

## *Laborem Exercens, On Human Work*

Pope John Paul II, September 14, 1981

*This document is available on the Vatican Web Site: [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va).*

### OVERVIEW

*Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II's encyclical, commemorates the ninetieth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*. John Paul II affirms the dignity of work and places work at the center of the social question. The encyclical states that human beings are the proper subject of work. Work expresses and increases human dignity. The Pope stresses the priority of labor over things while criticizing systems which do not embody these principles. He supports the rights of workers and unions. John Paul II concludes by outlining a spirituality of work.

### HISTORICAL NOTE

*Laborem Exercens* represents a clear and succinct statement of John Paul II's thoughts on the social question. Written almost entirely by the Pope himself, the encyclical reflects statements made while he was a Polish prelate and those made during the first years of his pontificate. *Laborem Exercens* develops and refines the Church's teachings on property and its criticism of capitalism and Marxism.

### DOCUMENT OUTLINE

#### Introduction

- Humans derive dignity from work even though it involves suffering and toil (#1).
- Recent changes in the realm of work (#1):
  - automation;
  - increase in price of energy and raw materials;
  - environmental awareness and respect;
  - people claiming right to participate.
- Role of the Church (#1):
  - call attention to dignity of workers;
  - condemn violations of dignity;
  - guide changes to ensure progress.
- Work is at the center of the social question, the key to making life more human (#2).
- Catholic social teaching has evolved and now considers the "world" as well as the "class" perspective; the Church calls for structural transformation on a more universal scale (#2).

#### Work and Human Beings

- Perspective on Work
  - Genesis states God's command to subdue the earth; work is the means to do so (#4).
  - Human beings are the proper subject of work (#5).
  - Aspects of technology (#5):
    - positive: facilitates work;
    - negative: can supplant or control humans.
- Work must serve an individual's humanity (#6).



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### DOCUMENT OUTLINE (continued)

- Materialism and Economism
  - Materialistic thought treats humans as instruments of production rather than as subjects of work (#7).
  - Workers are considered as merchandise (#7).
- Justice and Work
  - Leo XIII's call to solidarity was a reaction against the degradation of people as subjects of work (#8).
  - Within unemployment of intellectuals, a new "proletarianization" of workers is occurring (#8).
  - Church is committed to justice for workers; it wants to be a "Church of the poor" (#8).
- Nature of Work
  - People achieve dominion over the earth and fulfillment as human beings (#9).
  - Work and family life (#10):
    - work makes family life possible;
    - work makes possible the achievement of purposes of the family;
    - it increases common good of human family

### **Conflict Between Labor and Capital**

- The Conflict
  - Conflict has changed from one between capital and labor to an ideological struggle and now to a political struggle (#11).
  - Fundamental principles (#12):
    - priority of labor over capital;
    - primacy of people over things.
  - Humanity has two inheritances: nature, and the resources people have developed (#12).
  - Need to develop a system that will reconcile capital and labor (#13).
- Property
  - On ownership, Catholic social teaching differs from both Marxism (collectivism) and capitalism (#13).
  - Right of private property is subordinated to the right of common use (#14).
  - Property is acquired through work to serve labor (#14).
  - Socialization of certain means of production cannot be excluded (#14).
  - Church favors a joint-ownership of means of production (#14).

### **Rights of Workers - *Work is an obligation/duty* (#16)**

- Indirect Employers
  - Indirect employers (persons, institutions, sets of principles, states, socio-economic systems) determine one or more facets of the labor relationship (#17).
  - Policies need to respect the objective rights of workers—the criterion for shaping the world economy (#17).



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### DOCUMENT OUTLINE (continued)

- Employment
  - Suitable employment for all is needed (#18).
  - Indirect employers need to act against unemployment through (#18):
    - unemployment benefits (springing from principle of common use of goods);
    - a system of overall planning on economic and cultural levels;
    - international collaboration to lessen imbalances in the standard of living.
  - Resources must be used to create employment (#18).
- Workers
  - Just remunerations of workers is the key (#19).
  - Wages are a practical means whereby people can have access to goods intended for the common use (#19).
  - Church calls for (#19):
    - wages sufficient to support a family;
    - allowances to mothers raising a family;
    - reevaluation of the mother's role to ensure proper love for children and fair opportunities for women.
  - Other social benefits for workers are needed, including health care, right to leisure, pension and accident insurance, and a decent work environment (#19).
- Right to Form Unions
  - Indispensable element of social life (#20).
  - Originated with struggles of workers (#20).
  - Mouthpiece of the struggle for justice (#20).
  - Constructive factor of social order (#20).
  - Can enter political order to secure rights and the common good (#20).
  - Strikes are legitimate but extraordinary (#20).
  - Two cautions (#20):
    - demands can become "class egoism";
    - can stray from specific roles.
- Other
  - Agricultural work is the basis of healthy economies (#21).
  - Disabled people should participate in work (#22).
  - People have a right to leave their native countries in search of better conditions (#23).
- Elements of a Spirituality of Work
  - Humans share in the activity of their God (#25).
  - Work imitates God's activity and gives dignity (#25).
  - Jesus was a person of work (#26).
  - There are many references to work in the Bible (#26).
  - Vatican II: work allows people to fulfill their total vocation (#26).
  - Work is sharing in the Cross and Resurrection (#27).
  - Work is necessary for earthly progress and the development of the Kingdom (#27).



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### **Discussion Questions**

Illustrate, by way of examples from your own work situation or others, what the "priority of labor over capital" means to you.

In what ways does your own work give you a sense of dignity?

What aspects of your daily work affirm your dignity? Which are dehumanizing?

The complexity of today's world inhibits some people from social involvement. How do you deal with such complexity? How do others you know, or know of, deal with it?

