

A COMPARATIVE NOTE ON THE SOCIAL CONCEPT
OF WORK IN AQUINAS AND IN RECENT PAPAL
DOCUMENTS

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It is the purpose of this short note to project the contemporary validity of Aquinistic thought on work in its social context, in relation to some recent Papal documents.

One of the basic notions on work, in Christian thought, is that work derives its value from the dignity of a human person as a worker. It has always been paramount, in the teaching of the Church, that work cannot be considered simply as a market instrument but primarily as man's highest action.

The concept of work as a means by which man ennobles himself is one which occurs in both *Rerum Novarum* and in *Quadragesimo Anno* and, more specifically, in *Mater et Magistra* and in *Populorum Progressio*. In the latter document, Paul VI writes as follows:

'God has endowed man with intelligence, imagination and sensitivity, and furthermore, has given him the means whereby in one way or another he can continue God's own work; whether one is an artist or a manual worker or whether one is involved in the running of affairs, in industry or in agriculture — who works, creates'.

This view seems to be similar to the one expounded in the *Summa Theologica* where Aquinas rejects the contention that man has to bow to whatever conditions of work a prevailing market situation dictates. He writes in the *Prima Secundae*:

'Respondeo dicendum quod meritum et merces ad idem referuntur: id enim merces dicitur quod alicui recompensatur pro retributione operis, vel laboris, quasi quoddam pretium ipsius; unde sicut reddere iustum pretium pro re accepta ab aliquo est actus iustitiae',

since — he adds in a conclusion of overriding importance to the evolution of the philosophy of work —

'creatura rationalis seipsam movet ad agendum
per liberum arbitrium: unde sua actio habet
rationem mentis: quod non est in aliis creaturis'¹

A further light which Aquinas sheds on contemporary considerations on work concerns its social role. The Church today, for example, affirms the social value of work as a force binding men together, one that, properly used, can help men, congregating together at work, to achieve mutually higher standards of living by contributing to each other the values, attitudes and experiences of their individual personalities.

Thus, in *Populorum Progressio*, one reads that

'when work takes place together, when hope, hardship,
ambition and joy are shared, work unites together
men's will, intellect and heart; it is through
work that men realize they are brothers'.

There are some people who postulate that Aquinas would have disagreed with this view on the grounds that the Angelic Doctor's concept of society was such that man was essentially a social agent. And some others have sought to establish, for this reason, an identity between the Aquinistic view and the Marxian doctrine of the collectivity of labour which is at the roots of a determination, in Marxian thought, of economic value dependent on 'the labour-time socially-necessary'.

It is true that, in at least two places, Aquinas expresses a thought which, prima facie, might appear to be straight out of *Das Kapital*. Thus, in the *Secunda Secundae*, he writes:

'Quaelibet pars id quod est totius est; quilibet
autem homo est pars communitatis et ita quod est,
est communitatis'.

And later he states:

'Ipse totus homo ordinatur ut ad finem, ad totam
communitatem'.²

But to interpret the above quotations to imply that Aquinas held that the human value of work depended exclusively on that economic value conferred on it by society would be to ignore the Angelic Doctor's basic principle on the nature of the human personality. For indeed, he enunciates that principle in words as incisive as they are succinct:

¹S.Th., I-II ae, q. 114, a. 1.

²ibid., q. 65, a. 1

'Persona significat id quod est perfectissimum in tota nature'.³

In this perspective, man has an end unto himself, irrespective of society, since man's teleology is ultimately directed towards God and not towards society, which, in Aquinas' view, is simply a means towards the attainment of that finality, and not the finality itself. It is for this reason that Aquinas emphasizes all along that man's intellectual nature confers a special dignity on human work.

Through work, man seeks God, completing the work of his creation. In *De Veritate*, Aquinas writes:

'Et ideo sicut Deus propter hoc est premium efficiens agit in omni agente, ita propter hoc quod est ultimus finis appetitur in omni fine. Sed hoc est appeti ipsum Deum implicite in omni actione'.⁴

Paul VI expresses himself similarly in *Populorum Progressio*:

'For the Christian, work means much more; it should be the creation of a supernatural world, one that will not be complete unless we build together that Perfect Man whom St. Paul defines as "the one who achieves the fulfilment of Christ".'

It is to this fulfilment in God, through society, that Aquinas refers in his concept of the relationship between the work of an individual and that individual's role in society. In his thought, man is bound to help society to achieve its ends, which theoretically coincide with his own; but he should not be so bound to society as to lose thereby his individuality and the expression of his personal freedom.

'Homo non ordinatur ad communitatem politicam secundum se totum et secundum omnia sua'.⁵

This concept is further clarified.

'Et ideo non oportet quod quilibet actus ejus sit meritorius vel demeritorius per ordinem ad communitatem politicam: sed totum quod homo est, et quod potest, et habet, ordinandum est ad Deum; et ideo omnis actus hominis bonus,

³ *ibid.*, q. 29, a. 3

⁴ *De Veritate*, q. 22, a. 2

⁵ *S.Th.*, I-II ae, q. 21, a. 4 ad 3.

vel malus, habet rationem meriti, vel demeriti,
apud Deum, quantum est ex ipsa ratione actus’.

And *Populorum Progressio* echoes ‘that work is human only when it is intelligent and free’.⁶

It is interesting to note that these basic Aquinistic concepts are to be found not only in Papal documents but are emphasized in international legislation. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights and the European Social Charter all affirm man’s right to work as emanating immediately and necessarily from man’s free and unfettered nature.

⁶*Populorum Progressio*, para. 28.