

# Work as Key to the Social Question

The Great Social and Economic Transformations and the Subjective Dimension of Work



## The Subjective Dimension of Work and Liberalism

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### INTRODUCTION

Do the citizens of the United States still have an incentive to ponder Pope John Paul II's encyclical, *Laborem exercens* (henceforth LE)? Productivity has been on an upward trend for many years. Most people have become more prosperous. The liberal society in which Americans live has delivered a number of moral and material benefits. The historian Gertrude Himmelfarb presents a summary of these benefits, which most Americans would recognize as accurate or mostly accurate.

As a result of a heightened social consciousness, abetted by judicious social legislation, we have witnessed the opening up of society to women, blacks, and other minorities; and increase of racial, religious, and sexual tolerance; a greater sensitivity to infirmities and inequities; an expansion of higher education, economic opportunity, and social mobility; wider distribution of goods and comforts; and intellectual energy that has ushered in an era of unprecedented scientific, technological and medical advances. [1]

Despite our prosperity and opportunities this is still a good time to take another look at the pope's encyclical. In many ways work is not going very well. Capital is often used and moved without sufficient regard for the impact on workers. Corporations increasingly dismiss long-time employees for the sake of the bottom line, even if their workers have given loyal, competent service. When people are fired, stories recount how they are abruptly notified and escorted out of the building so they can't destroy property or steal information. Too many workers are now employed on a part-time basis—even by Catholic universities—with low salaries, few or no benefits, and no job security. Many people don't have well-paying, full-time jobs. Many high-salaried workers are wretchedly busy and take

little time for rest on Sunday or during their vacations. And prosperity itself has introduced a whole set of woes into American life!

The attitude of workers toward their jobs is often not very good. Many people don't choose their jobs out of a desire to serve the common good or because they love to do their work well. Consequently, we are so pleased to meet workers who love their jobs and do them competently, especially when we need some product or service. Loyalty to employers is becoming a foreign concept, since salary is to the worker as the bottom line is to employers. Many Christians do not see their work as an integral part of their Christian life. It is simply something they must do to earn a living. If people can still get paid without fulfilling all their assigned duties, many would say, "so much the better."

The pope's encyclical reintroduces a Christian attitude toward work, which will only be fully persuasive to people who have embraced Christianity, but will still be at least partially attractive to people of other faiths and to people of a certain philosophic bent. To accept what John Paul II says about work also requires the acceptance of Christian teachings on human dignity, the virtues, the family, the common good etc.

In my paper on LE I will briefly summarize what John Paul II says about the subjective dimension of work and then explain at length what he means by arguing that we express and increase our dignity through work, and contribute to the common good. As the concept of increasing or achieving dignity is not that familiar a concept in Catholic social teaching, I will show how this concept has to be understood in general and then in relation to work. Secondly, I will argue that the common good sought by work cannot be understood simply as a set of instrumental goods, but must include goods that perfect the human soul. In the last third of my paper I will explore John Paul II's assertion that society is the great educator of every man (no. 10) by discussing both the influence of liberalism on Americans and proposals to improve the moral tone of liberal society. My thesis is twofold. The present state of liberal culture has legitimated attitudes and practices that deter people from working with a Christian attitude; but a revitalized liberal society that promotes higher moral standards can dispose Catholics to be more receptive to Catholic social teaching on work.

## **A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE SUBJECTIVE SENSE OF WORK**

Pope John Paul II's encyclical on human work is not only addressed to bishops, priests religious and the Catholic laity, but also to all men and women of good will. Through work by which they earn their living and promote the development of science and technology, they also promote the "continual advance of morals and culture" (no. 1). The pope's inspiring vision of work for the people of the world focuses primarily on the subjective sense of work, that is to say, on persons doing their work, not the particular tasks they perform. The pope's source of inspiration for his "Gospel of work" is the hidden life of Jesus as a carpenter. That working life shows that "the basis for determining the meaning and importance of work (*de vi et momento*; therefore, not the value of work) is not primarily

the kind of work being done but the fact that the one who is doing it is a person” (no. 6). The Church has learned from Genesis that “work is a fundamental dimension of man’s existence on earth” (no. 4). Through work, which is a *bonum arduum*, persons perfect themselves, build up their lives and express as well as increase their God-given dignity. “Even when it is accompanied by toil and effort work is still something good, and so man develops through love for work” (no 11).

At the end of his encyclical John Paul gives Christians two profound reasons to love and appreciate the opportunity to work. Through work man participates both in the creative activity of God and in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. “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” (no. 27). Of course, to approach work as John Paul suggests requires faith, industriousness and the other virtues. In no other way could a person achieve perfection and participate in the life and mission of Jesus Christ.

Besides being a road to perfection “work constitutes a foundation for the formation of *family life*” (no. 10). Work provides the material necessities of family life and it is an important means whereby the family provides its members with an education, which is one of the main purposes of the family. In the pope’s words, “Work and industriousness ...influence the whole *course of education* in the family, for the very reason that everyone ‘becomes a human being’ through, among other things, work, and becoming a human being is precisely the main purpose of the whole process of education” (no. 10). Mothers and fathers work both within and outside the family and they teach their children to do the same in accordance with their age level. One of the main tasks of children, of course, will be to develop their talents through their school work.

The third area where work achieves outstanding goods is that of the great society to which everyone belongs by virtue of cultural and historical links. Through their work human beings can contribute to the common good of the society in which they live. This is a simple, but often neglected truth. Catholic social teaching in the United States does not emphasize that work well done is a significant contribution to the common good. If doctors teach us how to stay healthy or cure diseases, if carpenters build good houses, if teachers motivate students to develop their talents, if managers keep a business going and show respect for their workers etc., it is easy to see how the common good is promoted by day to day work. When a Lance Armstrong, after waging a painful battle with cancer, performs incredible feats riding a bicycle in the Tour de France (which is his work), cancer patients all over the world are given a lift and added courage to fight their own battles. Exhorting others by word and/or example to be intent on recovering their health is an eminent contribution to the common good.

In short, men and women work out of self-love, love for their families, their neighbors, their country, people in other countries, and, of course, God. As John Paul II puts it, “man must work out of regard for others, especially his own family, but also for the society he belongs to, the country of which he is a child, and the whole human family of

which he is a member” (no. 16). Given this vision of human work it is not surprising to read that John Paul II considers work as “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” (no. 3). To address the social question is to make life more human. Otherwise stated, it is work that promotes the physical, material and spiritual well-being of all. That goal can only be approached by the competent and dedicated work of a nation’s citizens direction toward the realization of many and varied goals. So, John Paul II’s reflections on the subjective sense of work lead him to mention objective tasks to accomplished in and for the family and society.

The priority of labor over capital and of the person over things naturally follows from the pope’s observations on the subjective sense of work. Still another argument for this priority is the origin of much capital from labor. For capital not only includes natural resources, but also all the means produced by labor to develop these resources. “Thus *everything that is at the service of work*, everything that in the present state of technology constitutes its ever more highly perfected ‘instrument,’ is *result of work*” (no. 12).

Pope John Paul II has put forth his vision work not only to promote Christian perfection but also in order to influence the theory and practice of contemporary liberalism and capitalism. He knows that the philosophic and economic theories of the eighteenth centuries as well as “the *economic and social practice* of that time” caused an opposition to develop between labor and capital. More specifically, that opposition was caused by an error of economism, “that of considering human labor solely according to its economic purpose.” Referring to this time as “the period of primitive capitalism and liberalism” (no. 13), he warns that the same error “can nevertheless be repeated in other circumstances of time and place, if people’s thinking starts from the same theoretical or practical premises” (no. 13). In fact, the root cause of the error will not be overcome, according to the pope, unless the present era embraces “adequate changes both in theory and in practice, changes *in line with the definite conviction of the primacy* of the person over things, and of human labor over capital...” (no. 13). This seems to be delicate way of saying that the theories about labor and the practice of employers today are often not sufficiently respectful of the working person.

## **WORK, THE DIGNITY OF THE HUMAN PERSON, AND THE COMMON GOOD**

The pope has written that “work is a worthy good, that is to say, corresponding to the dignity of man, a good we say, by which this dignity is expressed and increased” (*bonum ‘dignum,’ id est dignitati hominis consentaneum, bonum dicimus, quo haec dignitas declaratur atque augetur*, no. 9). I would like to draw attention to the pope’s assertion that human dignity may be increased by work. The implications of this Catholic teaching on human dignity for the personal life of individuals and life in community do not seem to be fully appreciated. What everyone understands is that human dignity is a given and is the basis of human rights. What is not clearly seen is that human dignity is also an arduous achievement of each individual with the help of families, intermediary associations, the

culture, the mores and even the law. In other words, various communities, by persuasion and law, lead individuals to realize their dignity especially by work and family life.

Catholics believe people have dignity because they are created in the image and likeness of God, redeemed by Jesus Christ and destined for eternal life in communion with God. As Vatican Council II puts it, "The principal cause [or proof] of human dignity lies in the call of human beings to communion with God." [2] Being created in the image of God and redeemed by Jesus Christ makes it possible for everyone to respond to God's invitation to communion with him. This threefold foundation for human dignity is both unshakable and instructive. No act of man can remove this foundation. Even when people commit the worst sins and crimes or suffer diminished physical and spiritual capacities they retain human dignity. While this Christian teaching about the permanent character of human dignity is often mentioned and acknowledged by many, rarely do Catholics hear that human dignity is also a goal or an achievement, despite the clear teaching of Vatican Council II.

Given the foundation of human dignity and the reality of sin, it logically follows that all will have to strive and strain to reach their ultimate goal, communion with the true God. Christians continually *achieve* or realize their dignity by seeking the truth, resisting sin, practicing virtue and repenting when they succumb to temptation. In other words, while dignity is a permanent possession, it is also necessarily appropriated and enhanced over a lifetime of living according to the fullness of truth. Saint Leo the Great's famous Christmas sermon states this point in a memorable way: "Christian, recognize your dignity, and now that you share in God's own nature, do not return by sin to your former base condition." [3] It is significant that this quotation stands as the first sentence in the section on morality in the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It immediately directs attention to the necessity of achieving human dignity by living without sin. *Gaudium et spes* says that "man achieves [the dignity to which he is called] when emancipating himself from all captivity to passion, he pursues his goal in a spontaneous choice of what is good, and procures for himself through effective and skillful action, apt means to that end. Since man's freedom has been damaged by sin, only by the help of God's grace can he bring such a relationship with God into full flower." [4]

In hearing of their dignity as persons, Christians should first think of their duties toward God, their families, friends, neighbors and employers and even toward themselves and not of their rights or claims on other people. These duties toward fellow human beings carried out through work increase the dignity of the worker. People even feel a sense of pride and dignity when they can support themselves and their families. The proper fulfillment of all these duties through work will, of course, depend on the prior acquisition of the virtues.

The key text on the common good in *Laborem exercens* is the following: "...man unites his most profound identity with membership in a nation and desires that his work contribute to the increase of the common good, a goal to be sought continuously with his compatriots." [5] Recent Catholic social doctrine still holds that the highest purpose of the political community is to promote the common good. [6] This seems clear enough until one asks what Church documents mean by the term. Echoing John XXIII's *Mater et magistra*

and *Pacem in terris*, and quoting Vatican Council II's *Gaudium et spes*, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes the common good as "the sum total of the conditions of social life which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their own perfection more fully and more easily." [7] In a more specific paragraph the *Catechism* adds, "The common good consists of three elements: respect for and promotion of the fundamental rights of the person; prosperity, or the development of the spiritual and temporal goods of society; the peace and security of the group and its members." [8] Except for the reference to "spiritual goods" this seems to be a purely instrumental description of the common good. The term "instrumental" refers to goods that facilitate the attainment of our proper end as human beings, but are not part of that end, such as food, clothing, shelter, a transportation system, civil liberties. etc. Instrumental goods would not include such important civic goods as the practice of faith, character formation in schools, forgiveness and reconciliation among racial and ethnic groups, the promotion of fidelity in marriage, courtesy, the prohibition of euthanasia, the promotion of a commitment to the poor, et. al.

In both *Mater et magistra* and *Pacem in terris* Pope John XXIII had described the common good as "the sum total of the conditions of social life, by which people may reach their perfection more fully and easily." [9] This description is clearly the source of the definition found in Vatican Council II's *Gaudium et spes* and the *Catechism*. It slightly modifies John XXIII's formulation by speaking of individuals and groups instead of "*homines*", but this doesn't change the substantial identity of the two definitions. Writing on Christian social doctrine, Oswald von Nell-Breuning, the well-known architect of Pius XI's *Quadragesimo anno*, referred to Pope John's definition of the common good as an "organizational and organizing value," what we would call the common welfare or instrumental goods. [10] These would include the whole panoply of rights described in *Pacem in terris*. Nell-Breuning says that Pope John XXIII's understanding of the common good differs from the traditional view articulated by Thomas Aquinas. For Aquinas the highest purpose of politics is to promote virtue in the body politic. Therefore, the common good in a Thomistic perspective includes not only instrumental goods, but also goods that perfect the human soul. God is the common good, par excellence. Nell-Breuning says that Thomistic authors understand by the term common good the *perfectio naturae specificae humanae*. In summing up the differences between the Thomistic understanding of the common good and Pope John's view, he writes: "the common welfare is a most important value in the service of the good, whereas the common good is a value in itself." [11]

It appears that Pope John XXIII, Vatican Council II, and the new *Catechism* have officially endorsed a limited notion of the common good, thereby quietly putting aside the longstanding Catholic teaching that the political community, with the help of the Church, intermediary associations and individuals, should attempt to pursue a substantive understanding of the common good and implement it in the measure possible, following the principle that wisdom must be reconciled with consent. As always, appearances can be deceiving. A close analysis of Pope John XXIII's two social encyclicals, Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes* and *Dignitatis humanae* and selected writings of John Paul II shows conclusively that official Catholic social teaching has not abandoned a substantive understanding of the common good, and in fact could not do so without adversely affecting

its primary mission, the achievement of eternal salvation for all.

The reason why the Church must have a teaching on a substantive common good is fairly easy to discern. Since certain laws and mores indispose people to receive Christian teaching and live a Christian life, the Church attempts to persuade political communities to establish and maintain good laws and mores, or in the language of classical political philosophy, a good regime. Quite some time ago, Pius XII made this same point in his 1941 Pentecost message in which he says that the Church “must take cognisance of social conditions, which, whether one wills it or not, make difficult or practically impossible a Christian life in conformity with the precepts of the Divine Lawgiver.” [12] He says that people need to “breathe the healthy vivifying atmosphere of truth and moral virtue” and not “the disease laden and often fatal air of error and corruption.” As a precedent and proof of his position Pius XII cites Leo XIII’s encyclical to the world, *Rerum novarum*, which “pointed out the dangers of the materialist Socialism conception, the fatal consequences of economic Liberalism, so often unaware, or forgetful, or contemptuous of social duties.” Around the same time that Pius XII was thinking about the significance of social conditions for the faith, a famous French theologian, Yves de Montcheuil, S.J., addressed the same subject in an essay entitled, “Christian life and Temporal Action.” He wrote: “The repercussions of political and social conditions in the lives of individuals can, in fact, render easier or more difficult the birth and development of religious life in humanity. It is therefore the duty of the Christian to create in this world conditions favorable to Christian life.” [13] He also told his readers that *Rerum novarum* reminded Catholics of this obligation. Montcheuil and Pius XII clearly do not limit their understanding of social conditions to instrumental goods. They have to be talking about substantive elements of the common good.

The second reason for the Church’s social teaching is that the realization of a substantive common good is a partial expression of the way human beings ought to live together. The dignity of the human person not only requires freedom for each individual, but a life dedicated to the practice of virtue and harmony among people based on truth.

A recovery of the concept of regime, as elaborated in the political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, would clarify the deep impact that “social conditions” can have on the minds and hearts of citizens. The regime or *politeia* is the whole political and social order. Leo Strauss’s explanation of what the classical political philosophers meant by regime is succinct and revealing:

The cause of the laws is the regime. Therefore the guiding theme of political philosophy is the regime rather than the laws. ... Regime is the order, the form, which gives society its character. Regime is therefore a specific manner of life. Regime is the form of life as living together, the manner of living of society and in society, since this manner depends decisively on the predominance of human beings of a certain type, on the manifest domination of society by human beings of a certain type. Regime means that whole, which we today are in the habit of viewing primarily in a fragmentized form: regime means simultaneously the form of life of a society, its style of life, its

moral taste, form of society, form of state, form of government, spirit of laws. [14]

In this perspective the regime has a crucial influence in the lives of most individuals. Only the few could escape its pervasive influence, such as the philosophers. With the emergence of Christianity the regime is no longer necessarily as decisive in the lives of individuals. God's word and grace, mediated through a faithful Church, can be wholeheartedly embraced even in the midst of bad regimes. Yet, experience shows that many Christians are unduly influenced by the negative aspects of the culture and the social conditions. Hence, the importance of Church teaching on a substantive common good.

In addition to the dispute about the meaning of the common good scholars also disagree about the proper role of the government in promoting the common good. John Courtney Murray argues that Leo XIII's ethical view of government was abandoned in favor of a juridical view of government. In Murray's words:

In the Leonine conception the function of government was primarily ethical, namely, the direction of the citizen subject--who was considered more subject than citizen--toward the life of virtue by the force of good laws reflecting the demands of the moral order. In the Pisan and Johannine doctrine, on the other hand, the primary function of government is juridical, namely, the protection and promotion of the exercise of human and civil rights, and the facilitation of the discharge of human and civil duties by the citizen who is fully a citizen, that is, not merely subject to, but also a participant in, the processes of government [15].

Murray characterizes the approach of Pius XII and John XXIII as a return to the basic political insight of Thomas Aquinas, "the freeman under a limited government." In sum, the Church, says Murray, now affirms that "the safekeeping and promotion of...rights is government's first duty to the common good." [16] The powers of government are, in fact, "limited by the higher ideal of human rights" defined in detail in John XXIII's *Pacem in Terris*, whose doctrine is completed by the Vatican II's *Declaration on Religious Freedom*. [17] John XXIII's encyclical gives a comprehensive list of socio-economic and political-civil rights that must be respected in order to promote the dignity of the human person. If Murray is correct, then there is a reversal in official Catholic social teaching. An analysis of the papal social encyclicals and the documents of Vatican II, however, reveals that Catholic social teaching still holds that government has an important role in promoting religion and morality, in addition to protecting rights. Don't informed Catholics properly work for laws that protect marriage, decrease the incidence, or at least, the rapidity of divorce, prohibit abortion and euthanasia, require some character education in the public schools etc.?

By way of conclusion to this section on the common good I will offer a few suggestions for amplifying the *Catechism's* definition of the common good, which, as previously mentioned, reads: "the sum total of the conditions of social life which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their own perfection more fully and more easily." I would add to this definition the following sentence or something to this effect:

“The perfection of each citizen is the goal of civil society and is, therefore, an essential part of the common good.” Next, I would attempt to describe in summary fashion the kind of social conditions helpful for the pursuit of perfection. Then, I would point out that establishing the requisite social conditions and educating individuals to perfection are the shared responsibility of government, the Church, voluntary associations and individuals themselves. When the principle of subsidiarity is observed there is less chance of improper intrusion on the part of the government and more chance of success in the combined efforts to achieve the common good.

The term “perfection” does not, of course, have a univocal meaning, especially in a liberal society. Catholics would necessarily understand perfection as the imitation of Jesus Christ, but would recognize other religious and philosophic understandings of perfection as a preparation or partial realization of the way taught by Jesus. Some understandings of perfection would surely be at odds with the Catholic view. Be that as it may, Catholics are always bound by the ideal of Christian perfection and would rely on the family, Church, educational institutions, other voluntary associations and the law to promote perfection as they understand it. What the law could and should achieve in a liberal society will always be a subject for debate, in which Catholics have the right and duty to participate. In accord with their understanding of the common good Catholics would also support efforts by individuals, voluntary associations and the government to promote sound but incomplete understandings of perfection.

The social conditions “which allow people ...to reach their proper perfection” may, at first glance, seem too difficult to name or describe. Perfection is not a common term in a liberal society. Citizens and theorists would more readily speak of social conditions conducive to the attainment or preservation of liberty and equality. The attainment of perfection would require a special set of social conditions, hardly limited to instrumental goods. According to Catholic social teaching some of these conditions are as follows: religious freedom, the fidelity of the Catholic Church to its salvific mission, fidelity in marriages, sound family life, character education in families and schools, comprehensive liberal education in the universities, high ethical principles in the trades, business and the professions, true friendships, concord or harmony among citizens, forgiveness of injuries and reconciliation among citizens who have committed and suffered wrong. How these goals could be presented through persuasion and law is the subject of another essay.

My final comment is on the practicality of the Church’s teaching on the necessity of pursuing a substantive common good in every society. This teaching doesn’t mean that Christians have to engage in utopian political reform. St. Augustine indirectly offers us some timely advice on how to proceed in his reflections on the nature of a republic. In the *De civitate Dei* Augustine comments on the definition of a republic given by Scipio in Cicero’s *De re publica*. Scipio says that a republic is “the affair of a people.” He then defines people as a “fellowship of a multitude united through a consensus concerning right and a sharing of advantage. [18] Augustine then explains that there can be no “consensus concerning right” without justice. In Augustine’s radical formulation justice requires order in the soul of citizens. Reason rules the vices and in turn is subject to God through the practice of the Christian virtues. If there is no justice in individuals, “without doubt neither

is there any in a fellowship of human beings which consists of such men.” So, without justice so understood there can be no consensus concerning right and thus no real republic. This seems to be a description of a common good that would be as close to communion with God that one can imagine on this earth. Augustine’s second and more realistic definition of a republic is “a fellowship of a multitude of rational beings united through a sharing in and agreement about what it loves. ...It is a better people if it agrees in loving better things; a worse one if it agrees in loving worse things.” [19] Otherwise stated, there can be various levels of solidarity or forms of a subordinate good in any particular regime. Citizens inspired by a Catholic vision of the common good have a paradigm in Augustine’s first definition of a republic by which to take their bearings in prudently working to refine and elevate the agreement about what the political community loves.

If Catholics can understand more completely all the beautiful and high things required by the common good, they will have more incentive to undertake demanding work and to carry out their duties as well as possible. My rationale for taking this position can be easily grasped by looking at passage from Gregory The Great’s *Pastoral Care*:

Generally we are better able to persuade the haughty to their profit, if we say that their progress is more likely to benefit us than themselves, and if we beg their amendment as a favor to us rather than to themselves. For the haughty are more easily led to good, if they believe that in turning to good they will profit others also. [20]

I think Gregory’s insight is applicable to more people than the haughty. Many people will make an extra effort if they really understand how their work can benefit other people. Some will even be willing to undertake great tasks.

## **THE INFLUENCE OF LIBERALISM**

Every society, of course, has an influence on its members. In *Laborem exercens* John Paul II describes society as “the great ‘educator’ of every man, even though an indirect one (because each individual absorbs within the family the things and goods (*eas res eaque bona*) that all taken together go to make up the culture of a given nation...” (no. 10). As the great educator, society or the culture will sometimes be a rival to the teaching of the Catholic family and the Catholic Church. This is also true of liberal society, which doesn’t simply provide a neutral framework, as some liberal theorists have claimed. The well-known American political theorist and defender of liberal society, Professor William Galston, describes a liberal regime as “community of subcommunities,” which is unified on the basis of core principles inculcated by public and private education and enforced by law. [21] While allowing considerable diversity in the subcommunities, a liberal community, Galston admits, does have a distinctive influence on the lives of most individuals, families, groups and churches. In other words, individuals are free in principle to choose a way of life, but liberal public principles exercise a gravitational pull on people’s day to day life. Galston even notes that these public principles contribute to the generation of pluralism within various churches. [22] For example, even Catholicism, once known for great unity among believers, now has to deal with individual Catholics deciding that “x” number of

Catholic teachings are not compatible with their way of life (In the case of Catholicism liberalism is not the only cause of illegitimate pluralism).

Galston's description of liberalism's influence is imaginative and, in my mind, quite accurate. It is really another way of saying that the regime necessarily has a strong influence on the lives of individual citizens.

Think of the social space constituted by liberal political principles as a rapidly flowing river. A few vessels may be strong enough to head upstream. Most, however, will be carried along by the current. But they still choose where in the river to sail and where along the shore to moor. The mistake is to think of the liberal regime's public principles as constituting either a placid lake or an irresistible undertow. Moreover, the state may seek to mitigate the effect of its public current on the navigation of specific vessels whenever the costs of such corrective intervention are not excessive. [23]

This description of a liberal society is both an encouragement and a warning. Catholic families and the Catholic Church can rejoice in their freedom to practice the faith, but must always keep in mind that individual Catholics may be unduly influenced by the opinions promoted by liberal culture. If they are insufficiently educated both in mind and heart, they will necessarily be carried by the current. As things now stand, the liberal culture in the United States significantly impedes Catholics from embracing John Paul II's vision of work, including Catholic teaching on dignity, virtue and the common good.

In order to understand the influence of liberalism more thoroughly it is helpful to pinpoint its origin about which there is some disagreement. I still find persuasive what the political philosopher, Leo Strauss, has written about the genesis and nature of liberalism:

If we may call liberalism that political doctrine which regards as the fundamental fact the rights, as distinguished from the duties, of man and which identifies the function of the state with the protection or the safeguarding of those rights, we must say that the founder of liberalism was Hobbes. [24]

John Locke's modification of Hobbes's liberalism is the form which is most familiar to us and probably the most influential in the world today. It is Locke's political philosophy which is the original form of capitalist theory.

In *The Second Treatise of Government* Locke argues that "a man may fairly possess more land than he himself can use the product of, by receiving in exchange for the overplus gold and silver which may be hoard up without injury to anyone..." [25] In fact, Locke goes further in defending the thesis that private vice by an invisible hand produces public benefits. In summing up the Lockean position Professor Ernest Fortin writes,

Since self-interest means, politically at any rate, the accumulation and preservation of property, we are led to the view that acquisitiveness and

ultimately unlimited acquisitiveness is more conducive to the good of society than such virtues as moderation and liberality. ... There is no need to be concerned with the common good which is procured automatically by the fact that each individual is now free to pursue his selfish goals and encouraged to do so. Instrumental or bourgeois virtue is all that is required of any one. [26]

Another incisive formulation of the Lockean argument is that of Leo Strauss, "...the emancipation of acquisitiveness is not merely compatible with general plenty, but is the cause of it. Unlimited appropriation without concern for the need of others is true charity." [27]

Many would dispute my interpretation of Locke, but it is hard to deny that, despite their admitted benefits, liberalism and liberal democracy today incline citizens to think about morality to a great degree in terms of rights without duties and in the categories of values rather than virtues. This orientation leads to a fixation on choice and autonomy as ends in themselves and about the goods of the body: safety, health, pleasure, and prosperity. In brief, liberalism tends to encourage individualism, not community and solidarity. Tocqueville, of course, made these points a long time ago in his *Democracy in America*. Ironically, liberalism in America, as Tocqueville also pointed out promotes subservience to the opinion of the majority.

Tocqueville argues that the power of the majority is "not only predominant but irresistible." Once the majority makes up its mind on any particular question, "there are, so to say, no obstacles which can retard, much less halt, its progress and give it time to hear the wails of those it crushes as it passes. The consequence of this state of affairs are fate laden and dangerous for the future." Americans believe, according to Tocqueville, that "there is more enlightenment and wisdom in a numerous assembly than in a single man." But they also assume that each individual is "as educated, virtuous, and powerful as any of his fellows." Given this view of the individual, it is no wonder that Americans can place such faith in an association of people who think the same way.

While Tocqueville doesn't systematically lay out his arguments for asserting that irresistible majority opinion is dangerous for the future of America, he does suggest various reasons for this observation. He fears that Americans will give up thinking, even accept their religion as common opinion rather than as revealed by God and ultimately conform their way of thinking and acting to the reigning public opinions. In other words, they will take their bearings by what is powerful in the culture and ascribe normative character to the spirit of the age. In a section entitled, "the power exercised by the majority in America over thought," Tocqueville makes one of the most startling statements of the his book: "I know of no country in which, speaking generally, there is less independence of mind and true freedom of discussion than in America." Then, he adds, "there is no freedom of the mind in America." Of course, these statements logically follow from Tocqueville's observations about the power and influence of majority opinion. How can there be independent and free minds when majority opinion dictates how individuals are to look at things? How can freedom be assured when untutored subjective wills are more likely to give rise to majority

opinion than objective truth? Not that truth cannot enter into the formation of majority opinion and thus guide the exercise of freedom, but that depends on the success of liberal education, religious leadership, religious conversion and various kinds of political and civic initiatives.

If Tocqueville is correct in his analysis, liberalism in America was a mixed blessing even before the counter cultural revolutions of the 1960s. While these changes brought a few good developments, as mentioned in the beginning of my paper, they caused the expansion of moral decay into many areas of our life. As a result, many secular liberals and religious leaders have devoted a great deal of effort to improving the culture. In recent times there has been a lot of talk about addressing the problems of liberal society through the renewal of civil society. The National Commission on Civic Renewal issued a report in 1998 entitled *A nation of Spectators: How Civic Disengagement Weakens America and What We Can Do About It*. In the same year The Council on Civil Society published their report entitled *A Call to Civil Society: Why Democracy Needs Moral Truths*. One of the leaders of this movement to revive civil society is William Galston. Along with Mary Ann Glendon and Jean Bethke Elshtain he signed both reports. Galston is a secular thinker, who admires and cherishes the liberal state because it enables people of different points of view to live together in relative peace and harmony. He has spent most of his professional career defending liberalism and addressing the requirements of a good liberal community. In order to show that John Paul II's reflections on the culture should not be dismissed as strange or foreign, I am going to present the views of this prominent secular liberal on the revitalization of liberal society.

Galston never tires of reiterating his conviction that a liberal community must be established and maintained. It can not be a good community if citizens abuse their liberty, think only of their rights and fail to maintain strong bonds in the family, neighborhoods and voluntary associations. Galston is especially worried about the relativism gaining a foothold in the lives of so many citizens.

This new morality—do what you choose, when you choose, without fear of legal coercion or social disapproval— is an experiment without precedent in human history. Perhaps it will succeed; I doubt it. At some point, we will be called upon for sacrifices that we can't pay others to make on our behalf. And then we will see whether the self-protective nonjudgmentalism Wolfe so ably describes constitutes an adequate basis for a free society. [28]

Galston is referring to the work of sociologist, Alan Wolfe, who published his findings about America's moral condition several years ago in *One Nation, After All*. From his conversations with middle-class Americans over a two year period Wolfe found that they are willing to be personally accountable, but reluctant to make judgments about what anyone else is doing or to assume responsibility for righting what they see as wrong in society. On the basis of the evidence presented by Wolfe, Galston says that the sociologist "pulls his punches" in not raising "far more serious questions."

A choice-based conception of social life leads to instrumental bonds, a cult of

conflict avoidance, an absence of real engagement, and a loss of seriousness. Worst of all it hard to see how this new morality provides any basis for sacrifice, in either personal or civic life. Marriages are ended when they become inconvenient; religions are selected like new fashions in the mall and then cast aside when they cease to meet our personal needs. [29]

In Galston's mind this level of morality is insufficient to build and maintain a good liberal community. Consequently, Galston addresses America's moral mediocrity in many of his writings and proposes helpful solutions.

Like a growing number of other public intellectuals Galston believes that families, public schools, voluntary associations and churches can become more effective seed beds of good habits, virtues and salutary beliefs. [30] To that end he advocates public support for the two-parent family, public discouragement of divorce and teen pregnancy, parents taking responsibility for giving a moral education to their children, a limited character formation in the public schools (as needed by a good liberal community), respect for religion, including its contribution to the public square, and a reinvigoration of civic associations. Galston would like to see marriage preparation mandated by the state and carried out by faith-based institutions. [31] He would further welcome the repeal of no-fault divorce laws, which have contributed to the high rate of divorces. And Galston would like all citizens to understand the difference between asserting a right and doing what is right. In his mind there has been too much rights talk and not enough talk about personal and social responsibilities. He also expresses "grave doubts" about the encouragement of gambling by the state. Galston believes that the rising popularity of gambling "not only reflects but also reinforces a loss of confidence in hard work as a source of social advancement." [32] Doing productive work is one of the ways citizens contribute to the viability of the liberal state.

Galston's expectations of colleges and universities reveal still another facet of his sustained effort to shore up a liberal community. He wants all colleges to transmit "the principles, beliefs, and virtues that liberal societies (indeed, all societies) require for their perpetuation." [33] He also wants them to make a "gentlemanly liberal education" available, which "equips talented individuals to exercise farsighted and public spirited leadership within the framework of an established order." [34] Those capable of such an education are the "natural aristoi," men and women of talent and virtue. Galston himself, of course is one of those men who has received such an education and has dedicated his life to promoting the good of civil society and the liberal state. I would like to summarize what Galston is saying in one of his own sentences: "To fill in the gap between rights and rightness, we need a much richer vocabulary, including some account of the virtues." [35] In other words, people need virtues to guide them in the exercise of their rights. Otherwise, they assert bogus rights or act in a wrongful manner while exercising their rights.

In Galston's mind, not too many people believe that a liberal democracy can thrive simply by protecting rights and by relying on a system of checks and balances.

It is possible to argue that this virtue-talk is beside the point because liberal democracy can be sustained through an artful arrangement of institutions that

use unrefined passions and interests to check one another. I think it fair to say that this brand of institutionalism is a distinctly minority view today, certainly among ordinary citizens and increasingly among scholars as well. People who disagree vigorously about political agendas nonetheless agree that sustainable self government requires certain beliefs, dispositions, and habits, which for brevity's sake may be called 'civic virtues.'" [36]

People would, of course disagree on the kinds of virtues that individuals need for their lives and that liberal societies need for survival and well-being. While Galston and John Paul II would not have the same list of virtues, they would, nevertheless, both recommend a number of similar beliefs and habits. Galston, for example, has nothing to say about the culture of death in America.

If civil society could be renewed along the lines that Galston suggests, liberalism would be more receptive and accommodating to the influence of Catholicism and Catholic social teaching. Catholics would feel less pressured to embrace erroneous and harmful opinions. But there are two major obstacle to this kind of renewal.. The new morality of doing, in Galston's words, "what you choose, when you choose, without fear of legal coercion or social disapproval" is fairly widespread in American society. Secondly, a significant percentage of elite opinion doesn't approve of promoting virtue in civil society. They fear that virtue-talk will impair individual autonomy, diminish respect for diversity (e.g. homosexuality and same-sex marriage), favor families with two parents, set back the feminist movement, and invite faith-based institutions into the public square. There really is a split in the American soul. "The *self sovereignty* of man [or the exercise of autonomy without a comprehensive vision of the good] and *liberty under God*, will continue to compete for the loyalty of democratic citizens and for the souls of individual men and women. This division is what is ultimately at stake in our *culture wars*." [37]

## **WORK RECONSIDERED**

Let us now take another look at work in the light of the current state of liberalism and relation to Catholic teaching on the common good. Contemporary liberal culture, if my assessment is accurate, is not hospitable to the Christian way of approaching work. In fact, the culture is so influential in the lives of many that they can't even begin to grasp what John Paul II is saying about work. Hence, the pope's call to change the culture, addressed especially to bishops and other Christian leaders, must be more effectively heeded. Even the realization of Galston's proposals would create a much more favorable climate for understanding and implementing Catholic teaching on work. Presently, the currents of liberalism affect American Catholics in the way they move other American citizens. In sum, liberalism tends to promote individualism, the separation of rights from duties, the loosening of commitments in families and at work, undue sympathy for the principle of autonomy and "the culture of death", more deference to reigning opinions than to Church authority, the reception of revealed religion as opinion, and understanding morality more in terms of rights and values than virtues. All these trends are an obstacle to the Christian

vision of work, especially to seeing work in relation to the common good.

Despite the unfavorable climate created by the reigning liberal culture, the Catholic Church can still put forward its vision of the common good in some detail as a beacon for individual Catholics. If Catholics really understood the grand vision of the common good in Catholic teaching, many would approach their work with renewed understanding and enthusiasm, knowing what could be accomplished by work, even apparently insignificant work. So informed, they would also understand the importance of working to reform liberal culture through their jobs or by means of volunteer work. They would also understand that the achievement of their dignity through work depends on the continuous struggle both to become competent and to practice the virtues. The Catholic Church in the United States, unfortunately, doesn't seem prepared to present John Paul II's teaching in all its fullness. Parishes and dioceses are even struggling to give adequate marriage preparation!

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## NOTES

[1]. Gertrude Himmelfarb, *One Nation, Two Cultures* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1999), 27.

[2]. "Dignitatis humanae eximia ratio in vocatione hominis ad communionem cum Deo consistit." *Gaudium et spes*, 19.

[3]. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1691.

[4]. *Gaudium et spes*, 17.

[5]. *Laborem exercens*, 10, "Unde consequitur ut homo intimam suam identitatem humanam coniungat cum vinculo, quo alicuius nationis est membrum, atque opus suum esse velit etiam incrementum boni communis, una cum popularibus suis perficiendi...."

[6]. *Gaudium et spes*, 74 formulates the traditional teaching as follows: "Hence the political community exists for that common good in which it finds its full justification and meaning, and from which it derives its pristine and proper right."

[7]. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1906. "Ut bonum commune oportet intelligere 'summam eorum vitae socialis condicionum quae tum coetibus, tum singulis membris permittunt ut propriam perfectionem plenius atque expeditius consequantur'" (quoting *Gaudium et spes*, 26.

[8]. *Catechism*, 1925. Bonum commune tria elementa implicat essentialia: iurium fundamentalium personae observantiam et promotionem; prosperitatem seu bonorum spiritualium et temporalium societatis incrementum; pacem et securitatem coetus eiusque

membrorum.

[9]. *Mater et Magistra*, 65 and *Pacem in terris*, 58. (“summam complecti earum vitae socialis condicionum, quibus homines suam ipsorum perfectionem possent plenius atque expeditius consequi.”).

[10]. Oswald von Nell-Breuning, “Social Movements,” in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology*, vol. 6, edited by Karl Rahner et al. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 110.

[11]. von Nell-Breuning, *Sacramentum Mundi*, 110.

[12]. *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 33 (1941): 218-219.

[13]. Yves de Montcheuil, S.J., *Problemes de Vie Spirituelle* (Paris: Editions de L’Epi, 1961), 199.

[14]. Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy? And Other Studies* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1959), 34.

[15]. John Courtney Murray, “The Declaration on religious Freedom,” in *War, Poverty, Freedom: the Christian Response*, vol. 15 *Concilium* (New York: Paulist Press, 1966), p. 13.

[16]. Murray, *War, Poverty, Freedom*, p. 15.

[17]. Murray, *War, Poverty, Freedom*, p. 15.

[18]. St. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* XIX. 21.

[19]. *De civ. Dei* XIX.24.

[20]. St. Gregory the Great, *Pastoral Care*, (New York, Newman Press, 1950), 143.

[21]. For example, Galston argues that the liberal state properly aims to protect human life, to ensure the development of every citizen’s basic capacities, and to promote social rationality, “the kind of understanding needed to participate in the society, economy, and polity.” In the name of these goals the state would rightly prohibit human sacrifice by the Aztecs and mistreatment of the young by any individual or group. It could also prevent any kind of private or public education from hindering the development of “social rationality.” Cf. “Two Concepts of Liberalism,” *Ethics* 105 (April 1995), p. 525.

[22]. William Galston, “Expressive Liberty, Moral Pluralism, Political Pluralism: Three Sources of Liberal Theory,” *William And Mary Law Review*, 40 (1999) p.880.

- [23]. "Two concepts of Liberalism," p. 530.
- [24]. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950) 181-182.
- [25]. John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, no. 50.
- [26]. Ernest Fortin
- [27]. Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 243.
- [28]. Review of Alan Wolfe, *One Nation, After All*, The Public Interest, no 133 (fall 1998), 116-120.
- [29]. Review of Alan Wolfe, One Nation After All in *The Public Interest*, no 133 (Fall 1998) pp.116-120.
- [30]. William Galston, "A Public Philosophy for the 21st Century," *The Responsive Community*, (Summer 1998), p.21.
- [31]. Cf. William Galston, "Divorce American Style," *The Public Interest* 124 (Summer, 1996), pp. 12-26.
- [32]. William Galston, "Gambling away our Moral Capital," The Public Interest 123 (1996), pp. 58-71.
- [33]. William Galston, "Moral Inquiry and Liberal Education in the American University," *Ethics* 110 (July 2000), 814.
- [34]. "Moral Inquiry and Liberal Education in the American University," 816.
- [35]. William Galston, "Civil Society, Civic Virtue, and Liberal Society," *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 75 (2000), 605.
- [36]. William Galston, "Civil Society, Civic Virtue, and Liberal Society," *Chicago -Kent Law Review* 75 (2000), 605-606.
- [37]. Daniel Mahoney, "The Moral Foundations of Liberal Democracy," in *Public Morality, Civic Virtue and the Problem of Modern Liberalism*.