One way to introduce students to the moral concerns raised in the social encyclicals is to assign portions of *Centesimus annus*. Written during the period when the economies of the Soviet bloc nations were crumbling, Pope John Paul II’s 1991 encyclical focuses on the dignity of the human person with regard to work and the sphere of economics. The first two chapters of the text provide a brief summary of Catholic social teaching. First, the text invites readers to look back at the 19th century social context when there was a rapid shift from traditional, agricultural economies to modern, industrial economies. With these changes, workers were frequently treated as mere items of cost and parts of the system of production rather than as persons with dignity. The main critics of industrial capitalism were socialists and communists, but their proposals frequently ignored private property concerns. Pope Leo, in his famous encyclical “On the New Things,” called attention to the condition of the working class and the moral concern to treat each worker and owner as a person endowed with a capacity for intelligence and freedom. John Paul II’s encyclical celebrates the active role played by Pope Leo XIII and others who brought attention to moral concerns raised by the “new things” of early industrial capitalism. Next, the text invites readers to look around and to look ahead, to examine these issues in our contemporary context.

Philosophers who use this text in their teaching can treat it in a way that is analogous to the manner they might use a work of literature, a movie, or a television program. This text is not written as a piece of philosophical literature. Indeed, as the encyclical states explicitly, the Church’s social doctrine "belongs to the field of theology and particularly of moral theology" (CA 55). Nonetheless, the social encyclicals of the Vatican raise in clear ways issues of concern to moral philosophy. Just as philosophy professors occasionally assign their students to read Russian novels or to view episodes of Star Trek in order to examine philosophical issues, the social encyclicals of the Church can be a fruitful way to examine moral concerns about the dignity of the human person with regard to work and the economy.

Reading and discussion questions for Pope John Paul II’s 1991 encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*

Introduction and Chapter One: Characteristics of *Rerum Novarum*

1. Focusing on the information in the title, when was this encyclical published? The title comes from the first two words of the original Latin, which can be translated, "on the hundredth anniversary." What is it the hundredth anniversary of? The encyclical is divided into numbered sections. What is the purpose of this encyclical? (1) How have working conditions changed since 1891? How have attitudes toward sweatshop conditions changed?

2. How has *Rerum Novarum* become part of the social doctrine of the church? (2)

3. In what three ways does John Paul II propose a rereading of *Rerum Novarum?* (3) The text points to millions of people who, acting individually or as members of groups, have “sought to make this teaching the inspiration for their involvement in the world” by defending the human person and safeguarding human dignity (3). Can you think of any such examples?

4. What was new about the "New Things" at the time of the writing of *Rerum Novarum?* (4)

5. What is the key to reading the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum?* (6)

6. What human rights are affirmed in *Rerum Novarum?* (7) What does it mean to say that these rights are “inalienable and proper to the human person”?

7. What argument is used to support the notion of a just wage? (8)

8. What does *Rerum Novarum* say about work and religious duties? (9)

9. The relationship between the State and citizens is key to the social teaching of the church. What flaws are there in this relation in socialism? in liberalism? (10)

Chapter Two: Towards the "New Things" of Today

1. How has the prognosis of *Rerum Novarum* stood up to the test of time? (12) How does it apply today?

2. The text states that the fundamental error of socialism is “anthropological in nature.” (13) What does this mean? Why is it an error to consider the individual person simply as an element within a social organism?

3. What is the state's task with regard to the economy? (15)

4. The text refers to two principles: subsidiarity and solidarity. (15) What do these terms mean? How does upholding these principles make it possible to emphasize both personal freedom and the truth that persons find their fulfillment in participating in and contributing to the common good?

5. *Rerum Novarum* is critical of a false understanding of freedom. Explain. (17)