

‘The Pressing Question of the Hour’: Fr. Vincent McNabb O.P. & the Reception of *Rerum Novarum*

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Abstract

A study of the British reception history of *Rerum Novarum* between 1891 and 1919 shows the key role of Fr. Vincent McNabb OP in popularising in the Catholic press what would become the predominant interpretation of the encyclical, switching its perceived emphasis away from the defence of private property to the advocacy of an urgent redistribution of property unjustly withheld from the impoverished working classes

Keywords

Vincent McNabb, *Rerum Novarum*, reception history, Catholic Social, Guild, Socialism

Introduction

Father John O’Connor, the Salford priest and friend of G.K. Chesterton, asserted of the plain-speaking Dominican preacher and writer, Fr Vincent McNabb, that he and Cardinal Hinsley ‘were the first in the world to take serious note of the Pope’s letter on the Condition of Labour, hardly anyone else knew what it was about, or cared very much, Cardinal Manning being just dead’.¹ The assertion raises three questions: first, whether McNabb was one of the first to pay serious attention to *Rerum Novarum*; second, by what means McNabb took public note of the encyclical and disseminated its teachings; and, third, in what way McNabb understood the letter. I hope to show with respect to these three questions: (i) that McNabb was not obviously among the first to take ‘serious note’ of *Rerum Novarum*, unless by ‘serious’ is

¹ Very Rev. J. O’Connor, ‘Fr. McNabb’, *The Bradford Catholic*, January 31st 1937.

meant a particular reading of the encyclical, but that he was among the first to explicate the encyclical in some detail for a popular audience; (ii) that for this purpose McNabb employed a distinctive 'apostolate of the press'; and (iii) that McNabb offered a radical interpretation of the encyclical which re-constructed the defence of private property as a call for its major redistribution, and marginalised the encyclical's rejection of communism (or 'Socialism' so understood), to stress instead the injustices of contemporary capitalism.

Reception History I

There were clearly others who took public note of *Rerum Novarum* before McNabb. It was discussed in both the British Catholic and secular press within weeks of its promulgation. Yet, it is apparent from the pages of *The Tablet* how differently people presented the encyclical and understood its import. The periodical published the Latin text in two parts.² The first was followed by a 'General Summary' of the letter, which focussed on its 'rejecting the Socialist solution, which would abolish private property and form a collective and common ownership in its stead'. It noted the Pope's call for 'masters and workmen [...] to live in harmony by the fulfilment of their mutual duties of justice'. The Church strove 'in every way to give to the working classes all the moral and material helps which can be provided for their advantage by the charity of Jesus Christ'. It stated that the Pope had treated the role of the state in 'benefiting the working classes' and 'protecting the common welfare and the rights of parties'. The encyclical had spoken on 'various questions concerning the rest from labour [...], strikes, wages and the hours of labour considered with reference to the nature of the work, and to the sex and age of the workers', as well as 'the various institutes and societies for mutual aid'. The account thus prescinded from stating *what* the Pope had actually said on many of these matters, thereby and in other ways muting the encyclical's championing of workers' rights, including the right to form trade unions, and its forthright condemnation both of the injustices afflicting the working-classes and of their perpetrators. *The Tablet* contributed in this way to a particular early reading or presentation of the encyclical. Its edition for May 30th further reveals the controversial nature of this reading: it reported that a writer in *The Pall Mall* saw *Rerum Novarum* as 'a magnificent confirmation from the Papal Chair of Cardinal Manning's doctrines' and as 'gall and wormwood' for 'English Catholics of the old Conservative school'. However, *The Manchester Guardian* had commented that the 'Pope figures in the Encyclical as

² *The Tablet*, May 23rd 1891, pp. 805-806; May 30th 1891, pp. 845-51.

a staunch Conservative'. *The Tablet* criticised the former writer, while noting that the latter 'had the advantage of reading the original text for himself'.³

The Tablet's conservative bias was only partly redressed the following week by Bishop John Hedley of Newport, the principal English translator of the encyclical.⁴ Hedley used the language of his translation without direct quotation from it, which at least allowed the reader to sense the moral sympathy and urgency with which the Pope sought for a 'remedy' to be 'quickly found, for the misery which presses so heavily at this moment on the large majority of the very poor'. Hedley balanced the Pope's condemnation of those who sought to abolish private property with his defence of a labourer's 'right [...] to a wage sufficient to support him in reasonable and frugal comfort'. Hedley closed by expressing the hope that 'every intelligent man and woman in the country will read and study this earnest and eloquent Encyclical'. On the other hand, Bishop Hedley summed up the encyclical as 'a proclamation of individualism' in which 'the note of true Conservatism' was 'firmly sounded'. Its 'strong part' was 'the religious side of the subject', whereby there was 'no solution of the Labour Question [...] without the assistance of religion and of the Church'. That assessment contrasts with the trenchant verdict of the London *Guardian* newspaper on *Rerum Novarum* as quoted in the same issue: 'In the labour disputes which seem more and more likely to swallow up every other question, it places the Roman Catholic Church definitely on the side of the labourer'.⁵

In the *Dublin Review* for July 1891, Manning defended *Rerum Novarum's* establishment of 'broad principles' rather than 'detailed and particular solutions', and commended its concern with the 'political' or 'social economy' within which 'finance and commerce are an important but subordinate part'.⁶ After first separating out the core 'axioms' of the Pope's moral reasoning, he defined the Socialism condemned by the Pope as 'the denial of the natural right of property' and 'the assertion that it is lawful to reform and constitute human society on the

³ *The Tablet*, May 30th 1891, p. 853; *The Manchester Guardian*, May 23rd 1891, p. 9 (The author, who signed himself signed 'Verax' was the Liberal editor of the *Manchester Examiner and Times*, Henry Dunckley).

⁴ J. Hedley, 'The Encyclical on Labour', *The Tablet*, June 6th 1891, p. 885; the English translation was printed on pages 897-905 in the same edition. According to a letter from Cardinal Manning to Archbishop Walsh of Dublin on April 12th 1891, the two archbishops would 'revise' Hedley's text; in reality, it was Manning who determined the revisions: Shane Leslie, *Henry Manning, His Life and Labours*, 2nd ed. (London: Burns Oates & Washbourne, 1921), p. 379.

⁵ *The Tablet*, June 6th 1891, p. 894; *The Guardian*, June 3rd 1891, p. 876.

⁶ Henry Edward Manning, 'Leo XIII on "The Condition of Labour"', *Dublin Review*, July 1891, pp. 153-67, at 154-55.

basis of the universal equality of man, and the community of goods'.⁷ Manning stressed Leo XIII's assertion that Christian teachings and the charitable 'action of the Church' were crucial to remedying modern ills.⁸ However, Manning also highlighted the encyclical's defence of legislation to protect the poor, its account of the 'liberty, duties, and co-operation of workers', and the right to a minimum wage defined in terms of maintaining a home and family in 'reasonable and frugal comfort'.⁹

This glance at the initial reception of *Rerum Novarum* in Britain does not in itself challenge Fr O'Connor's assertion concerning the role played by Fr Vincent McNabb after Manning's death. It may alert us, though, to what O'Connor may have meant first by 'serious note', such that it may imply a particular reading of the encyclical, and second by 'hardly anyone else', to be understood as the broad British public beyond the narrow confines of an educated laity and clergy.

Reception History II

Some confirmation of this approach to O'Connor's claim may be gained if we look at the reception of *Rerum Novarum* in Britain between Manning's death and the onset of the First World War. It has been argued, for example, that Manning's reading of the encyclical and approach to issues of social justice was not shared by Cardinal Vaughan, though Vaughan was vocal in decrying poor and insanitary housing.¹⁰ A conservative reading of the encyclical is evident in the sub-headings that Fr William Eyre inserted in Hedley's translation in his 1895 book *The Pope and the People, Select Letters and Addresses on Social Questions*.¹¹ These include: 'The Socialist solution: its refutation', 'Private Property a natural right', 'The right of Private Property proved by the Family', and 'No practical solution without Religion'. A full list is set out below in the appendix Table 1.

The five years preceding the Great War saw the birth in 1909 and subsequent rapid growth of the Catholic Social Guild in Britain. Its *Catholic Social Year Books* from 1910 to 1914 reveal how Guild members were inspired by and sought to inspire others to a study of *Rerum Novarum*. The Year Book for 1910 opened with the assertion by an anonymous author that Leo XIII had 'told us in emphatic terms that

⁷ Ibid., p. 156.

⁸ Ibid., p. 159.

⁹ Ibid., p. 162.

¹⁰ Kester Aspden, *Fortress Church: The English Roman Catholic Bishops and Politics, 1903-63* (Leominster, Gracewing, 2002), pp. 8-9.

¹¹ W. H. Eyre (ed.), *The Pope and the People Select Letters and Addresses on Social Questions*, (London and Leamington: Art and Book Company, 1895).

modern society is very badly out of joint.' The statement was supported by lengthy quotations from what in the modern version of *Rerum Novarum* are paragraphs 1 and 3. Later in the same volume, it was reported that at the inaugural conference of the Guild Mgr Henry Parkinson 'urged upon Catholics a careful study of the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* [*sic*] and the perusal of such literature on social subjects as we already possess'.¹² The Year Book's long list of 'Outline Lectures' which it hoped to produce 'for essays and discussions in Catholic clubs included: 'Why Pope Leo wrote his Letter on Labour'; 'The Social Programme of Leo XII', and 'Results of Pope Leo's Letter on Labour'.¹³ The Year Book for 1912 contained an advertisement for an edition of the encyclical prepared by the Guild with an introductory 'analysis' or schematic outline by Parkinson. One of the strengths of Parkinson's writings on the encyclical was to place it in the context of Pope Leo XIII's other writings on society, and of the 'studies and energetic propaganda' of earlier writers or churchmen. This is evident in his introduction to the 1913 edition of Eyre's *The Pope and the People*.¹⁴ The volume had already been reprinted with a preface by Charles Devas in 1902. Furthermore, between July 1913 and January 1914, the Guild sold some 3,000 copies of Parkinson's *Primer of Social Science*. That winter it counted over one hundred 'study-clubs, mostly of working men, meeting regularly and working steadily through the Primer or one of the Manuals'.¹⁵ What the Year Books do not reveal, however, is a rebuttal or re-interpretation of the largely conservative reading of the encyclical advanced in *The Tablet* and elsewhere.

A letter to *The Tablet*

Fr Vincent McNabb OP had long been concerned with the plight of the impoverished working-classes. In the very opening years of the century he had campaigned in the local press for proper drainage and sewerage in the district of rural Gloucestershire around the Dominican Priory at Woodchester. His campaign was motivated by the 'closed schools and scattered children' as well as deaths caused by outbreaks of measles, scarlet fever, and diphtheria.¹⁶ However, McNabb's public intervention in social affairs took a new turn in an article 'From the Convent

¹² *The Catholic Social Year Book for 1910* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1910), pp. 9-10, and p. 32.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.

¹⁴ Parkinson, 'Introduction,' *The Pope and the People, Select Letters and Addresses on Social Questions by Pope Leo XIII* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1913), pp. 5-8, at 7.

¹⁵ V. Crawford, letter to *The Tablet*, January 17th 1914, p. 103.

¹⁶ Richard Finn OP, *The Dominicans in the British Isles and Beyond: A New History of the English Province of the Friars Preachers* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming), Chapter 7.

Window', which he published in August 1911. After reflecting on the recent 'cyclone' of the 'Great Strike', he concluded that Pope Leo had identified the root cause of the unrest in *Rerum Novarum*. He quoted from what in a modern edition is the close of paragraph 3: 'A small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the labouring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself'. More telling than the quotation is McNabb's provocative claim that Pope Leo had written in 'words strong enough almost for a Socialist manifesto' – thereby calling into question any partial reading of the encyclical as primarily a condemnation of Socialism.¹⁷

A little under two years later, on July 5th 1913, McNabb 'delivered an eloquent and striking address' at the fourth National Catholic Congress at Plymouth on 'the condition of labour' in a debate on the living wage held under the auspices of the Catholic Social Guild.¹⁸ The speech was widely reported. McNabb 'wished he could write the word "unjust", as descriptive of the state of the worker, upon a blackboard, to impress it on his hearers'. *The Tablet's* reporter was unhappy with the vehemence of McNabb's performance; he commented that 'Father McNabb's strong emphasis ... upon certain points seems to have prevented him from making himself clear that the condition of things described and denounced was not universal'. According to *The Manchester Guardian*, McNabb 'emphasized the authoritative character of the encyclical' and the papal declaration that the condition of working people was 'the pressing question of the hour'. He mentioned that he was 'in the habit...of quoting the words of the Pope without giving his authority. The result was that he was called a Socialist'. McNabb now tackled what was meant by the right to property, not 'the right of a few men to all the property', but 'that all men had a right to some property'.¹⁹ The 'real right of property meant the right not to be sweated, the right to earn enough, not only for self, but also for the wife and family, the right to earn enough to live in reasonable comfort and sufficiency'.²⁰ We can see here McNabb's key initial steps in re-interpreting *Rerum Novarum*.

The following January, McNabb went one step further with an article for *The Tablet* entitled, 'Towards Social Thinking'.²¹ While avowing that his 'thoughts on Socialism' were not a '*defence of Socialism*',

¹⁷ 'From the Convent Window: A Reverie on the Great Strike', *The Catholic Times*, August 25th 1911. He quoted the same passage from the encyclical in his 1912 C.S.G. pamphlet, *The Question of the Feeble-Minded*.

¹⁸ *The Tablet*, July 12th, 1913, pp. 55-56.

¹⁹ *The Manchester Guardian*, July 7th, 1913, p. 10.

²⁰ *Daily Herald*, July 7th, 1913, p.5. The *Daily Herald*, launched in 1912, was a British daily supportive of the Labour movement and Labour Party.

²¹ Vincent McNabb OP 'Towards Social Thinking', *The Tablet*, January 3rd 1914, pp. 6-7, reprinted in Ferdinand Valentine OP, *Father Vincent McNabb, The Portrait of a Great Dominican* (London: Burns & Oates, 1955), pp. 400-403.

he attacked the policies of 'the existing Conservative and Liberal, and Democratic and Republican parties' for sustaining a form of State 'enslavement'. This in McNabb's view was essentially 'what Socialism is condemned for proposing to bring in'! A series of charges normally levelled against Socialism were now levelled against the prevailing political and economic order. Behind the article was McNabb's agreement with the arguments advanced by Hilaire Belloc's 1912 book *The Servile State*; but he clinched his points with quotations from *Rerum Novarum*, twice using the sentence: 'A small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the labouring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself'. In the second instance, this quotation capped a move by which McNabb again took the right of property to mean 'not that some men shall own all property, but that all men shall own some property' and rhetorically asked whether 'the inalienable right of property' was 'kept in a state of things where vast numbers of work-folk have not a square yard of land and are never more than a month from destitution'? McNabb quoted from the 1910 translation of what is now paragraph 47 together with a line from the opening of paragraph 3: was this right to property kept

where there are 'two widely differing castes... one which holds power because it *holds wealth* and which has in its grasp the whole of labour and trade, [when] on the other side there is the needy and powerless multitude, broken down and suffering,' so that that 'some remedy must be found, and found quickly, for the misery (i.e. want) and wretchedness pressing so heavily and so unjustly on the vast majority of the working classes'.

McNabb stopped shy of a final description of the multitude in paragraph 47 as 'ever ready for disturbance'.

McNabb was making novel use of *Rerum Novarum* to condemn a capitalist economy. Unsurprisingly, the article caused something of a furor in educated Catholic circles. The following edition of *The Tablet* saw his 'brilliant fireworks' condemned as a 'source of real danger' by one priest in the letters column, and a longer riposte by Thomas F. Burns, Secretary of the National Conference of Catholic Trade Unionists. He accused McNabb of having 'confused Catholic social thinkers instead of guiding them'.²² McNabb replied to Burns with a letter published on January 17th 1914. He observed that many Catholics felt that there were 'forms of Socialism which are not opposed to any doctrine of the Catholic Church' and might 'profess these forms with a quiet conscience.' McNabb opposed to Burn's condemnation the approval given by the Archbishop of Liverpool to the 'new Socialism' advocated by the Labour MP Philip Snowden in his 1913 book *Socialism and Syndicalism* as (in the prelate's words) 'a Socialism with which

²² *The Tablet*, January 10th, 1914, pp. 66-67, and 48-49.

we can make friends'.²³ The exchange thus gives further ground for thinking that Fr O'Connor's 'serious note' has behind it a particular understanding, presentation, or use of *Rerum Novarum*.

The Articles in the *Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion* and *The Universe*

The edition of *The Tablet* which carried McNabb's reply to Burns also contained a letter from Mrs Virginia Crawford, Honorary Secretary of the Catholic Social Guild, who insisted that 'well-known churchmen - the Bishop of Northampton, Mgr Parkinson, Father Plater, SJ among others' had offered the 'light and leading to the multitude' on social and economic affairs 'through the medium of the Guild', yet many Catholics still remained 'in ignorance of our very existence'.²⁴ This leads us to Fr. McNabb's attempts to bring the encyclical's import to the widest possible audience, the ordinary Catholic working-class and middle-class readership of the *Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion* and of *The Universe*. The weekly *Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion* had grown since 1860 to become the most widely read Catholic paper in the country, popular with Irish Catholics in Liverpool, Northern England, and London, though its circulation declined sharply after the end of the Great War.²⁵ Between early January 1916 and late October 1919 McNabb contributed no fewer than eighty-four articles to this paper (including one longer article in three parts), most of which concerned questions of social justice. Of these, some thirty-three refer explicitly to *Rerum Novarum*. Most are not listed in Charles Auth's 1954 incomplete bibliography of McNabb's publications.²⁶ At least three more articles referring to the encyclical appeared in *The Universe*. Of these thirty-six articles, nearly all quoted from the text, and twenty-four opened with a quotation from the encyclical (Table 2). These openings gave the series the appearance of a commentary on the encyclical, though as we shall see, they are more properly understood as applications of some parts of the text to a series of social problems. Nonetheless, the articles imply, and generate a distinctive reading of *Rerum Novarum*.

²³ *The Tablet*, January 17th, 1914, p. 102; McNabb made the same point in a further letter of January 31st 1914, p. 183.

²⁴ *The Tablet*, January 17th, 1914, p. 103.

²⁵ J. J. Dwyer, 'The Catholic Press, 1850-1950' in George Beck (ed.), *The English Catholics, 1850-1950: Essays to Commemorate the Centenary of the Restoration of the Hierarchy of England and Wales* (London: Burns Oates, 1950), pp. 475-514, at 508.

²⁶ Charles Auth, *A Contribution to a Bibliography of the Published Writings of Very Reverend Vincent McNabb, OP, STM (1868-1943)* (Washington: Dominican House of Studies, 1954).

The principal recurrent theme in McNabb's articles is the unjust distribution of wealth and the impoverishment of men and women exacerbated by the modern industrial economy. Within this overarching theme, McNabb denounced the concentration of capital within the control of a few, and its use to accumulate or 'control' further wealth. He claimed that 'we have the authority of Pope Leo XIII for looking even on the present distribution of wealth as a permanent crime against the Right to Property. All shades of Catholic politicians should agree with the Holy Father, and should at once organise some legislation for the gradual relief of this concentration'.²⁷ McNabb traced how the unjust concentration of wealth led to the control or 'enslavement' of the working-classes who were relatively powerless to shape their own lives, much to the detriment of their families, where the mother was forced to work outside the home to the neglect of her children, and where the number of children was limited by the joint wage-earning ability of their parents. Even in so-called democracies the power of wealth engineered a politics geared to the needs of the wealthy to create a *de facto* 'plutocracy': 'Political power is controlled by a political machine; and money controls the machine. Lobbying has become a recognised business method'. McNabb quoted with approval from Sidney Webb's *Socialism and Individualism* to chart the means by which the 'mere worker became steadily less and less industrially independent as his political freedom increased. From a self-governing producing unit he passed into a mere item in a vast industrial army over the organization and direction of which he had no control'.²⁸ Individual charity was insufficient to counter these economic forces; so, McNabb advocated legislation to realise Pope Leo's call for a living wage capable of maintaining a family in 'reasonable comfort', and if that could not be done at once, then to raise the state pension and lower the age at which people became eligible to receive it. Some 'simple legislation' was required 'which will make slum dwellings almost a civic impossibility'.²⁹ Moreover, McNabb further qualified (or in practice undercut) the papal teaching on private property as a right, by condemning as unlawful those laws which had enclosed the old commons (open land on which villagers had traditional rights of grazing, collecting firewood, and fishing). He asked why in these circumstances legislation should not confiscate wealth that had been legally but unjustly obtained: 'why should not legislation that is really law give back to the poor what is theirs by right'? He posed the question: 'Can it really be maintained

²⁷ 'After-War Problems, How shall we deal with them?', *Catholic Time and Catholic Opinions*, 23rd March 1917, p.5.

²⁸ 'The Causes of Poverty', *The Universe*, 25 May and 1 June, 1917.

²⁹ 'After-War Problems, How shall we deal with them?', *Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion*, 23rd March 1917, p.5.

that to restore ill-gotten gains is a crime against property'?³⁰ If the current economic order could not deliver a living wage, McNabb saw no alternative than to replace that order: If 'private capital' does not 'give this Living Wage; if therefore, it ceases to function, it must be set aside as a social organism that has become useless and dangerous'.³¹

The degree to which McNabb's presentation of the encyclical differs from earlier accounts noted in the first part of this study should be evident. He effectively made the point himself, though he accused politicians rather than clerics or journalists of the earlier reading:

From the moment of its publication this letter of the Father of Christendom became little more than a dead letter. Its carefully worded condemnation of the error of a group of Socialists was used by politicians to mask their own flagrant breach of the whole spirit of the Encyclical. They pointed to the Pope's condemnation of those who deny the Right of Property. Yet they did not point out that this Right of Property is mortally wounded in a state of things wherein 'a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the labouring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself'.³²

McNabb did not explicate *Rerum Novarum* in any comprehensive or systematic manner; but he aimed to identify its most salient teachings as they applied to his readers and to the society in which they lived, where what was salient was determined by the sheer scale of present economic injustices. He brought to the task his formidable skills as a preacher and journalist. It was once said of him that he 'excelled in epitomizing truths in an unforgettable form of words'.³³ His articles contain many punchy sentences: "'To buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest'" was once looked upon as a formula for the greatest happiness of the greatest number. It was but a deodorised form of selfishness'.³⁴ Pope Leo XIII was a doctor who had diagnosed the disease of modern society: indeed, 'The present state of poverty is not only a disease, but a crime. It is not an unhappy accident; it is a mortal sin'.³⁵

The non-systematic manner of McNabb's reading of the encyclical in these articles can be ascertained by noting the paragraphs from which he quoted, and how he quoted from them. We may also note those sections of the text from which he didn't quote. As we might expect,

³⁰ 'Leo XIII and St. Thomas on bad laws', *Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion*, 11th January 1918, p.5.

³¹ 'The Employer's chief duty', *Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion*, July 6th, 1917, p.5.

³² 'An Open Letter to the Electors', *Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion*, December 14th, 1918, p.7.

³³ Letter of 15th May 1945 from 'Br' Paul to Bernard Delany, English Dominican Archives, V, VM 2.

³⁴ 'Human rights and State laws', *Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion*, July 20th, 1917, p.5.

³⁵ 'The Injustice of the Social State' *The Universe* for June 22nd 1917.

McNabb quotes most often from what in modern editions is paragraph 3: quotations from this section appear in fourteen of the articles from the *Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion* and from *The Universe*. Four include the Pope's denunciation of 'rapacious usury'; nine articles quote the phrase about a 'yoke little better than that of slavery itself'; he cites in four articles the 'misery and wretchedness pressing so heavily *and unjustly* at this moment on the vast majority of the working-classes'. Indeed, McNabb queried in one article why the term 'unjustly' had been dropped from 'a second translation purporting to be the "official translation"'.³⁶ In an earlier section of this article I noted McNabb's quotation from paragraph 47 in the modern edition of the encyclical, and in particular how McNabb omitted the final words describing the 'needy and powerless multitude, broken down and suffering' as 'ever ready for disturbance'. He also quotes from this paragraph in eleven of the articles. On seven occasions when he quotes this section of the paragraph he again omits that final part.

What else is not quoted? McNabb passes over the defence of private property in paragraphs 6 and 9–11. He passes over the assertions in paragraphs 17–19 'that humanity must remain as it is', that 'it is impossible to reduce human society to a level', and that like the pain of agricultural labour 'the other pains and hardships of life will have no end or cessation on this earth' while 'to suffer and endure, therefore is the lot of humanity'. Nor does McNabb cite the Pope's denial that 'class is naturally hostile to class'. He makes no explicit use of Pope Leo's teachings on the role of the Church in paragraphs 21–31. The obvious exception is to cite Leo's denial in paragraph 28 that 'the solicitude of the Church is so preoccupied with the spiritual concerns of her children as to neglect their temporal and earthly interests'.³⁷

'Does the Catholic Church Protect Work Folk?'

In this respect we can also examine a short pamphlet or 4-page leaflet entitled 'Does the Catholic Church Protect Work Folk?' which McNabb produced at a date I have not yet been able to ascertain, and which was printed by the Catholic Publishing Company in Liverpool. It comprises a series of 'extracts' from Leo XIII's encyclical entitled *The Condition of the Working Classes* which it states 'may be of value in the present crisis'. It groups them under certain headings or topics and gives numbers for the paragraphs in a Catholic Truth Society edition, numbers which differ from those currently in use (Table 3). The chosen

³⁶ 'The English Translation of the Labour Encyclical', *Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion*, April 3rd, 1917, p.5.

³⁷ 'The Church's Divine Discontent, A Distorted View Corrected', *Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion*, 30th March 1917.

topics give a distinctive, indeed trenchant, reading of the encyclical as a defence of workers' rights and of the obligations of employers and the state towards them. We see again the characteristic use of the truncated phrase from paragraph 47, and a similar selection of paragraphs from which McNabb chose not to cite.

Fr McNabb continued to talk, write, and preach on *Rerum Novarum* in later years. On January 3rd 1919 he had been discussing the publication of a book on the encyclical with Eric Gill and Hilary Pepler during a walk over the Sussex downs.³⁸ Though the book did not materialize, he spoke on the encyclical and the plight of the unemployed from the plinth at the foot of Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square on February 20th 1920.³⁹ He later stressed the encyclical's advocacy for small land-holdings; and he would champion such 'homesteads' in a return to the land from the cities as an integral element of Distributism. In 'Towards Nazareth', published in the autumn of 1941, McNabb quoted Pope Leo's statement that the law 'should favour ownership, and its policy should be to induce as many as possible to become owners'. He considered these words as 'perhaps the most momentous in the Encyclical' and further concluded that 'Mass Production and Big Business of a town organisation cannot give to the people that effective control which, alone, is ownership'.⁴⁰ But this conclusion was not yet part of the reading of *Rerum Novarum* which he developed in the First World War articles studied here.

Conclusions

The present study shows that Fr John O'Connor would have been wrong to think that McNabb was amongst the very first to promote *Rerum Novarum* even after the death of Cardinal Manning. Nor were there lacking attempts to bring it before a wide audience. However, O'Connor was correct in as much as McNabb presented successfully a particular view of the encyclical which was to prevail in Catholic circles for the remainder of the century. As McNabb himself had argued: 'Not everyone who approaches this masterpiece of Roman Law and Theology is qualified to give it authentic explanation'.⁴¹ Furthermore,

³⁸ Letter of January 11th 1919 from Eric Gill to Desmond Chute, in W. Shewring, ed., *Letters of Eric Gill* (London: Cape, 1947), pp. 124-5.

³⁹ Provincial's Diary (Regestrum), 1894-1932, entry for February 20th 1921, English Dominican Archives, V, BJ 23; *The Daily Mirror*, February 21st 1920, p.5. McNabb shared the platform with the Mirfield priest, Rev Paul Bertie Bull.

⁴⁰ McNabb, 'Towards Nazareth', *The Cross and the Plough*, vol. 8, no. 1 (Michaelmas 1941), p. 9; see also, J. M. Cleary, *Catholic Social Action in Britain 1909-1959* (Oxford: Catholic Social Guild, 1961), p. 119.

⁴¹ V. McNabb, 'The Bishop of Cork and the *Rerum Novarum*', *Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion*, November 17th 1916, p.5.

McNabb brought his interpretation before the widest possible audience in the pages of the Catholic popular press. Fr Peter Yorke was quoted by the Maynooth professor, Walter MacDonald (who died in 1920), as asking 'how are we to meet socialism if we have nothing to place before the labouring classes but extracts – platitudinarius [*sic*] for the most part – taken from the encyclicals of Leo XIII'.⁴² To which we may imagine McNabb as replying: 'better than you think'!

It is said of the Church's social teaching that it is not only a matter of unchanging moral principles, but also of their application to particular times and places, historical conditions concerning the economy, the political order of society, a culture's understanding of the common good it seeks to pursue, and of the particular forms taken by the virtues required in that pursuit. From this perspective, it might seem that an encyclical such as *Rerum Novarum*, issued in 1891, would be at its most authoritative and most influential at or close to that date and that it would most easily be understood in this period. However, this study of its reception history indicates that within the British Isles there is good reason to think that the encyclical's authority and influence were initially much muted, minimal even, for the first two decades after its issue, and that a key figure in its increasing authority and influence after that period was none other than Fr Vincent McNabb. For McNabb it then posed the pressing question of the hour.

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⁴² W. MacDonald, *Reminiscences of a Maynooth Professor*, 219, cited by Bernard Aspinwall, 'Rerum Novarum in the transatlantic world', in Philippe Boutry (ed.), *Rerum Novarum: Écriture, Contenu et Réception d'une Encycle: actes du colloque international* (Rome: Ecole Franciase de Rome, 1997), pp. 465-95 at 493, where the title is given as *Memoirs of a Maynooth Professor*.

Appendix

Table 1: Sub-headings inserted by William Eyre to Bishop Hedley's translation of *Rerum Novarum*

'The Socialist solution: its refutation'
'Private Property a natural right'
'The right of Private Property proved by the Family'
'No practical solution without Religion'
'Labour and Suffering must exist'
'Class should help class'
'The Rich must help the Poor'
'The Poor must accept their lot'
'The Church serves Society by upholding Christianity'
'She is also solicitous about the temporal interest of her children'
'The State should promote the general good'
'should be solicitous for the working population'
'In what respects the Church should interfere'
'How the State should deal with labour questions'
'Working people must have their spiritual rights respected'
'The State and the regulation of labour'
'The Living Wage'
'The working-man should be encouraged to acquire property'
'Associations and organisations'
'The rights of associations'
'The right of ecclesiastical association'
'Bad and dangerous Associations'
'Catholic Associations for working-men to be encouraged'
'Advice to Catholic associations'
'Summary and Conclusion: Divine Charity'

Table 2: Articles by Fr. V. McNabb in the *Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion* and *The Universe*, between March 24th 1916 and October 4th 1919, which refer to or quote from *Rerum Novarum*

Title and place of publication	Date of publication	Opening quotation from <i>Rerum Novarum</i>
'Hard Lot of The Working Poor. A Lesson from Cork', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	March 24th, 1916	Y
'Employers and a Living Wage, Practical Proposals', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	April 28th, 1916	N
'The Bishop of Cork and the <i>Rerum Novarum</i> ', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	November 17th, 1916	N
'Rapacious Usury: The Power of Wealth, its use and abuse', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	March 2nd, 1917	Y
'After-War Problems, How shall we deal with them?', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	March 23rd, 1917	N
'The Church's Divine Discontent, A Distorted View Corrected', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	March 30th, 1917	Y
'The English Translation of the Labour Encyclical', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	April 13th, 1917	N
'The Priest's Relation to Politics, Present-day claims I', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	May 18th, 1917	N
'The Priest's Relation to Politics, Present-day claims II', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	May 25th, 1917	-
'The Priest's Relation to Politics, Present-day claims III', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	June 1st, 1917	-
'Concerning Wealth and Poverty: Present State of Things', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	June 15th, 1917	Y
'The Causes of Poverty I', <i>The Universe</i>	May 25th, 1917	Y
'The Causes of Poverty II', <i>The Universe</i>	June 1st, 1917	-
'The Worker's Slavery, State of the Teeming Masses', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	June 8th, 1917	Y
'The Injustice of the Social State' <i>The Universe</i>	June 22nd, 1917	Y
'The Living Wage', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	June 29th, 1917	Y
'The Employer's chief duty', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	July 6th, 1917	Y
'The Rights of Man', <i>The Universe</i>	July 20th, 1917	Y
'Human rights and State laws', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	July 20th, 1917	Y

(Continued)

Table 2: (Continued)

Title and place of publication	Date of publication	Opening quotation from <i>Rerum Novarum</i>
'Right of Private Property', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	August 3rd, 1917	Y
'Towards Slavery', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	August 24th, 1917	N
'The Social Need of Religion', <i>The Universe</i>	September 28th, 1917	Y
'The pressing question of the hour', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	October 12th, 1917	Y
"'Do as You're Told'", <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	November 16th, 1917	N
'Towards Servile Education', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	November 30th, 1917	N
'Leo XIII and St. Thomas on bad laws', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	January 11th, 1918	Y
'In a Friars' Refectory: A Study in Contrasts', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	January 25th, 1918	N
'Compulsory v. voluntary education', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	February 8th, 1918	N
'The Cardinal-Archbishop and the Bishops on the Servile State', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i> ,	March 1st, 1918	Y
'Trades Unionists and Socialism' (letter), <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	June 29th, 1918	N
'After-War Injustice', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	July 27th, 1918	Y
'The Danger of Industrialism', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	August 24th, 1918	Y
'Rebel Beware', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	September 21st, 1918	N
'Victory of the Profiteers', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	November 23rd, 1918	Y
'The Hypocrisy of Politicians', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i> ,	December 7th, 1918	N
'An Open Letter to the Electors', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i> ,	December 14th, 1918	Y
'Leo XIII on Usury', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i>	February 8th, 1919	Y
'The New Industrial Charter', <i>Catholic Times and Catholic Opinion</i> ,	April 5th, 1919	Y
'The End of the Wage System', <i>Catholic Times ad Catholic Opinion</i> ,	July 19th, 1919	Y
'Towards Guilds', <i>Catholic Times ad Catholic Opinion</i> ,	October 4th, 1919	Y

Table 3: Lists of Topics in 'Does the Catholic Church Protect Work Folk?' and the paragraph numbers for these topics in *Rerum Novarum*

Topic	from modern paras
The Evil	60 + 3
Nature of the Evil – A Few Rich and Many Poor	47
The Causes of Poverty	3
The Church wishes the evil to end	28
Work makes wealth	8 + 34
Rights must be guarded by State	37
The Right not to be sweated	20
The right to live by work	44
The right to a living wage	46
The right to the full result of labour	10
The right of association (i.e. Trade Unions)	51
The Work-Folk's special right to Protection	37
Bad laws are no laws	52 [footnote from Aquinas]
Ownership is Stewardship	22
The State can control property	47
What God has done – what the State must do	8
Small owners	46
The duty of the Church	63