

THE DIGNITY OF WORK, RIGHTS OF WORKERS AND SUPPORT FOR LABOR UNIONS

The historical origin of the tradition of Catholic social teaching is bound up with the Church's concern for workers. Social Catholicism in the nineteenth century was dedicated to improving the conditions of labor wherever possible. In many ways, the Church was ahead of its time in advocating for better treatment of workers. Today we take for granted many of the original goals of these early church efforts. Government has become the instrument that now enforces prevailing labor protections, at least in most industrialized nations. These include minimum wage laws, safety and health regulations, pension plans, social insurance, and the rights of workers to organize into labor unions.

The two encyclicals with the most extensive treatment of labor issues are *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 and *Laborem Exercens* in 1981. Although separated by ninety years, they share at least one remarkable feature in common: both show a tendency to move back and forth rather quickly between the worlds of abstract theological reflection and practical principles of worker justice. This "quick passage" from eternal truths to specific measures reflects the great confidence shared by both their authors that the nitty-gritty reforms advocated in these documents are fully congruent with the will of God for the world. Both Leo XIII and John Paul II hold up an ideal of worker justice that demands close attention to the concrete conditions that face workers in the actual workplace and in the labor markets that determine the availability of work and the terms of their employment. While both popes respect the fact that the great diversity of conditions complicates the way broad principles of worker justice are applied from place to place, neither is afraid to insist on the importance of concrete measures, such as "living wages" and reasonable work hours, for the entire workforce.

Perhaps the most controversial of the positions regarding work staked out within the Catholic social teaching concerns the Church's support for labor unions. Workers' rights to organize and enter into collective bargaining are considered an important outgrowth of other human rights, such as the right to free association and the right to participate fully in the economic and political life of society. Of course, we all know that labor unions have often been criticized on a number of grounds, sometimes with good reason. For example, we often hear them associated with corruption, favoritism, and the threat of disruptive and potentially violent strikes. They also are accused of driving up the cost of doing business and sacrificing the international competitiveness of domestic industries because of the allegedly excessive wage demands they make.

Clearly, there are some problematic aspects of union activity. Yet Catholic social teaching contends that a world without labor unions would witness a much less favorable environment for achieving justice and an equitable sharing of the earth's resources. Without the ability to combine their voices through organized labor, workers would be at the mercy of their far more powerful employers who might take advantage of their inferior position. Labor unions are crucial elements in the overall balance of power in the economy, and Catholic social teaching consistently portrays them as playing a constructive role in the pursuit of economic justice. Indeed, it is increasingly a source of concern that in many places unions seem to be on the decline. As unions represent a smaller and smaller percentage of the overall workforce and enjoy a lower profile in our economic life, the power of workers to bargain effectively to protect their rights will unfortunately diminish greatly.

Alongside its support of labor unions, Catholic social teaching contains many additional messages about work. Here, labor is portrayed as neither a necessary evil nor merely a means to the end of supporting family life; rather, labor is presented as something that is intrinsically good for us. In our work, we can discover rich meaning and develop our potential. Even in the humdrum routine of daily life in the workplace, work is more than a taxing or boring necessity. Engaging in labor opens up new avenues of communication and planning with our colleagues, with whom we toil for common purposes and build up mutual respect. Work represents an opportunity to collaborate with others and to contribute our special talents to the wider society.

Besides its practical benefits, human labor also includes theological significance, as it contains our response to the God who invites us to become co-creators of the material world. This is why human work should never be treated as a mere commodity, something to be bought and sold in a cavalier way, in impersonal markets. This is also why workers must not be treated as just another cog in the huge machine of production, an attitude that offends the dignity of all. These concerns are especially prominent in *Laborem Exercens*, where John Paul II repeatedly insists on the “priority of labor over capital”. Through labor, we pursue not only a job or a career, but a vocation – a calling in which we are summoned by God to develop our capabilities and to follow the Carpenter from Nazareth on our path of discipleship. Catholic social teaching is a great resource for future efforts to develop full-blown theology of work and indeed to discover a spirituality of labor appropriate for our age.