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The Rights of Labor in the New Millennium --- the 'great work-bench' of humanity ... John Paul II Part 2

"The Quest for Jobs" headlines the cover of the current issue of *The Economist*. The September 16-20, 2011 edition publishes a Special Report entitled "The Future of Jobs." The feature surveys crucial aspects of employment and unemployment in the global job market, especially in the troubling times affected by the international financial crisis of 2008.

The rights of workers have been a central moral concern in the social doctrine of the Church.

When Pope Leo XIII promulgated the first social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* ("On the Condition of Workers") in 1891, the parameters of the social question were limited to the rights of industrial workers at a national level.

In advocating the cause of the industrial workers, *Rerum Novarum* was a moral response to the injustices spawned by the Industrial Revolution. At the end of the 19th century, the moral demands for justice in the work force centered on the right to a just wage, the responsibility of capital towards labor, and the duties of the state on behalf of the common good.

Leo XIII's encyclical symbolized an "option for the poor," for "the poor" at that moment were truly identified with the industrial workers.

A century later in 1991, Blessed John Paul II issued *Centesimus Annus* ("On the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*"), the centenary encyclical commemorating *Rerum Novarum*.

In retrospect, the social issues at mid-20th century contrasted sharply with the historical context of the original state of the social question. As the third millennium was nearing, globalization and technology

were radically transforming economic and political life on an international scale. Moreover, political and cultural factors were emerging and overlapping with questions in the economic sphere.

The developing social teaching of modern Popes --- from the encyclicals of John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II to the writings of Benedict XVI --- continues to address unjust social structures in an international economy, one presently linked to an international political order.

Among the 21st century issues of work in a globalized world, Pope Benedict XVI singles out the interrelationship between poverty and unemployment. In his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* ("Charity in Truth, 2009) the Holy Father recalls Blessed John Paul II's message on the occasion of the Jubilee of Workers on May 1, 2000. His predecessor had boldly called for upholding "the right to a just wage" and for respecting "the personal security of the worker and his or her family."

In 1981, a decade before his centennial encyclical "Centesimus Annus," Blessed John Paul II was already engaged with the evolution of the social question in the encyclical *Laborem Exercens* ("On Human Work"). Written on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, *Laborem Exercens* applied traditional Church social doctrine to the challenges of increasingly global socio-economic developments. [LE nn. 1-3]

Among the urgent problems on the world stage, *Laborem Exercens* highlights the stark inequality between "the rich nations and the poor nations."

The Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky, established in 1968. It speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 406,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK's Board of Directors.

Blessed John Paul II observed: “[t]he disproportionate distribution of wealth and poverty and the existence of some countries and continents that are developed and of others that are not call for a leveling out and a search for ways to ensure just development for all.” [LE n.2]

Nonetheless, *Laborem Exercens* is marked by continuity with the past social encyclicals. Despite changes in historical socio-economic conditions, the theme of human work still stands at the core of the social question, for human work is “a constant factor both of social life and of the church’s teaching.” This commemorative encyclical on human labor emphasized “the fact that human work is *a key*, probably *the essential key*, to the whole social question.” [LE n. 3]

Laborem Exercens presents a distinctive approach to the social question inasmuch as this encyclical is a theological meditation on the meaning of human work. Accordingly, the concept of work serves as a singular lens to analyze the multifaceted implications of the social question.

In the changed context of the social question, Pope John Paul II conceptualized a broader meaning to the concept of work that denotes more than “physical work” or “industrial labor.”

Rerum Novarum in 1891 and *Laborem Exercens* in 1981 firmly rejected on moral grounds two ideological economic and political extremes --- laissez-faire or unbridled capitalism and Marxism. Unbridled capitalism viewed human work as a commodity to be bought and sold subject to market mechanisms. The Marxist perspective regarded the “worker question” as a matter of class struggle.

In a specific criticism of the Marxist understanding of “the proletariat,” *Laborem Exercens* extends the meaning of “work” to signify any activity, manual or intellectual, performed by human persons. Moreover, work, as a universal vocation, is a distinctively human activity, a characteristic of functioning within a community of persons.

In regard to his discussion of employment, Pope John Paul II developed this more ex-

pansive meaning of work to counteract the narrowness of the Marxist ideology. Referring to various types of labor, *Laborem Exercens* speaks of “work on the land, in industry, in the various services, white-collar work and scientific work or artistic work in accordance with the capacities of individuals and for the common good of each society and of the whole of mankind.” [LE n.18]

Pope John Paul II’s inclusive description of work not only acknowledges the technological transformations of the 20th century but also creates an alternative model to replace Communist ideology of class warfare.

In brief, justice at the end of the second millennium will call for new forms of “worker solidarity.” [LE n. 8]

To illustrate this point, *Laborem Exercens* then treats the worker’s right to form unions, a freedom rooted in the prior right of association. Unions have played a historically significant role in defending the interests of the industrial workers. Yet such associations of workers should not simply be restricted to the protection of the rights of industrial workers. As mediating institutions, unions can ensure the rights of every profession.

For example, the encyclical envisions associations of agricultural workers, of white-collar workers, and even of “employers’ associations.” [LE n. 20]

In the same vein, the encyclical adds a clarification about the role of unions: “Catholic social teaching does not hold that unions are no more than a reflection of the ‘class’ structure of society and that they are a mouthpiece for class struggle which inevitably governs social life. They are indeed a mouthpiece for the struggle for social justice, for the just rights of working people in accordance with their individual professions.”

But the struggle for justice on behalf of workers is “‘for’ the just good.” It is “not a struggle ‘against’ others.” Even in the absence of the need to secure just rights, unions represent “a constructive factor of social order and solidarity...” [LE n. 20]

Laborem Exercens contends that the central aim of unions is to unite people, not the elimination of opponents: “In the final analy-

sis, both those who work and those who manage the means of production or those who own them must in some way be united in this community." As a result, its capacity to unite constitutes the social power of work, "the power to build community." [LE n. 20]

Blessed John Paul II described capital and the means of production "as the product of the work of generations." In doing so, he affirmed that "it is equally true that capital is being unceasingly created through the work done with the help of the means of production, and these means can be seen as a great work-bench at which the present generation of workers is working day after day." In this regard, he noted: "Obviously we are dealing here with different kinds of work, not only so-called manual labor, but also the many forms of intellectual work, including white-collar work and management." [LE n. 14]

Affirming the premise that work is the key to the entire social question, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004) distills the core of Pope John Paul II's theological vision on the dignity of work: "*Laborem Exercens* outlines a spirituality and ethic of work in the context of a profound theological and philosophical reflection. Work must not be understood only in an objective and material sense, but one must keep in mind its subjective dimension, insofar as it is always an expression of the person." [CSDC n. 101]

Under the theme "The Dignity and the Rights of Workers," *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, the 2007 statement of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, provides a moral framework for political responsibility in the light of Catholic social doctrine: "The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's creation."

Society's responsibilities towards workers are also briefly spelled out: The rights "to productive work, to decent and just wages, to adequate benefits and security in their old age, to the choice of whether to join unions, to the opportunity for legal status for immigrant workers, to private property, and to economic initiative."

Workers, in turn, are bound by correlative duties "to provide a fair day's work for a fair day's pay, to treat employers and co-workers with respect, and to carry out their work in ways that contribute to the common good."

In short, beyond securing their own legitimate interests, workers, employers, and unions should "also work together to advance economic justice and the well-being of all." [FCFC n. 52]

Rev. Ronald M. Ketteler --- *Commentary*
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