

The Church's Teaching on Work

A. Three theories concerning the proper organisation of work

1. Extreme Liberalism

Extreme liberals defend the freedom of individuals to unrestricted private property and to the pursuit of individual interest in a market which is free from government interference. They hold that it is the market which should stimulate and regulate the production and distribution of goods and wealth, according to the law of supply and demand. In its extreme form, this theory supports: 'self-love which leads to an unbridled affirmation of self-interest and which refuses to be limited by any demand of justice'(JPII Centesimus Annus 1991, n. 17)

2. Extreme Socialism

Extreme socialists reject all right of personal ownership of the means of production. They insist on state ownership and regulation of production and distribution, and on the State being controlled by the party (Communist) which alone knows how to direct the state for the ultimate good of the workers.

In the light of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, it is of value to recall the words of Leo XIII (*Rerum Novarum* 1891) warning the world not to see in the removal of personal ownership a solution to the grave social injustices of his day:

‘To remedy these wrongs (the unjust distribution of wealth and the poverty of the workers), the Socialists encourage the poor person’s envy of the rich and strive to do away with private property, contending that individual possessions should become the common property of all ... but their contentions are so clearly powerless to end the controversy that, were they carried into effect, the working person would be the first to suffer. They are moreover emphatically unjust, for they would rob the lawful possessor, distort the functions of the State, and create utter confusion in the community’(n. 99; CA 12).

‘Where self-interest is violently suppressed, it is replaced by a burdensome system of bureaucratic control, which dries up the wellsprings of initiative and creativity’(JPII *Centesimus Annus* 1991, n.25).

3. Reform Capitalism & Democratic Socialism (see CA n. 42)

Reform capitalists and democratic socialists recognise the importance of personal ownership and of government policies which care for the common good, for legislation governing labour, for welfare programmes and for legislation that frees the market from monopolistic control by large corporations.

B. The contributions of Christian Spirituality to the principles governing work

There is no one Christian answer to the complex problems of economic policy. These have to be worked out by those in touch with the actual dynamic and changing circumstances. But Christianity does alert us to certain principles that need to be kept in mind.

Paul VI Octogesima Adveniens 1971 n. 37

‘The Spirit of the Lord, who animates mankind renewed in Christ, continually breaks down the horizons within which our understanding likes to find security and the limits to which our activity would willingly restrict itself. There dwells within people a power which urges them to go beyond every system and every ideology.

At the heart of the world there dwells the mystery of men and women discovering themselves to be God's sons and daughters in the course of an historical and psychological process in which constraint and freedom as well as the weight of sin and the breath of the Spirit alternate and struggle for the upper hand.

The dynamism of the Christian faith here triumphs over the narrow calculations of egoism. Animated by the power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of mankind, and upheld by hope, Christians involve themselves in the building up of the human city, one that is to be peaceful, just, a communion of brothers and sisters, and acceptable as an offering to God. In fact the expectation of a new earth must not weaken, but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one. For here grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age'(Paul VI Octogesima Adveniens 1971, n. 37).

'It is on the level of our understanding of ourselves and of our destiny that the Church's specific and decisive contribution to true culture is to be found'(John Paul II Centesimus Annus 1991 n.51).

C. Workers should not act or be treated other than as persons

‘The Church, sharing the noblest human aspirations, and suffering when it sees them not satisfied, wishes to help people attain their full flowering, and that is why it offers what it possesses as its characteristic attribute: a global vision of the human person and of the human race’(Paul VI *Populorum Progressio* 1967, n. 13).

‘Development has to promote the good of every person and of the whole person’(Paul VI *Populorum Progressio* 1967, n. 14).

‘What must be aimed at is complete humanism. And what is that if not the fully-rounded development of the whole person and of every person? A humanism closed in on itself, and not open to the values of the spirit and to God who is their source, could achieve apparent success. True, people can organise the world apart from God, but ‘without God we can organise it in the end only to mankind’s detriment. An isolated humanism is an inhuman humanism’ [de Lubac]. There is no true humanism but that which is open to the Absolute and is conscious of a vocation which gives human life its true meaning.’

(Paul VI *Populorum Progressio* 1967, n. 42)

‘Men and women fulfil themselves by using their intelligence and freedom. In so doing they utilise the things of this world as objects and instruments and make them their own. The foundation of the right to private initiative and ownership is to be found in this activity. By means of work we commit ourselves, not only for our own sake but also for others and with others. Each person collaborates in the work of others and for their good. People work in order to provide for the needs of their family, their community, their nation, and ultimately all humanity. Moreover, they collaborate in the work of their fellow employees, as well as in the work of suppliers and in the customer’s use of goods, in a progressively expanding chain of solidarity’(JP II Centesimus Annus 1991 n. 43).

- the goal of work in families, schools, churches and society is persons living in harmony.

‘Peace and prosperity are goods which belong to the whole human race. It is not possible to enjoy them in a proper and lasting way if they are achieved and maintained at the cost of other peoples and nations, by violating their rights or excluding them from the sources of well-being’(JPII Centesimus Annus 1991 n.27).

- persons are subjects, and should be respected as graced to be capable of a creative contribution through work and to have a right to make this contribution.

‘We must act against unemployment, which in all cases is an evil, and which, when it reaches a certain level, can become a real social disaster’(JPII Laborem Exercens 1981, n.18).

- persons are not individuals, but are inter-dependent. This should be obvious in work.

D. Natural Resources

Work is meant to order, organise, orchestrate natural resources in a way that respects nature, and recognises that it is graced and is a gift for the benefit of all. It is morally wrong to ‘consume the resources of the earth and human life in an excessive and disordered way’(JPII Centesimus Annus 1991 n. 37).

Natural Resources are not the product of work. However ownership is organised, they must be used for the benefit of all. ‘Everything that comes from people throughout the whole process of economic production, whether labour or the whole collection of means of production and the technology connected with these means (meaning the capability to use them at work), presupposes these riches and resources of the visible world, riches and resources that we find and do not create’(JPII Laborem Exercens 1981, n. 12)

E. Capital

Capital as means of production is the product of work and should be at the service of workers. ‘Everything that is at the service of work, everything that in the present state of technology (machines, factories, laboratories, computers) constitutes its ever more highly perfected “instruments” is the result of work’(JPII Laborem Exercens n. 12).

‘The only legitimate title to the possession of the means of production, whether this be in the form of private ownership or in the form of collective ownership, is that they should serve labour’(JPII Laborem Exercens 1981 n. 14).

‘Alienation is found in work when it is organised to ensure maximum returns and profits with no concern whether the worker, through his or her own labour, grows or diminishes as a person, either through the increased sharing in a genuinely supportative community or through increased isolation in a maze of relationships marked by destructive competitiveness and estrangement, in which the person is considered only a means and not an end’(JPII Centesimus Annus 1991 n. 41).

F. Workers have the right to enjoy the fruit of their work

- provided workers remember that they are inter-dependent members of a community.

G. Workers have the right to co-determine policy in the use of resources

- Workers are also co-responsible for their proper use.
- This includes the principle of subsidiarity:
tasks which can be properly carried out by a lower body should not be performed by a higher one.

H. Under-development and the sin of over-development

‘Both for nations and for individuals, avarice is the most evident form of moral under-development’(Paul VI *Populorum Progressio* 1967 n. 19).

‘To the “economic and social indices” of under-development other indices must be added which are equally negative and indeed even more disturbing, beginning with the cultural level. These are illiteracy, the difficulty or impossibility of obtaining higher education, the inability to share in the building of one’s own nation, the various forms of exploitation and of economic, social, political and even religious oppression of the individual and his or her rights, discrimination of every type, especially the exceptionally odious form based on difference of race’(J-P II *Solicitud Rei Socialis* 1987 n. 15).

‘The over-development which consists in an excessive availability of every kind of material goods for the benefit of certain social groups, easily makes people slaves of “possession” and of immediate gratification, with no other horizon than the multiplication or continual replacement of the things already owned with others still better. This is the so-called civilisation of “consumption” or “consumerism”, which involves so much “throwing-away” and “waste”. An object already owned but now superseded by something better is discarded, with no thought of its possible lasting value in itself, nor of some other human being who is poorer’(J-P II Sollicitudo Rei Socialis 1987 n. 28).

I. Technology is a problem only when it is misused

‘Technology facilitates work, perfects, accelerates and augments it. It leads to an increase in the quantity of things produced by work, and in many cases improves their quality. However, it is also a fact that, in some instances, technology can cease to be mankind’s ally and become almost our enemy, as when the mechanisation of work “supplants” us, taking away all personal satisfaction and the incentive to creativity and responsibility, when it deprives many workers of their previous employment, or when, through exalting the machine, it reduces people to the status of slaves’(JPII Laborem Exercens 1981, n. 5).

J. There is need for effective central planning
to promote justice and to offset injustice

‘The concept of “indirect employer” includes both persons and institutions of various kinds and also collective labour contracts and the principles of conduct which are laid down by these persons and institutions and which determine the whole socio-economic system or are its result ... In order to meet the danger of unemployment and to ensure employment for all, the agents defined as ‘indirect employer’ must make provision for overall planning with regard to the different kinds of work by which the economic and cultural life of a given society, is shaped.

‘They must also give attention to organising that work in a correct and rational way. In the final analysis this overall concern weighs on the shoulders of the state, but it cannot mean one-sided centralisation by the public authorities. Instead what is in question is a just and rational coordination, within the framework of which the initiative of individuals, free groups and local work centres and complexes must be safeguarded, keeping in mind what has been said with regard to the subject character of human labour’(JPII Laborem Exercens 1981, n.18).

‘A society of free work, of enterprise and of participation is not directed against the market, but demands that the market be appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the State, so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole of society are satisfied’(JPII Centesimus Annus 1991 n. 35).

‘The common good is not simply the sum total of particular interests; rather it involves an assessment and integration of those interests on the basis of a balanced hierarchy of values; ultimately, it demands a correct understanding of the dignity and the rights of the person’(JPII Centesimus Annus 1991 n. 47).

Conclusion

Every situation must be examined carefully by the people who are involved in it, and appropriate directions set. “Eco-nomy” means the “order” (nomos) of the Household (oikos). We must assist each other in recognising injustice and alienation in all our institutions. We must distance ourselves from individualism and work together in solidarity in the struggle to reverence the person and respect nature. This will require an intelligently and sensitively organised planning of the economy (Rerum Novarum 1891), while organising work to achieve a greater participation of workers (with the mind, heart, soul and strength) in all aspects of work, remembering that the collective interest of one group must recognise that the interests of all workers at all levels must be respected, and in a way that advances the cause of the unemployed.

Paul VI Octogesima Adveniens, 1971, n. 48

‘Let each of us examine ourselves to see what we had done up to now, and what we ought to do. It is not enough to recall principles, state intentions, point to crying injustices and utter prophetic denunciations; these words will lack real weight unless they are accompanied for each individual by a livelier awareness of personal responsibility and by effective action.

It is too easy to throw back on others responsibility for injustices, if at the same time one does not realise how each one shares in it personally, and how personal conversion is needed first. This basic humility will rid action of all inflexibility and sectarianism; it will also avoid discouragement in the face of a task which seems limitless in size.

‘The Christian’s hope comes primarily from the fact that we know that the Lord is working with us in the world, continuing in his Body, which is the Church - and, through the Church in the whole of mankind - the Redemption which was accomplished on the cross and which burst forth in victory on the morning of the Resurrection.

‘This hope springs also from the fact that the Christian knows that others are at work to undertake actions of justice and peace, working for the same ends. For beneath an outward appearance of indifference, in everyone’s heart there is a will to live in brotherhood and a thirst for justice and peace, which is to be expanded.’

JPII Sollicitudo Rei Socialis 1987 n. 47

‘There is no justification for despair or pessimism or inertia. Though it be with sorrow, it must be said that just as one may sin through selfishness and the desire for excessive profit and power, one may also be found wanting with regard to the urgent needs of multitudes of human beings submerged in conditions of under-development, through fear, indecision, and, basically, through cowardice.’

Creation calls (video)

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