



Leo XIII, who served as pope 1878-1903, is depicted in a window at Holy Family Church in Mitchell, South Dakota, in a 1999 file photo. His 1891 encyclical on labor, *Rerum Novarum*, marks the start of modern Catholic social teaching. (CNS/Crosiers)



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Pope Leo XIV, in a meeting with cardinals two days after his election, [explained](#) that he chose that name as an acknowledgment of the similarities of our own time with those of Pope Leo XIII. He specifically mentioned that pope's encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, the first "social encyclical" that addressed the problems raised by industrialized society.

"In our own day, the church offers everyone the treasury of its social teaching in response to another industrial revolution and to developments in the field of artificial intelligence that pose new challenges for the defence of human dignity, justice and labour," the new pope said.

The 61 cardinals who gathered in the Sistine Chapel in February 1878 to elect a successor to Pope Pius IX chose Cardinal Gioacchino Pecci in part because he was nearly 68 at the time of his election. In the 19th century, 68 was pretty old and the cardinals did not want another 32-year reign, the longest in history, like the one just concluded. Alas, Pecci, who took the name Leo XIII, would live to be 93 years old, dying in 1903, making his the second longest pontificate until John Paul II overtook him for second place.

Pope Pius IX had been elected as a reformer in 1846, but after a revolution forced him to flee Rome, he was returned to power with help from French troops and became a reactionary. He detested the modern ideas that had inspired the revolutionaries: All forms of liberal democracy were considered anathema, and the "Syllabus of Errors" condemned many propositions, like religious freedom, that we now take for granted.



Pope Leo XIV celebrates his first Mass as pope with the cardinals who elected him in the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican on May 9, 2025. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Leo XIII charted a different course. He decided to engage the world, not repudiate it. In addition to *Rerum Novarum*, three of his encyclicals and apostolic exhortations are especially significant and each, in different ways, reflected his desire for the church to engage modernity, not uncritically, but engage nonetheless.

[*Rerum Novarum*](#) is considered the first social encyclical but the ideas Leo put forth were not new. They were [deeply based on](#) a firm foundation of Catholic scriptural and doctrinal beliefs. But the application to the situation of the modern world was new, and the application proved seminal. Almost every pope since Leo has issued a social encyclical, from Pope Pius XI's [*Quadragesimo Anno*](#) through Pope Francis' [*Fratelli tutti*](#).

Unlike Marxism, which started its analysis with materialistic and deterministic assumptions about social dynamics, Leo began with the human person, made in the image and likeness of God. Specifically, he focused on the plight of workers in the

heyday of industrial capitalism. He affirmed their rights to a living wage, something that would allow them to live in dignity. He affirmed their right to form labor unions to defend their rights and advocate for their interests. Leo stipulated that all social relations were subject to the common good and that their aim was social solidarity, not Marxist class warfare or capitalist competition. His critique of both Marxism and capitalism would remain a hallmark of Catholic social doctrine.



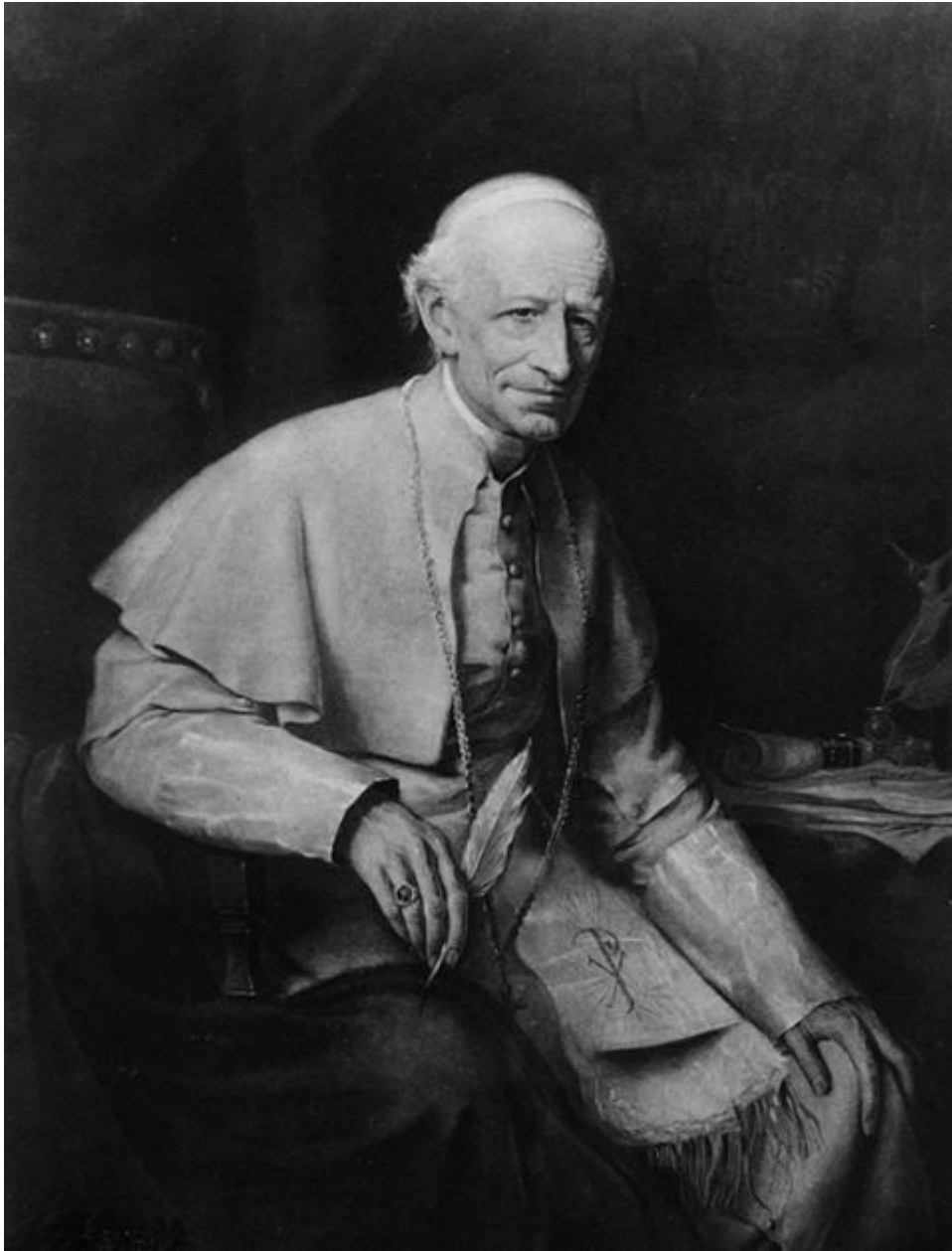
Augustinian Fr. Anthony Pizzo, poses in a 2024 photo with then-Cardinal Robert F. Prevost, now Pope Leo XIV. (OSV News/Augustinian Province of Our Mother of Good Counsel handout via Reuters)

Last week, before Pope Leo XIV was elected, I spoke by phone with [Augustinian Fr. Anthony Pizzo](#), provincial of the Midwestern Augustinians, who has known the new pope since 1974 when they both attended Villanova University. He said of then-Cardinal Robert Prevost, "He is not demanding, but he knows what needs to be done. He is very in line with church doctrine and with making sure that Catholic social teaching is integrated in all that we do. He sees that as being the Gospel message." Pizzo added, "He is truly a man of the church."

It is safe to conclude that Catholic social teaching, so often manipulated for ideological purposes, will be a central focus on the new pope, and that his teaching in that area will be rooted in the tradition of papal teaching to which he is now heir.

The second document of special interest to Americans was Pope Leo XIII's [*Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae*](#), an apostolic letter that condemned "Americanism." I [wrote](#) a little about that famous document in February after Pope Francis wrote a short letter to the U.S. bishops concerning the challenges posed by President Donald Trump's draconian policies against migrants.

The particulars of *Testem Benevolentiae Nostrae* need not detain us, but one lesson from that document might be especially important in the new pope's approach to specific issues: It was sufficiently flexible in its discussion of liberalism, church and state, and the virtues proper to religious life, that most Americans were able to say, "Well, we never held the positions that were specifically condemned." In short, the letter excluded the extremes, not the well-meaning efforts of churchmen like Cardinal James Gibbons, the primate of the U.S. church in fact, though not in name, to inculturate Catholicism into American ways of life. It permitted diversity with guardrails.



This portrait of Pope Leo XIII shows him holding a quill pen. In *Rerum Novarum*, he wrote, "To defraud any one of wages that are his due is a great crime which cries to the avenging anger of heaven." (CNS/Library of Congress)

The third encyclical of Leo XIII's that warrants attention is [*Aeterni Patris*](#), which invited Catholic theologians to return to the original writings of St. Thomas Aquinas as a sure guide. This helped steer the church's intellectual apostolate away from a Neo-Scholasticism that had grown stale. It also marked the beginning of the *ressourcement* theological approach, a return to the sources to discover their riches and apply them to the circumstances of the day. Soon, that discovery moved to the

scriptural and patristic sources, and the theological groundwork for Vatican II was begun.

I discussed this dynamic last week (May 6) in my [column](#) explaining why political categories do not work well when applied to the church. Those who wear their traditionalism on their sleeves tend to forget that our tradition is one of continual reform. Call it growth: Only dead things do not grow. Some reformers forget that what is being reformed is a tradition, not Silly Putty, and it stretches in some ways but not others. When a tradition grows stale and nonresponsive, we Catholics do not create anything we want. We dive into the wellsprings and there discern a way to move forward.

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Finally, there is [Au Milieu Des Sollicitudes](#), Leo's encyclical to the church in France, encouraging them to rally to the republic. The French church largely opposed any compromise with republican forms of government, claiming that only the union of throne and altar was a proper form of social arrangement.

Leo XIII thought differently and, as he had done in *Rerum Novarum*, applied ancient ideas to the issue at hand. What I hope the new pope learns from that experience is that some papal initiatives don't work. The French church refused Leo's invitation, remained stubbornly opposed not just to the decisions but to the existence of the Third Republic. For their troubles, that government became increasingly anti-clerical, eventually suppressing religious orders throughout the country and imposing other burdens on Catholics. I hope our new pope remembers that he has a responsibility to act, but that he has no right to expect that his decisions will meet with success. Success is not a Gospel category.

Perhaps in the homily at his inaugural Mass, Leo XIV will tell us more about his choice of name. But, as he looks to guide the church in the years ahead, he can see in his predecessor of the same name a disposition to engage the world, not hide from it, to bring the best of our tradition to bear on the problems and the hopes of our day. Leo XIII is a good guide for all popes, but especially for his namesake, as the weight of the global church comes to rest on his shoulders.

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