

The Social Encyclicals of John Paul II

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Main content

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The Social Encyclicals of John Paul II

Edited with introductions by J. Michael Miller, C.S.B.

Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, Inc., 1996, 1,008 pp.

The primary aim of Miller's book is to provide the first compilation of John Paul's twelve encyclicals written to date. This, in itself, makes the book an extraordinary tool. But Miller's book offers more. Prior to introducing each of the encyclicals individually, Miller offers some details about John Paul's approach, his use of scripture, his style, and his philosophical influences. The description he provides demonstrates a scholarly understanding of John Paul's corpus of encyclicals. However, the reader unfamiliar with terms from specialized theological or philosophical language such as 'scholasticism,' 'neo-scholasticism,' 'personalist phenomenology,' and 'realism' might find some difficulty appreciating Miller's insightful commentary since these terms are introduced without definitions. As mentioned earlier in the context of Catholic theology, the definition of terms is necessary in undertakings of the multidisciplinary sort, such as in Miller's book. This is especially true for books aimed at a broad audience. Not all Catholics are theological masters, not all theologians are fluent in philosophy, and not all philosophers are acquainted with personalism or phenomenology.

Nevertheless, Miller dedicates some effort at clarifying 'phenomenology,' despite the difficulties presented by the absence of a single unifying school of thought in the broad phenomenological movement. Miller might not do justice to the differences in views within the phenomenological movement as a whole, but he depicts John Paul's phenomenology both non-controversially and succinctly.

Miller introduces each of the twelve encyclicals by John Paul II with a general commentary, summary, and discussion of the key themes in the encyclical. This organization is very useful for three reasons. First, the general commentary provides the reader with a glimpse of Miller's scholarship of the corpus of John Paul. For each of the encyclicals, Miller's commentaries include, among other things, comparative views of the encyclical at hand in relation to other encyclicals (John Paul's and those of other popes), discussions of John Paul's style, and an analysis of probable factors that motivated the primary focus of the encyclical. Second, the summary provides the reader with a brief, well-organized description of the encyclical. Third, the classification of key themes allows the reader to identify the underlying structure of the encyclical in order to more clearly understand its overall message. Miller's introductory essays are thus valuable guides for both those acquainted with John Paul's writings and the uninitiated. The remaining discussion shall focus on Miller's introduction to John Paul's three social encyclicals: *Laborem Exercens* (1981) on human work, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987) on social concerns, and *Centesimus Annus* (1991) on the consequences of socialism in light of the hundredth anniversary of Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891).

Laborem Exercens

The central theme in this encyclical is, Miller writes, the dignity and role of human work. Miller observes that *Laborem Exercens*, although written in commemoration of the ninetieth anniversary of Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, does not cite quotes from this nor any other encyclical....

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John Paul II's encyclicals and other writings have often been longer and more meditative than those of previous pontiffs. In a sense, he has created a body of work which is a consciously interrelated statement of the Faith. Having established this notion of man as the subject of work, John Paul uses it to examine various aspects of work and of the social question. For example, the Pontiff points out that according to certain nineteenth-century theories, work was understood and treated as a sort of merchandise that the worker ...sells to the employer, who at the same time is the possessor of the capital, that is to say, of all the working tools and means that make production possible (no. 7). Pope John Paul II reigned as pope of the Roman Catholic Church and sovereign of Vatican City for nearly 27 years (1978–2005). Encyclicals. Centesimus Annus: (On the 100th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's Rerum Novarum – On Capital and Labor; On Catholic social teaching) May 1, 1991. Dives in Misericordia: (The Father of mercies and God of all comfort) November 30, 1980. Dominum et Vivificantem: (The Lord and Giver of Life) May 18, 1986. Ecclesia De Eucharistia: (On the Eucharist in its Relationship to the Church) April 17, 2003. Evangelium Vitae: (The Gospel of Life) March 25, 1995. Fides et Ratio: (Faith and Reason) September 14, 1998. Laborem Exercens: (On Human Work) September 14, 1981. John Paul II Encyclicals. Encyclicals. Ecclesia de Eucharistia (17 April 2003). [Chinese - Croatian - English - French - German - Hungarian - Italian - Latin - Polish - Portuguese - Spanish]. Pope John Paul II's eighth encyclical, subtitled "On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate," stresses the urgency of missionary evangelization. The encyclical examines the new frontiers for missionary activity in modern cities or some traditionally Christian areas needing re-evangelization, while emphasizing the continued importance of a mission ad gentes—to the nations. The relationship of missionary activity to ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, to the development of peoples, to situations in which Christians are the minority and to inculturation of the faith, along with the role of the communications media in evangelization, are among points discussed in the encyclical. Centesimus Annus, "On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum" May 1, 1991.