

## Dignity of Work and Rights of Workers

*The 10 second Summary:*

### WHAT IS THE CATHOLIC VIEW REGARDING THE DIGNITY OF WORK AND THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS?

We learn through the Genesis story that God has made the human person in the image and likeness of God. Human dignity finds its origin here. The creation of humans takes place only after the creation of heaven and earth, and man and woman are created to be in relationship with their environment. All that human beings need for their survival and well-being is provided by God but requires their creative effort and toil.

Because human beings are social by their very nature, human dignity is not realized in isolation but is realized in community with others. The dignity of the person is lived out in society by the fulfillment of personal responsibilities. Work is one such essential responsibility which shapes and fulfills human dignity by providing for the needs of one's self and one's family. Work belongs to the vocation of every person. Work is an essential means by which the goods of the earth and the creative capacities of human beings are engaged to provide for human flourishing and the common good. Human work is the fulfillment of human dignity by engaging in and cooperating with the creative work of God.

### WHERE DOES THIS TEACHING COME FROM?

- **Scripture**—Biblical source: rooted in scripture
- **Tradition**—Moral source: located in the Catholic tradition, shaped by the past and the present.
- **Teaching**—Ecclesial source: expressed in the Pope's Encyclical letters, Apostolic letters, Apostolic exhortations, and the Bishops' Pastoral letters, which respond to the issues of the day. (This source is often what is referred to as Catholic Social Teaching.)

*How does this teaching connect with my life?*

**It provides:**

- Principles for reflection;
- Criteria for judgment;
- Guidelines for action;
- Tools for conscience formation.

## WHAT ARE SOME OF THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS THAT CAUSED THE CHURCH TO TAKE NOTICE AND RESPOND TO THE PROBLEMS FACING WORKERS?

What was the reality?	Document & Year	What was presented?
<p>The industrial revolution is changing the way people work. People are leaving the farms to find steady work in the factories in the city. This new form of work is often dangerous, demanding and degrading. Wealthy owners are exploiting workers. The Church is navigating between capitalism and socialism—critiquing both.</p>	<p>Rerum Novarum (The Condition of Labor), 1891, Pope Leo XIII</p>	<p>Pope Leo XIII brings to light the dehumanizing conditions of the masses of workers and spells out the conditions for the proper treatment of workers and the dignity of work. He asserts the right to private property, the right to a just wage and the right to form worker associations (unions), and he spells out rights and duties of workers. He is attempting to safeguard the power of the workers so that they will not be oppressed by the power of the wealthy capitalist owners, or the claims of socialism. Pope Leo XIII asserts the Church's rightful place to speak on these issues.</p>
<p>The effects of the Great Depression are being felt around the world. For the first time, massive unemployment becomes a startling reality. The system of capitalism is being questioned. Unions are emerging and gaining popularity thanks in large part to 'labor priests.' The emphasis on private property is moving outward to remind people of its social dimension to serve the common good.</p>	<p>Quadragesimo Anno (Reconstruction of the Social Order), 1931, Pope Pius XI 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Rerum Novarum</p>	<p>The advocacy for poor workers shifts in this document from critiquing wealthy owners to expanding the critique to include the <i>structures</i> which oppress the workers. There is call for social justice in the economic order. Stress is placed on intermediary associations along the vocational lines—influenced by fascism in Italy. The principle of <i>subsidiarity</i> is explicitly introduced here for the first time. One key focus in this document is the relationship between employer and employee.</p>
<p>The nuclear age brings new insecurities. The Cuban missile crisis is on the horizon. Global trade continues to expand following post WWII industrialization. Human rights language provides a new way to discuss worker's rights, and economic rights. The focus is no longer between rich and poor people but between rich and poor <i>nations</i>. The world view is expanded. Corporate colonialism is replacing the void left by de-colonization of the nations.</p>	<p>Mater et Magistra (Christianity and Social Progress), 1961, Pope John XXIII 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Rerum Novarum</p>	<p>The focus is broadened in this document to include workers in the non-industrialized nations. Agricultural workers get extended attention here for the first time in the encyclicals. A living wage is supported and encouraged. Pope John XXIII notes that economic undertakings should be governed by justice and charity and a 'juridical' order is essential to ensure that economic efforts conform to the common good.</p>
<p>The nature of work begins to shift from industrialized labor to service related work—financial services, technological services, etc. The rapid movement of global capital is creating a new reality with the swift creation and subsequent elimination of jobs. Instability is a hallmark of this era.</p>	<p>Laborem Exercens (On Human Work), 1981, Pope John Paul II, Ninetieth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum</p>	<p>Work is placed at the center of the social question. Pope John Paul II distinguishes between objective work and subjective work. "Work is for the person, not the person for work,"—this well known phrase regarding the priority of labor over capital is found here. The exploitation of labor is a central focus. Workers have the right to leave their native countries in search of work. Rights and duties regarding employer/employee are also treated.</p>
<p>The events of Eastern Europe in 1989 are a significant focus in this document. This collapse was significantly influenced by non-violent worker solidarity movements. The fall of communism should not be seen as a victory for capitalism. Workers are facing new displacement and challenges with technology, globalization and corporate mobility. International debt is threatening the very lives of poorer nations.</p>	<p>Centesimus Annus (One Hundred Years), 1991, Pope John Paul II 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Rerum Novarum</p>	<p>The threats to the dignity of the human person receive a significant focus. New threats to this dignity include technology, social structures, debt and corporate greed. The collapse of socialism is a temptation to assert capitalism as the best organization of an economic system. A key focus here is restoring harmony between various social groups. This document highlights some of the "just reforms" that Pope John Paul II sees as necessary for protecting and promoting the dignity of the human person and the dignity of work.</p>

## WHAT DOES THE CATECHISM HAVE TO SAY ABOUT THE DIGNITY OF WORK AND THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS?

See paragraphs 2427, 2428, 2429, 2434, 2435 and 2436.

### **Nine Axioms for judging any economy:**

1. The economy is for people;
2. The economy is for being, not having;
3. The economic system ought to be needs based;
4. The economy is an act of stewardship;
5. The economy must be a participatory society;
6. There must be fair sharing;
7. The system must permit self-reliance;
8. The economy must be ecologically sustainable;
9. The economy must be productive.

*Source: Phil Land, "The Earth is the Lord's: Thoughts on Economic Order," in Above Every Name: The Lordship of Christ and Social Systems, ed. Thomas E. Clarke (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), pp. 237-38.*



## HOW HAS THIS TEACHING DEVELOPED OVER THE YEARS?

- The basis of human dignity is found in the Genesis account indicating that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. Human work is the fulfillment of human dignity in engaging in and cooperating with the creative work of God.
- The formal teaching in the shape of the encyclical letter begins with *Rerum Novarum* in 1891. The dignity of the person was being eroded by dehumanizing effects of capitalism and the collective depersonalization of socialism. The fundamental rights of workers were affirmed.
- From the beginning, Catholic Social Teaching has supported the notion of “workers’ **unions**” for the purpose of balancing power between capital and labor as a way to insure and maintain human dignity. The purpose of the unions was to serve the interests of the workers and the common good.
- Pope Leo XIII asserted that workers have the right to **strike** if working conditions pose a grave threat to the workers.
- The idea of unions flourished and ‘labor priests’ supported and encouraged the movement. The second encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*, expanded the idea to include a vocational corporatist structure. This idea originates in fascism and was not received widely, but the principle of **subsidiarity** was asserted, stating that decisions should be made at the lowest level possible before seeking intervention from higher levels. This was again intended to maintain dignity and prevent power from become too centrally concentrated. It remains a strong part of CST, indicating the norm for the proper ordering of civil society.
- The formation of the International Labor Organization moves the ability of workers to organize from the local level to the international level.
- The focus on the worker is broadened to the international arena.
- The priority of labor over capital is asserted as a needed correction to the economic order. A listing of four rights of labor are defended by Pope John Paul II:
  1. Right to suitable employment for all those capable of it
  2. Right to just remuneration for the work done
  3. Right to the organization of the labor process to respect the requirements of the person and his or her life
  4. Right to form unions.
- The assertion that economic rights are part of the body of human rights emerges in the tradition.

### Did You Know . . . ?

The CST principle of **subsidiarity** states that decision making should take place at the lowest possible level in the social hierarchy commensurate with the pursuit of the common good, before seeking intervention from higher levels. This is intended to maintain dignity and prevent power from become too centrally concentrated. It remains a strong part of CST, indicating the norm for the proper ordering of civil society.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is the nature of the work you do? What gifts and talents of yours does it engage? Are there essential gifts and talents that you possess that remain unused?
2. Would you define the work you do as your vocation? Why or why not?
3. As you look back over your family history, how has the kind of work done by members in your family changed through the years? How has it changed for the men in the family, how has it changed for the women in the family? Discuss the beneficial and detrimental aspects of this change.
4. How does the work you do uphold or promote your human dignity?
5. What trends have you observed over the course of your work history that might highlight the priority of labor over capital? Have you seen or experienced situations where the opposite was true?
6. How would you describe the status of 'the priority of labor over capital' today—locally and/or globally. Is there an equal power balance today between labor and capital? Can you site specific examples or cases?
7. The idea of the spirituality of work is gaining lots of attention today in books and articles. How has this idea been reflected in the Catholic tradition? How is it reflected in your life?

## MORE FROM CST ON THE DIGNITY OF WORK AND THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS

If one wishes to define more clearly the ethical meaning of work, it is this truth that one must particularly keep in mind: Work is a good thing for the human person—a good thing for his or her humanity—because through work the human person not only transforms nature, adapting it to his or her own needs, but he or she also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed in a sense becomes “more a human being.”

*Laborem Exercens (On Human Work), #9*

Work constitutes a foundation for the formation of family life, which is a natural right and something the human person is called to . . . It must be remembered and affirmed that the family constitutes one of the most important terms of reference for shaping the social and ethical order of human work . . . the family is simultaneously a community made possible by work and the first school of work, within the home, for every person.

*Laborem Exercens (On Human Work), #10*

It is the respect for the objective rights of the worker—every kind of worker: manual or intellectual, industrial or agricultural, etc.—that must constitute the adequate and fundamental criterion for shaping the whole economy, both on the level of the individual society and state and within the whole of the world economic policy and of the systems of international relationships that derive from it.

*Laborem Exercens (On Human Work), #17*

It should also be noted that the justice of a socioeconomic system and, in each case, its just functioning, deserve in the final analysis to be evaluated by the way in which the human person’s work is properly remunerated in the system.

*Laborem Exercens (On Human Work), #19*

One method used by unions in pursuing the just rights of their members is the strike or work stoppage, as a kind of ultimatum to the competent bodies, especially the employers. This method is recognized by Catholic social teaching as legitimate in the proper conditions and within just limits.

*Laborem Exercens (On Human Work), #20*

The obligation to earn one’s bread by the sweat of one’s brow also presumes the right to do so. A society in which this right is systematically denied, in which economic policies do not allow workers to reach satisfactory levels of employment, cannot be justified from an ethical point of view, nor can that society attain social peace.

*Centesimus Annus (One Hundred Years), #43*

The human person fulfills himself or herself by using his or her intelligence and freedom. In so doing he or she utilizes the things of this world as objects and instruments and makes them his or her own. The foundation of the right to private initiative and ownership is to be found in this activity. By means of his or her work the human person commits himself or herself, not only for his or her own sake but also for others and with others. Each person collaborates in the work of others and for their good. The human person works in order to provide for the needs of his or her family, community, nation, and ultimately all humanity.

*Centesimus Annus (One Hundred Years), #43*

The obvious truth is that in labor, especially wage labor, as in ownership, there is a social as well as a personal or individual aspect to be considered. For unless human society forms a truly social and organic body; unless labor be protected in the social and juridical order; unless the various forms of human endeavor, dependent one upon the other, are united in mutual harmony and mutual support; unless, above all, intellect, capital and labor are brought together in a common effort, the human person’s toil cannot produce due fruit. Hence, if the social and individual character of labor be overlooked, it can be neither equitably appraised nor properly recompensed according to strict justice.

*Quadragesimo Anno (Reconstruction of the Social Order), #69*

## SCRIPTURE PASSAGES FOR PRAYER AND REFLECTION:

Then God said: "Let us make humans in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground." God created humans in God's image; in the divine image God created them; male and female God created them. God blessed them, saying: "Be fertile and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it. Have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and all the living things that move on the earth."

Genesis 1:26-28.

What advantage has the worker from his or her toil? I have considered the task which God has appointed for humans to be busied about. God has made everything appropriate to its time, and has put the timeless into their hearts, without humans ever discovering, from beginning to end, the work which God has done. I recognize that there is nothing better than to be glad and to do well during life. For every human, moreover, to eat and drink and enjoy the fruit of all his or her labor is a gift of God.

Eccles. 3:9-13

But the Lord said, "I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the hands of the Egyptians and lead them out of that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the country of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites. So indeed the cry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have truly noted that the Egyptians are oppressing them. Come, now! I will send you to Pharaoh to lead my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt."

Exodus 3:7-10

To the man he said: "Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat, cursed be the ground because of you! In toil shall you eat its yield all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you, as you eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; for you are dirt, and to dirt you shall return."

Genesis 3:17-19

Your wealth has rotted away, your clothes have become moth-eaten, your gold and silver have corroded, and that corrosion will be a testimony against you; it will devour your flesh like a fire. You have stored up treasure for the last days. Behold, the wages you withheld from the workers who harvested your fields are crying aloud, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

James 5:2-4

Let your work be seen by your servants and your glory by their children; and may the gracious care of the Lord our God be ours; prosper the work of our hands for us!

Psalms 90: 16-17

### See also:

Mt 25:40, Mt 25: 26-28

Mt 16:19

Gn 1:26-28

Jn 8:31-32

Lk 10:29-37

*-prepared by Katherine Feely, snd*