

# **PASTORAL ATTITUDES IN VIEW OF RAPID CHANGES IN THE WORLD OF WORK**

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More than suggesting concrete attitudes that we should assume in view of the rapidly changing world at the centre of which is work, I like to propose a reflection on the *state of the art* so to speak of Catholic Social Thought regarding human work, from which each one, according to his or her situation, can conclude as to the necessary attitudes to be assumed in his or her pastoral endeavour.

At the very origins of Christian Revelation we find the foundations of the present conception of work as expressed in numerous documents of the Church's social magisterium. In fact in the first pages of the Book of Genesis God reveals himself as a remarkable worker who has created man and woman as the only works of his hands which are at the same time, his own image and are called to fulfill his likeness in themselves.

On creating God assigns a specific vocation to every creature. The entire material world is destined to a continuous growth whose plenitude transcends history when everything will be recapitulated in Christ (Eph 1, 10). Development is therefore, the vocation of the world. It must be noted however, that the Christian concept of development is one in which there is a mysterious interaction between the nature of things and human action which in many instances is necessary for the accomplishment of the will of the Creator. It is here that we understand human work as a necessary reality on the one hand, and as a complement on the other: nature requires the complement of human work while man and woman need nature with which they establish a fruitful dialogue. This type of relationship is useful in completing the work initiated by God and is also necessary for the salvation of human creatures who are saved precisely within the context of this relationship.

As a partial result of the influence of varied cultural elements which, with the passage of time have become part of Church tradition, the transparency of the original revelation has been obscured to the point that even today it is difficult for many Christians to accept the positive vision of human work. However, to the Church

Fathers it was quite obvious that work was not the result of sin, but an element of the first creation. In fact, they thought, God had created the substance of all things leaving to human industriousness their necessary transformation. For example, God makes the grain grow, but human work will be required to turn it into bread; God created the sheep's wool, but the intervention of man will be required to make of it a piece of cloth for protection. St. John Chrisostomus thinks that the human soul has been created for action and thus, if it is not active it will get involved in evil actions. When Adam became inactive, he lost the Garden of Eden. According to him, again, if idleness were a good thing, the earth would yield without seed nor farming. Work is therefore inherent to human nature.

The present situation is the result of personal sin which has rendered this relationship between human beings and nature a dramatic one, a relationship which in its origins was harmonious. And yet, some Christians cling to this truth ignoring further developments introduced by the mystery of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Through this new and wonderful reality, the human persons not only cooperate through their work with God's creative action, but can also offer a positive contribution to the work of the second creation, of the redemption of Jesus (*see GS 67*).

## ***2. Human Work According to Catholic Social Thought***

The systematic presentation of the Church's social concern started with a document (*Rerum novarum*) on the situation of the workers reduced to the inhuman condition of the proletariat and on work reduced to a commodity as the result of the industrial revolution dominated by a new economic system characterized by individualism and the materialistic conception of man and the world. *Rerum novarum* makes an appeal to solidarity with the world of work and a call to conversion of hearts as well as of the conditions of work.

For a hundred years after this Encyclical letter, work has occupied a central place in the Church's social teachings to the extent that John Paul II considers it the essential key to the whole social question.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless the renewal introduced by

1. Encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (LE) Addressed by the Supreme Pontiff JOHN PAUL II to His Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, to the Priests, to the Religious Families, to the Sons and Daughters of the Church and to all Men and Women of Good Will on Human Work on the Ninetieth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*. September 14, 1981. n. 3.

Vatican II was necessary in order to give back to work its full Christian meaning by returning to the original sources of inspiration. The pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*<sup>2</sup> offered all the elements which will be developed later by Paul VI and John Paul II.

*For while providing the substance of life for themselves and their families, men and women are performing their activities in a way which appropriately benefits society. They can justly consider that by their labour they are unfolding the Creator's work, consulting the advantages of their brother men, and consulting the advantages of their brother men, and contributing by their personal industry to the realization in history of the divine plan (GS 34).*

### **2.1. The Universal Destination of Material Goods**

The world was created for man and woman. All creatures that are part of that wonderful order (the *cosmos*) are placed at their service. Man and woman need those creatures in order to reach the fullness of their vocation received from God. Material creatures and people enter into an intimate relationship which presupposes work as the necessary mediation. Work is the capacity given by the Creator to his creature-image as the means to have access to the world. Through work men and women make creation their own, they transform it placing it at their service, make of it a useful tool for their personal or communal realization. Thus we can understand that work as the activity of man is not the result of sin, but constitutes a characteristic of the human person, something that God intended from the beginning. This is the genial conception offered by John Paul II in *Laborem exercens* where he says that the person can be defined by work, since every human activity can be somehow considered as work. From this presentation we arrive at the conception of man and woman as *ens laborans* (the being at work), superseding the old Hellenistic conceptions of the *ens nationale* (the being that reasons). It is from work that man and woman are defined. This brings us back to the Book of Genesis which describes

2. Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World of the II Vatican Council: *Gaudium et Spes* (GS).

man and woman as the last step in the order of creation of an earth given to man so that he might have dominion over it by his work and enjoy its fruits.<sup>3</sup>

God ordered man and women to *subdue the earth*. To this end the first and most important instruments is work. Catholic tradition has been accused of using this truth from Revelation against nature. This dominion has to be understood correctly, to subdue someone on something means to be the lord of someone or of something. Traditionally the objective aspect of this dominion has been privileged (the earth dominated by man and woman) whereas, according to divine revelation the subjective aspect of it should have the priority. This dominion is a form of stewardship. It means projecting one's nature of God's image on creation. It means being lord of oneself, creating an orderly relationship with creation, a just relationship, one which does not lose sight of the necessary link to Him who is the origin of everything and from whom this mandate has been received. It cannot be ignored that this dominion is in function of the realization of the self and of the accomplishment of the work of the Creator. This truth reveals the ethical *dimension* of human work since the one who carries work out is a *person, a conscious and free subject, that is to say, a subject that decides about himself* (LE 6). The obliviousness of this truth is responsible, among other evil effects, for the ecological disaster which is assuming apocalyptic proportions.

Catholic social teaching considers work under this light of the relationship to the world destined to all: "*It is ordinarily by his labour that a man supports himself and his family, is joined to his fellow men and serves them, and is enabled to exercise genuine charity and be a partner in the work of bringing God's creation to perfection*" (GS 67). This idea of work as the ordinary means to support oneself brings us to the problem of salary and to the relationship between work and property. Human work "*comes immediately from the person. In a sense, the person stamps the things of nature with his seal and subdues them to his will*" (Ib). Through his or her action the person not only transforms creation physically, but at the same time, in a marvelous way he or she communicates to the earth a bit of the self, a personal imprint. But the person also receives something in this action in the sense that he or she perfects him or herself fulfilling that original calling to be the image of the Creator.

3. Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* (CA) address by the Supreme Pontiff JOHN PAUL II to his Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, the Priests and Deacons, Families of Men and Women Religious, all the Christian Faithful, and to all Men and Women of Good Will on the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, May 1, 1991. n.31.

## 2.2. Cooperation in Development (*The Objective Dimension*)

The commandment to subdue the earth is rendered more explicit by the image of the Creator's rest on the seventh day. The portion of his work has been accomplished and now it is man's turn. Man and woman are entrusted with the tremendous responsibility of concluding the work initiated by God. The entire world has received the vocation to continuous progress, a goal which is possible only through human cooperation. In this sense, to work means to cooperate in the development of creation. Faith has no fear of progress or technology, seeing in all of this the result of human work, a spark of divine wisdom which is participated by creatures and, at the same time, the accomplishment of God's design on creation. Work is conceived therefore as an obligation, a fundamental duty which presupposes its corresponding right.

It must be noted however that when we speak of creation and development we are not simply referring to material things. Science is a decisive element for progress, science understood in all its manifestations. Its importance has been understood by John Paul II in *Centesimus annus* (32): *"In our time, in particular, there exists another form of ownership which is becoming no less important than land: the possession of know-how, technology and skill. The wealth of the industrialized nations is based much more on this kind of ownership than on natural resources."* Cooperation in development means to apply one's abilities and knowledge not only to economic growth, but also to the progress and perfection of all, in the sense expressed by Paul VI:

*"If further development calls for the work of more and more technicians, even more necessary is the deep thought and reflection of wise men in search of a new humanism which will enable modern man to find himself anew by embracing the higher values of love and friendship, of prayer and contemplation. This is what will permit the fullness of authentic development, a development which is for each and all the transition from less human conditions to those which are more human."*<sup>4</sup>

4. Encyclical Letter of His Holiness PAUL VI on the Development of People, *POPOLORUM PROGRESSIO* (PP), to the Bishops, Priests, Religious, the Faithful and to all Men of Good Will. March 26, 1967. n. 20.

### 2.3 The Realizations of the Self (Subjective dimension)

From what has been said so far it can be seen that the human person, from its very origins, is intimately linked to the rest of creation, not only physically, but also ontologically. In other words, this relationship to the earth constitutes part of its essence and, therefore, of its destiny. This is what we learn from *Gaudium et spes*:

*Though made of body and soul, man is one. Through his bodily composition he gathers to himself the elements of the material world. Thus they reach their crown through him, and through him raise their voice in free praise of the Creator (GS 14).*

Biblical imagery tries to transmit this conception of solidarity with the whole of creation through the description of the effects of sin as the cause of the rupture of the marvelous original harmony. When Christ assumes human nature He also accepts this intimate relationship and thus the fruits of his death and resurrection will have a direct effect on the whole of creation. This is what we mean when in the Eucharistic Prayer we speak of the Kingdom, freed from the corruption of sin and death.

The calling man and woman have received is not only to transform the earth by subduing it. While they accomplish their work thus giving something of themselves to the earth, by this very action they perfect themselves. This action is then, not only transient, but circular if we may use the term.

*As a person, man is therefore the subject of work. As a person he works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfill the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity (LE 6).*

The obvious conclusion from the consideration of the subjective dimension of work is its ethical character since he who performs it is a person, conscious and free.

*Whether he be artist or craftsman, engaged in management, industry or agriculture, everyone who works is a creator. Bent over a material that resists his efforts, a man by his work gives his imprint to it, acquiring, as he does so, perseverance, skill and a spirit of invention (PP 27).*

The Christian conception of work offers no justification, therefore, to make of it the grounds for differentiations of class, salary or prestige, since *the primary basis of the value of work is man himself, who is its subject (LE 6)*. Finally, and perhaps this is the most important conclusion on practical grounds, work is for the person, and not the person for work. This a fundamental principle which, by itself, if taken seriously, could contribute quite efficiently to the transformation of the social question. The scope of work is not simply the production of goods, but the people who carry it out. While the prevailing economic system considers human work as an instrument of production, the Christian conception teaches us that production is the instrument, not the scope, to the service of the workers.

The conclusions that can be drawn from these premises are almost self evident. We can think of the way work is organized: the conditions of the working place, the way work is carried out, the way it is remunerated, the type of participation in the fruits of work, among others. One simple look at the prevailing state of affairs is enough to realize how far our reality is from the Christian conception of work. And this is true of local, as well as of international situations.

#### **2.4. Work and Solidarity**

Vatican II has reassumed the ancient Church tradition based on Divine Revelation about the sacred dignity of the human person and the consequent solidarity of the human race. The mystery of Incarnation is the key to the understanding of both dimensions:

*The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of him who was to come, namely, Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear (GS 22).*

The foundations for the essential equality among all are to be traced back to the common origin and destiny.

*God, who has fatherly concern for everyone, has willed that all men should constitute one family and treat one another in a spirit of brotherhood... Man, who is the only creature on earth which*

*God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself (Ib 24).*

*Through his dealing with others, through reciprocal duties, and through fraternal dialogue he develops all his gifts and is able to rise to his destiny (Ib 25).*

God created man and woman to form a society. He wants to sanctify and save mankind constituting a people of his own, people He chose as members of a particular community. Jesus Christ, the first born of many brothers constitutes, together with the gift of the Spirit a new fraternal community of all those who accept him with faith and charity.

*This solidarity must be constantly increased until that day on which it will be brought to perfection. Then, saved by grace, men will offer flawless glory to God as a family beloved of God and of Christ their Brother (Ib 32).*

Coming back to the context of work, John Paul II has synthesized this doctrine applying it to human activity: *More than ever, work is work with others and work for others: it is a matter of doing something for someone else (CA 31)*. In other words, work is the privileged field for solidarity. Here we can see once more that many answers to the so-called social question – today the problem of institutionalized injustice, of the structures of sin – can be found at the very sources of the Christian conception of the world and of work.

The world today is organized for work, but with a conception of work inspired by liberal capitalism characterized by individualism and exaggerated materialism. Work thus has become a commodity, a source of alienation for the worker and of increasing wealth, not always just, for the owners of the means of production.

*... alienation – and the loss of the authentic meaning of life – is a reality in Western societies too... Alienation is found also in work, when it is organized so as to ensure maximum returns and profits with no concern whether the worker, through his own labour, grows or diminishes as a person, either through increased sharing in a genuinely supportive community or through increased isolation in a maze of relationships marked by destructive*



*competitiveness and estrangement, in which he is considered only a means and not an end (CA 41).*

*The fact is that many people, perhaps the majority today, do not have the means which would enable them to take their place in an effective and humanly dignified way within a productive system in which work is truly central (CA 33).*

At the international level some countries which are rich in resources but poor in capital and technology must submit to conditions imposed by those countries which own these two elements, essential for the economy. Both then run the risk of being the victims of the idols of contemporary world: *the all-consuming desire for profit and the thirst for power at any price* (see SRS 37).

*Working with others.* The modern phenomenon of *interdependence, sensed as a system determining relationships in the contemporary world, in its economic, cultural, political, and religious elements* (SRS 38) acquires ever growing dimensions in contemporary society. No nation of the world could pretend total autonomy or self sufficiency. It would be clearly irrational to imagine that someone can realize his or her mission in the world ignoring others. Interdependence, as such a neutral phenomenon, may assume a negative character when it makes abstraction of the ethical dimension. As a matter of fact interdependence had become an instrument of exploitation of the small and powerless countries.

We can conclude from the previous insights that, when the person works he or she must feel as one who cooperates (*works with*) the rest of humanity, not only from the evident fact that no one can complete the work of humanity by him or herself, but from the discovery of his or her belonging to the one and only human family, responsible for the success or the failure of all. Here we deal with necessary certitude that the action of each one has a decisive effect on the destiny of mankind. All persons in their work place and according to their abilities, are called to cooperate in the construction of a family united by the bond of brotherhood, which participates in the goods destined for all and structured according to criteria of justice and equity:

*when work is done in common, when hope, hardship, ambition, and joy are shared, it brings together and firmly unites the wills, minds, and hearts of men; in its accomplishment, men find themselves to be brothers (PP 27).*

It follows logically that, whoever acquires this awareness will understand that his or her work is at the same time a work for others. That is, that because of that mysterious solidarity which exists from the beginning as a calling, and which has been elevated to a supernatural level through the incarnation of the Word, whatever one accomplishes acquires a social dimension which will result to the benefit or to the disadvantage of others, of the whole human family.

This way we can better understand what John Paul II tells us, namely that, when solidarity is assumed as a moral category,

*when interdependence becomes recognized in this way, the correlative response as a moral and social attitude, as a "virtue," is solidarity. This then is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all (SRS 38).*

Solidarity then means to be ready to sacrifice oneself for others instead of exploiting them, to serve others instead of oppressing them. It means the capacity to offer one's life for the other as the supreme manifestation of love after the example of Jesus.

## **2.5. Work, Evangelization, Promotion.**

John Paul II speaks of the first gospel of work in reference to the description of creation and to the example of Jesus in Nazareth (*LE* 6; 25). *This Christian spirituality of work should be a heritage shared by all (Ib 25).*

Paul VI stated that the most efficacious form of evangelization is the witness of life<sup>5</sup> which, of course, has to be validated by consistency through a deep internal

5. Apostolic Exhortation *EVANGELII NUNTIANDI* of His Holiness POPE PAUL VI to the Episcopate, to the Clergy and to All the Faithful of the Entire World, ON EVANGELIZATION IN THE MODERN WORLD. December 8, 1975. n.21

conviction. To proclaim the Gospel by witness means to show... *capacity for understanding and acceptance... sharing of life and destiny with other people... solidarity with the efforts of all for whatever is noble and good* (Ib). In the context of work it means to bear witness to its human and sanctifying meaning.

In the midst of a world dominated by the new religion, the idolatry of profit and power, which is part of the emerging culture, Christians have the mission of proclaiming the redeeming nature of work, its character as fulfillment of the person that performs it, its nature as the continuation of the great work initiated by the Creator, as the solid foundation for an authentic universal brotherhood.

