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Neither Cog, Nor Instrument: Work and the Dignity of Man

POPE SAINT JOHN PAUL II

*One of Saint John Paul II's great contributions to Catholic social teaching is *Laborem exercens*, his encyclical on human work. It was promulgated in 1981 and is available in its entirety on the [Vatican website](#). The excerpts that follow (pars.6,7 and 15) emphasize the importance of man as the proper subject of work.*

[H]owever true it may be that man is destined for work and called to it, in the first place work is “for man” and not man “for work.” Through this conclusion one rightly comes to recognize the pre-eminence of the subjective meaning of work over the objective one. Given this way of understanding things, and presupposing that different sorts of work that people do can have greater or lesser objective value, let us try nevertheless to show that each sort is judged above all by *the measure of the dignity* of the subject of work, that is to say the person, *the individual who carries it out*. On the other hand: independently of the work that every man does, and presupposing that this work constitutes a purpose—at times a very demanding one—of his activity, this purpose does not possess a definitive meaning in itself. In fact, in the final analysis it is always man who is *the purpose of the work*, whatever work it is that is done by man—even if the common scale of values rates it as the merest “service,” as the most monotonous, even the most alienating work.

It is precisely these fundamental affirmations about work that always emerged from the wealth of Christian truth, especially from the very message of the “Gospel of work,” thus creating the basis for a new way of thinking, judging and acting. In the modern period, from the beginning of the industrial age, the Christian truth about work had to oppose the various trends of *materialistic and economic* thought.

For certain supporters of such ideas, work was understood and treated as a sort of “merchandise” that the worker—especially the industrial worker—sells to the employer, who at the same time is the possessor of the capital, that is to say, of all the working tools and means that make production possible. This way of looking at work was widespread especially in the first half of the nineteenth century. Since then, explicit expressions of this sort have almost disappeared, and have given way to more human ways of thinking about work and evaluating it. The interaction between the worker and the tools and means of production has given rise to the development of various forms of capitalism—parallel with various forms of collectivism—into which other socioeconomic elements have entered as a consequence of new concrete circumstances, of the activity of workers’ associations and public authorities, and of the emergence of large transnational enterprises. Nevertheless, the *danger* of treating work as a special kind of “merchandise,” or as an impersonal “force” needed for production (the expression “workforce” is in fact in common use) *always exists*, especially when the whole way of looking at the question of economics is marked by the premises of materialistic economism.

A systematic opportunity for thinking and evaluating in this way, and in a certain sense a stimulus for doing so, is provided by the quickening process of the development of a one-sidedly materialistic civilization, which gives prime importance to the objective dimension of work, while the subjective dimension—everything in direct or indirect relationship with the subject of work—remains on a secondary level. In all cases of this sort, in every social situation of this type, there is a confusion or even a reversal of the order laid down from the beginning by the words of the Book of Genesis: *man is treated as an instrument of production*, whereas he—he alone, independently of the work he does—ought to be treated as the effective subject of work and its true maker and creator. Precisely this reversal of order, whatever the programme or name under which it occurs, should rightly be called “capitalism”—in the sense more fully explained below. Everybody knows that capitalism has a definite historical meaning as a system, an economic and social system, opposed to “socialism” or “communism.” But in the light of the analysis of the fundamental reality of the whole economic process—first and foremost of the production structure that work is—it should be recognized that the error of early capitalism can be repeated wherever man is in a way treated on the same level as the whole complex of the material means of production, as an instrument and not in accordance with the true dignity of his work—that is to say, where he is not treated as subject and maker, and for this very reason as the true purpose of the whole process of production.

This explains why the analysis of human work in the light of the words concerning man’s “dominion” over the earth goes to the very heart of the ethical and social question. This concept should also find *a central place* in the whole *sphere of social and economic policy*, both within individual countries and in the wider field of international and intercontinental relationships, particularly with reference to the tensions making themselves felt in the world not only between East and West but also between North and South. Both John XXIII in the Encyclical *Mater et Magistra* and Paul VI in the Encyclical *Populorum Progressio* gave special attention to these dimensions of the modern ethical and social question.

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Thus, *the principle of the priority of labor over capital* is a postulate of the order of social morality. It has key importance both in the system built on the principle of private ownership of

the means of production and also in the system in which private ownership of these means has been limited even in a radical way. Labor is in a sense inseparable from capital; in no way does it accept the antinomy, that is to say, the separation and opposition with regard to the means of production that has weighed upon human life in recent centuries as a result of merely economic premises. When man works, using all the means of production, he also wishes the fruit of this work to be used by himself and others, and he wishes to be able to take part in the very work process as a sharer in responsibility and creativity at the workbench to which he applies himself.

From this spring certain specific rights of workers, corresponding to the obligation of work. They will be discussed later. But here it must be emphasized, in general terms, that the person who works desires *not only* due remuneration for his work; he also wishes that, within the production process, provision be made for him to be able to *know* that in his work, even on something that is owned in common, he is working “*for himself*.” This awareness is extinguished within him in a system of excessive bureaucratic centralization, which makes the worker feel that he is just a cog in a huge machine moved from above, that he is for more reasons than one a mere production instrument rather than a true subject of work with an initiative of his own. The Church’s teaching has always expressed the strong and deep conviction that man’s work concerns not only the economy but also, and especially, personal values. The economic system itself and the production process benefit precisely when these personal values are fully respected. In the mind of Saint Thomas Aquinas, this is the principal reason in favor of private ownership of the means of production. While we accept that for certain well-founded reasons exceptions can be made to the principle of private ownership—in our own time we even see that the system of “socialized ownership” has been introduced—nevertheless the personalist *argument still holds good* both on the level of principles and *on the practical level*. If it is to be rational and fruitful, any socialization of the means of production must take this argument into consideration. Every effort must be made to ensure that in this kind of system also the human person can preserve his awareness of working “*for himself*.” If this is not done, incalculable damage is inevitably done throughout the economic process, not only economic damage but first and foremost damage to man.

Pope Saint John Paul II served as pope from 1978 to 2005. He was canonized in 2014.

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