

# Themes of On Human Work (*Laborem Exercens*)

A Reflection on  
Pope John Paul II's Encyclical  
by Deacon Robert Bender

## Introduction

- The immediate occasion for writing the encyclical was the 90th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XII's social encyclical of 1891.
- Drawing heavily upon an earlier work of Pope Paul VI and the thought of the Second Vatican Council, Pope John Paul II invites us 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.
- John Paul II entrusts all of us with the task of deciding how best to cultivate a civilization grounded in work which confers dignity upon all, no matter one's occupation or profession.

What are the presuppositions in the encyclical?

- *On Human Work* examines our obligation to work from a scriptural and faith point of view.
- Within this perspective many issues are discussed around 10 main themes.

## 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.
- Work plays a significant and necessary role in our universal call to become human persons.

## Theme 1: *The Meaning and Dignity of Work cont.*

- Work is meaningful only when the human person's dignity is fully appreciated and when the activity of work is complimented by a certain receptivity towards life.

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

- 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.
- Work becomes dehumanizing and is robbed of the Christian meaning of work if the focus of work is too singularly on productivity.

Theme 2: *The Subjective and Objective Dimensions of Work cont.*

- The subjective and objective dimensions of work must be properly integrated and balanced.
- The subjective dimension of work (the dignity of the human person) always has priority over the objective dimension (productivity).



## 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.
- Our every activity is an essential ingredient in the building of the earth and of the kingdom of God.
- 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 salvation plan for mankind 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.

## Theme 5: *A Spirituality of Work cont.*

- 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 role 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.

## Theme 6: *Work and Question of Justice, cont.*

- 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.

## Theme 6: *Work and Question of Justice, cont.*

- 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.

## Theme 7: *Work and Various Ideologies*

- The encyclical deals with our tendency in thought and behavior to make *one* idea or value the *only* idea or value. *Laborem Exercens* 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.



## Theme 7: *Work and Various Ideologies cont.*

- Economic profit is necessary and justifiable but never at the expense of human dignity. Matter is a part of God's creation, but it is subordinate to the value of the human person.
- The Church uses the insights of Scripture and Tradition in articulating basic principles 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.
- The encyclical states that historically certain means have usurped the prerogatives of the end.
- For Example, technology (a means) has become the master and the human person (the end) the slave.

## 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.

## In Conclusion

- In conclusion, 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.

## Last Word

- 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.

## Reflection/Discussion Prompts

- What theme had particular meaning for or impact on you? In what way? To what effect?
- Why do you think Pope John Paul II wrote this encyclical? Why should we read it?
- How could you apply the themes to your work life?
- If you applied these themes to your work life, how would that affect your life?

**Thank you for your  
attention and  
participation.**