



Ever Ancient, Ever New: Rerum Novarum 2.0

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This is a brutal, yet beautiful message addressed to Poland. It is also a powerful diagnosis of our own predicament. Drawing on the wisdom of Catholic Social Thought, Saint Augustine, Saint John Paul II and Leonard Cohen, Lord Glasman speaks hard truths with kindness. It is never too late to repent.

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Pope Gregory I wrote that the primary virtue is Gratitude. I agree, and I wish to express mine to you.

My first gratitude is to the Catholic Church for the gift of *Rerum Novarum* and the Encyclicals which have shaped my ethics, my politics and my life. Ever Ancient, Ever New, I will always be faithful and grateful. Founded by Leo XIII, I believe that Leo XIV will also be true to this calling.

My second point of eternal gratitude is to the Polish working-class and to *Solidarność*, that most glorious and sacred thing, a Catholic Trade Union. Blue Labour is really nothing more than Catholic Social Thought and the *Solidarność* statement of 1981 applied to my beloved country Britain. Ever Ancient, Ever New - I still rage over the desecration of *Solidarność* and defy those who say it was impractical, nostalgic, idealistic and wrong. I spent my entire doctoral thesis lamenting Balcerowicz, Jeffrey Sachs and their shock therapy. The Polish working class and farmers were the great losers, told to get with the programme so that their children could become faithless yuppies whose greatest success is a start up in the tech sector. We are living through the reckoning with all of that now.

Poland has not reconciled its differences or healed its wounds. It is not a country where solidarity is a primary virtue. It is not a country where the dignity of labour is honoured, where the status of the worker is upheld, where the land and those who work it are respected. It is neither a Christian democracy nor a social one.

When the market and the state are the two dominant institutions, solidarity is liquidated. The original sin of post-Communist Poland is precisely that you turned to the EU and Goldman Sachs, Pfizer and McDonald's, and in the name of progress you desecrated the meaning and memory of Solidarity, whose 1981 document said, 'We draw upon the traditions of the Church, of the Labour Movement and of our Nation'. That well has not run dry. The redemption of Poland can only be found in the resurrection of its own tradition.

For various reasons I am very interested in the History of Polish Political Thought. Truth demands that I do not discount the Enlightenment in the story, Republican and geometric, but there was also Monarchical, Imperial, Socialist, Christian and Agrarian visions, which were obviously much more interesting. What I never found was anything like the kind of politics and policy that emerged after 1989. The imposition of the free market on society by a centralised state, followed by the voluntary surrender of your Sovereignty to a transnational legal entity dominated by Germany was not really a Polish idea. Who were you trying to impress with that?

Let us return to St Augustine.

The Original Sin was not eating the apple, it was Adam blaming his wife. When God enquired as to what happened, Adam said, 'She made me do it'. Cowardly and pathetic. That is, by the way, the reason Orthodox Jews do not name our sons Adam. (Or Noah, but that is a different story). It is also the moment when God began to think that there may be a design flaw in the crown of his creation, and the next thing you know it's 'Am I my brother's keeper?' when God asks Cain why Abel is lying on the floor in a pool of blood. That's when God really starts to grasp the scale of the problem. If the first virtue is gratitude, then surely the original sin is blame.

And Poland has no-one to blame but itself for its present predicament. 'Ever Ancient, Ever New', as St Augustine wrote, or to quote Leonard Cohen:

"They whisper still the injured stones
The blunted mountains weep
As he died to make men holy

Let us die to make things cheap
And save your Mea Culpa
Which you quietly forgot
Year by year, month by month
Day by day, thought by thought”

And Poland, above all other nations, had two living treasures to guide it into the new terrain in 1989. St John Paul II was one of the great figures of the Second Half of the 20th Century. *Laborem Exercens* and *Centesimus Annus* define the Magisterium, sublime and magnificent. *Centesimus Annus* was published in 1989 just to guide the way but *Laborem Exercens* was in 1981, the same year as *Solidarność*’s ‘Self-Governing Republic’. I read them together as one document and they never fail me. Ever ancient, ever new. The greatest articulation of Catholic Thought and of the Labour Movement in the same year, inspired by the same country. They were both produced by many hands and not the result of individual glory, academic careers and CVs. Christian writing and socialist writing. But Poland went for fast food and a privatised pharmaceutical industry instead. I have never seen as many McDonald’s and Apteka’s as I do driving through Poland, which I do a lot because it is on the way to Ukraine where there is a real crucifixion going on. Slava Ukraine. It sometimes feels like I am driving through a nation hooked on hamburgers and anti-depressants. Redemption is not to be found in either of those things.

St John Paul II and the *Solidarność* Movement define the uniqueness of modern Poland and while you live in their shadow they seem to give you no light. The gift to the *orbi et urbi* was a *Gloria Mundi*. I, perhaps, more than anyone else, have stolen your inheritance, I am Jacob to your Esau. I didn’t even have to give you porridge. I bless and steal from John Paul II and *Solidarność* every day. They define my path and give me strength and no-one from Poland has even disputed my claim to your birthright. All I heard was a theoretical silence, a political void and a theological preoccupation with the unborn rather than the born. And meanwhile, as Bob Dylan said, ‘life goes on all around you’. Poland does not seem to understand what is going on let alone shape it.

And this is the point of this talk. The teaching of St John Paul II and *Solidarność* are of far greater relevance to our contemporary moment than anything written in the last 35 years. They could both have been written by the Angelic Doctor himself, but now we must move to the Doctor of Grace, Augustine, who gave the title to this lecture. The full quote reads as follows:

“Late have I loved you, O Beauty, ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you. You were within me, but I was outside, and it was there that I searched for you. In my unloveliness I exploited the lovely things which you created. You were with me, but I was not with you. The things you created kept me from you; yet if they had not been in you they would not have been at all. You called, you shouted, and you broke through my deafness. You flashed, you shone, and you dispelled my blindness. You breathed on me; I inhaled your scent and now I am breathless for you. I have tasted you, now I hunger and thirst for more. You touched me and I burned for your peace.”

This quote is inexhaustible in its beauty, its meaning and its truth; its incarnated longing, its sensuality, its breath and its breathlessness, its burning peace. We are always late for eternity. I will

concentrate, however, on what those things are, that are 'ever ancient, ever new' within the Orthodox tradition within which the Catholic Tradition is firmly placed. I am not seeking a reconciliation with modernity but to define it. The old is the new, antiquity is modern, Sinai is now.

In a rare moment of clarity the late Pope Francis said that we are not living through an era of change but through a change of era. By the way, I have never missed John Paul II more than since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The lack of clarity and position by the Church is a primal weakness in our world. On the change of era, however, he was profoundly right.

The origins of the previous era, initiated in 1979, were fully in place by 1989 and the world that modern Poland entered into was as much a fantasy world as the Bolshevism it replaced. Up is down, bad is good, weird is normal. Human Rights mean you can't tell the truth, justice is the defence of corporations, democracy is liberalism, sovereignty is obedience to multi-national treaties, freedom means compliance, creativity is marketing, diversity is homogeneity and, of course, Poland is a normal European country. Two generations have been sacrificed to this idiocy masquerading as reason, and universities have been the main incubators. And by the way, men are women and Islam is a religion of peace.

In order to comply with this reality, Solidarity was liquidated.

There is no longer even a pragmatic reason for going along with this. And 'late I have loved you, Oh beauty, ever ancient, ever new, late I have loved you'. It is never too late to repent. The New Era will be defined by borders, working class anger, sovereignty, war and armies. The fantasy is over and the truth is kind, only our delusions make us tremble. It enables me to say to you, without fear of being called nostalgic or outdated that the first point, ever ancient, ever new, is that the free market did not create the world.

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth is the first sentence of Holy Scripture. Without following Aquinas too closely, we can define Creation as 'human beings' and 'nature'. The definition of capitalism is the commodification of both. The exploitation of human beings and nature in order to turn them into commodities of fluctuating price in competitive markets is the definition of capitalism. Pope Leo XIII called this a system of 'modern slavery' and Saint John Paul II wrote of a 'structure of sin'. It desecrates the human status of the worker. The highest return at the greatest speed is its objective and the status of a worker limits that return. Capitalism is like diarrhoea, it liquidates the blockage.

The second truth is that the State did not create the world either. The preservation of the sacred status of human beings and nature is the primary role of politics, and the Tower of Babel seems to indicate that a sovereign power made up of many different people with different tongues does not go well. Subsidiarity is the best way to temper the Pharaonic tendency of centralised power. Sovereignty is necessary to resist the domination of capital, subsidiarity is required to resist the tyranny of the State and all this is predicated on democratic Solidarity as the fundamental ethic of society. Cain made a very big mistake. He was his brother's keeper, we all are. This is the political position of Blue Labour in British politics and it is based entirely on John Paul II and *Solidarność*. People in Britain seem to like it, I am quite confident that the Polish People might like it too.

The fundamental teaching of Catholic Social Thought is that tyranny is a real threat in the economy and the state and that only a Christian Democracy, founded upon solidarity, the sharing of the burdens of this hard and merciless life, can generate a virtuous politics through domesticating the demonic energy of capitalism. Solidarity, Status and Subsidiarity are the three pillars.

That is why I argue, as a Jew, and an Orthodox one, that in politics, Christ is King, that in honouring the name of God we honour his Creation, incarnated. That the attributes God gave to himself when he spoke face to face with Moses on Mount Sinai are the very condition of Citizenship. Mercy, Grace, Kindness and Truth. That is why secular republics fail, it is not only that they yearn for a King but they reject the very idea of nobility that is essential for virtue. Ever Ancient, Ever New. Trump's inauguration was a very interesting experience. They are yearning for a King and an aristocracy and all they have is Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos. There are many rich people but very little nobility.

God described himself to Moses as a God of mercy and grace, slow to anger and a God of enormous kindness and truth. This is the paradox of God, for the truth is not kind, it hurts one's feelings. In order to be kind however we must honour the truth and in order to honour God we must honour his Creation and recognise the truth that the last thirty five years have been a desecration of all that is sacred. *Solidarność* and John Paul II understood this better than anyone. Even better than Marx who wrote:

“All that is holy is profaned
And everything solid, melts into air.”

Our redemption will be found in honouring John Paul II and *Solidarność* once more. They speak to us directly, at this time and in this place, if only we have the courage to hear. Only through the restoration of your ancient traditions can the new be born.

Maurice Glasman is the Director of the Common Good Foundation and the founder of the Blue Labour movement. A life peer who has served in Parliament for 14 years, Lord Glasman is a key figure in the current battle for Labour's soul, challenging the party to return to its founding principles. Lord Glasman has deep experience in authentic community organizing, from the original campaign for the Living Wage to small-town organizing in Grimsby today. Rooted in the Jewish tradition, Maurice is deeply influenced by Catholic Social Thought. He is the author of [*Blue Labour: the Politics of the Common Good*](#) (Polity 2022) and [*Unnecessary Suffering: Management, Markets and the Liquidation of Solidarity*](#) (Verso, 1996).

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Image: Lord Glasman by John Milbank