

THE INFLUENCE OF THE WORLD OF WORK ON FAMILY LIFE

Sergio Bernal Restrepo SJ

The year 1981 was an important year for the history of the social discourse of the Catholic Church. Two significant documents were released, one commemorating the hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* and another one on the problems of contemporary family, which was supposed to present a synthesis of the conclusions of the Synod of Bishops held in Rome the previous year.

The coincidence of the publication of these documents on the same year gives us a clue about the importance that the Catholic Church gives to these topics as well as the close relationship existing between them. In fact, the Church proclaims in these documents the absolute priority of labour over capital and of the family over any other social institution. The Church's social teaching and its whole strategy of evangelisation and pastoral care are focused around the family. The social conditions that surround the family are, therefore, a major concern of evangelization.¹ A serious consideration of the dignity of the human person and of the common good, must start from the family which stands as a mediation between these two basic principles of Catholic social doctrine. "The well-being of the individual person and of human and Christian society is intimately linked with the healthy conditions of that community produced by marriage and family."²

Sergio Bernal Restrepo was born in Colombia; he joined the Jesuits in 1953 and was ordained priest in 1964. He graduated in Social Sciences from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, and in Sociology from Brown University, USA. He teaches sociology and Christian Social doctrine at the Gregorian University. He was Dean of the School for Social Sciences of the same University and formed part of the Holy See's FAO delegation. This paper was read in Malta during a seminar with the title "Xoghol u Familja, Liema Rabta?" organised by Pastoral Secretariat in April 1994.

1. cf. Steidal-Meier Paul, *Social Justice Ministry: Foundations and Concerns* (Le Jacq Publishing Inc; New York 1984)
2. Pastoral Constitution on the Church and the Modern World of the II Vatican Council: *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), 47.

Laborem exercens (LE), the Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II on Human Labour, is in line with the tradition of social discourse started in its systematic form by *Rerum Novarum*, but goes far beyond, thus constituting an extraordinary contribution to the understanding of human work in its most profound sense. Leo XIII expressed his concern about the conditions of salaried work which was a novelty in European society subjected to the effects of industrial revolution at the time. Opposing the ideology hidden under emerging capitalism, the Encyclical Letter insists on the social dimension of the working person, not ignoring his or her individuality, and perceives the intimate relationship between two basic rights: the right to work and the right to form a family. Thus, from its early beginnings Catholic social doctrine assumes a dialectical form which is rooted in work and the family.

In its early stages Catholic social thought insisted on the economic aspect of work as a necessary means for survival, thus underscoring the importance of just wages, a question which has not as yet found a satisfactory solution. A new aspect was added to the question, namely the so-called family wage, an even more complex issue from a practical standpoint. This issue was raised as a consequence of the consideration of the family as the “foundation of society” (GS, 52).

*Laborem exercens*³, making a synthesis of the new and the old, not ignoring the economic aspect of human work (the Pope claims that the fairness of a social system can be judged according to the way work is remunerated), makes a greater emphasis on what John Paul II calls the “subjective dimension of work”. With an insight whose roots are to be found in Christian Revelation, but using an analysis which in some ways resembles the Marxian conception, the Pope presents work as the means through which man and woman attain their full realisation as human persons. This way it can be better understood that work constitutes an inalienable right of the person, as Catholic social doctrine has taught since the times of Pius XII. Therefore, denying the right to work means the denial of the right to become a full person.

At the very origins of our own existence there is the family, understood by Catholic teaching as the stable and permanent union of husband and wife. Man and woman, in fact, are unthinkable outside the family. Therefore any discourse on

3. 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 Nineteenth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, September 14, 1981).

human activity must in some way be related to the reality of the family. The family is the very beginning of all human societies. This idea is taken by John Paul II when he speaks of the “family nature of human life” (*LE, 10*).

The human person is called to communion with others and to the gift of self, which is the theological foundation of the social dimension of the person. Society is both the fruit and the sign of this social dimension and thus it is considered as a community of persons, not a simple aggregate nor only a statistical reality. The family, in society, is the fundamental expression of the person. “God did not create man a solitary, for from the beginning «male and female» he created them. Their companionship produces the primary form of interpersonal communion” (*GS, 12*).

This conception is rooted in the Church’s tradition about the human person: “The fact that man «created as man and woman» is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created as a «unity of the two» in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life.”⁴

The relationship between work and family is clearly expressed in the Encyclical Letter *Laborem exercens* where the Pope says that “work constitutes a foundation for the formation of family life, which is a natural right and something that man is called to. (...) Work is a condition for making it possible to found a family, since the family requires the means of subsistence which man normally gains through work. (...) 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. (...) In fact, the family is simultaneously a community made possible by work and the first school of work, within the home, for every person” (*LE, 10*).

When the Pope speaks of the working person he seems to be referring to that fundamental aspect of the person’s vocation to be the head of a family. The understanding of this call leads us to the logical right that has to be respected. Such conception is clearly expressed in *Familiaris Consortio*⁵ in which the Pope proclaims

4. Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem (MD)* of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II, on the Dignity and Vocation of Women on the occasion of the Marian Year, August 15, 1988, n. 7.
5. Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio (FC)*, of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II, on the Scope of Christian Families in today’s world, November 22, 1981.

the right of every man and woman to found a family and to own all the means adequate to sustain it (*FC*, 46). This intimate, interactive link between family and society is at the base of some important considerations.

The Family and the World of Work.

The Second Vatican Council had already declared that God had made the marriage the founding principle of human society. Thus the family becomes the first and basic cell of society. The family is both foundation and nourishment to society, being by its nature at the service of life (*FC*, 42). However, the family not only contributes to the demographic growth of society. The family is the first and basic educator to the extent that it has become almost a common place to say that what the person has not learned in the family, he or she will not learn elsewhere. As a matter of fact, the person *learns how to learn* in the family, that is, we all acquire the ability to incorporate and to adapt ourselves in an appropriate way to the social group.

The family, and more explicitly, the couple, is seen as the basic sphere of social commitment. This congregation presupposes, of course, the certitude about the unique and irreplaceable value of the family for the development of society.

Man and woman are defined by work in the proem of *Laborem exercens*. In these opening lines, in fact, work is defined as: "any activity by man, whether manual or intellectual, whatever its nature or circumstances; it means any human activity that can and must be recognised as work, in the midst of all the many activities of which man is capable and to which he is predisposed by his very nature, by virtue of humanity itself." The image of the Creator making a pause after having completed his work on the seventh day is there to indicate that God delegates on man and woman the continuation of his work. "The word of God's revelation is profoundly marked by the fundamental truth that man, created in the image of God, shares by his work in the activity, and perfects it as he advances further and further in the discovery of the resources and values contained in the whole of creation" (*LE*, 25). Thus from the beginning human beings appear as workers. Work constitutes their very life in spite of the fact that sometimes, because of sin, it will be arduous.

The presence of every man and woman in society is, therefore a contribution to its growth and elevation through work. The family has the obligation to prepare its

members to assume this task responsibly. Within the prevailing social cultural context the family is seen simply as the supplier of man power to society. This conception becomes more and more prevalent in the dominant economic model and yet, nothing could be more contrary to revealed truth.

This way of seeing work leads to the identification of the persons with other instruments of production. In fact, working men and women are considered elements of production at the same level with other inanimate tools which become more sophisticated every day and end up by superseding direct human work. This conception ignores the subjective dimension of work and tends to forget that whoever performs the action is a person. This way the sacredness of the human dignity is ignored or even worse, violated. Work should be accomplished under those conditions that allow the persons that performs it to grow up, to achieve full realisation, to experience personhood, to discover that through his or her action he or she is contributing with its own being manifested through work, to the continuation and perfecting of the great work initiated by the Creator.

The family has to accomplish a mission which is imperative in order to render this vision of work real. It is precisely in the context of the family that each one must discover and understand what it means to be a person. "The family constitutes the natural habitat and the most efficient instrument of humanisation and personalisation in society; she cooperates in an original and profound way to the construction of the world, making human life possible, especially through the custody and transmission of virtues and values" (*FC*, 43). Each family must be a school where each person be allowed to express freely him or herself, to grasp his or her own dignity, and to respect others. It is necessary to discover the true objectives of each family, its real values, the type of relationships existing among its members. A truly free person will resist slavery and to this purpose the family has to train its members. It must be remembered however, that, more than through words we educate through our own example. No one who is a prey of consumerism will be able to transmit to others the true sense of freedom. This much is also true of those who are slaves of the thirst for immediate enjoyment beyond control, for money and power.

To work, according to the Christian conception, means to perform an action together with others and for the benefit of others. In other words, in community and in a spirit of service. This is a formidable challenge that the family in the modern world has to face.

Living with others and for others is the most beautiful expression of true

community, of *communio* in the Christian sense. "In the family the mutual gift of self by husband and wife creates an environment in which children can be born and develop their potentialities, become aware of their dignity and prepare to face their unique and individual destiny."⁶ Unfortunately we must admit that we live in a society for which all this is pure absurdity. Once more we must remember that present day society, dominated by the economic value sees in the family a simple supplier of man power. The sense of the other, self denial, solidarity, are virtues which contradict the ideal of power and dominion over others. Such conception of life and work is seen as a challenge to the spirit of competition, the very heart of the system of production. It is necessary to gain awareness of this fact assuming with courage the mission to educate solitary men and women.

Solidarity is learned by living in solidarity. Sharing is learned through sharing. Magnanimity is acquired through the struggle against one's selfishness. The family has to develop the context for and become a living experience of communion and participation. "The very experience of communion and participation which should characterize the daily life of the family, constitutes its first and foremost contribution to society. The relationships among the members of the familiar community must be inspired and guided by the law of «gratuitousness» which respects and favours in each and everyone personal dignity as the only value title and thus becomes cordial welcome, encounter and dialogue availability free of any personal interest, generous service, deep solidarity" (*FC*, 43). This way the family will assume its function as primary and irreplaceable school where people learn to live socially. "In order to overcome today's widespread individualistic mentality, what is required is a *concrete commitment to solidarity and charity*, beginning in the family with the mutual support of husband and wife and the care which the different generations give to one another. In this sense the family too can be called a community of work and solidarity" (*CA*, 49). The solitary person becomes the cornerstone of society, the solid foundation of the common good through a realistic commitment with the weaker members of society, with those which are left aside, margined for reasons of race, colour, age, sex or religion.

In the intimacy of the home, through the relations between parents and children, between brothers and sisters, it is necessary to learn to experience the joy of self

6. Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* (*CA*) addressed 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. 39.

gift without any interest for personal gain. This way it will be understood that the creation of a favourable milieu for the growth of all, is the result of the contribution of all. It will become evident that the first ones to benefit from it will be those that have contributed to its development. This supposes, of course, that each member of the family group be given the opportunity to assume his or her own responsibility without undue pressures that will slow the process of growth. There is a need to create spaces for personal expression that has to be encouraged and respected.

A family where these values are experienced will be making a positive contribution to the creation of a society where work will be free, responsible and shared. A society in which each person can be and fully express him or herself through his or her own activity.

In contemporary society where everyday work becomes more impersonal and depersonalising, working men and women must be able to find in the family the appropriate environment where they can express their affectivity and at the same time feel that they are loved by the other members. This is indeed one of the functions of the nuclear family. Enriching this sociological vision with the Christian conception we come to the conclusion that the family must become a true school where each member learns to contribute to the coming of the civilisation of love. What we have said up to this point must be accomplished in a context of mutual love which will give its full meaning to the life of each person as well as of the whole family.

Society and the Family

Primary and fundamental duty of society is that of creating an environment which favours the realisation of life that it be truly human. "Man receives from God his essential dignity and with it the capacity to transcend every social order so as to move towards truth and goodness. But he is also conditioned by the social structure in which he lives, by the education he has received and by his environment. These elements can either help or hinder his living in accordance with the truth. The decisions which create a human environment can give rise to specific structures of sin which impede the full realisation of those who are in any way oppressed by them. To destroy such structures and replace them with more authentic forms of living in community is a task which demands courage and patience" (CA, 38).

"The first and fundamental structure for «human ecology» is *the family*, in which man receives his first formative ideas about truth and goodness, and learns

what it means to love and to be loved, and thus what it actually means to be a person" (CA, 39).

Salaried work is performed, usually outside the home. It is important to create those conditions which are necessary in order to make the work an activity that allows each person to attain full realisation and to fulfil his or her vocation.

The conditions under which work is performed must be such as to allow for the creation of a human environment. Unfortunately under present conditions work, especially industrial work, has become dehumanising. It is not possible in many instances to discover the sense of one's activity, especially in as much as it is related to one's growth and to the service of society. In the words of John Paul II: "In today's world, the majority of people 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. They have no possibility of acquiring the basic knowledge which would enable them to express their creativity and develop their potential" (CA, 33).

The problem of wages represents one of the hardest challenges in the search for a just society. The Pope recognizes, however, that so far there seems to be no better way of doing justice to the working person, at least on theoretical basis. The main difficulty is the fact that it is not possible to measure the amount to be paid from the quantity produced alone. From the first social Encyclicals the concept (not necessarily the term) of family wage appears. Bypassing technical aspects, it must be underlined that according to the Church's social teaching, the person that works has the right to perceive for his or her work, a remuneration that may suffice to restore his or her strength as well as to provide for the needs of his or her family. It is not possible to measure with mathematical precision the fruits of the work of a person even in those cases in which the contract is based upon the amount of matter which is produced or transformed. It would be unfair to retribute the worker with one amount that will not allow the person to form or maintain a family.

Another important issue is that of the work of women, be it performed outside the home, or as part of the daily tasks of a house wife. One of the most significant changes that have taken place in Europe in recent times is the work of women outside the home. Statistics show an increase and the effects of this new trend on child care, family relationships and the democratisation of the family structure, among others, cannot be ignored. The Church is often misinterpreted about the defence of the right of the woman to work in the house so as to render her roles of mother and worker compatible. Employment should be organised in a manner that

make it compatible with child-rearing. Furthermore, women should not in any way be discriminated against in the workplace because of their family responsibilities nor, indeed, because they are women. This viewpoint does not mean condemning the woman to make of the home some sort of prison. The woman has the same right to work as the man for there is no difference between them from the standpoint of personal dignity. The Church recognises that widespread social and cultural traditions have reduced the role of the woman in the family only to being a mother and a wife, not allowing space for public roles reserved exclusively to males. However, the Pope recognises that today in many societies women work in nearly every sector of life.

The teachings of the popes stress the fact that the woman seems to be better fitted to understand and solve certain delicate problems of family life which is the foundation of social life. What the Church affirms is that the woman should not be obliged to work outside the home. The work of the woman in the household is not a humiliation but rather a consecration. In fact, the woman cooperates directly with the good functioning of the family and this is a great task which could be seen as a true mission which requires a proper preparation in order to be competent for the various activities. The woman has to be able to rationalise her activity, she must understand the psychology of the family in order to learn the "pedagogy of the effort" which allows for a better organisation of her own contribution to the welfare of the family, as well as for the accomplishment of her function as an agent of education. The defence of the work of women in the house implies the elaboration of a new conception of work which may stress the dignity of this type of work, as well as the struggle for some form of remuneration for this activity, at least under the form of social security which will guarantee health care, the necessary attention in old age, and other types of protection.

Society and the State, therefore, must develop those conditions and mechanisms that guarantee the just remuneration of work. In spite of the dominating ideology the principle of ancient capitalism according to which the market possesses the necessary elements to regulate itself and to guarantee justice, is not acceptable from an ethical point of view. As the Pope reminds us once again, this principle favours the creation of an institutional, juridical or political vacuum which will penalise the worker on the long run. He concludes that "the principal task of the State is to guarantee individual freedom and other conditions that allow those who work to enjoy the fruits of their labours and thus be encouraged to work efficiently and honestly" (*cf. CA, 48*). Even though the State cannot ensure the right to work to

all citizens, it has however, the duty to create conditions which will ensure job opportunities (*Ib.*).

We cannot simply identify the State with society. The conclusion is not however, to disengage oneself from any responsibility thus leaving all decisions to the State. The true way is one of solidarity and responsibility which will lead to the political commitment of all members of society. Instead of spending our lives criticising the State; it is necessary to take things seriously, exercising the right to vote with intelligence and responsibility, participating actively in politics, not in search for power and personal gain, but at the service of the community, even with one's sacrifice when this would be required. Christians must be present on the political arena with a clear project towards a society characterized by solidarity and brotherhood, where justice may reign and the rights of all be respected. Only thus will there be space for the necessary conditions for a stable and just peace that the world of today so badly needs.