

# Discussion of *Laborem Exercens*

By  
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## **What is Pope John Paul II trying to respond to in the encyclical? A brief summary of the encyclical.**

The immediate occasion for writing the encyclical was the ninetieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XII's social encyclical of 1891, the starting point for what is usually known as papal social teaching. Drawing upon the social thought of progressive Catholic movements in the nineteenth century, often referred to as social Catholicism, Pope Leo XIII initiated a social philosophy that was open to the modern world, criticized secularization and economic injustices, and provided guidelines for the political involvement of Catholics in society. Subsequent popes developed this social teaching.

Pope John Paul II, the first Polish pope in history, brought to the preparation of this work a special sensitivity and political experience as a citizen of and a religious leader in a country (Poland) deeply immersed in Marxist/communist/socialist/capitalist struggles especially in relation to the consequences of these economic systems on workers. At the time that this encyclical was written the union movement *Solidarity* was actively transforming Polish society.

It was against this backdrop that Pope John Paul II, drawing heavily upon an earlier work of Pope Paul VI (*Octogesima adveniens* - 1971) and the thought of the Second Vatican Council (especially *Gaudium et Spes*), invites each of us in *Laborem Exercens* to consider the idea of a new civilization based on the spirituality of work.

In a "nutshell" the encyclical calls upon Christians to regard their work as sharing in God's own creative work. The work does not propose some new socioeconomic order (as opposed to Marxism/communism/socialism and capitalism). There is no blueprint. Rather, Pope John Paul II offers a way of looking at and evaluating any economic arrangement, however primitive or technological, to determine how it can enhance the dignity of the worker. *Laborem Exercens* calls upon Christians to regard their work as sharing in God's own creative work. John Paul II entrusts all of us with the task of figuring out how best to cultivate a

civilization grounded in work which confers dignity upon all, whatever one's occupation or profession might be.

## **What are the theological, philosophical, and moral presuppositions in his encyclical?**

*Laborem Exercens* provides an underpinning of our obligation to work from a scriptural and faith point of view. Within this perspective many issues are discussed: the nature and meaning of work; the relationship of work to the person, family and society; how work is influenced by various ideologies; the duties and rights of the worker; a spirituality of work. Rather than delineate detailed and specific policies, the encyclical is concerned with articulating certain principles and guidelines to govern the formation of policy for specific situations. When these principles are adequately and properly applied, work helps to build up the world community and becomes a means of safeguarding the humanity of all.

Following is a brief summary of the key themes developed in the encyclical.

### *☞ Theme 1: **The Meaning and Dignity of Work***

Work is an active process by which creative and productive persons gain dominion over the earth and achieve fullness as human beings. The human person takes the many resources of the world and fashions them into useful and beautiful objects in the meeting of human needs. This process, both creative and productive, brings order out of chaos. The newly won unity fills the human spirit with a sense of meaning, peace, and joy. Work plays a significant and necessary role in our universal call to become human persons. Work is meaningful only when the human person's dignity is fully appreciated and when the activity of work is complemented by a certain receptivity towards life (contemplation).

### *☞ Theme 2: **The Subjective and Objective Dimensions of Work***

The subjective dimension of work (the dignity of the human person) always has priority over the objective dimension (productivity). Work always involves a person, a process, and a

product. The language of the encyclical refers to the person as the subject of work (the subjective dimension), while the product is the object of work (the objective dimension). The distinction is important. A product does not have interiority. The human person, on the other hand, is spiritual and called to fullness of life in God. Work becomes dehumanizing and is robbed of the Christian meaning of work if the focus of work is too singularly on productivity. The subjective and objective dimensions of work each have their own unique value and as such they must be properly integrated and balanced.

☞ *Theme 3: **The Value Scale of Work***

Work involves three spheres of values: (1) a *personal* value bringing dignity to the individual; (2) a *family* value forming the foundation of communal life; and (3) a *societal* value enriching the common good. In fulfilling the commandment of God that we work, we contribute to God's plan. Our contribution to this has eternal significance; no one else can do the work assigned to us.

☞ *Theme 4: **Work and the Mystery of Creation***

Work is inextricably bound up with the mystery of God's creative activity. Each person shares in the wonder of creation through work. God longs for us to work with him in the fulfillment of the plan of salvation. Our very activity is an essential ingredient in the building of the earth and of the kingdom. This is our scriptural and theological understanding of work.

☞ *Theme 5: **A Spirituality of Work***

Work is a means by which persons grow in union with God and participate in the paschal mystery (the salvific plan for man and the world). The people of God are scattered throughout every profession and work situation and it is precisely in that context that they exercise their spirituality. All of life, permeated by God's presence and love, becomes a grace opportunity and can further the process of salvation. Grace, the free gift of God's self-giving

which transforms our minds and hearts, is the heartbeat of a spirituality of work. To live in God's presence at work with sensitivity, awareness, and love is to live a spiritual life.

☞ **Theme 6: *Work and Question of Justice***

Work plays a significant function in the justice question: there can be no justice unless work is available to people in such a way that basic rights and duties are protected and promoted. The work relationship between employer and employee presents a mutuality of duties and rights. The encyclical addresses itself primarily to threatened rights of the employee, giving little attention to the duties of the employee toward the employer. Employees' rights are numerous: the right to a just wage, the right to social benefits that ensure life and health, the right to rest, the right to pension and insurance, the right to suitable working environments, the right to strike under certain circumstances, the right to form voluntary associations, the right of the disabled to productive activity suited to them, and the right to emigrate in search of work.

The linkage between justice and peace is clearly articulated: "...*Respect for this broad range of human rights constitutes the fundamental condition for peace in the modern world*" (16). Whenever rights are denied or duties neglected a profound disturbance shakes the life of individuals and society at large. The order of God's plan is broken and until reconciliation comes about, until justice is done, fragmentation continues and peace is not found.

☞ **Theme 7: *Work and Various Ideologies***

The encyclical deals with our instinct in thought and behavior to make one idea or value the *only* idea or value. The label we attach to this tendency is "-isms." *Laborem Exercens* exposes this proclivity to "absolutize" and firmly rejects specific "-isms" that surround work (Marxism, liberalism, economism, materialism).

Christian theology consistently seeks a balanced position that protects moral, personal, and spiritual values. For example, private property is a basic right, though the common good will limit this right or even exclude it under very restricted circumstances. Economic profit is

necessary and justifiable but never at the expense of human dignity. Matter is a part of God's creation but is subordinated to the value of the human person. The Church uses the insights of Scripture and Tradition in bringing light on the complex realities of the work world. Basic principles are articulated through theological reflection to provide a theory to inform our actions in the work world.

☞ *Theme 8: **Work and Its Abuse***

Work, which is meant to humanize and develop persons, can become destructive when means become ends. Historically the document states that certain means have usurped the prerogatives of the end; technology (means) has become the master and the human person (end) the slave. The whole order is overturned, human freedom is lost. This process can happen insidiously.

☞ *Theme 9: **Work and the Common Good***

Work, through the use of natural and personal resources, is an essential force to achieve the common good. The pope states explicitly that the first principle of the whole ethical and social order is the principle of the common use of goods. A mentality of privatized ownership, if taken too far, can threaten the realization of the common good.

☞ *Theme 10: **Work and Community***

Work builds community by uniting people into a powerful solidarity. Communities are formed when there is a common sense of identity, when there is a commitment to a specific value system, when lives are shared by mutual experience. The theme of work and community is closely allied with the theme of work and the common good.

## What are the pastoral implications of his encyclical?

There are many pastoral implications. Unfortunately, I believe the teachings of this encyclical are at risk for being largely lost in our country today. For many years I have been affiliated with a group in the Akron area that tries to promote the spirituality of work, especially among Catholics. It was largely within this context that I came to understand my call to become a Permanent Deacon. My spiritual director, Fr. Norm Douglas, is the leader of this effort. Currently [in 2000] we are meeting with a group of about 20 working men and women on Tuesday mornings at 6:30 a.m., following morning Mass, to craft a weekend retreat focusing on a Catholic spirituality of work. The retreat is loosely based upon the Christ Renews His Parish model. It is going to be piloted in the early Spring in three parishes in Akron (St. Vincent, St. Hilary, and St. Sebastian). [Ed. Note: the retreat is now called [\*Faith Alive!\*](#) and is available on the [Living Faith at Work website](#).]

The proclamation and enactment of the kingdom of God constituted the focal point of the ministry of Jesus. Jesus frequently utilizes images of work to describe the kingdom of God, even using the work of harvesters or fishermen to describe the actions of those who proclaim the kingdom of God. Jesus presents himself as “the waiter,” serving at table those who come for life-giving food. This same focal point constitutes the vocation of any who wish to follow him. We are fulfilling that vocation precisely in our daily work. In our daily work we participate in God’s creative acts; we are co-creators with God. This co-creation provides the most profound motive for human work. Whatever our task in life, however humble, we lovingly accept the charge given us and contribute to the realization of the Father’s plan. Interiorizing this knowledge presents the Church with an enormous pastoral challenge.

John Paul’s vision of the spirituality of work is in direct conflict with contemporary understandings of the meaning of work. In fact, work in our culture becomes devoid of meaning. It is most often seen as a necessary means for making a living and caring for a family, as a way of obtaining money for other pursuits that are seen as “real living” in contrast to the routine of work. In other words, work becomes a necessary evil, something to be endured. Suppose we preached on the act of work, whatever its nature, as a creative act in union with God the Creator, that actually builds up the earth and helps to form a new human

family. Suppose in our preaching we encouraged others to view their toil and labor as very concrete ways of continuing the redemptive activity of Jesus Christ, a specific way of dying and rising with him. John Paul's vision of the spirituality of work encompasses these precepts. Our church has the potential to dramatically impact the spiritual lives of millions of Catholics by taking to heart the spirituality of work envisioned in *Laborem Exercens*.

Besides preaching, another area well-suited to bring to life the encyclical's vision of the spirituality of work is the liturgy itself. Besides the obvious opportunities afforded by liturgies on Labor Day and the feast of Saint Joseph the Worker, we could reflect from time-to-time on the most essential elements in the sacrifice of the Mass (bread and wine) which are offered as "...the work of human hands."

I believe there is evidence that a growing number of workers want to behave as Christians seven days a week, not just on Sundays. Our culture does a good enough job of orienting us toward a career; our Sunday gatherings for Mass ought to equip women and men to re-orient their work toward that of vocation. Catholics should be able to turn to their parishes as a place to commend, encourage, and support those who struggle mightily to live moral, ethical lives in the marketplace. We need to hear from our pastoral leaders that truck farmers, electricians, politicians, homemakers, nurses, and janitors are called to holiness through their daily chores. There is still too much tension between the so-called sacred and secular pathways to God.

The pastoral implications can perhaps best be captured and summarized in the words of the encyclical itself: "Let the Christian...know the place that his work has not only in earthly progress, but also in the development of the kingdom of God, to which we are all called through the power of the Holy Spirit and through the word of the Gospel (N27).

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**What is your response to the encyclical? Agreement? Disagreement? Why? Is there anything that you have noticed in the encyclical that corresponds to what you have learned?**

I hope that my paper has successfully conveyed my overwhelming enthusiasm for *Laborem Exercens*. I am frustrated that it is not well known among most Catholics. I believe

that our Church risks losing a considerable amount of its perceived relevance among many when it seems to focus so exclusively on issues of sexual morality and ethics and so little on the moral and ethical dimensions of living our Baptismal commitment in the marketplace. This work is so uplifting in its treatment of the holiness of our day-to-day work lives. There are difficult teachings in this encyclical, especially for wealthy capitalists who have lost sight of the proper relationship of labor and capital. These can be very difficult words for such a wealthy and prosperous country such as the United States, and especially for Catholics who may individually prosper in their work life at the expense of basic concepts of justice and the promotion of the common good. Perhaps this is a partial explanation for why nearly twenty years later this particular encyclical is so little known by the "rank-and-file" faithful.

There is considerable connection between the encyclical and concepts learned in class. Beginning with God's action at creation as the foundation for human nature, natural law, and the development of conscious, Pope John Paul II begins this encyclical by stating unequivocally that work is particularly human. Work is a duty because our Creator demanded it and because it maintains and develops our humanity. It is work that distinguishes us from other creatures. It is our nature to work. "Skillful performance" - work - is defined by Grisez as a basic human good, a component of being fully human. The pope is very clear in the encyclical that human life is built up every day in work. Grisez, in defining integral human fulfillment states: *"Integral human fulfillment" is the realization in all persons of all the human goods in all the ways they can be realized which are compatible with one another.*" (P. 80) The encyclical is clear that we must pay more attention to the one who works than to what the worker does. The self-realization of the human person is the measure of what is right and wrong. This is asserted as the basic truth and the heart of Christian teaching on human work. This is completely consistent with the foundations of moral theology as we have learned it. Grisez develops the notion that within each of us is a personal vocation - an ability to act according to God's providential plan. It is in this acting that we cooperate with our redemption. Work becomes a vocation when our attitude toward it is transformed in this way and when we assign meaning to it in this way. This is completely consistent with John Paul II's insistence that work is a good thing for this reason. In this way work expresses and increases the worker's dignity. Finally, Grisez emphasized that true integral human fulfillment



is rooted in Jesus. A humanly fulfilling life is one in which fulfillment here and now is at the same time intrinsically oriented to the eternal fulfillment of heaven. The Christian is a human person by nature but divine by the grace of God. Through our lives and through our work we cooperate with God in creating a part of the kingdom which will last forever. This reality is echoed in the final section of the encyclical. Here John Paul II shares that the Christian finds in work something of Christ's cross and should accept it in the same spirit. In work, too, thanks to the resurrection, we also find the good news of the "new heaven and the new earth" in which we take part through the toil of our work. To the extent that work helps to order human society in a better way it is indeed rooted in Christ and it becomes of vital concern to the kingdom of God.

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