

THE SPIRITUALITY OF WORK: ON THE CONDITION OF LABOR

Introduction

The first modern Catholic social teaching (CST) document focuses on a significant issue for the new era of Industrialization; written by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, this document, *Rerum Novarum* (*The Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor*) sets out some of the basic tenants of CST—the common good, the option for the poor, the centrality of the human person—as well as the rights of workers. In the custom of writing encyclicals on the anniversary of an earlier one, Pope John Paul II’s 1981 *Laborem Exercens* (*On The Condition of Labor*) reflects on *Rerum Novarum*, and also seeks to develop the Church’s teaching on this basic human activity.



John Paul II reflects on the centrality of work to the human condition, seen through the lens of a “spirituality of work,” as he responds to the signs of the times in terms of workers’ situation in the advent of globalization. “There is a need for ever new movements of solidarity of the workers and with the workers.” Solidarity itself extends the meaning of human work as it contributes to the fullness of the human person: part of the work we are called to is to “see, reflect and act” to ensure the human dignity of all workers is fully respected.

The four main sections of this encyclical are based on the premise that “**Human work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question....** And if the solution...which keeps coming up and becomes ever more complex, must be sought in the direction of ‘making life more human,’ then the key, namely human work, acquires fundamental and decisive importance.” Work is a primary way humans can develop their talents, skills, and voices—their own humanity—and thus flourish as human beings who can contribute to the flourishing of other humans and to the common good. John Paul II believes work is “a good thing,” because through work, persons can achieve fulfillment as human beings and become even “more human.”

Primacy of the Worker

The encyclical reviews and develops the concept of the primacy of the worker over the work s/he does, based on the CST central belief in the dignity and rights of the human person. John Paul II had experienced labor firsthand, enduring harsh, physical work for a time under Poland’s Nazi occupiers, and he had seen up close the realities of workers,



especially those in the huge Nova Huta industrial complex in the outskirts of Krakow. In this city in Southwest Poland, he spent decades in pastoral work, as well as in philosophical and theological reflection with academics at the University of Krakow. John Paul II's encyclical was developed out of his rootedness in the actual experience of work and in his encounters with workers; his exploration of the meaning of work in Scripture and theology; and in the modern philosophical tradition of Phenomenology, out of personal history as a worker and a pastor of workers.

John Paul II rejected the belief that human labor should be reduced to merely its “economic purpose,” and declared that the “position of ‘rigid’ capitalism continues to remain unacceptable, namely the position that defends the exclusive right to private ownership of the means of production as an untouchable ‘dogma’ of economic life.” Unions are supported because they support ways for workers to participate in shaping the systems and structures of the workplace, giving them agency and a role in creating their own work lives.

The Spirituality of Work

John Paul II declared, in the section on the Spirituality of Work, that “work in its subjective aspect is always a personal action;” thus, “*the whole person, body and spirit*, participates in it, whether it is manual or intellectual work. It is also to the whole person that the word of the living God is directed. . . the work of the individual human being should *be given the meaning which it has in the eyes of God*. Thus, work



enters into the salvation process. Humans, “*created in the image of God, share by their work in the activity of the Creator*”—thus, they become co-creators of the kingdom of God, working to restore the original goodness of Creation.

We strive to “imitate God both in working and also in resting, since God himself wished to present his own creative activity under the form of work and rest. This activity by God in the world always continues, as the words of Christ attest: ‘My Father is working still.’ Humans’ work not only requires rest but also must consist

in more than the mere external action; it must leave room for us to prepare ourselves by becoming more and more what, in the will of God, we ought to be, “for the ‘rest’ that the Lord reserves for his servants and friend.”

Awareness that man’s work is a participation in God’s activity ought to permeate even “*the most ordinary everyday activities*. For, while providing the substance of life for themselves and their families, men and women are performing their activities in a way which appropriately benefits society. They can justly consider that by their labor they are unfolding the Creator’s work, contributing by their personal industry to the realization in history of the divine plan.”



From Scripture to the Council

John Paul II notes that Christ was a man of work: “he belongs to the working world, he has appreciation and respect for human work.” It can indeed be said that he looks with love upon human work and the different forms that it takes, seeing in each one of these forms a particular facet of man’s likeness with God, the Creator. In his parables on the Kingdom of God, Jesus Christ constantly refers to human work, including the work of women.

John Paul II also points to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council: “Just as human activity proceeds from humans, so it is ordered towards humans. For, when a human works, s/he not only alters things and society, s/he develops herself/himself as well.” By our work we learn much, cultivate our resources, and go outside of ourselves and beyond ourselves. “Rightly understood, this kind of growth is of greater value than any external riches which can be garnered.... Hence, the norm of human activity is this: that in accord with the divine plan and will, it should harmonize with the genuine good of the human race, and allow people as individuals and as members of society to pursue their total vocation and fulfill it. “A person is more precious for what he is than for what he has. Similarly, all that people do to obtain greater justice, wider brotherhood, and a more humane ordering of social relationships has greater worth than technical advances.”



As he ends his encyclical on human work, John Paul II reminds us that work is not always easy: “sweat and toil, which work necessarily involves the present condition of the human race, present us with the possibility of sharing lovingly in the work that Christ came to do. The Christian finds in human work a small part of the Cross of Christ and accepts it in the same spirit of redemption in which Christ accepted his Cross for us.” In work, thanks to the light that penetrates us from the Resurrection of Christ, we always find a glimmer of new life, of the new good, as if it were an announcement of “the new heavens and the new earth.” As workers, we can taste this goodness if we are rooted in the values of our faith, reflect on, and participate in the spirituality of work.