

Catholic Social Teaching, the Right to Work and Human Development

“For when people work, they not only alter things and society, they develop themselves as well. They learn much, they cultivate their resources, they go outside of themselves and beyond themselves. Rightly understood, this kind of growth is of greater value than any external riches which can be garnered.”

-The Church in the Modern World, 1965, The Vatican II Council

“All work has a threefold moral significance. First, it is a principle way that people exercise the distinctive human capacity for self-expression and self-realization. Second, it is the ordinary way for human beings to fulfill their material needs. Finally, work enables people to contribute to the well-being of the larger community. Work is not only for one's self. It is for one's family, for the nation, and indeed for the benefit of the entire human family.”

-U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, Economic Justice for All, 1987

Introduction

Job creation is a key agenda item for the current administration in 2010. This is a moral task as well as an economic necessity. From a theological perspective, authentic human flourishing can only be realized when all members of the human family are able to participate, through effort and engagement, in the process of the ongoing creation of the world.

Since the beginning of the modern tradition in Catholic Social Teaching, with Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical, "On The Condition of Labor," the right to work has been a central tenet of CST because of its importance to human development. As many other Church statements, Pope Paul VI's 1971 encyclical, Call to Action, emphasizes work is a necessity for human dignity:

All people have the right to work, to a chance to develop their qualities and their personalities in the exercise of their professions, to equitable remuneration which will enable them and their families to lead a worthy life on the material, social, cultural and spiritual level and to assistance in case of need arising from sickness or age. (CA#14)

While U.S. economists continue to debate the pros and cons of full employment, as they have throughout the 20th century, countries such as Australia have made practical progress in full employment policies and practices. Because the question of work goes beyond economic theories to the heart and soul of human life, our contemporary popes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, have written and spoken extensively in the last decades on the right to work and its connection to human dignity. A sample of their reflections on work follows.

These reflections remind us that all people of faith are called to support government policies that support job creation and rights for all workers. Faithful citizenship requires us to actively be involved in the current dialogue on jobs and to make our voices heard in support of policies and programs that will help enable all our citizens to work.

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Pope John Paul II on Work

In addition to his encyclical on work and workers, and his many statements on the right to work, John Paul convened several meetings to discuss work in the contemporary world. The following is excerpted from Pope John Paul II's message of greeting to the participants of the conference: "Work As Key to the Social Question" which was held in 2001 at the Vatican.

In this important sector of social life, we are undergoing a profound evolution that at times has the shape of a radical change. The form of work has changed and its hours and sites have been altered. In the more industrialized countries the phenomenon has taken on such dimensions that the model of dependent work that was carried out in big factories with set hours, already belongs to the past. Like every major transformation, this too presents elements of tension and, at the same time, of complementarity between the local and global dimensions of the economy; between what is defined as the "old" and the "new" economy: between technological innovation and the need to safeguard the workplace; between economic growth and environmental compatibility.

It would be a serious error, however, to think that the changes taking place happen in a deterministic manner. The decisive factor, the "arbiter" of this complex phase of change, is once again the human person, who must remain the true protagonist of his work. He can and must take responsibility in a creative way for the changes that are happening, to ensure that they promote the growth of the person, of the family, of the society in which he lives and of the entire human family.

In this regard, the emphasis on the subjective dimension of work, constantly referred to by the social doctrine of the Church, is enlightening: "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" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 2427).

As long as man exists, there will be the free gesture of authentic participation in creation which is work. Work is one of the essential components in realizing the vocation of man who, in fulfilling himself, always discovers that he is called by God. Despite himself, he can never cease to be a subject that decides about himself: to him God has entrusted this supreme and demanding freedom. From this viewpoint, today more than in the past, we can repeat that human work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question.

. . . Human beings and their vocations are defined by reference to the transcendent. Starting from these needs, the human person tackles the adventure of transforming reality with his work according to a dynamic impulse that always goes beyond the results achieved by it in the present.

If the historical forms of work are changing, its permanent foundation certainly does not, that is, respect for inalienable rights. Unfortunately, we risk seeing these rights denied. This is particularly the case with unemployment,

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which, in the earliest industrialized countries, in an unprecedented way, involves masses of men and women; I am thinking of those who worked in outdated production processes; I am thinking of the young people and of those who live in disadvantaged areas, where unemployment rates are still high.

To deal with these problems, new forms of solidarity must be created, taking into account the interdependence that forges bonds among workers. If the changes in progress are profound, there must be a

correspondingly intelligent effort and the will to protect the dignity of work, strengthening, at various levels, the interested institutions. Governments have a great deal of responsibility, and no less important is that of the organizations who defend the collective interests of workers and of those who provide work. All are called not only to foster these interests in an honest form and through dialogue, but also to rethink their own functions, their structure, their nature and their kinds of action.

Pope Benedict XVI on Work

In his latest encyclical, “Love in Truth” (2009), Pope Benedict calls for a new economic order that honors the dignity of the human person, workers and workers’ rights must become a new priority for a new economic discourse and order. Benedict writes: “Business activity has a human significance, prior to its professional one. It is present in all work, understood as a personal action, an ‘actus personae’, which is why every worker should have the chance to make his contribution knowing that in some way ‘he is working ‘for himself’. With good reason, Paul VI taught that ‘everyone who works is a creator.’”

Work is a central way that human persons reflect the giftedness of God’s creation and the Truth of being made in God’s image—the Imago Dei. Because of this fundamental insight of Catholic social teaching, Benedict echoes earlier Church statements on the importance of work to humans. He also reminds us that new efforts must be made to ensure that all humans have the opportunity to work.

Reminding us of Pope John Paul II efforts to support the International Labor Organization’s movement for “decent work,” Benedict addresses the connection between unemployment and poverty by advocating meaningful labor with a just wage. This vision demands that government, civil society, and businesses all understand that full employment policies are not simply economics:

What is meant by the word “decent” in regard to work? It means work that expresses the essential dignity of every man and woman in the context of their particular society: work that is freely chosen, effectively associating workers, both men and women, with the development of their community; work that enables the worker to be respected and free from any form of discrimination; work that makes it possible for families to meet their needs and provide schooling for their children, without the children themselves being forced into labor; work that permits the workers to organize themselves freely, and to make their voices heard; work that leaves enough room for rediscovering one’s roots at a personal, familial and spiritual level; work that guarantees those who have retired a decent standard of living. CV#63

The dignity of the individual and the demands of justice require, particularly today, that economic choices do not cause disparities in wealth to increase in an excessive and morally unacceptable manner, and that we continue to prioritize the goal of access to steady employment for everyone.

—Pope Benedict XVI, Caritas in Veritate, #32

Reflection Questions:

- The Catholic Church has, for over a century, promoted the “right to work”; what importance does a “right” have?
- Why is the right to work not widely promoted in our society? What does Catholic Social Teaching have to offer our country and the global community from its perspective on the right to work?
- What does Pope John Paul II mean when he states that the work we do is always “defined by reference to the transcendent.” How is work connected to the Sacred beyond everyday life?
- John Paul goes on to declare that the human person “tackles the adventure of transforming reality with his work according to a dynamic impulse that always goes beyond the results achieved by it in the present.”
- How does work impact the future as well as the present? How does this concept relate to John Paul II’s decree that we all must participate in the “co-creation” of God’s kingdom on earth?
- What are the emotional and spiritual benefits to work that you have experienced or witnessed in your own life?
- Why does the Church value these benefits as well as the economic benefits of work?
- What does Pope Benedict XVI mean by “decent” work and why does he emphasize it at this time in human history?
- What are some creative ideas that could help people in our country back to work in decent jobs?
- How can you let your government know that you support job creation policies and programs? Who can you work with to learn more about job creation and how to advocate for full employment policies?

Prayer

Our God, who toiled at creation for our benefit, help us to think deeply about the human need to work and to create the world anew each day. With the guidance of Mother Church, help us to support the right to work for all. In prayer and reflection, guide us to envision a better society, one where all work is designed to promote the common good, and where all workers are respected and protected. Amen

