

# Seeing the Social Question through the Lens of Human Work and Alienation

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## Introduction

In discussing the body of Catholic Social Teachings (CST), an inquiry into one's social reality is essential to make relevant the Christian mission<sup>1</sup> entrusted to every baptized. To the charge that "religion is an opium of the people,"<sup>2</sup> a reducer of people to mere passive spectators in the face of suffering, the proper reply is not to demonize the quote's origin but to scrutinize religion and see how to make it not solely as "other-worldly" but primarily as "this-worldly." For an honest scrutiny of Jesus's mission will reveal that he did not entice people to enter the Kingdom of Heaven by merely making promises beyond this life, but instead by providing an "ethical response" to the question of suffering experienced by people, especially those marginalized by society. Jesus' healings, exorcisms and table-fellowships were concrete signs of compassion that removed obstacles to the person's experience of fullness of life freed from the effects of sin. The criteria he set on Judgment Day, which pertain to bodily needs, are but concrete challenges to uplift the living conditions of the least members of society<sup>3</sup>.

This challenge is as imposing as it was when Jesus started his mission and boldly proclaimed that he came "to bring good news to the poor."<sup>4</sup> Looking beyond the comfort of one's environment, the reality of disparity in lifestyle is too obvious to ignore. On one side of the spectrum are those who "have": proper nutrition, education, secured future, decent house; while at the other end are the "have-nots": those who eat not when they are hungry but when they have something to eat, those for whom education is a luxury more than a right, or those whom we meet but never give a second look. They are those who are at the margins of society, dependent on the generosity of others and lacking the capacity to be full masters of their fate. Such a social issue begs to be addressed in the light of rapid economic progress that has also seen the unabated rise of poverty. The nineteenth century Industrial Revolution saw the creation of vast wealth but it also gave rise to the social question that sought to challenge the libertarian approach to economic progress in light of the political and moral threat

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mt. 28:19-20.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, "A Criticism of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right," 1843.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Mt. 25: 31-46.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Lk. 4: 18-19.

posed by the condition of the working class and society at large. The social question asks what rights workers have, what responsibilities employers have to protect their employees, why there are people who *have* and those who *have-not*, what is the root of this problem of the gap between the rich and the poor.<sup>5</sup>

Every three years, the National Statistical Board of the Philippines comes up with a report on the present socio-economic condition. This report is contained in the Family Income Expenditure Survey (FIES) which was issued last 2003 and is used to gauge, among others, how wealth is distributed in society.

Reading the report does not inspire much, especially for those who are at the lower part of society, for one will realize that although there is more than enough wealth to go around, only a few benefit from it. Below are some interesting conclusions drawn from the most recent report:

1. According to the 2003 Family Income and Expenditure Survey (FIES), the richest 20% of the population account for 53% of total national income while the bottom 20% get only 4.63 percent. The income of the richest 10% of households is 21 times that of the poorest 10 percent.
2. If the shares to total income defined in the 2003 (FIES) were used to allocate the 2006 GDP, the poorest 10% would have a per capita annual income of just P2,781 while the richest 10% would have a per capita income of P56,695 (based on an average family size of five).
3. This inequality is further reflected in the huge gap between the wealth of the country's richest individuals and families and the poorest Filipinos. The US\$12.4 billion net worth as of 2006 of the country's 10 richest is equivalent to the combined annual income of the poorest 9.8 million households (i.e. P625 billion in 2003).<sup>6</sup>

This paper would like to answer this question by using the meaning of work as the focal point of understanding the problem and an impetus for social change. The succeeding discussion will draw from scriptures, Marx's theory of labor, and the social doctrine of the church.

### **Genesis 2 and 3: Something Good Becomes a Curse**

Let us start by locating man and woman in the creation accounts and re-visiting the story of the Fall.

In affirming that God created people in his own image and likeness, there is the fact that people are like God—a worker. God worked for six days to create the world, resting on the seventh day, and his work of creation

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed study of this gap, see the Family Income and Expenditure Survey (FIES) of 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Rosario Bella Guzman, "The Philippine Poverty Situation: Beyond Poverty Measures, Inequality Grows." *Ibon Features*. May 10, 2007, Vol. 13, No.10.

initiated the plan of salvation. God's work produced something good and people were put in the Garden of Eden to tend to it. God also made people share in his rationality and creativity (an expression of freedom) to become both stewards of creation and even co-creators. Thus, work is both literally and figuratively sharing in God's saving activity intended to benefit all of creation, including people. Yet how did work become a curse for people?

As stewards, Adam and Eve were given the charge over Eden with the freedom to eat from any tree except one. However, Adam and Eve used their freedom irresponsibly by eating the forbidden fruit, thus meriting them varied punishment, one of which was that human work would be a curse. God made work as punishment for their act of defiance:

*Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life . . . By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground.<sup>7</sup>*

From then on, human work has become a bane to human existence.

Implicit in the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2 is the truth that God created people for a particular purpose which is to glorify God.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, in affirming people's divine origin, the value, worth or dignity of people is rooted in being created in God's image who must bring this to complete fruition by glorifying God (cause) through attaining one's self-actualization (purpose). As St. Irenaeus aptly put it, "The glory of God is man fully alive, and the life of man is the vision of God."<sup>9</sup> Living life to its fullest reflects the greatness of the one who authored life itself, and what better way to do this than to work. St. Paul similarly affirms:

*For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.<sup>10</sup>*

People are given the capacity to determine what to do with their lives<sup>11</sup> and similarly to decide on the means to achieve their goal. Their efforts only find meaning if it serves the very purpose it was meant to be. With the application of rationality (capacity for self-determination) and creativity (capacity to make something for something), human work is therefore performed for a divine end, i.e. God's glory and the person's vision of God. As John Paul II asserts:

*People have to subdue the earth and dominate it, because as the 'image of God' they are people. . . capable of deciding about themselves, and with a tendency to self-realization.<sup>12</sup>*

<sup>7</sup> Gen. 3:17-19.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Pet. 4:11.

<sup>9</sup> *Against Heresies*, Book 4, 20:7.

<sup>10</sup> Eph. 2: 10.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Sir. 15:14.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *Laborem Exercens*, 73.

Yet, when people sinned, human work became the end itself, losing the transcendental aspect of this activity. Work has become a purely humanistic enterprise, only seeking people's own gain so much so that the fruits of their toil can deny them entry into the kingdom of God<sup>13</sup> and their wealth becomes a source of oppression or suffering for other people.<sup>14</sup> Sin has separated people from their origin, who is God, and this has caused people to live not with God but in suffering. Work was understood solely as "this-worldly" and its "other-worldly" aspects were disregarded. Therefore, instead of being a humanizing experience, a participation in the salvific plan, work stained by sin became a degrading experience that impeded people in reaching their ultimate destiny, and it became identified with bondage to evil (e.g. greed) or an abject way of life (e.g. poverty).

### I. Work as Alienation

Understanding the complexities of human work should lead to a comprehensive synopsis of the human nature and the productive activity. In the order of nature's existence authored by God, not only is creation an out-of-nothing event, but also a "creation-for-something" that characterizes the universe as a consistently purposeful experience. At a persistent vanguard in the person's existence, in view of the person's dignity being created in the image and likeness of the Creator, and thus being co-creator himself or herself, is the quest for reason why he or she exists, i.e., the propensity to create.

As a rational being, which is the person's most fundamental nature, one is disposed to understand the essence of this act of creativity, which is two-fold. First, the person is to create himself or herself which is the very act of self-actualization. Every individual exists with inherent faculties, abilities, and capacities. Acting upon these inherent features shapes up the uniqueness of each individual that, also by nature, is directed towards the intrinsically satisfying experience of mutuality in self-determination; therefore, in the creative process, an individual experiences his or her own subjectivity. Second, the person manipulates the environment around him or her. In the creative process of self-actualization, an individual acts upon his or her inherent faculties, ability, and capacity, and yet also "upon something". The world, at first, is merely an object before him or her. Once an individual places his or her creative hands on this particular world, the product is transformed into something that reflects one's self. Meaning,

<sup>13</sup> Lk. 18:25.

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Amos 2:6-7, "Thus says the Lord: For three transgressions of Israel, and for four, I will not revoke the punishment; because they sell the righteous for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals—they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth, and push the afflicted out of the way."

one's creative humanity is externalized that eventually humanizes the world. Therefore, the world is not merely an external object totally distinct from one's being. Rather, it is the very objectivity of one's self.

Within the two-fold essence of creative process lies the key features of human life's productive activity that integrates the world, the humane, and the social relationships into one order of existence. In general, productive activity should always take a vantage point as essentially laborious expression of human life which constantly aims at the transformation of both the way how people live and what human life should necessarily be. Productive activity is an experience that encompasses the most basic form of survival and the intrinsically satisfying world transformation that suits humanity's purposes in the realms of experiential subjectivity as actualized beings and the well-affirmed objectivity of beings as concrete phenomena.

As organic species, human beings exert effort in order to live. People work for food, water, shelter, and clothing to withstand the elements of man's material nature and the external environment. These basic needs are the primary material objects of human consciousness for survival. They need to be satisfied. As free and conscious beings, people produce goods not only for themselves but for others too. Primarily, a person works freely on something he or she needs. Free in a sense that he or she works at will in whatever fashion he or she enjoys. As everyone is endowed with unique abilities and capacities by nature, each one expresses his or her being through the work he or she can masterfully do and eventually get better yields. Recognition and acting upon individual uniqueness builds up a common understanding that no one can satisfy all needs by oneself alone. Thus, directly or indirectly, all individuals "work-with" and "work-for" a common disposition. Notwithstanding, the collective process of human activities within a social group magnifies every person who freely delivers products out of his own creativity.

Individually, a person freely and consciously works on something that completely reflects his or her needs or creative powers, whether the product is made to satisfy his or her basic needs or a display of his or her inherent ability. A sack yield of rice, for instance, reflects one's ability to grow rice ("palay") and the need for food. Or a wooden statue is indeed a reflection of one's appreciation for aesthetics. In whatever manner of expression, every produce of human work has on it an imprint of the "self" of a person who at the same time also recognizes others' needs and acknowledgement, i.e., in one way or the other, all share common disposition. Here, the collective dimension is also visible as social active responses.

Moreover, human intelligence does not limit people to simply meet the demands for survival through the most imaginable rustic means.

People invent tools in their quest for even the most unimaginable means to deliver goods for the satisfaction of human needs and further attain a more comfortable living. As the needs grow, and so does the need to produce. However, it is maintained that mass production through sophisticated means is only directed towards enriching the lives of the people, i.e., to further reach the universal display of human creativity and satisfaction. People who work for theirs and others' needs. People who are free to live decently as actualized human beings.

Any form of productive activity that detaches from the essential elements of creative process is in itself an alienating experience. Alienation here refers to the separation of the very essence of creative process away from the manifestation of what is expressed. The object of expression in the creative process is the personal identity of the subject himself or herself--the dignity of the worker. The product of work is a manifestation of one's creativity and that which expresses one's being. It is the one kind of creativity that builds individual subjectivity and is objectified within the social active responses. John Paul II emphasizes that "the person who works desires not only due remuneration for his or her work but also wishes that, within the production process, provision be made for him or her to be able to know that in his or her work, even on something that is owned in common, he or she is working 'for himself or herself.'"<sup>15</sup>

The most visible kind of alienation in the productive activity is estrangement of a worker from the product of his or her effort. In a rapidly changing world, the current system of production has been successful in fostering an alienating environment in the production process. A worker does not work anymore in order to express his or her creative powers by yielding his or her own produce. Rather, a worker is only measured by a value paid to him or her which is more often much less than the value he or she creates. He or she creates goods which he or she does not own. He or she drains sweat and blood for something that is at the disposal of another. This is one painful experience of exploitation. Farmers toil land for great harvests and yet they remain malnourished. Miners dig deep into the earth for precious metals more valuable than their lives. A sales lady stands all day selling clothes but finds her children naked when she gets home. At the end of the day, a worker leaves a workplace without anything in his or her hand but sheer exchange value. This is what alienation from the product is all about: the loss of self-worth by losing his or her creative product. It is said to be a "creative product" in the sense that the product is an end in itself that reflects the creator's details in creating his or her personal identity, which is lost within a system of production.

<sup>15</sup> *Laborem Exercens*, 15.



In the current system of production, when a worker applies for a job, he or she embarks on an organization which is heavily structured in terms of a proper delivery of pre-imposed and prescribed work details, called job description. Here, the productive process is measured by what kind of work is to be done, how well a worker performs his or her job, and when the job is to be rendered. Under the watchful eyes of superiors and bosses, a worker is rather concerned with these structured measures. Therefore, the entire productive process is reduced to only aiming at the satisfaction of people in control in order to keep one's job. While the essence of productive activity includes the productive process itself as natural occurrence in the one's effort to freely create and actualize his or her own being, a rigidly controlled work environment shuns this freedom. To work is to work at will, to work on what is desired, and to work in a fashion deemed by the creative agent himself or herself. In any case where actual industrial or corporate experience stands in opposition to a free and purposeful event of the productive process, a worker is alienated from the productive activity itself. Moreover, alienation from the productive process visibly manifests in breaking down of work process into smaller component parts. Especially in assembly lines, a worker is assigned to one specific task which is only part of one particular product within a well-structured mechanical system. A worker is simply reduced into a mere mechanical part. Here, the essential aspect of one's creativity and the objectification process of his or her personal identity are dissolved within the mechanical system and, thus, the worker is estranged from his or her product beyond recognition. It is a dissolution of supposedly integrated experience of the worker and the product itself within the productive process. "Productive process", which is "creative" by nature, is hereby only taken as "production process" which concern is solely focused on producing more goods and raising profits to the interest of the owners/managers but to the disinterest of the workers.

Embedded in the alienations from the product and the productive process is the most disenchanting experience: alienation from oneself, i.e., estrangement from one's own being. While one's faculties, abilities, and capacities remain active and utilized, they are not directed towards the personal growth and development. Rather, human effort becomes conversant only with some external control that manipulates the very being of an individual. A creative agent loses his or her self-worth when he or she is deprived of the very product of his or her work. One's work product is his or her own self-worth and not just an exchange value. In his or her self-worth lies the objectification of his or her personal identity, his or her being as his or her own subjectivity. In a productive process dominated by external control, his or her being is altered by some

imposed activities that do not reflect his or her interior motive to create himself or herself as a self-actualized being. Alteration of being is most exemplified by one's creative ability and capacity reduced as mechanical part within a mechanical system of production. Merely used as a material component, a person loses his or her freedom for self-determination and the opportunity to become oneself. (A high turn-over ratio in an organization can be an indication of this type of alienation).

As mentioned above, the essence of creative process includes a form of human activity as "working-with" and "working-for" social experience. It is a social experience in which the collective activity magnifies every individual who freely delivers goods and services out of his or her creative powers. "Working-with" is a social experience that allows everyone to work with each one in as much as everyone works for the satisfaction of various societal needs. After all, this particular social experience is directed towards the satisfaction of individuals. However, where there is an alienating socio-economic structure, there also is the presence of alienation from other human beings. The "working-with" social experience is transformed into working with the technical means of production. One does not socialize with fellow human beings but with the mechanical system. While the working-for social experience is transformed into working for the pre-imposed and pre-scribed job description and working for the claimers of a worker's produce. The alienating socio-economic structure builds up tensions between the workers and the co-workers as one competes for promotion or simply for sake of keeping the job, between the capitalists and the workers as there are various forms of exploitation, and between the products and the consumers as certain products foster stereotyping of people in different economic brackets – whereas there are those who can only afford the most basic commodities while others can enjoy the luxuries of life.

## A. The Spirituality of Work

The rupture in the divine plan of salvation deviated human endeavors from its original end. The experience of alienation pitted labor against capital while dualistic ideologies created a dichotomy between material and spiritual matters that belittled the importance of human activity that addressed material concerns. Work has been associated with the punishment for sin and its pursuit a distraction.

However, the death of Christ restored creation to its original order<sup>16</sup> and the relationship of God with people. His work here on earth redeemed people so that they could experience grace in everything they do, without being dominated by sin. Work regained

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Romans 5:12ff.



its salvific value for people, and it was even seen as a participation in Christ's redemptive activity:

*Sweat and toil, which work necessarily involves the present condition of the human race, present the Christian and everyone who is called to follow Christ with the possibility of sharing lovingly in the work that Christ came to do. This work of salvation came about through suffering and death on a Cross. By enduring the toil of work in union with Christ crucified for us, man in a way collaborates with the Son of God for the redemption of humanity. He shows himself a true disciple of Christ by carrying the cross in his turn every day in the activity that he is called upon to perform.<sup>17</sup>*

With the original value of work restored, work serves the good of people by enabling them to create themselves by utilizing their God-given gifts. This "self-creation" is the very act of self-actualization whereby people's uniqueness and freedom are imprinted on the product of their work. Thus, work enhances the dignity of the worker.

If work is understood as the act in which the person exercises creative powers and produces and distributes the good necessary for human flourishing, in working, people get the opportunity to do something better to themselves. It is by working that people get to enhance their dignity because through work, they get to utilize their potentials and bring it to perfection.

*It is not only good in the sense that it is useful or something to enjoy; it is also good as being something worthy, that is to say, something that corresponds to people's dignity, that expresses this dignity and increases it.<sup>18</sup>*

The more people engage in work, the better people become because they are able to improve their worth through the act of self-creation. Work, therefore, has dignity because the people doing it have dignity and, at the same time, work develops the dignity of the ones doing it. This is similar to the parable of the stewards left with money.<sup>19</sup> By way of analogy, if God were a businessman, he would be seeking to profit from his investments, which are people, because he invested them with some of his own traits. God will measure his profit by asking his stewards whether they were able to realize themselves by engaging in meaningful activities.

How then is work a valuable activity for people? Three reasons can be given as to what makes work essential to people's achieving their self-actualization. The first reason expresses people's creativity while the remaining two affirm the social nature of people.

First, through work, people get to transform nature to meet their basic needs.<sup>20</sup> This shows the original creation mandate to

<sup>17</sup> Cf. *Laborem Exercens*, 27.

<sup>18</sup> *Laborem Exercens*, 9.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Mt. 25: 14-30.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *Laborem Exercens*, 14.

exercise “dominion” over creation. It also gives equal emphasis that people need to *have* resources and opportunities in order to be. Farmers, for instance, work the land to provide people with food. Food, which is a product of many natural components, is important to make people continue to live. Even in Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, self-actualization presupposes the satisfaction of personal needs essential to subsistence and beyond. For marginalized and oppressed people, salvation only becomes real if they have food on the table or freedom from dehumanizing conditions.

Second, by working, people become productive contributors to society and are linked to other members of society as well.<sup>21</sup> What they produce and perform serve to help and satisfy the needs of the community. For example, working as a professor contributes to the learning of college students. The college students then become interdependent to them, and the professors to the students. A simplistic explanation would be the students need to be taught while the professors need to teach to fulfill their purpose; otherwise, professors have no reason to work in the school. Yet at the same time, the act of teaching creates a positive impact that benefits society as a whole.

Lastly, people can found families if they have work.<sup>22</sup> The ability to meet the obligations of sustaining a family encourages people to assume that responsibility of procreating new life. One can assume that the master in Jesus’ parable of the vineyard workers<sup>23</sup> was a just man because the master gave the same wage for all his workers, regardless of their hours rendered, because he saw beyond mere compensation but opportunity for the workers to provide for their family.

For many people, starting a family gives them a sense of purpose or meaning in life because they get to act on their being loving and relational persons, and at the same time, they become part of their children’s striving for living a better life. A family founded on a nurturing environment can in turn serve the good of society.

Therefore, when people work, they are able to utilize what creation has to offer them, which in turn contributes to the enhancement of people’s worth, and the structures they operate in.

Work remains a good thing, not only because it is useful and enjoyable, but also because it expresses and increases the worker’s dignity. Through work we not only transform the world, we are transformed ourselves, becoming “more” a human being.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Mt. 20:1-16

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 9.

## How does one become more human by working?

It would be instructive to distinguish the two dimensions of work, as mentioned by John Paul II in *Laborem Exercens*.<sup>25</sup> The first is called the objective dimension while the second is called subjective dimension.

The objective dimension of work refers to “the sum of activities, resources, instruments and technologies used by people to produce things, to exercise dominion over the earth.”<sup>26</sup> The objective dimension includes both the things used in exercising creativity and the product of such activity. On the one hand, technology makes work more convenient and more efficient. On the other hand, workers earn their wages, but these are external manifestations that people have achieved something thus far while doing their work. It would be very difficult to equate the people’s contribution with their wage because the former is ambiguous when put side-by-side with the latter. That is why the objective dimension is but “the contingent aspect of human activity, constantly varying in its expressions according to the changing technological, cultural, social and political conditions.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, the objective dimension cannot be used to qualify work because this dimension is very superficial since it is primarily dependent on something material and evolving. This is not to deny the significance of the objective dimension of work as the externalization of the nature of the person. A certain level of fulfillment is achieved when people perceive in a concrete manner their capacity to act upon their being reflections of the image of God. This does not exclude the use of creation to glorify God through the expression of the transcendentals truth, beauty and goodness. However, this horizontal movement of work will inevitably cause a discontentment because their needs will come again to the fore. Such feeling can stir a lingering sense of estrangement.

Here is where the subjective dimension adds depth to the meaning of work. It refers to “the activity of the human person as a dynamic being capable of performing a variety of actions that are part of the work process and that correspond to his or her personal vocation.”<sup>28</sup> Work allows the person to ascend to a spiritual level that cannot be quantified by the products of work. The subjective dimension (*being*) has more emphasis than the objective dimension (*having*) because work is an activity beginning in the human subject and directed towards an external object which is manipulated by people for it to gain value or worth that enables him or her to experience the transcendental aspect of work.<sup>29</sup> The subjective side

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>26</sup> *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 270.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Laborem Exercens*, 4.

of work tries to seek what is happening to the people doing the work in terms of experiencing humanization or alienation in the work that they do, or being affirmed in the experience of creating or working for something. One can just wonder what employees working as temps experience every time their contracts end to protect the bottom line profit of their company. This is where the experience of alienation can occur, that is, if the subjective dimension is neglected.

In jobs that society judges as degrading, earning much from it does not evoke pride since the central concern is hinged on the enhancement or diminution of one's self-worth. This makes it easier to understand why some people would quit their jobs, even if it were high-paying if they never experienced being actualized in what they do. Conversely, this is also what makes some persist in jobs that provide meaning to their lives and where the monetary gain is less relevant to their over-all purpose in life.

Hence, "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."<sup>30</sup> The importance or worth of work is not measured on the basis of titles or monetary gains (*having*) but on whether the work is a dignifying activity for people (*being*). In determining who has the most valuable work, the important question that needs to be asked is whether people experience self-actualization in what they do, regardless of the kind of work they are into.

## **B. Work as an Answer to the Social Question**

If religion is to be made relevant or "this-worldly," the meaning and value of work must not solely be discussed in the context of spirituality but also in other spheres where people operate (e.g. business ethics, human resources management, and economics). Work is seen as the key to restore the social order whereby emphasis is put on stewardship with regards the right to private property as subservient to the common good. It is also seen as a development of both natural and human resources to create a stable and peaceful society.

How can the emphasis on the dignity of work be a moving force to initiate social change? This paper would like to cite some imperatives that can embody the spirituality of work:

1. Treat workers with the respect that is due to people and not see them as part of the capital that can be utilized for profit, thereby, objectifying

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 6.

- them. “We must first of all recall a principle that has always been taught by the Church: the principle of the priority of labor over capital.”<sup>31</sup> “Management prerogative” has become a hackneyed term to justify decisions by superiors to the detriment of the dignity of the worker.
2. Challenge employers to create a more equitable distribution of profit by increasing wages to a level that will enable families to subsist. Spreading the wealth around increases the purchasing power of ordinary people which can spur the growth of the economy, and it also provides more opportunities for everyone, not just to a select few. This is anchored on the principle of the universal destination of goods that “entails obligations on how goods are to be used by their legitimate owners. . . From this there arises the duty on the part of owners not to let the goods in their possession go idle and to channel them to productive activity, even entrusting them to others who are desirous and capable of putting them to use in production.”<sup>32</sup>
  3. Conscientize donors to act justly first to their workers before performing charity works which at times are but measures to assuage or silence the donors’ conscience. James lists the deprivation of workers of their just wage as one of the sins that cry to heaven for vengeance.<sup>33</sup> True charity can only exist if the prerequisite demands of justice had been met.
  4. Address the issue of contractualization and unemployment. This can have a strong negative impact on the person’s perceived well-being when faced with the difficulties of being unemployed, the psychological sense of inadequacy and stigma for being unproductive and unable to provide for one’s family. The Compendium even calls unemployment a “real social disaster.”<sup>34</sup> Poor working environment, such as unemployment, can also contribute to hostility and social unrest as evidenced by the riots in Paris (2005) and London (2011).<sup>35</sup>
  5. On a more radical side, allow workers to share in the capital because this is a good way to empower them.<sup>36</sup> This is like teaching a man how to fish instead of giving him a fish which embodies the principle of subsidiarity.<sup>37</sup>
  6. Respect the rights of workers to unionize because this is an expression of their solidarity and freedom to associate. The union is the means of the workers to be protected from abuse and to be treated on equal terms by management, and at the same time to participate in crafting the common good of the company and even of society. *Laborem Exercens* equates the right to association with “the call to solidarity and

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>32</sup> *Compendium of the Social Doctrine*, 178.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Jas. 5:4

<sup>34</sup> John Larivee, “The Subjective Dimension of Work” in “Catholic Social Thought: American Reflections on the Compendium.” D. Paul Sullins and Anthony Blasi, eds. Lexington Books, 2009.

<sup>35</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/14/uk-riots-france-2005> parallels.

<sup>36</sup> This is discussed by Harvie Ramsay and Nigel Haworth in “Worker Capitalists? Profit-Sharing, Capital-Sharing and Juridical Forms of Socialism” Economic and Industrial Democracy, August 1984.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *Centessimus Annus*, 48.

common action addressed to the workers—especially to those engaged in narrowly specialized, monotonous and depersonalized work in industrial plants, when the machine tends to dominate man. . . It was the reaction against the degradation of man as the subject of work, and against the unheard-of accompanying exploitation in the field of wages, working conditions and social security for the worker. This reaction united the working world in a community marked by great solidarity.”<sup>38</sup>

In the end, productive people translate to a productive society that is not only measured from an economic vantage point. “Development is not only limited to the economic concept, for it subjects the human person to the demands of economic planning and selfish profit. Mere accumulation of goods and services is not enough for the realization of human happiness.”<sup>39</sup> Rather, authentic human development must be “measured according to the respect it renders to the integral specific nature of the person. There is always a moral dimension to development: true development implies a lively awareness of the value of the rights of all and of each person.”<sup>40</sup> It is not just moving forward but towards something. Development must ultimately benefit people, individually and collectively. For to every person’s success, there is a corollary obligation to seek that others will progress.

The discussion on the spirituality of work sheds light on how people will seek an answer to the social question at hand. *Centesimus Annus* laments:

*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. They have no possibility of acquiring the basic knowledge which would enable them to express their creativity and develop their potential. They have no way of entering the network of knowledge and intercommunication which would enable them to see their qualities appreciated and utilized. Thus, if not actually exploited, they are to a great extent marginalized. Many other people, while not completely marginalized, live in situations in which the struggle for a bare minimum is uppermost. . . In fact, for the poor, to the lack of material goods has been added a lack of knowledge and training which prevents them from escaping their state of humiliating subjection. Unfortunately, the great majority of people in the Third World still live in such conditions.”<sup>41</sup>*

Therefore, the best possible solution to the social question relies on affirming a vision of the true value of human work that is at the heart of authentic progress. The Social Doctrine of the Church does not aim to propose a new economic model but calls for a re-ordering of values

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<sup>38</sup> *Laborem Exercens*, 8

<sup>39</sup> *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 28.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>41</sup> *Centesimus Annus*, 33.



that will permeate the economic systems which ultimately must have as its alpha and omega the development of people. The principle of stewardship provides both a caveat against greed that deprives people of resources and opportunities, and a reminder that human work is an extension of God's work and therefore must also serve God's plan for his creation. Work is never to be seen as serving the interests of capital but the other way around because "labor is always a primary efficient cause, while capital . . . remains a mere instrumental cause."<sup>42</sup>

*Gaudium et Spes* puts people, and not economic fundamentals, at the heart of addressing the social question:

*A person is more precious for what he or she is (being) than for what he or she has (having). Similarly, all that people do to obtain greater justice, wider brotherhood, and a more humane ordering of social relationships has greater worth than technical advances. For these advances can supply the material for human progress, but of themselves alone they can never actually bring it about.*<sup>43</sup>

## CONCLUSION

As we close this discussion on the social question and the importance of work, it would be good to remember that we have been tasked to become stewards of the earth, something which carries an equivocal meaning.

If by stewards we have said that people are supposed to work towards their self-actualization, with the right to enjoy the product of their work (private property) as an affirmation of this self-actualization, being stewards also reminds us that no one has absolute claim to the goods of the earth, especially if this is already detrimental to the common good. Right to private property becomes highly questionable if opportunities diminish.

The goods of the earth are created by God meant for the use of everybody. The possession of it must always be balanced by the need to use it for one's development, which is fulfilled through work, and to contribute to the common good through an equal distribution of wealth. Individual persons may not use their resources without considering the effects of its use, rather they must act in a way that benefits not only themselves and their family but also the common good.<sup>44</sup> It is sharing resources that can serve the dignity of others.

<sup>42</sup> *Laborem Exercens*, 12.

<sup>43</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, 35.

<sup>44</sup> Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 178

To abate the scandalous disparity in lifestyle between social classes, sporadic acts of charity for the poor do not create a long-lasting impact on their life because it does not free them from their dependence and lack of mastery over their fate. Rather, if we are really sincere in ending the cycle of poverty, we must also seek to break the cycle of wealth that limits resources and opportunities to a select few, so that opportunities, and not solely financial aid, will spread to everybody, especially those willing to realize themselves through work. In that way, a new social order will rise, where no one will live at the margins and enjoy what others can enjoy. This is what Christians pray for in the coming of the Kingdom.

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