 1891, nos. 41-43). Rest is not merely the interruption of labour for renewed productivity. It belongs to the dignity and spiritual formation of the person. A society that denies rest weakens worship, contemplation, family life, education, and moral responsibility.

Benedict XVI deepens this formative reading by insisting that economic life must be shaped by truth, charity, fraternity, and the logic of gift (Benedict XVI, 2009, nos. 34-36). Francis develops a similar concern in *Fratelli Tutti*, warning against a throwaway logic that values persons according to usefulness (Francis, 2020, nos. 18-21). The declaration *Dignitas Infinita* gives doctrinal precision to the same principle by affirming that human dignity is intrinsic and inalienable, not dependent on usefulness, capacity, or recognition (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2024). These teachings illuminate Leo XIII's defense of the worker: the worker's dignity does not depend on economic contribution, physical strength, efficiency, or class. It rests on the person's created dignity and vocation before God.

In this light, Leo XIII's treatment of the worker becomes foundational for the article's larger movement from *Rerum Novarum* to the "new things" of the present age of Leo IX. The industrial

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age risked reducing the worker to a productive instrument. The present age risks new forms of reduction through economic precarity, technological mediation, social fragmentation, migration, cultural polarization, and loss of spiritual horizon. Yet the criterion remains unchanged. The dignity of the person, not the efficiency of the system, is the measure of social life. The social question is inseparable from the anthropological question: what kind of human person is formed by economic order?

Eastern Patristic Resonances in Rerum Novarum

To claim that *Rerum Novarum* has roots in Eastern theology does not mean that Leo XIII directly composed the encyclical as a reception of the Greek or Syriac Fathers. Rather, it means that the encyclical's anthropology, its concern for the poor, its moral understanding of property, and its defense of the worker stand within a wider Christian tradition strongly articulated in Eastern patristic theology. Although *Rerum Novarum* is a Latin magisterial document of the nineteenth century, its deepest principles belong to the common inheritance of the undivided Church.
The first Eastern root is theological anthropology. Leo XIII's defense of the worker rests on the conviction that the labourer is not a tool, a thing, or a mere productive body, but a person whose dignity precedes economic usefulness (Leo XIII, 1891, no. 20). This resonates with Gregory of Nyssa's theology of the human person created in the image of God. For Gregory, humanity is marked by divine likeness, rationality, freedom, and vocation toward communion with God (Gregory of Nyssa, 2023). Thus, human dignity is not grounded in productivity, property, class, or social usefulness, but in creation and divine calling.

This anthropology is also connected to the Eastern doctrine of *theosis*. Athanasius presents the incarnation as the divine economy by which humanity is restored and elevated toward participation in God (Athanasius, 2011). While Leo XIII does not use the language of *theosis*, *Rerum Novarum* presupposes that social life must serve the whole vocation of the person, including moral, familial, and religious life. His insistence on rest, worship, family stability, and moral protection shows that the worker is not ordered merely to production, but to a spiritual destiny.

A second Eastern root appears in the theology of property. Leo XIII defends private property yet refuses to absolutize ownership. Property must serve family responsibility, justice, and the common good (Leo XIII, 1891, nos. 6–13, 19–22). Basil of Caesarea strongly anticipates this balance by condemning hoarding and insisting that possessions are entrusted by God for responsible use and service to the poor (Basil of Caesarea, 2009). John Chrysostom develops the same conviction in his homilies on wealth and poverty, teaching that wealth becomes spiritually dangerous when detached from mercy and responsibility toward the needy (John Chrysostom, 1984). These Eastern Fathers do not deny possession, but they place ownership under the judgment of charity, justice, and ecclesial responsibility.

The third Eastern root is the social and ecclesial meaning of poverty. In Basil and Chrysostom, the poor are not merely objects of charity; they reveal the moral truth of the community. Holman (2001) shows that Basil's charitable institutions embodied a theology in which worship, mercy, and social responsibility were inseparable. This illuminates *Rerum Novarum*: Leo XIII defends workers not merely as an economic class, but as people whose suffering reveals disorder in the social body.

Finally, Eastern theology helps show that *Rerum Novarum* is a spiritual anthropology. Ephrem the Syrian's poetic theology sees creation as sacramental and ordered toward praise (Ephrem the Syrian, 1990). Similarly, Leo XIII refuses to reduce labour, property, family, or society to

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economic function. Work must allow worship; property must become stewardship; family must form moral life; associations must cultivate solidarity. Therefore, *Rerum Novarum* can be said to have Eastern theological roots because it shares the patristic conviction that the human person is created in the image of God, called to communion, and never reducible to labour, wealth, class, or power.

The Domestic Church as the First School of Human Formation

If *Rerum Novarum* is read as a theological text of human formation, the family must be recognized as one of its central anthropological foundations. Leo XIII does not present the worker as an isolated economic agent detached from personal, moral, and social relationships. The worker is embedded within a network of belongings: spouse, parent, child, neighbor, believer, and citizen. Consequently, the dignity of the worker cannot be separated from the dignity and stability of the family. The social question is also a family question, because economic structures affect the primary community in which people are received, educated, morally formed, and introduced into responsibility.

Leo XIII's understanding of the family is rooted in the conviction that the family is prior to the state. In *Rerum Novarum*, he describes the household as "a true society" with rights and duties proper to itself and "older than any State" (Leo XIII, 1891, no. 13). This claim is not merely juridical; it is theological and anthropological. The family does not receive its dignity from political recognition, nor is it reducible to the function of the state, market, or civil society. It belongs to the natural and moral order and possesses a formative authority that political society must respect. Aquinas had already situated marriage and household life within the natural and moral structure of human sociality, linking domestic life to generation, education, mutual help, and the ordering of people toward the good (Aquinas, 1947).

The family is the first place where human formation occurs. Before the person enters school, market, workplace, or state, he or she receives life, language, affection, discipline, memory, faith, and the grammar of social existence within the family. The Second Vatican Council describes the family as a "school of deeper humanity" in which different generations help one another grow in wisdom and mutual support (Second Vatican Council, 1965b, no. 52). John Paul II gives this insight particular theological depth in *Familiaris Consortio*, calling the family the "first and irreplaceable school of social life" and an educating community (John Paul II, 1981a, nos. 36, 43). *Gravissimum Educationis* likewise teaches that parents, because they have given life to their children, are their first and foremost educators (Second Vatican Council, 1965c, no. 3).

The link between family and formation clarifies Leo XIII's treatment of wages and property. When he defends the worker's right to wages sufficient for family support, he is defending the material conditions necessary for moral and familial formation. A wage that cannot sustain family life is not only financially inadequate; it undermines the environment in which people are formed. Similarly, Leo XIII's defense of property is connected to the responsibility to provide for the household, protect the family from insecurity, and transmit stability to future generations (Leo XIII, 1891, nos. 9-13). Property, rightly ordered, supports responsibility; detached from justice and the common good, it becomes disordered.

This approach resists both individualism and collectivism. Against individualism, the family shows that the person is not self-created or self-sufficient. Each person receives life, identity, language, affection, faith, and moral orientation through relationships. Against collectivism, the family shows that society is not reducible to state or class. Natural and personal communities possess their own dignity, rights, and formative authority. Glendon's critique of modern "rights talk" is useful

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here because it shows how public discourse becomes impoverished when rights are detached from responsibility, obligation, and communities that sustain moral life (Glendon, 1991).

The family is therefore a criterion for evaluating the social order. A society may be politically stable, economically productive, and institutionally efficient while still failing if it weakens family life, undermines parental responsibility, or makes it difficult for families to educate children, transmit faith, care for the vulnerable, and participate in the common good. In the "new things" of the present age, labour, family, education, religion, and technology are often fragmented into separate spheres. *Rerum Novarum* resists such fragmentation by presenting the worker as a whole person whose dignity is inseparable from family, work, property, religion, and community. The social question is inseparable from the family question because the kind of society that forms the worker also forms the family, and the family society supports or weakens will shape the future of the person.

Labour as Vocation: Work, Human Formation, and the Dignity of the Person

The anthropological depth of *Rerum Novarum* becomes visible when work is interpreted not merely as production, but as formative human action. Leo XIII does not treat labour as a neutral economic activity whose sole purpose is to generate wealth or increase output. Work belongs to the whole person: body, will, intellect, conscience, family, society, and spiritual vocation. Its meaning cannot be exhausted by wages, productivity, market exchange, or institutional efficiency. Work forms the person when governed by dignity, justice, rest, responsibility, creativity, solidarity, and the common good. It deforms the person when it becomes exploitation, domination, greed, alienation, or mere survival.

The workplace is not only a site of economic exchange; it is a formative environment. It shapes habits, desires, responsibilities, relationships, family life, social participation, and the worker's understanding of human worth. Therefore, Catholic social teaching asks not only what work produces, but what work does to the person who works. Leo XIII recognizes the necessity of labour yet refuses to reduce the labourer to the labour performed. The worker acts, suffers, chooses, provides, worships, belongs, and hopes. The economy must therefore be judged by the dignity of the person, not the person by the demands of the economy (Leo XIII, 1891, no. 20).

John Paul II's distinction between the objective and subjective dimensions of work remains decisive. The objective dimension includes tools, techniques, production, and external results. The subjective dimension concerns the person who works. Catholic social teaching gives priority to the subjective dimension because the one who works is always a person (John Paul II, 1981b, nos. 4, 6). *Gaudium et Spes* offers a broader foundation by teaching that human labour proceeds directly from the person and that through work the person not only transforms things and society but also develops himself or herself (Second Vatican Council, 1965b, no. 35). Work has an interior as well as external effect. It forms dispositions, virtues, relationships, and social responsibilities.

This theological interpretation is supported by the broader Christian tradition. Aquinas's account of human action and virtue shows that repeated acts shape habits and orient the person toward or away from the good (Aquinas, 1947). Work, as a repeated and socially embedded act, can cultivate prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance, responsibility, patience, and solidarity. It can also foster greed, resentment, domination, servility, or indifference when detached from justice. Volf's Work in the Spirit develops this formative interpretation by understanding work through vocation, charism, and service (Volf, 1991). Work is not simply what one does to survive; it is a way of cooperating with God's creative and redemptive purposes. Sayers (1949) similarly insists

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that work should not be reduced to earning money but understood as service to the work itself and the community.

The dignity of work is inseparable from justice. Leo XIII argues that wages must not be determined only by contract or market force, because labour belongs to the person and is connected to the preservation of life (Leo XIII, 1891, nos. 43-45). Economic consent alone does not guarantee justice when necessity forces the worker to accept conditions contrary to dignity. A just wage is not merely payment for labour; it recognizes that the worker is a person with bodily needs, family responsibilities, moral duties, and a right to live in dignity. The Compendium presents work as both a right and a duty: a right because it enables participation in creation, family life, and society; a duty because the person is called to cooperate with others and serve the common good (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, nos. 264-266).

The familial dimension of work is especially important. In *Rerum Novarum*, the worker is never isolated; the burdens and fruits of work are borne by the household. Just work gives the family stability, dignity, and growth. Unjust work produces insecurity, exhaustion, conflict, and moral strain. John Paul II teaches that work is a foundation for family life because it provides subsistence and contributes to the education of children (John Paul II, 1981b, no. 10). Questions of wages, hours, unemployment, migration, rest, and workplace conditions are therefore also questions about marriage, parenting, childhood, education, and the transmission of values.

Rest is equally central to work's theological meaning. Leo XIII's insistence on rest and religious observance shows that work must be ordered toward God and must never become an idol (Leo XIII, 1891, no. 41). Pieper argues that leisure is not idleness, but a receptive posture before reality, truth, and worship; it protects the person from absorption into utility and total work (Pieper, 2009). A society without meaningful rest forms people who forget contemplation, gratitude, worship, and transcendence. Francis develops this critique in *Laudato Si'*, where work is part of the meaning of life on earth, a path to growth and fulfillment, yet must not be subordinated to technological or economic systems that neglect the worker's dignity (Francis, 2015, nos. 124-129).

The “new things” of the present age require a renewed application of the anthropological criteria already present in *Rerum Novarum*. Contemporary labour is increasingly shaped by automation, platform economies, precarious contracts, migration, surveillance, accelerated productivity, and expectations of constant availability. These developments do not replace the central anthropological concern of Catholic social teaching; rather, they extend its relevance to new historical conditions. The fundamental question remains whether economic structures promote or diminish human dignity, moral agency, relational responsibility, spiritual vocation, and participation in the common good. Work must therefore be analysed not only as a productive or economic activity, but also as a formative human practice. It contributes to personal responsibility, social solidarity, family stability, civic participation, and moral development. For this reason, the dignity of work cannot be separated from the dignity of the person who performs it, nor can economic efficiency be treated as the sole criterion by which labour systems are evaluated.

Property, Responsibility, and Moral Agency

Leo XIII's defense of private property in *Rerum Novarum* is often interpreted primarily as an argument against socialism. Such a reading is accurate but incomplete. The encyclical's treatment of property also belongs to its deeper anthropology of human formation. Property is not defended simply as possession, accumulation, or economic power. It is defended because it can serve moral agency, family stability, responsible labour, foresight, stewardship, and participation in the common good. At the same time, Leo XIII does not absolutize property. Ownership must remain

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governed by justice, charity, and the universal destination of created goods. Catholic social teaching therefore resists both collectivist abolition and individualistic absolutization.

In *Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIII grounds the right to private property in the rational and moral nature of the person. Unlike other creatures, the human person remembers, anticipates, plans, provides, and acts in view of the future. Property corresponds to this capacity for reasoned agency because it allows provision not only for immediate needs but also for future security (Leo XIII, 1891, nos. 6-7). Property is therefore more than an economic arrangement; it is a sphere in which the person exercises foresight, responsibility, and moral self-direction. It is closely connected to labour: the worker who expends intelligence, bodily effort, time, and personal agency upon the earth or material goods gains a stable relation to the fruit of labour. To deny this entirely would weaken responsibility and reduce labour to dependence.

Yet Leo XIII's defense of property is never a defense of possessive individualism. The family is central. The person labours not only for the self, but for spouse, children, dependents, and future generations. Property gives the household stability and independence; it allows parents to provide for children, protect the family from insecurity, and transmit responsibility across generations. Since the family is a "true society" with rights prior to the state, property safeguards its capacity to fulfill its mission (Leo XIII, 1891, no. 13). Property therefore has a formative function: it teaches care, planning, sacrifice, moderation, accountability, and intergenerational responsibility.

The broader Catholic tradition confirms this balance. Aquinas defends private possession because it can contribute to order, diligence, and peaceful social life; yet he insists that the use of goods must remain ordered toward the common need of all (Aquinas, 1947, II-II, q. 66, a. 2). This distinction between possession and use is decisive. Goods may be privately administered, but they are never morally detached from the needs of others. Patristic theology offers a sharper warning against absolutizing ownership. Basil of Caesarea criticizes the hoarding of goods while the poor lack necessities, insisting that excess possessions carry obligation toward those in need (Basil of Caesarea, 2009). Leo XIII stands within this older Christian tradition: property is meaningful only when subordinate to the dignity of persons and the universal purpose of creation. *Gaudium et Spes* teaches that private property and other forms of ownership can contribute to the expression of the person and provide opportunities for responsible action, while also insisting that private ownership must never obscure the universal destination of goods (Second Vatican Council, 1965b, nos. 69-71). *Centesimus Annus* reaffirms the right to private property while emphasizing its social function and its subordination to the universal destination of goods (John Paul II, 1991, nos. 30-31). The Compendium describes the universal destination of goods as a primary principle of the ethical and social order while affirming private property as a legitimate means of respecting personal freedom and responsibility (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, nos. 171-184).

Property is thus a school of moral agency. To own responsibly is to learn that goods are entrusted, not merely possessed. The owner is called to prudence in use, justice in distribution, temperance in desire, gratitude for what is received, and charity toward those in need. The wealthy should “do good, be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share” (1 Timothy 6:18).Property forms responsibility when used to provide for family, sustain community, support work, cultivate the land, build institutions, and serve others. It deforms when it becomes an instrument of greed, status, domination, hoarding, or indifference toward the poor. Leo XIII's warnings to the wealthy confirm this interpretation: wealth does not free one from suffering, death, judgment, or obligation; possessions must be used in justice and mercy (Leo XIII, 1891, nos. 19-22).

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Benedict XVI develops this moral horizon by teaching that economic life must be shaped not only by contract and exchange but by gratuitousness, fraternity, and the logic of gift (Benedict XVI, 2009, nos. 34-36). Francis's *Laudato Si'* adds an ecological dimension by placing property within a relational theology of creation and affirming that private property is subject to the social mortgage derived from the universal destination of goods (Francis, 2015, nos. 93-95). Created goods are gifts of God before they become objects of ownership. Human beings may possess, cultivate, exchange, and transmit goods, but they do so as stewards. Property is legitimate when it serves the person, family, poor, creation, and common good under God.

Contemporary forms of property include not only land, homes, and material goods, but financial assets, intellectual property, digital platforms, data, technological infrastructure, and ecological resources. These forms intensify the theological question. Do property relations form people in responsibility, participation, and solidarity, or deepen exclusion, dependency, surveillance, and fragmentation? Leo XIII's principles remain relevant because they judge every form of ownership according to whether it serves the dignity and formation of the person. Property is not an idol of possession but a school of responsibility, stewardship, and participation in the common good.

From Isolation to Communion: The Formative Role of Associations

A formative reading of *Rerum Novarum* must give serious attention to Leo XIII's defense of associations. The encyclical does not present the worker as an isolated individual standing alone before employer, market, or state. The worker is a social person whose dignity is protected and developed through belonging, cooperation, solidarity, shared responsibility, and participation. Leo XIII's defense of workers' associations is therefore not merely practical labour organization; it is an anthropological claim. The human person is not formed alone. The person becomes responsible, free, morally mature, and socially active through communities that mediate between the individual and larger structures of society.

Leo XIII's defense of associations rejects two reductions. He rejects individualism, which imagines the worker as an isolated economic unit protected only by private contract or personal effort. He also rejects collectivism, which absorbs the person into class, state, or ideology. Against both, *Rerum Novarum* presents the person as relational, social, moral, and spiritual. Workers need more than individual contracts in order to defend dignity, improve conditions, and participate responsibly. Associations allow them to act together, support one another, seek justice, and cultivate moral and religious life (Leo XIII, 1891, nos. 36-43). Properly ordered associations are necessary expressions of human sociality and practical instruments of justice.

Gaudium et Spes teaches that the human person is social by nature and cannot live or develop fully without relationships with others (Second Vatican Council, 1965b, no. 12). This gives theological depth to Leo XIII's teaching. If the person cannot develop apart from others, associations are not optional additions but necessary environments of formation. Jacques Maritain's personalism clarifies the same point: the person cannot be reduced either to the individual self or to the collective whole, because the person is spiritual, free, and ordered toward communion and the common good (Maritain, 1966). Mounier similarly rejects both bourgeois individualism and collectivist depersonalization, arguing that the person becomes fully human through engagement, responsibility, and communion (Mounier, 1952).

John Paul II develops this theme in *Centesimus Annus*, affirming that human sociality is fulfilled through communities beginning with the family and extending through economic, social, political, and cultural associations (John Paul II, 1991, nos. 13, 49). The person is not fulfilled simply by belonging to the state or participating in the market. Between individual and state stand

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communities allow freedom to become responsible, rights to become participatory, and social life to become personal. The principle of subsidiarity is essential: higher institutions must support, not replace, smaller communities and associations (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, nos. 185-188). Subsidiarity is not merely administrative; it is formative, because it protects spaces where responsibility and participation are learned.

The "new things" of the present age make this teaching urgent. Digital platforms, economic precarity, migration, political polarization, loneliness, and weakened civic institutions create new forms of isolation and dependence. The question is no longer only whether workers can form associations in industrial society, but whether people today can still belong to communities that cultivate responsibility, truth, solidarity, and spiritual vocation. Associations occupy a central place in the anthropology of Rerum Novarum because they protect the worker and form the worker; they defend rights and cultivate duties; they resist exploitation and promote cooperation. The social question is also a question of communion: whether society forms people capable of solidarity, responsibility, and service to the common good.

The Leonine Legacy Renewed: Leo XIV and the Human Question in a New Historical Moment

The movement from Leo XIII to Leo XIV should not be interpreted merely as a symbolic correspondence between two papal names. Nor should it be described as a doctrinal rupture within Catholic social teaching. The continuity is clear: both Leo XIII and Leo XIV place the dignity of the human person, the moral meaning of work, the social function of property, the vulnerability of the poor, and the common good at the centre of the Church's social discernment. Yet this continuity does not eliminate the presence of a hermeneutical shift. The shift does not concern the Church's anthropology itself, but the historical location, diagnostic object, and interpretive lens through which that anthropology is applied.

Leo XIV's *Magnifica Humanitas* provides the methodological foundation for this distinction. Catholic social doctrine is not presented as a closed set of abstract principles mechanically repeated across history. Rather, it is described as a process of discernment born from the encounter between the Gospel and the questions of history (Leo XIV, 2026, no. 27). Leo XIV explicitly states that the tradition contains an "unchanging core" regarding the human person and society, while also requiring a renewed capacity to listen to historical situations and respond to contemporary issues (Leo XIV, 2026, no. 28). Therefore, the hermeneutical shift does not consist in replacing one anthropology with another. It consists in reading new forms of power, vulnerability, and dehumanization through the stable anthropological principles of Catholic social teaching.

The first aspect of this shift is the change in interpretive location. Leo XIII read the "new things" of the nineteenth century from the situation of industrial workers exposed to the power of capital, unjust wages, weakened families, and insufficient social protection. Leo XIV receives this tradition by asking from where the "new things" of the present should be interpreted. His address to the World Meeting of Popular Movements is particularly important here. He observes that contemporary discourse often names the "new things" from the centre, referring to artificial intelligence, robotics, high technologies, cryptocurrencies, innovation, and digital progress. Yet he deliberately proposes another location: the "view from the periphery" (Leo XIV, 2025c). This is the first concrete evidence of the hermeneutical shift. The question is not only what is technologically new, but who is affected, excluded, displaced, monitored, rendered invisible, or deprived of land, housing, and work.

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The second aspect of the shift is the change in diagnostic object. In *Rerum Novarum*, the central problem is the industrial labour question: the relation between capital and labour, the rights of workers, the dignity of wages, the legitimacy and limits of property, the role of family, and the importance of associations. In *Magnifica Humanitas*, Leo XIV identifies a different historical configuration: the technocratic paradigm, digital power, artificial intelligence, algorithmic infrastructures, data extraction, platform economies, automation, and new dependencies. This does not mean that labour is no longer central. Rather, the labour question is now mediated by digital and technological systems that reshape employment, surveillance, participation, access, and exclusion. Thus, the hermeneutical shift moves from the factory and the wage contract as privileged sites of analysis to digital infrastructures and technological systems as new sites where the dignity of the person is either protected or diminished.

The third aspect of the shift is the change in analytical lens. Leo XIII resisted the reduction of the worker to labour power, economic cost, or class function. Leo XIV extends this concern by resisting the reduction of the person to data, profile, performance, algorithmic prediction, or technological utility. *Magnifica Humanitas* warns that when technology becomes the ultimate criterion, the human person risks being reduced to data, a cog in a machine, or a commodity (Leo XIV, 2026, no. 180). This is not merely a continuation of the same concern in general terms; it is an interpretive expansion of the category of dehumanization. The older danger was the commodification of labour under industrial capitalism. The newer danger is the datafication and technological administration of the person under digital power. Both are anthropological problems, but they require different modes of analysis.

This distinction clarifies how continuity and shift should be held together. Continuity appears at the level of theological anthropology: the person remains created in the image of God, irreducible to economic function, social usefulness, productivity, or technological efficiency. Continuity also appears in the moral principles of Catholic social teaching: human dignity, the common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, the universal destination of goods, and social justice. Leo XIV explicitly identifies these principles as criteria for discernment in the digital world (Leo XIV, 2026, nos. 96–97). The shift appears at the level of historical mediation: the structures that threaten the person have changed. The nineteenth-century worker was endangered by industrial exploitation, capital concentration, and the weakness of protective associations. The contemporary person may be endangered by automation, data extraction, surveillance, algorithmic exclusion, platform dependency, and technological systems that operate beyond adequate public accountability.

The shift is therefore not from labour to technology in a simple thematic sense. It is from interpreting modernity primarily through the social question of industrial labour to interpreting contemporary modernity through the anthropological question of technological mediation. This is why Leo XIV's reception of *Rerum Novarum* is not a nostalgic return to Leo XIII. It is a renewed hermeneutical act. He does not simply repeat the nineteenth-century framework; he relocates its anthropological criterion within the present configuration of digital power and artificial intelligence. The significance of this hermeneutical shift is that it prevents Catholic social teaching from becoming either antiquarian or reactive. If only continuity is emphasized, the article risks suggesting that Leo XIV merely repeats Leo XIII with new examples. If only discontinuity is emphasized, the article risks implying a rupture in Catholic doctrine. The more precise claim is that Leo XIV preserves the same theological anthropology while shifting the site of interpretation from industrial exploitation to technological mediation, from the capital-labour conflict to digital power, and from the centre's language of innovation to the periphery's experience of exclusion. In this sense, the "new things" are not only new technologies, but new forms of interpreting, organizing, and sometimes reducing the human person.

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The hermeneutical shift, therefore, lies in the way the same Catholic social tradition is made to read a new historical field. Leo XIII asked whether the industrial order could be considered just if it diminished workers, families, associations, and the poor. Leo XIV asks whether the technological order can be considered humane if it reduces persons to data, performance, surveillance, exclusion, or instrumental use. The anthropology remains continuous; the hermeneutics shifts because the historical forms of power and vulnerability have changed.

Safeguarding the Imago Dei: Catholic Social Teaching (CST) against Dehumanization

The continuity from Leo XIII to Leo XIV is not merely historical; it is anthropological. In every age, Catholic social teaching asks whether the social order forms persons in dignity, freedom, responsibility, communion, and openness to God, or deforms them through exploitation, exclusion, isolation, domination, or reduction. This question stands at the heart of *Rerum Novarum* and remains central in *Magnifica Humanitas*. Both pontiffs address moments of transformation in which the person risks being obscured by systems of production, power, ideology, or technique. Leo XIII resisted the dehumanization of the worker in the industrial age. Leo XIV receives that tradition by calling attention to safeguarding the person in a new age of technological acceleration, social fragmentation, economic precarity, and anthropological reduction.

In *Rerum Novarum*, dehumanization appears primarily in the reduction of the worker to an instrument of production. The worker is not merely a body that labours, a cost within production, a class member, or a replaceable economic function. The worker is a person created by God, endowed with reason and freedom, situated within family and community, called to worship, and responsible for the common good. Leo XIII's defense of wages, rest, religious practice, property, family stability, and association constitutes a set of formative conditions protecting the person from absorption into the logic of production. A worker denied rest is deprived of worship, family life, contemplation, and renewal. A worker denied just wages is deprived of the means to sustain responsibility and family stability. A worker isolated from associations is deprived of solidarity and participation.

Dehumanization rarely appears only as open violence. It can occur through social arrangements that teach people to measure themselves and others according to usefulness, productivity, consumption, autonomy, status, data, or technical capacity. In such cases society forms people according to a false anthropology. *Gaudium et Spes* teaches that the human person is the source, center, and purpose of social life (Second Vatican Council, 1965b, no. 63). John Paul II's priority of the subjective dimension of work resists the same reduction (John Paul II, 1981b). *Dignitas Infinita* affirms that dignity is intrinsic and inalienable, not dependent on utility, autonomy, productivity, health, or recognition (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2024).

The Church's social doctrine must therefore be understood as both critical and constructive. It criticizes social orders that reduce the person, but it also offers a positive vision of formation: work that forms responsibility rather than exploitation; property that forms stewardship rather than greed; family life that forms love and moral responsibility; associations that form solidarity and participation; politics that forms justice; technology that serves wisdom; and economic life ordered to the common good. The goal is not merely to prevent harm, but to form people and communities capable of truth and love.

This concern also requires dialogue with contemporary scholarship on digital anthropology, artificial intelligence, and surveillance capitalism. Shoshana Zuboff's analysis of "surveillance capitalism" is especially relevant because it identifies how digital economies can transform human

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experience into behavioural data for prediction, monetisation, and control (Zuboff, 2019). From the perspective of Catholic social teaching, this analysis helps clarify a new form of dehumanization: the person is no longer reduced only to labour power, as in the industrial order, but also to data, behaviour, prediction, and economic extraction. Luciano Floridi's account of the "infosphere" further deepens this analysis by showing that digital technologies do not merely provide new tools; they reshape the environment in which persons understand themselves, relate to others, and inhabit reality (Floridi, 2014). In this sense, digital transformation raises not only technical or regulatory questions, but anthropological ones: what kind of human subject is being formed within digital environments?

Contemporary Catholic AI ethics offers a normative response to these challenges. The *Rome Call for AI Ethics* emphasizes transparency, inclusion, responsibility, impartiality, reliability, security, and privacy as ethical principles for artificial intelligence (Pontifical Academy for Life, 2020). Similarly, *Antiqua et nova* insists that the ethical evaluation of AI must begin from the human person created in the image of God and must resist every reduction of intelligence, freedom, and relationality to technological function (Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith & Dicastery for Culture and Education, 2025). These sources strengthen the continuity between Catholic social teaching and contemporary digital ethics. They show that the Church's critique of dehumanization is not opposed to technological development as such, but to technological systems that weaken human dignity, moral agency, solidarity, responsibility, and the common good. Thus, the article's argument is not limited to general theological concern; it engages contemporary accounts of digital power and digital reality in order to show why Catholic social teaching remains necessary in the present age.

Conclusion

This article has argued that *Rerum Novarum* should be read not only as the foundational document of modern Catholic social teaching, but as a theological text of human formation. Leo XIII's concern for labour, property, family, associations, wages, and social justice was never merely economic or political. Beneath these questions stood a more fundamental anthropological concern: the dignity and formation of the human person within the social order. The worker is not simply a producer, wage earner, economic unit, or member of a class. The worker is a person created in the image of God, endowed with dignity, called to moral responsibility, situated within family and community, and ordered toward the common good and eternal life.

This reading is situated within the broader scholarly interpretation of Catholic social teaching. Jean-Yves Calvez's classic account of *Rerum Novarum* rightly interprets the encyclical as the foundational text of modern Catholic social doctrine and as a Christian response to the social consequences of industrial capitalism. For Calvez, Leo XIII rejects both laissez-faire individualism and socialist collectivism by insisting that economic life must be ordered to justice, human dignity, and the common good (Calvez, 1961). This article builds on that insight by arguing that the encyclical's social teaching also contains a formative anthropology: its concern is not only how labour, property, and social institutions should be organized, but what kind of human person such arrangements form.

David Hollenbach's work on the common good further clarifies this dimension. Catholic social teaching does not treat the person as an isolated individual, but as one whose dignity is realized through relationships, institutions, responsibilities, and participation in shared social life (Hollenbach, 2002). Russell Hittinger's interpretation of Catholic social doctrine also helps show that the tradition is not merely a collection of moral exhortations, but a sustained theological and

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institutional reflection on the right ordering of persons, communities, law, authority, and social bodies (Hittinger, 2003). Read in this light, *Rerum Novarum* resists both atomistic individualism and collectivist absorption. The person is neither an isolated bearer of interests nor an instrument of state, market, or technology. The person is relational, social, moral, spiritual, and responsible before God and neighbour.

The same formative logic appears in Leo XIII's treatment of family, property, and associations. The family is the first place where the person is received, loved, educated, and introduced into social responsibility. Property, when rightly ordered, forms stewardship, stability, care for family, and participation, yet must never be separated from the universal destination of goods. Associations form solidarity and participation because the person is not formed alone. Catholic social teaching therefore evaluates society through a formative anthropology. It asks not only whether institutions function, markets grow, or systems remain stable, but whether persons are formed in justice, responsibility, communion, and openness to God.

This anthropological reading also helps explain the article's movement from Leo XIII to Leo XIV. The continuity is doctrinal and anthropological: both pontiffs place the human person, the dignity of work, the vulnerable, and the common good at the centre of social discernment. Yet there is also a hermeneutical shift. Leo XIII addressed the "new things" of industrial society by defending workers, families, the poor, rightly ordered property, and associations against economic and ideological reduction. Leo XIV receives this tradition by applying the same anthropological criterion to the "new things" of the present age: technological acceleration, artificial intelligence, data extraction, platform economies, social fragmentation, economic precarity, and renewed forms of dehumanization.

This contemporary relevance requires engagement with scholars of digital society. Shoshana Zuboff's analysis of surveillance capitalism shows how digital economies can transform human experience into behavioural data for prediction, monetisation, and control (Zuboff, 2019). Luciano Floridi's account of the infosphere further demonstrates that digital technologies do not merely provide new tools; they reshape the environment in which persons understand themselves, relate to others, and inhabit reality (Floridi, 2014). These analyses clarify why the Leonine tradition remains urgent. The modern danger is not only the reduction of the worker to labour power, but also the reduction of the person to data, profile, function, prediction, or technological utility. Catholic social teaching responds by insisting that no economic or technological system may become the final measure of the human person.

The article makes an original contribution to contemporary theological scholarship by interpreting Catholic social teaching as a formative and pedagogical tradition. It expands the reading of *Rerum Novarum* beyond economic history and labour ethics, situating it within theological anthropology, Christian ethics, and contemporary debates about dehumanization. Its originality lies in showing that the enduring relevance of *Rerum Novarum* is not only in the social questions it addressed, but in the anthropological criterion it established: the true measure of every social order is the kind of human person it forms.

The limitations of this study should also be acknowledged. Because the article is conceptual and theological in nature, it does not undertake empirical analysis of contemporary labor conditions, technological systems, or reception of Catholic social teaching in particular communities. Its argument is therefore limited to textual interpretation, historical-theological analysis, and constructive theological reflection.

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Future research could build on this study by examining how the formative anthropology of *Rerum Novarum* is received in concrete ecclesial, educational, economic, and digital contexts. Further studies might compare Catholic social teaching with Eastern Christian social theology more extensively, investigate the practical implications of Leo XIV's technological ethics for labor and artificial intelligence, or explore how parishes, Catholic universities, and social institutions can embody Catholic social teaching as a pedagogy of human formation.

The article therefore concludes that the Church's social teaching is not secondary to theology, nor merely an application of doctrine to public life. It is theological anthropology in action. It reveals what the Church believes about the person and teaches society how to protect the conditions in which people can flourish. It defends workers, families, the poor, migrants, the young, the elderly, and the vulnerable not merely as social categories, but as people whose dignity reveals the moral truth of society. From Leo XIII to Leo XIV, the true measure of every social order is not how much it produces, how efficiently it functions, or how rapidly it progresses, but what kind of human person it forms.

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