

## SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE:

### First reactions in the Dutch national press to the 1891 Papal Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*<sup>1</sup>.

M. Wintle

All over the world *Rerum Novarum* made a significant impact, but in some ways the impact in the Netherlands was unusual and more impressive than elsewhere. Serious and practical discussion amongst Dutch Catholics of 'the social question' (the generic term used to refer to the social consequences of economic and political change since the French Revolution) had hardly arisen at all before the 1880s, with its economic depression and social strife. The Dutch Catholic historian L.J. Rogier remarked that the debate on these matters fought out by such men as Von Ketteler, Manning, and Mermillod 'had apparently entirely eluded the Netherlands', and suggested that this lack of serious interest in the social question amongst Dutch Catholics was due to late industrialization in the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup> It is also the case that Dutch Catholics had undergone a relatively late political emancipation process, and their episcopal hierarchy had been restored only as late as 1853: Dutch Catholics were too concerned with the essentials of specifically Catholic life, like their Church and their schools, to expend very much time and attention on universal matters like the condition of the working classes. Liberal Catholicism, as it was manifested in opposition to Pius IX at the time of the Vatican Council of 1869-70, had also virtually passed the Netherlands by. So for many Dutch Catholics in May 1891, the doctrines put forward in *Rerum Novarum* were a surprise, and in some cases almost revolutionary.

On the other hand, the decade of the 1880s had been as economically distressed in the Netherlands as it had in other countries, particularly in the agricultural

1. This paper is an extended and revised version of one delivered to the International Conference on the Centenary of *Rerum Novarum*, 'Social Catholicism and the Development of Catholic Social Doctrine', at the University of Hull (UK), 12-14 April 1991.

2. L.J. Rogier, *Katholieke herleving: geschiedenis van katholiek Nederland sinds 1853*, The Hague 1956, 309-310. See also J. Perry, *Roomsche kinine tegen roode koorts: arbeidersbeweging en katholieke kerk in Maastricht 1880-1920*, Amsterdam 1983, 33-34; and H. Righart, *De katholieke zuil in Europa: een vergelijkend onderzoek naar het ontstaan van verzuiling onder katholieken in Oostenrijk, Zwitserland, België en Nederland*, Meppel 1986, 219.