

Franciscan Rome

Basilica of Saint John Lateran

The Popes Still Speak to Us from their Tombs

fra Michael Lasky

Saint John Lateran

Leo XIII, the last Pope to be buried outside of Saint Peter's Basilica, rests here in the Lateran. Having planned for his funeral monument to be built over the door in the left transept, he first had constructed what would be a mirror tomb in the right transept, to serve as a preamble to his own legacy.

Known as the *Social Pope* and the *Pope of the Workers*, Leo's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* began the development of contemporary social doctrine of the Church. What Leo did for social teaching in our time is equivalent to what Innocent III did for the codification of Canon Law in the 13th century. This, however, is not the story Leo wants to tell us from his tomb. While Innocent was the personification of papal power at its height, Leo's moving his body from its resting place in the cathedral in Perugia to the magnificent cathedral of Rome, is really more about recalling the supporting role Innocent played in the birth of the Franciscan Order. It was here at the Lateran that Francis of Assisi and his early followers sought permission from Innocent to simply, "*Live the Gospel of our Lord, Jesus Christ.*" With a nod of his papal tiara, the great experiment of having "*a poor church for the poor*" began.



It was Leo's fervent desire that he would also be forever remembered as playing a pivotal part in the story of Franciscanism. For like Nicholas IV, Leo adapted the Secular Franciscan Rule to help him better respond to the needs of the church in his time. Beyond this, Leo also saw the Franciscan intellectual tradition as providing the practical and spiritual underpinnings for his own social teachings. Therefore, the relocation of Innocent's tomb narrates a prelude to Leo's legacy story of how we might better "*Live the Gospel*" in a Franciscan manner, today.

A careful look at the writings of Leo reveals his thoughtful intent of preparing the minds and hearts of the faithful to receive his social and economic teachings. Scholars tell us that the experience of Franciscan Third Order clerics and laity, in the field of industrial relations, was the starting point of Leo's analysis and prognosis of the injustices that plague modern society. For this reason, nine years before *Rerum Novarum* Leo penned his encyclical *Auspicato Concessum*, to commemorate the 700th anniversary of the birth of Saint Francis.

Through this letter, Leo began a process of making ready the faithful for his future teachings on the dignity of work, the rights of workers, as well as many other rights and responsibilities. He saw the hope and relief of a suffering world as resting within the Franciscan tradition saying, "*...domestic peace, incorrupt morality, gentleness of behavior, the legitimate use and preservation of private wealth, civilization and social stability, spring as from a root from the Franciscan Third Order*" (21).

For Leo, Franciscans have a depth and breadth to accompany those who long for the fulfillment of God's promises amid suffering and despair. His instinct of harnessing the Franciscan tradition for the sake of justice and peace in the modern world, would find its full expression with Pope Francis and his encyclicals *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti*.

The purpose of the social doctrine of the Church is not to provide solutions to specific problems in the world, but rather to help Christians to better proclaim that *Jesus is Lord* and then to faithfully live out the moral implications of that confession of faith.

In *Auspicato Concessum*, Leo is offering the Franciscan Rule as the most eloquent way of *loving God and neighbor* and proclaiming that *Jesus is Lord* in our times. He artistically highlights this using the tomb of Innocent and his own tomb as bookends to the story of salvation history being told in the apse mosaic of St. John Lateran. Here, nestled between these tombs, is an unfolding golden drama that includes Francis of Assisi, Anthony of Padua and other Franciscans, who squeeze themselves into the scene of Mary, John the Baptist, John the Evangelist, and other apostles proclaiming *Christ as Lord!*



The legacy of Leo XIII begs some questions for us as Christians pilgrims in our world today:

- What are the moral implications of confessing that *Jesus Christ is Lord*: socially, economically, and politically?
- How do we help make a poor Church for the poor?
- How does the Franciscan way of living the Gospel help us to better hear and respond to the cry of the poor and the cry of the planet?