Work as Key to the Social Question

The following readings have been excerpted from *The Social Agenda: A Collection of Magisterial Texts*, a publication of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. Discussion questions follow.

**THE NATURE OF WORK**

The Church finds in the very first pages of the book of Genesis the source of her conviction that work is a fundamental dimension of human existence on earth. An analysis of these texts makes us aware that they express sometimes in an archaic way of manifesting thought the fundamental truths about humans, in the context of the mystery of creation itself. These truths are decisive for humans from the very beginning, and at the same time they trace out the main lines of their earthly existence, both in the state of original justice and also after the breaking, caused by sin, of the Creator’s original covenant with creation in humans. When humans, who had been created in the image of God ... male and female (Gn 1:27), hears the words: Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it (Gn 1:28 29), even though these words do not refer directly and explicitly to work, beyond any doubt they indirectly indicate it as an activity for humans to carry out in the world. Indeed, they show its very deepest essence. Humans are the image of God partly through the mandate received from their Creator to subdue, to dominate, the earth. In carrying out this mandate ... every human being reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe.

Work understood as a ‘transitive’ activity, that is to say, an activity beginning in the human subject and directed towards an external object, presupposes a specific dominion by humans over ‘the earth,’ and in its turn it confirms and develops this dominion. It is clear that the term ‘the earth’ of which the biblical text speaks is to be understood in the first place as that fragment of the visible universe that humans inhabit. By extension, however, it can be understood as the whole of the visible world insofar as it comes within the range of humans’ influence and of their striving to satisfy their needs. The expression ‘subdue the earth’ has an immense range. It means all the resources that the earth (and, indirectly, the visible world) contains and which, through the conscious activity of humans, can be discovered and used for their ends. And so these words, placed at the beginning of the Bible, never cease to be relevant. They embrace equally the past ages of civilization and economy, as also the whole of modern reality and future phases of development, which are perhaps already to some extent beginning to take shape, though for the most part they are still almost unknown to humans and hidden from them.

Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, #4

In our time, the role of human work is becoming increasingly important as the productive factor both of nonmaterial and of material wealth. Moreover, it is becoming clearer how a person’s work is naturally interrelated with the work of others. More than ever, work is work with others and work for others: it is a matter of doing something for someone else. Work becomes ever more fruitful and productive to the extent that people become more knowledgeable of the productive potentialities of the earth and more profoundly cognizant of the needs of those for whom their work is done.

Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, #31

In the design of God, all persons are called upon to develop and fulfill themselves, for every life is a vocation. At birth, all people are granted, in germ, a set of aptitudes and qualities for them to bring to fruition. Their coming to maturity, which will be the result of education received from the environment and personal efforts, will allow all people to direct themselves toward the destiny intended by the Creator. Endowed with intelligence and freedom, people are responsible for their fulfillment, as they are for their salvation. People are aided, or sometimes impeded, by those who educate them and those with whom they, but each all remain, whatever be these influences affecting them, the principal agents of their own success or failure. By the unaided effort of their own intelligence and will, all people can grow in humanity, can enhance their personal worth, can become more human.

Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, #15
THE NATURE OF WORK (continued)

Human work proceeds directly from persons created in the image of God and called to prolong the work of creation by subduing the earth, both with and for one another. Hence work is a duty: If any one will not work, let him not eat (2 Thes 3:10). Work honors the Creator’s gifts and the talents received from him. It can also be redemptive. By enduring the hardship of work in union with Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth and the one crucified on Calvary, humans collaborate in a certain fashion with the Son of God in his redemptive work. They show themselves to be disciples of Christ by carrying the cross, daily, in the work they are called to accomplish. Work can be a means of sanctification and a way of animating earthly realities with the Spirit of Christ.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2427

Throughout the course of the centuries, humans have labored to better the circumstances of their lives through a monumental amount of individual and collective effort. To believers, this point is settled: considered in itself, such human activity accords with God’s will. For humans, created to God’s image, received a mandate to subject to themselves the earth and all that it contains, and to govern the world with justice and holiness, a mandate to relate themselves and the totality of things to Him, who was acknowledged as the Lord and Creator of all.

Vatican Council II, Gaudium et Spes, #34

Humans have to subdue the earth and dominate it, because as the ‘image of God’ they are persons, that is to say, subjective beings capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about themselves, and with a tendency to self realization. As persons, humans are therefore the subject of work. As persons, humans work, they perform various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realize their humanity, to fulfill the calling to be persons that are theirs by reason of their very humanity.

Pope John Paul II, Laborem Exercens, #6

Humans must work, both because the Creator has commanded it and because of their own humanity, which requires work in order to be maintained and developed. Humans must work out of regard for others, especially their own family, but also for the society they belong to, the country of which they are a child, and the whole human family of which they are a member, since they are the heir to the work of generations and at the same time a sharer in building the future of those who will come after them in the succession of history. All this constitutes the moral obligation of work, understood in its wide sense. When we have to consider the moral rights, corresponding to this obligation, of every person with regard to work, we must always keep before our eyes the whole vast range of points of reference in which the labor of every working subject is manifested.

Pope John Paul II, Laborem Exercens, #16
JUST WAGES AND COMPENSATION

Among the most important duties of employers, the principal one is to give all workers what is justly due them. Assuredly, to establish a rule of pay in accord with justice, many factors must be taken into account. But, in general, the rich and employers must remember that no laws, either human or divine, permit them for their own profit to oppress the needy and the wretched or to seek gain from another’s want. To defraud anyone of the wage due him/her is a great crime that calls down avenging wrath from Heaven: Behold, the wages of the laborers . . . which have been kept back by you unjustly, cry out: and their cry has entered into the ears of the Lord of Hosts (Jas 5:4).

Finally, the rich must religiously avoid harming in any way the savings of the workers, either by coercion, or by fraud, or by the arts of usury; and the more for this reason, that the workers are not sufficiently protected against injustices and violence, and their property, being so meager, ought to be regarded as all the more sacred. Could not the observance alone of the foregoing laws remove the bitterness and the causes of the conflict?

Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, #20

In determining the amount of the wage, the condition of a business and of the one carrying it on must also be taken into account; for it would be unjust to demand excessive wages which a business cannot stand without its ruin and consequent calamity to the workers. If, however, a business makes too little money, because of lack of energy or lack of initiative or because of indifference to technical and economic progress, that must not be regarded a just reason for reducing the compensation of the workers. But if the business in question is not making enough money to pay the workers an equitable wage because it is being crushed by unjust burdens or forced to sell its product at less than a just price, those who are thus the cause of the injury are guilty of grave wrong, for they deprive workers of their just wage and force them under the pinch of necessity to accept a wage less than fair.

Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, #2

It also seems necessary to make provision for a twofold insurance, one covering agricultural output, the other covering farmers and their families. Because, as experience shows, the income of individual farmers is, on the average, less than that of workers in industry and the services, it does not seem to be fully in accord with the norms of social justice and equity to provide farmers with insurance or social security benefits that are inferior to those of other classes of citizens. For those insurance plans or provisions that are established generally should not differ markedly one from the other, whatever be the economic sector wherein the citizens work, or from which they derive their income.

Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, #35

Besides wages, various social benefits intended to ensure the life and health of workers and their families play a part here. The expenses involved in health care, especially in the case of accidents at work, demand that medical assistance should be easily available for workers, and that, as far as possible, it should be cheap or even free of charge. Another sector regarding benefits is the sector associated with the right to rest. In the first place, this involves a regular weekly rest comprising at least Sunday, and also a longer period of rest, namely the holiday or vacation taken once a year or possibly in several shorter periods during the year. A third sector concerns the right to a pension and to insurance for old age and in case of accidents at work. Within the sphere of these principal rights, there develops a whole system of particular rights which, together with remuneration for work, determine the correct relationship between worker and employer. Among these rights, there should never be overlooked the right to a working environment and to manufacturing processes which are not harmful to the workers’ physical health or to their moral integrity.

Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, #9

A just wage is the legitimate fruit of work. To refuse or withhold it can be a grave injustice. In determining fair pay, both the needs and the contributions of each person must be taken into account. Remuneration for work should guarantee humans the opportunity to provide a dignified livelihood for themselves and their family on the material, social, cultural and spiritual level, taking into account the role and the productivity of each, the state of the business, and the common good (*Gaudium et Spes*, #67). Agreement between the parties is not sufficient to justify morally the amount to be received in wages.

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2434
Finally, remuneration for labor is to be such that people may be furnished the means to cultivate worthily their own material, social, cultural, and spiritual life and that of their dependents, in view of the function and productiveness of each one, the conditions of the factory or workshop, and the common good.

Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, #67

We shall now touch upon a matter of very great importance, and one which must be correctly understood in order to avoid falling into error on one side or the other. We are told that free consent fixes the amount of a wage; that, therefore, the employer, after paying the wage agreed to would seem to have discharged his/her obligation and not to owe anything more; that only then would injustice be done if either the employer should refuse to pay the whole amount of the wage, or the worker should refuse to perform all the work to which he/she had committed; and that in those cases, but in no others, is it proper for the public authority to safeguard the rights of each party.

Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, #43

Let it be granted, then, that worker and employer may enter freely into agreements and, in particular, concerning the amount of the wage; yet there is always underlying such agreements an element of natural justice, and one greater and more ancient than the free consent of contracting parties, namely, that the wage shall not be less than enough to support a worker who is thrifty and upright. If, compelled by necessity or moved by fear of a worse evil, workers accept a harder condition, which, although against their will they must accept because an employer or contractor imposes it, they certainly submit to force, against which justice cries out in protest.

Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, #45

Furthermore, society and the State must ensure wage levels adequate for the maintenance of workers and their families, including a certain amount for savings. This requires a continuous effort to improve workers’ training and capability so that their work will be more skilled and productive, as well as careful controls and adequate legislative measures to block shameful forms of exploitation, especially to the disadvantage of the most vulnerable workers, of immigrants and of those on the margins of society. The role of trade unions in negotiating minimum salaries and working conditions is decisive in this area.

Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, #15
THE WORK PLACE

Work, of course, can have contrary effects, for it promises money, pleasure and power, invites some to selfishness, others to revolt; it also develops professional awareness, sense of duty and charity to one’s neighbor. When it is more scientific and better organized, there is a risk of its dehumanizing those who perform it, by making them its servants, for work is human only if it remains intelligent and free. John XXIII gave a reminder of the urgency of giving all people who work their proper dignity by making them a true sharer in the work they do with others: every effort should be made that the enterprise become a community of persons in the dealings, activities and standing of all its members (Mater et Magistra, #91). Human labor means much more still for the Christian: the mission of sharing in the creation of the supernatural world, which remains incomplete until we all come to build up together that perfect Man of whom St. Paul speaks, who realizes the fullness of Christ (Eph 4:13).

Pope Paul VI, Populorum Progressio, #28

This requires that mutual relations between employers and directors, on the one hand, and the employees of the enterprise, on the other, be marked by mutual respect, esteem, and good will. It also demands that all collaborate sincerely and harmoniously in their joint undertaking, and that they perform their work not merely with the objective of deriving an income, but also of carrying out the role assigned them and of performing a service that results in benefit to others. This means that the workers may have a say in, and may make a contribution toward, the efficient running and development of the enterprise. Thus, our predecessor of happy memory, Pius XII, clearly indicated: The economic and social functions which everyone aspires to fulfill, require that efforts of individuals be not wholly subjected to the will of others (Allocution, 1956). Beyond doubt, an enterprise truly in accord with human dignity should safeguard the necessary and efficient unity of administration. But it by no means follows that those who work daily in such an enterprise are to be considered merely as servants, whose sole function is to execute orders silently, and who are not allowed to interject their desires and interests, but must conduct themselves as idle standbys when it comes to assignment and direction of their tasks.

Pope John XXIII, Mater et Magistra, #92

Finally, ‘humane’ working hours and adequate freetime need to be guaranteed, as well as the right to express one’s own personality at the workplace without suffering any affront to one’s conscience or personal dignity. This is the place to mention once more the role of trade unions, not only in negotiating contracts, but also as ‘places’ where workers can express themselves. They serve the development of an authentic culture of work and help workers to share in a fully human way in the life of their place of employment.

Pope John Paul II, Centesimus Annus, #15

The following duties, on the other hand, concern the rich and employers: Workers are not to be treated as slaves; justice demands that the dignity of human personality be respected in them, ennobled as it has been through what we call the Christian character. If we hearken to natural reason and to Christian philosophy, gainful occupations are not a mark of shame to humans, but rather of respect, as they provide them with an honorable means of supporting life. It is shameful and inhuman, however, to use people as things for gain and to put no more value on them than what they are worth in muscle and energy. Likewise, it is enjoined that the religious interests and the spiritual well being of the workers receive proper consideration. Wherefore, it is the duty of employers to see that workers are free for adequate periods to attend to their religious obligations; not to expose anyone to corrupting influences or the enticements of sin; and in no way to alienate them from care for their family and the practice of thrift. Likewise, more work is not to be imposed than strength can endure, nor that kind of work which is unsuited to a worker’s age or sex.

Pope Leo XIII, Rerum Novarum, #20

Similarly with work: while it can sometimes be given exaggerated significance, it is for all something willed and blessed by God. Humans created to His image must cooperate with their Creator in the perfecting of creation and communicate to the earth the spiritual imprint they themselves have received (Paul VI, Letter to the Fifty First Session of the French Social Weeks). God, Who has endowed humans with intelligence, imagination and sensitivity, has also given them the means of completing His work in a certain way: whether they be artist or
craftsman, engaged in management, industry or agriculture, everyone who works is a creator. Bent over a material that resists their efforts, humans by their work give their imprint to it, acquiring, as they do so, perseverance, skill and a spirit of invention. Further, when work is done in common, when hope, hardship, ambition and joy are shared, it brings together and firmly unites the wills, minds and hearts of humans: in its accomplishment, humans find themselves to be brothers and sisters.

Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, #27
WORK AS KEY TO THE SOCIAL QUESTION

UNEMPLOYMENT

When we consider the rights of workers in relation to the ‘indirect employer,’ that is to say, all the agents at the national and international level that are responsible for the whole orientation of labor policy, we must first direct our attention to a fundamental issue: the question of finding work, or, in other words, the issue of suitable employment for all who are capable of it. The opposite of a just and right situation in this field is unemployment, that is to say, the lack of work for those who are capable of it. It can be a question of general unemployment or of unemployment in certain sectors of work. The role of the agents included under the title of indirect employer is to act against unemployment, which in all cases is an evil, and which, when it reaches a certain level, can become a real social disaster.

It is particularly painful when it especially affects young people, who, after appropriate cultural, technical and professional preparation, fail to find work, and see their sincere wish to work and their readiness to take on their own responsibility for the economic and social development of the community sadly frustrated. The obligation to provide unemployment benefits, that is to say, the duty to make suitable grants indispensable for the subsistence of unemployed workers and their families, is a duty springing from the fundamental principle of the moral order in this sphere, namely the principle of the common use of goods or, to put it in another and still simpler way, the right to life and subsistence.

Pope John Paul II, Laborem Exercens, #18

Access to employment and to professions must be open to all without unjust discrimination: men and women, healthy and disabled, natives and immigrants. For its part, society should, according to circumstances, help citizens find work and employment.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2433

Beginning our discussion of the rights of humans, we see that every human being has the right to life, to bodily integrity, and to the means which are suitable for the proper development of life; these are primarily food, clothing, shelter, rest, medical care, and, finally, the necessary social services. Therefore, a human being also has the right to security in cases of sickness, inability to work, widowhood, old age, unemployment, or in any other case in which he/she is deprived of the means of subsistence through no fault of his/her own.

Pope John XXIII, Pacem in Terris, #11
UNIONS

From the fact that human beings are by nature social, there arises the right of assembly and association. They have also the right to give the societies of which they are members the form they consider most suitable for the aim they have in view, and to act within such societies on their own initiative and on their own responsibility in order to achieve their desired objectives.

Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, #23

The rules, therefore, which Leo XIII issued in virtue of his authority, deserve the greatest praise in that they have been able to break down this hostility and dispel these suspicions, but they have even a higher claim to distinction in that they encouraged Christian workers to found mutual associations according to their various occupations, taught them how to do so, and resolutely confirmed in the path of duty a goodly number of those whom socialist organizations strongly attracted by claiming to be the sole defenders and champions of the lowly and oppressed. With respect to the founding of these societies, the Encyclical On the Condition of Workers most fittingly declared that workers’ associations ought to be so constituted and so governed as to furnish the most suitable and most convenient means to attain the object proposed, which consists in this, that the individual members of the association secure, so far as is possible, an increase in the goods of body, of soul, and of property (*Rerum Novarum*, #53), yet it is clear that moral and religious perfection ought to be regarded as their principal goal, and that their social organization as such ought above all to be directed completely by this goal (*Rerum Novarum*, #54). For when the regulations of associations are founded upon religion, the way is easy toward establishing the mutual relations of the members, so that peaceful living together and prosperity will result (*Rerum Novarum*, #54).

Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, #31-32

In the task of development, human beings, who find their life’s primary environment in the family, is often aided by professional organizations. If it is their objective to promote the interests of their members, their responsibility is also great with regard to the educative task which at the same time they can and ought to accomplish. By means of the information they provide and the formation they propose, they can do much to give to all a sense of the common good and of the consequent obligations that fall upon each person.

Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, #38

All these rights, together with the need for the workers themselves to secure them, give rise to yet another right: the right of association, that is, to form associations for the purpose of defending the vital interests of those employed in the various professions. These associations are called labor or trade unions. The vital interests of the workers are to a certain extent common for all of them; at the same time, however, each type of work, each profession, has its own specific character which should find a particular reflection in these organizations.

Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, #20

Among the basic rights of the human person is to be numbered the right of freely founding unions for working people. These should be able truly to represent them and to contribute to the organizing of economic life in the right way. Included is the right of freely taking part in the activity of these unions without risk of reprisal. Through this orderly participation joined to progressive economic and social formation, all will grow day by day in the awareness of their own function and responsibility, and thus they will be brought to feel that they are comrades in the whole task of economic development and in the attainment of the universal common good according to their capacities and aptitudes.

Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, #68
STRIKES

Recourse to a strike is morally legitimate when it cannot be avoided, or at least when it is necessary to obtain a proportionate benefit. It becomes morally unacceptable when accompanied by violence, or when objectives are included that are not directly linked to working conditions or are contrary to the common good.

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2435

One method used by unions in pursuing the just rights of their members is the strike or work stoppage, as a kind of ultimatum to the competent bodies, especially the employers. This method is recognized by Catholic social teaching as legitimate in the proper conditions and within just limits. In this connection, workers should be assured the right to strike, without being subjected to personal penal sanctions for taking part in a strike. While admitting that it is a legitimate means, we must at the same time emphasize that a strike remains, in a sense, an extreme means. It must not be abused; it must not be abused especially for ‘political’ purposes. Furthermore, it must never be forgotten that, when essential community services are in question, they must in every case be ensured, if necessary, by means of appropriate legislation. Abuse of the strike weapon can lead to the paralysis of the whole of socioeconomic life, and this is contrary to the requirements of the common good of society, which also corresponds to the properly understood nature of work itself.

Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, #20

When, however, socioeconomic disputes arise, efforts must be made to come to a peaceful settlement. Although recourse must always be had first to a sincere dialogue between the parties, a strike, nevertheless, can remain even in present day circumstances a necessary, though ultimate, aid for the defense of the workers’ own rights and the fulfillment of their just desires. As soon as possible, how ever, ways should be sought to resume negotiation and the discussion of reconciliation.

*Vatican Council II, Gaudium et Spes*, #68

**Discussion Questions**

How can work develop and “fulfill” the human person?

How does the Church’s view of work compare and contrast with the traditional American work ethic and the view of work in contemporary American culture?

Discuss what a just wage and just benefits for workers should be.

How can workplaces respect human dignity?

Why does the Church support unions?

Pope John Paul II has said that work is the key to the whole social question: there must be just and decent work for everyone in order to have a just social order. He has also spoken out about the waste of unemployment. Countries who have national institutionalized commitments to full employment have been successful in avoiding the kind of unemployment that destroys families’ economic, social and emotional lives. Have you witnessed the waste and destruction of unemployment in your family and/or community? What are the challenges to promoting full employment policies in the U.S.? How can full employment become an issue of discussion in our local and national election campaigns?