

WORK, EVANGELIZATION & SOCIAL JUSTICE OVERVIEW

Understanding the Place of Work in Catholic Teaching

This section entitled *Work, Evangelization & Social Justice* intends to help the reader understand what is not all that obvious - that our daily work plays an essential role in helping us to grow in holiness and to help fulfill the Church's mission to the world. These are connections that the average Catholic is not ordinarily exposed to in weekly homilies or in their spiritual readings. To understand the place of work in our lives, we need to develop an appreciation of the role of the lay person in the life of the Church and the world. To this end, we must turn to the documents of the Second Vatican Council and subsequent development of the Council's vision in more recent ecclesial texts.

These documents are inspiring but often not easy reading. And, furthermore, these works are rich and complex in the development of their thought, covering a host of important themes. Thus, while the documents have striking and powerful things to say about the importance of work to the spiritual life, these statements are embedded in a broader presentation and so can easily lose their impact.

To overcome these obstacles, we begin this section with key excerpts taken from three ecclesial documents: the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* from Vatican II (1965), *On Evangelization in the Modern World* written 10 years later by Pope Paul VI, *The Lay Members of Christ's Faithful People*, an apostolic exhortation by Pope John Paul II based on a synod held to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Decree.

Evangelization

The dimensions of the layperson's mission to the world are developed in excerpts from *The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* and *On Evangelization in the Modern World*. These documents have some surprising things to say. Most of us wouldn't consider ourselves directly involved in the Church's mission of evangelization. Not so says Holy Mother Church. The *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* proclaims that "The work of Christ's redemption concerns essentially the salvation of men: it takes in also, however, the renewal of the whole temporal order. The mission of the Church, consequently, is not only to bring men the message and grace of Christ but also to permeate and improve the whole range of the temporal."

On Evangelization in the Modern World goes on to state: "Lay people, whose vocation places them in the midst of the world and in charge of the most varied temporal tasks, must for this very reason exercise a very special form of evangelization." The encyclical goes on to specify the nature of this "special form" of evangelization given to the laity: "Their own field of evangelizing activity is the vast and complicated world of politics, society, and economics, but also the world of culture, of the sciences and arts, of international life, of the mass media. It also includes other realities which are open to evangelization, such as human love, the family, the education of children and adolescents,

professional work, suffering.” We are evangelizers to the extent that we endeavor to bring Christian values into these varied realms through our holy lives and our promotion of Christian values.

John Paul II develops a critical theme: the “secular character” of the laity in *The Lay Members of Christ’s Faithful People*. What is meant by the secular character or dimension? The document says that for lay persons “to be present and active in the world is not only an anthropological and sociological reality, but in a specific way, a theological and ecclesiological reality as well.” Simply put, it is part of God’s plan that the laity are where they are, doing what laypersons normally do - working, raise a family, contributing to their parishes and communities. Through faithfulness to these everyday commitments and activities, including our work, the Church understands the laity to be personally growing in holiness and building the kingdom of God. As Pope John Paul II emphasizes: “*The ‘world’ thus becomes the place and the means for the lay faithful to fulfill their Christian vocation because the world is destined to glorify God the Father in Christ.*”

Our Order is now called the *Secular* Franciscan Order precisely in order to be faithful with the Church’s new and profound appreciation of the vocation and mission of the laity proclaimed by the Second Vatican Council. In fact, it is this newfound appreciation of the “secular character” of the laity that gives rise to the new appreciation of the importance of work in the layperson’s spiritual lives. This fact is reflected by the 1978 Rule’s inclusion of work for the first time in the history of the Order as a positive dimension of our way of life and it’s admonition for Secular Franciscans to “esteem work.”

This secular dimension of the Secular Franciscan way of life finds expression on a personal level in Ed Zablocki’s reflection *Finding Identity as a Secular Franciscan* and on an international level in excerpts from the 1993 General Chapter of the International Fraternity with the theme *Secularity as a Characteristic Element of Secular Franciscan Identity.*”

Social Justice

While the particularly positive role of the mission of the laity to build the kingdom and renew the social order through their work is a development arising out of the Second Vatican Council, the Church’s concern with the fate of the abused worker has been expressed in ecclesial documents for over a century in what has come to be called the Catholic “social justice tradition.” Terrence McCarthy Sr.’s articles take us from the first social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (The Condition of Labor) through social justice encyclicals by Pope Pius XI, Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II.

Fr. Geoffrey Bridges, OFM uses St. Anthony of Padua as an exemplar of social justice for Secular Franciscans in “*Salt, Light and Leaven.*” What is “social justice”? To gain clarity and understanding of the term’s meaning, we next turn to an eponymous chapter from a book by Gregory Pierce and William Droel.

Initiatives for Justice in the Workplace

The importance of work to the end of achieving social justice cannot be overstated. As Pope John Paul II proclaimed in *On Human Work*, “human work is *a key*, probably *the essential key*, to the whole social question.” With John Paul II’s words in mind, we move on to the final part of this section where specific initiatives for social justice are suggested. First, the SEE-JUDGE-ACT methodology is suggested as a time-tested method of moving from insight to action.

Finally, some examples of specific social justice initiatives are provided. First we have former Work Commission chair Allen Jordan’s suggestions to address unemployment, entitled *Francis@Work*. Second, Carolyn Shadle describes practical steps to address the strains in managing work life and family life in her article *The Church’s New Mission Field: The Workplace*. Sweatshops have been and continue to be a major social justice issue. The National Work Commission prepared several informational packets describing the intolerable working conditions found in Third World countries and inviting Secular Franciscans to take specific action. Part of that material is included here.