

# *Laborem Exercens*

On Human Work

Pope John Paul II, 1981

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## 1. Historical Context

The body of work that was to become known as Catholic Social Teaching began with an Encyclical letter written by Pope Leo XII in 1891 called *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of Labour). As successive popes have added to the body of teaching this body of teaching has grown and addresses topics from the concentration of wealth to setting out conditions for world peace. Following the Second Vatican Council (1963-1965) Pope Paul VI wrote two letters that covered a wide range of social concerns on an international scale, *Populorum Progressio* (The development of peoples - 1967) and *Octagesima Adveniens* (The coming eightieth [anniversary of *Rerum novarum*] - 1971). In his first encyclical addressing social issues *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work) Pope John Paul II revisited the topic of "work" first addressed by Leo XII 90 years and examined it at considerable depth. As a native of Poland John Paul II was a man who knew Marxism as both an economic theory and a concrete political regime and was well aware of the popular political and social movements for change that were beginning to influence thinking throughout Eastern Europe in 1981. This context shaped both the proclamation and reception of this important Encyclical.

In June 1979 John Paul II had visited Poland. This trip was marked by large enthusiastic crowds and the Pope's support for the *Solidarity* movement in the struggle to bring freedom and human rights to this nation.

In Poland, during September 1981, the National Congress of Delegates of the *Solidarity* (*Solidarność*) met in two sessions in Gdańsk and elected Lech Wałęsa as President of the union. It issued a "Message to working people of Eastern Europe" extending greetings and words of support to workers of Albania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the German Democratic Republic, Romania, Hungary and all nations of the Soviet Union. The message included the following:

As the first independent trade union in our post-war history we are deeply aware of our interlocking fates. We assure that, contrary to lies spreading in your countries, we are a genuine, 10-million-strong employee organisation set up as a result of worker strikers. We aim to fight for improved living standards of all working people. We support those of you who decided to embark on the difficult road of struggle for a free trade union movement. We believe that your and our representatives will soon be able to meet with a view to exchanging union experiences. <sup>1</sup>

The two sessions of the *Solidarity* national congress were held 5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> September and then 26<sup>th</sup> September to October 7, 1981. Between these two sessions Pope John Paul II proclaimed *Laborem Exercens* on September 14<sup>th</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.solidarity.gov.pl/?document=89>

On December 13<sup>th</sup> Martial law was declared in Poland under General Wojciech Jaruzelski. All NGO's organisations, including Solidarity "Solidarność" were suspended and about ten thousand union and opposition activists were held in detention camps. The following day December 14<sup>th</sup>, general strikes in companies, mines, and steelworks factories, shipyards and harbours occurred all over the country. The strikes were broken up by anti-terrorist units and the army. On December 18<sup>th</sup> Pope John Paul II appealed for an end to the bloodshed in Poland.

## 2. Overview of the Document

This is the first of John Paul II's social encyclical. *Laborem Exercens* begins with a Christian anthropology, humanity as persons made in the divine image. The implications of this anthropology for public policy are expanded, and related to both international and national issues.

The main concern of *Laborem Exercens* is to affirm the dignity of workers as human persons. The encyclical identifies a potential threat by reductionist perspectives in the economic world that view labour as simply a means of production. Labour, rather than being an independent entity, is constituted by human persons and the work that they do.

The document contains a philosophical analysis and critique of both Marxist and capitalist systems. While Marxism sets labour and capital in opposition, capitalism can see workers as instruments to be exploited. In *Laborem Exercens* the point is made that all capital is the result of labour. The issue then becomes the proper use and ownership of capital. While the right to private ownership of property including the means of production is affirmed, it is the view of the church that this right is not absolute but subject to the common good.

### Critique of Marxism and Liberal Capitalism

Central to the encyclical is the development the Marxist idea of the person self-actualising through work. There is a clear implication that labour be not viewed as a commodity. Work has intrinsic significance, independent of what is produced, because work is linked to self actualization and self realisation.

The document insists on the priority of labour over capital on biblical and theological perspectives. In practice this means the first concern must be the quality of life of the workers and not the maximization of profit.

The concept of human rights underpins *Laborem Exercens* and in this context workers' rights are discussed in relation to employment practices in general with particular difficulties related to large impersonal corporations. Wages and other social benefits, like pensions, health insurance, and workers compensation are also examined. These rights are linked to social morality. John Paul II defends the rights of workers to combine and bargain with employers and this solidarity affirmed even to the point of the right to strike. One example of respect for the dignity of the worker is the identification of the right to of workers to participate in decisions that affected them.

Work is described as a share in the divine creative activity, as well as participation in the redeeming cross of Christ. In transforming the world, all work helps to make life more

human. This view is in stark contrast to secular materialism that equates employment to only a contract for wages.

### 3. Key Points of Document

#### **Work - making life more human**

*Laborem Exercens* identifies work as the key to the whole social question (LE #3). As an organic development of the Church's social action and teaching it states that every human person at work reflects the action of the creator. Work bears a particular mark of humanity, a person operating within a community of persons. The question of work, seen as a fundamental dimension of human existence, is linked to injustice within and between nations. New developments and changes in technological, economic and political conditions which impact the world of work influence the disproportionate distribution of wealth and poverty and hence challenge us to enable just development for all. Even in the age of ever mechanized work the proper subject of work continues to be the human person. So when people are treated as instruments in the production process this is identified as a threat to the right order of values, for workers are the ends not just the means of work.

#### **Work in the subjective sense: The human person as the Subject of Work**

The source of the dignity of work stems from its subjective dimension, "the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done, but the fact that the one doing it is a person" (LE #6). This is the "gospel of work".

The encyclical recalls Church teaching regarding the priority of labour over capital. All the technological advances that currently act as instruments of work are the results of work previously undertaken. Everything contained in the concept of capital is only a collection of things, humans alone are persons. Worker solidarity, the right of workers to combine and bargain with employers, is affirmed even to the extent of strikes. As capital is the product of labour, labour and capital cannot be in opposition to each other. Capital is meant to serve labour. Economism is identified as the error of considering human labour according to its economic purpose only, and materialism is the error that views human values to be at the service of material things. The Catholic understanding of the right to private property as subordinated to the right to common use, "to the fact that goods are meant for everyone" (LE #14), is reiterated.

#### **Workers Rights: Wages and other social benefits**

The rights of workers are to be seen within the broad context of human rights. Not only remuneration for work but a sense of personal involvement is needed. The worker is more than a cog in a huge impersonal system. A just wage and other social benefits are the concrete means that verify the justice of the whole socioeconomic system. Just remuneration for the work of an adult who is responsible for a family is identified as remuneration that adequately provides for that family and its future. The right of association (LE # 20) is affirmed. Unions have a role in the struggle for social justice and are not simply a reflection of the class structure of society. The dignity of agricultural work is addressed as are the rights of people with disability. Disabled people should be

offered work according to their capabilities, "For this is demanded by their dignity as persons and as subjects of work" (LE #22). People have the right to seek better conditions of life in another country (LE#23). The most important thing is that the person working away from his native land should not be placed at a disadvantage in comparison with other workers in that society in the matter of workers rights.

### **Spirituality of Work**

The meaning of work, a sharing in the activity of the Creator, is linked to a person's self development and self realisation (see *Gaudium et Spes* ,#34). Christ, the man of work, "has appreciation and respect for human work" (LE #26). Christians share in the redeeming cross of Christ by the toil of work. The risen Christ animates and strengthens the efforts to make life more human. This is a vital concern for the kingdom of God.

#### 4. Key Quotes

Through work man must earn his daily bread and contribute to the continual advance of science and technology and, above all, to elevating unceasingly the cultural and moral level of the society within which he lives in community with those who belong to the same family (Introduction).

Work means any activity by man, whether manual or intellectual, whatever its nature or circumstances; it means any human activity that can and must be recognized 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 (Introduction).

Taking the whole content of the Gospel message as its point of departure, especially the fact that the one who, while *being God*, became like us in all things devoted most of the years of his life on earth to *manual work* at the carpenter's bench. This circumstance constitutes in itself the most eloquent "Gospel of work", showing that the basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done but the fact that the one who is doing it is a person. The sources of the dignity of work are to be sought primarily in the subjective dimension, not in the objective one. (LE#6)

Human work is *a key*, probably *the essential key*, to the whole social question, if we try to see that question really from the point of view of man's good. And if the solution-or rather the gradual solution-of the social question, which keeps coming up and becomes ever more complex, must be sought in the direction of "making life more human", then the key, namely human work, acquires fundamental and decisive importance (LE#3)

However 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". (LE#6)

*everything that is at the service of work*, everything that in the present state of technology constitutes its ever more highly perfected "instrument", is *the result of work*. (LE#12)

*the error of economism [is]* that of considering human labour solely according to its economic purpose. This fundamental error of thought can and must be called *an error of materialism* (LE#13)

The Church considers it her duty to speak out on work from the viewpoint of its human value and of the moral order to which it belongs, and she sees this as one of her important tasks within the service that she renders to the evangelical message as a whole. At the same time she sees it as her particular duty *to form a spirituality of work* which will help all people to come closer, through work, to God, the Creator and Redeemer, to participate in his salvific plan for man and the world and to deepen their friendship with Christ in their lives by accepting, through faith, a living participation in



his threefold mission as Priest, Prophet and King, as the Second Vatican Council so eloquently teaches. (LE#24)

## 5. Reception

The reception of *Laborem Exercens* by journalists, academics and commentators was significant. Some journalists argued that in this document John Paul had severed the link between Christianity and capitalism. In a number of academic circles *Laborem Exercens* was viewed as so radical that the Pope's concept of work could modify the very structure of capitalism. Commentators opinions ranged across a spectrum of ideas. At one end there were academic reviews which examined the underlying philosophy of the document. At the other end of the spectrum was an embrace of the encyclical as a blueprint to assist those who were struggling for economic justice.

Immediately following the proclamation of the encyclical in 1981, the teachings contained in *Laborem Exercens* had an impact beyond the world of the Catholic Church, particularly in the United States and other developed nations. Throughout the encyclical the Pope demonstrates a comprehensive understanding of the thinking that underpins both Capitalism and Communism and critiques both of these systems in the light of the gospel. This critique ignited public discussion in both the seemingly unbounded marketplace of capitalism and in the controlled economies influenced by Marxist thought.

The document was received according to particular circumstances, especially in the countries of the developing world that had a significant Catholic population. In Latin American countries where Church teaching had in the past sometimes been misused to oppress workers, the document was received by the oppressed workers as a message of hope and understanding. In Poland and other countries in Eastern Europe the document was viewed as a political statement in support for the *Solidarity* movement and its action in attempting to bring about reforms in the Eastern Bloc nations influenced by Russia. Twenty years after its proclamation the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops through its Office of Domestic Social Development released a social justice statement *The Dignity of Work and Workers: The Message of Laborem Exercens*. This statement contains a summary and a strong reaffirmation of meaning and message of this ground breaking encyclical. during the Workchoices debate 2006-2007 in Australian, *Laborem Exercens* formed the foundation for critiques of the Workchoices policy by some Australian Catholic Bishops, academics and those working for social justice.

*Laborem Exercens* stands as clear teaching on the place and role of work in human life, a teaching that stands as constant challenge to present and future generations that work is for the person, not the person for work.

## 6. Discussion Questions

1. *Laborem Exercens* suggests that it is through work that we realise our humanity. Discuss this idea with reference to paragraph 3.

2. Technology can be seen as

- a) the human person serves machines in the production of goods.
- b) human persons produce goods with the assistance of machines.

Comment on these two views in the light of paragraph 5.

3. *Laborem Exercens* sees technology as an ally when it assists and augments work and improves its quality. Technology can become almost an enemy when the mechanisation of work takes away all personal satisfaction and the incentive to creativity and responsibility. Discuss these two views of technology using specific examples.

4. *Laborem Exercens* identifies the danger of treating work as a special kind of “merchandise” or as an impersonal force needed for productions (#7) . What implications might this idea have with regard to the use of the terms “Work Force” and “Human Resources” in contemporary discourse about work?

5. *Laborem Exercens* identifies an intrinsic link between work and the formation of family life. With reference to paragraph 10 outline what the encyclical says as to how these two values should be balanced.

6. Identify some of the rights and responsibilities of Labour or Trade Unions as outlined in paragraph 20 of *Laborem Exercens*.

7. Identify and discuss some of the reasons given by *Laborem Exercens* in supporting the right of persons with a disability to work.

8. According to *Laborem Exercens* by means of work the human person shares in the work of creation, “by their labour they are unfolding the Creator’s work” (# 37) Discuss the implication of this view for a spirituality of work

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16<sup>th</sup> April, 2007 ([www.parra.catholic.org.au/Bishop/speeches.htm](http://www.parra.catholic.org.au/Bishop/speeches.htm)) accessed 18/05/2007

## Web links

*Laborem Exercens* (On Human Labour)

[http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0217/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0217/_INDEX.HTM)

*Redemptor Hominis*

[http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0218/\\_INDEX.HTM](http://www.vatican.va/edocs/ENG0218/_INDEX.HTM)

*Gaudium et Spes*

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

## Solidarnosc

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Solidarity](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Solidarity)

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