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Blast From the Past: Leo XIII

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Distinctly Catholic

Last Sunday, Pope Benedict XVI went to the village of Carpineto Romano to commemorate the bicentennial of the birth of Pope Leo XIII. The visit did not garner much attention from the press, but it should have. Leo was a truly great Pope.

Leo XIII is already, and most widely known, for his authorship of *Rerum Novarum*, the seminal encyclical that launched Catholic social teaching in the modern era. But, his contributions to the life and health of the Church were more varied. One of these was his attempt to rebuild the Church in France.

Amongst the many complicated inheritances Pius IX had bequeathed his successor was a through-going hostility to modernity. The Church condemned democracy, separation of Church and State, freedom of the press, all of it. Leo, however, understood that modernity was not going anywhere and that the Church needed to find a way to come to terms with modernity. Nowhere was this more difficult than in France. French Catholics were profoundly committed to the ancient regime. They were monarchists to a fault, and they refused to participate in the political life of the Third Republic. Leo encouraged them to end this hostility and to participate in the political life of their homeland, to rally to the Republic, which gave the effort its name, the *Ralliement*, which Leo launched in 1892.

The *Ralliement* was a complete failure because the Catholics of France were not loyal to their Pope and they undermined his effort at every turn. The French Catholics, egged on by the journal *La Croix*, refused to accept the legitimacy of the republican regime. They were at the heart of the Dreyfus Affair. Their anti-government attitude, in turn, led to greater anti-clericalism by the government, and a vicious cycle was begun. In some ways, that struggle continues. The Lefebvrists are the heirs of the Catholics who opposed Leo then, right down to their anti-Semitism and their willingness to be loyal to Rome only when it suits them.

I wish the world press had taken greater note of Benedict's tribute to Leo. I really hope the Lefebvrists and their sympathizers were taking note. And I hope Benedict himself will realize that he can go halfway to bring these rightwing crazies back into the fold, he can go more than halfway, but it won't work. They are loyal to a world that no longer exists, not to the papacy or the Church.

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