

ON HUMAN WORK
Selections from the encyclical *Laborem Exercens*
by John Paul II
September, 1981

On the ninetieth anniversary of the publication of Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, I wish to devote this document to a consideration of human work. Man eats the bread produced by the work of his hands, not only the daily bread which keeps the soul alive but also the bread of science, progress, civilization and culture. He eats this bread by the sweat of his face, not only by personal effort and toil but also in the midst of tension, conflict and crisis.

This ninetieth celebration is on the eve of new developments in technological, economic and political conditions which could influence the world of work and production no less than the industrial revolution of the last century: widespread automation into many spheres of production, the increased cost of energy and raw material, the growing realization that the heritage of nature is limited and is being intolerably polluted.

Work, as a human issue, is at the very center of the "social question." Work is as old as man but the general situation of man in the modern world calls for the discovery of new meanings of human work. Human work as the essential key to the whole social question needs to be continually brought up to date while maintaining basic Christian truths, which are ageless. From the first pages of the book of Genesis, the Church finds the source of her conviction that work is a fundamental dimension of human existence. The term "the earth" is to be understood as that fragment of the visible universe inhabited by man and by extension of the visible world insofar as it comes within the range of man's influence and his striving to satisfy his needs. That means all the resources the earth contains can be discovered and used to his ends. So these words "the earth" placed at the beginning of the Bible never cease to be relevant. They embrace equally the past ages, the whole modern reality and future phases of development beginning to take shape, though most are unknown to man or hidden from him.

Man's dominion over the earth is achieved by means of work. Man dominates by domesticating animals for food and clothing, extracting various resources from the earth, the sea or cultivated crops and transforming its products to his own use. Industry links the earth's riches, agriculture, mineral or chemical resources with man's work, physical or intellectual. Manual work, the toil of human hands and muscles, is aided by highly perfected machinery, microprocessors, electronics, etc. While it may seem that it is the machine that works and man supervises, the proper subject of work continues to be man. (No. 5)

Man as the "image of God" is a person, a subjective being, capable of acting in a planned and rational way, deciding about himself to self-realization. Man is therefor the subject of work independent of the work's objective content. Human work has an ethical value of its own. The ancient world classed people by type of work, physical work and hands was considered unworthy of free men and given to slaves. Christianity brought

fundamental changes to this field of ideas. Christ, while being God, devoted most of his years to manual work at the carpenter's bench, an eloquent "Gospel of Work." The dignity of work is to be sought in the subjective dimension not in the objective. The "Gospel of Work" creates a basis for a new way to think, judge and act. (No. 6)

New forms of work appear while others disappear. Even if this is a normal phenomenon, it must be seen to what extent certain ethically and socially dangerous irregularities creep in. In the last century, this gave rise to the "worker question" with a burst of solidarity between workers. The need of solidarity may become necessary for social groups not previously included the working intelligentsia. With a wider access of education and more people with degrees or diplomas accompanied by a drop in demand for their labor results in the unemployment of intellectuals. This "proletarianization" process remains possible. (No. 8)

Toil is universally known and experienced in laborious conditions, agriculture, mines, quarries, steelworkers, construction, etc. Toil is also familiar to those at the intellectual workbench, scientists, those who bear the responsibility of decisions that have a vast impact on society, doctors and nurses, women responsible for their homes and children. In work where matter gains nobility, man's dignity should not be lowered. (No. 9)

Work constitutes a foundation of family life, making it possible to found a family. The family is simultaneously a community made possible by work and the first school of work, within the home, for every person. (No.10)

The Church has always taught the principle of the priority of Labor over Capital. In the production process, labor is the efficient cause; capital remains a mere instrumental cause. The resources of the earth can serve man only through work. Man takes ownership of the earth's natural riches by making them his workbench, through work and for work. Capital includes the natural resources which man transforms according to his needs and all of these means are the result of the historical heritage of human labor. The gigantic and powerful instruments of production considered "capital" are the results of work and bear the signs of human labor. (No.12)

Rigid capitalism, that defends the exclusive right to private ownership of the means of production as untouchable, is unacceptable. Capital, as the whole means of production, is the product of work and seen as a great workbench where the present generation is now working. The Church proposes a joint ownership of the means of work, manual labor, white-collar, intellectual and management. Each person should consider himself as part owner of the great workbench at which he works. (No. 14)

When man works he wishes to take part in the process by sharing in the responsibility and creativity of this workbench where he applies himself. He is in a sense working for "himself," not just another cog in the vast machine moved from above. (No.15)

Man must work, his Creator commanded it, for his own humanity, to maintain and develop himself, his family, regard for others, his society, country and to the whole

human family. Man is heir to the work of previous generations and is a sharer in building for future generations. (No.16)

Workers have the right of association, labor or trade unions, to protect their just rights. Union activity enters into the field of politics as a matter of concern for the common good, but its role is not to “play politics.” (No. 20)

The Church considers it her duty to speak on the human value and moral order of work, a spirituality of work by a living participation in Christ’s threefold mission as Priest, Prophet and King. Man in his work share in the Creator’s activities. (No. 24)

PAX ET BONUM

Terry McCarthy, Sr., SFO