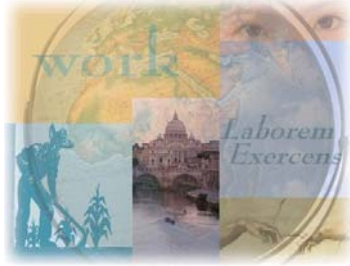


# Work as Key to the Social Question

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



## Unemployment as an Anthropological Drama

---

by [Alessandro Gamba](#)  
Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

«First comes eating, then morality»[\[1\]](#). This short quotation from Bertolt Brecht epitomizes the predominant reputation that work has in modern society (I am deliberately leaving out the famous playwright's attitude and ideological context, I use the quotation only as a dialectical slogan). We are used to viewing work as a constraint, a levy to pay for existence – in a word, as a necessity to earn a living. This perspective, however, detaches human beings from their own personal morality (by morality I mean «responding to the truth of being human»[\[2\]](#)). At most, it is a locus of moralistic-deontological outbursts on the one hand, and alienating careerism on the other hand.

It is all too easy to fall into the sceptically dualistic vision which Brecht's sentence portrays so well. It is equally true at any rate that a closer observation, like the negative plate of a photograph, presents totally different evidence. The unemployed man is indeed not only incapable of meeting his own material needs and those of his family or his closer community. But even more striking is his moral and spiritual condition: his goals are vague and he is cut off from reality. This condition can lead to wearing away his consciousness and the allied attention to the factors which make up his own personality.

It is never superfluous to pay tribute to the decisive role of the Church in having continually and patiently shown the real significance of work. This opus has culminated in the inspired encyclical *Laborem exercens*, the indispensable point of reference on the issue of human being acting through work – whatever the methodology one uses to tackle the question.

«Then the Lord took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and care for it»[\[3\]](#). Work is connatural to human being. To till and to care for are the two verbs that the Holy Scriptures use explicitly to show this. It is a question of a task given directly by the Creator

to man, and therefore an activity that should remind us about the divine image and likeness reflected in human nature. «These truths are decisive for man from the very beginning, and at the same time they trace out the main lines of his earthly existence, both in the state of original justice and also after the breaking, caused by sin, of the Creator's original covenant with creation in man»[4].

In fact, original sin introduced toil into this framework – «the sweat of your brow»[5]. This component is definitely mysterious but it is doubtlessly linked to Jesus's redeeming passion. «The Christian finds in human work a small part of the Cross of Christ and accepts it in the same spirit of redemption in which Christ accepted his Cross for us»[6]. Without insisting at length on the purely theological issues, I propose this formulation from the council fathers: «For while providing the substance of life for themselves and their families, men and women are performing their activities in a way which appropriately benefits society. They can justly consider that by their labor they are unfolding the Creator's work, consulting the advantages of their brother men, and are contributing by their personal industry to the realization history of the divine plan»[7].

Consequently, from a social point of view – in particular from the perspective of the common good – allowing every one to work becomes a precise moral duty.

«The Church has always said, held and preached that the right to work comes before all other rights. It is no coincidence that the Christian message brought about the first social revolution. This revolution gave importance to the dignity of work, including manual labour, and totally changed the pagan society which considered work as being unworthy of human beings who wanted to recognize themselves as such»[8].

The eighteenth paragraph of *Laborem exercens* mentions to the problem of unemployment explicitly. John Paul II devotes part of his section on man's right to work to this problem. Here we find a text containing some seminal remarks. The pope invites us to «act against unemployment, which in all cases is an evil, and which, when it reaches a certain level, can become a real social disaster. It is particularly painful when it especially affects young people, who after appropriate cultural, technical and professional preparation fail to find work, and see their sincere wish to work and their readiness to take on their own responsibility for the economic and social development of the community sadly frustrated»[9].

Hence, the pope, following a long Catholic tradition in this respect, does not hesitate to define unemployment as an evil in itself. That is quite the point: an evil in itself, well before being a social plague or a socio-economic constraint.

The extraordinary metaphysical range of this statement allows me, without further mediation, to place the problem of unemployment at its substantial level: as an

anthropological drama.

I will start from book Z of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*. In this crucial point for the entire history of human thought, Aristotle says that things come into being in three ways: by nature, by art or by chance. Work obviously belongs to the second category (although it can indirectly exploit the first and the third). The human persona is the only creature that can produce by art in Aristotelian terms («from art proceed the things of which the form is in the soul of the artist»[\[10\]](#)).

At this point, it becomes inevitable to introduce the category of finality in order to understand the deepest meaning of this metaphysical discovery. For this purpose, it is worthwhile to refer to the analysis of the finality-nexus carried out by the philosopher Nicolai Hartmann, known for his criticism of the so-called «teleological thought»[\[11\]](#). In a nutshell: taking Aristotle's position as a point of departure, Hartmann's analytical framework divides a goal-oriented activity into three indispensable and successive actions: (1) establishing objectives; (2) selecting, backwards, the means to achieve the objectives; (3) achieving the objectives in reality. The first two actions take place at consciousness level while the third action is accomplished in the spatio-temporal dimension.

Applying this framework to the activity of work proves to be immediately illuminating. To have a working activity, in the full sense of the word as indicated by *Laborem exercens*, all these three operations must be present – in varying and even minimal parts. The inconveniences for the working person come into being when one of the first two actions is absent. A worker who does not know the objectives of his activity or who is not involved in the selection of the means to achieve these objectives will hardly be able to perform the actual task of realization with creativity and passion. One can give many examples, all implying this kind of blindness with respect to one's particular duty. In these cases, it is even harder to make the person aware of the unique dignity of his own concrete effort.

Unemployment involves the lack of the third action, goal achievement. I merely make a passing observation that the moment in which an objective is realized is not to be undervalued. It is not a banal question of dull manual labour or the material vulgarisation of abstract, genial planning. Goal achievement involves following each phase of the task step by step, if necessary intervening occasionally, making changes and bringing in insights in order to win the desired result. Goal achievement involves theoretical and practical knowledge of the specifically requisite skills. Moreover, it involves a form, even if primitive, of the love of reality, which despite being manipulated (or, in biblical terms, subdued and dominated), is still a positive value that we should respect and be in harmony with, intellectually and physically.

Where this does not happen, we have, exactly, what we define as unemployment. The lack of experience (and even of possibility) of achieving an aim, and not seeing the fruits of

one's labour exposes man to substantial damages. Above all, the unemployed man does not experience the «knowledge that by means of work man shares in the work of creation»[12]. Creativity, planning capacity and future drive are therefore reduced. The more the period of unemployment persists, the more the first two actions of the hartmannian framework (setting goals and selecting means) are gradually reduced. The unemployed person inevitably forgets the true significance of time (Guardini used the term duration: «that which, in the course of time, has affinity with the everlasting»[13]), wallowing in boredom and dissatisfaction. Soon, it becomes difficult to see the wonder and curiosity of daily life. Once more, John Paul II expresses this precious possibility in positive terms. «In work, thanks to the light that penetrates us from the Resurrection of Christ, we always find a glimmer of new life, of the new good»[14].

The most serious damage caused by unemployment concerns the human soul itself: «in a society, the unemployed man suffers a serious attack to his own conscience: he is in such a state that the perception of his own personal values is foggy»[15]. It is as though man's fundamental and inevitable questions (who am I? what is the meaning of reality? what is my destiny?) were less pressing for an answer. Similarly, it becomes equally hard to develop one's own talents and attitudes. The Church tradition uses a word that I would love to see particularly venerated: vocation, in other words the path that the Lord of Heaven and Earth chooses and discreetly suggests to us in each of our personal histories. Unemployment is an anthropological drama because it impedes the recognition and realization of the vocation. *Laborem exercens* refers to this problem citing the example of a particular vocation: family life: «In a way, work is a condition for making it possible to found a family, since the family requires the means of subsistence which man normally gains through work. Work and industriousness also influence the whole process of education in the family, for the very reason that everyone “becomes a human being” through, among other things, work»[16].

It is, nevertheless necessary to mention that the phenomenon of unemployment deprives an entire human community of the contribution that each person is called upon to give in view of the common good. This is what John Paul II describes when proposing the third sphere of values, with reference to society at large. «Man must work, both because the Creator has commanded it and because of his own humanity, which requires work in order to be maintained and developed. 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, since he is the heir to the work of generations and at the same time a sharer in building the future of those who will come after him in the succession of history. All this constitutes the moral obligation of work, understood in its wide sense. When we have to consider the moral rights, corresponding to this obligation, of every person with regard to work, we must always keep before our eyes the whole vast range of points of reference in which the labour of every working subject is manifested»[17].

Aware of the anthropological significance of the problem of work, the legislator with a good will must pay special attention to it. *Laborem exercens* expresses a wish for global planning, coordinated at an international level. This should not surprise us. «The Christian discovery of the value of inner nature and purpose is not in opposition with, but in harmony with one's practical involvement in the world»[\[18\]](#).

But I would like to emphasise John Paul II's call for the need of educating. Just as every worker must be trained to perform his duty well, every human being must be educated to live in accordance with the truth. The virtue of faith is doubtlessly the highest point of this educational process («the objective of faith is always the first truth»[\[19\]](#)). No one, however, can take the liberty to oppose truth with individual freedom, because the virtue of faith «is possible only by grace and the interior helps of the Holy Spirit. But it is no less true that believing is an authentically human act»[\[20\]](#). And in order to bring out genuine human nature, attention should be paid to the enhancement of human reason. Educating human beings to the correct and worthy use of their reason is the first path that we must tread, so that, with sincerity and openness, human beings may really recognize the Maker of all things, and also experience the dimension of work as a chance to deepen His incidence in life: «The greatness of man consists in the possibility for him to become God's friend»[\[21\]](#).

Thus, we shall really have, a work for man, «this man in all the truth of his life, in his conscience, in his continual inclination to sin and at the same time in his continual aspiration to truth, the good, the beautiful, justice and love»[\[22\]](#).

## Endnotes

[\[1\]](#) Bertolt Brecht, *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928), Zweiter Akt, Zweites Dreigroschen-Finale.

[\[2\]](#) Joseph Ratzinger, *La via della fede. Saggi sull'etica cristiana nell'epoca presente*, Milano 1996; p. 30 (my translation).

[\[3\]](#) *Gn* 2,15.

[\[4\]](#) *Laborem exercens*, 4.

[\[5\]](#) *Gn* 3,19.

[\[6\]](#) *Laborem exercens*, 27.

[\[7\]](#) *Gaudium et spes*, 34.

[\[8\]](#) Giovanni Saldarini, *Il sale e il lavoro. Persona, impresa, solidarietà*, Genova 1996; p.

163 (my translation).

[9] *Laborem exercens*, 18.

[10] Aristoteles, *Tà metὰ ta physikà*, Z7, 1032a32-1032b2.

[11] Nicolai Hartmann, *Teleologisches Denken*, Berlin 1951; p. 1 (my translation).

[12] *Laborem exercens*, 25.

[13] Romano Guardini, *Die Lebensalter. Ihre ethische und pädagogische Bedeutung*, Mainz 1983; p. 44 (my translation).

[14] *Laborem exercens*, 27.

[15] Luigi Giussani, *Il senso religioso*, Milano 1997; p. 47 (my translation).

[16] *Laborem exercens*, 10.

[17] *Laborem exercens*, 16.

[18] Adriano Bausola, *Tra etica e politica*, Milano 1998; p. 161 (my translation).

[19] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II 1 1.

[20] *Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae*, 154.

[21] Christoph Schönborn, *Herzstücke unseres Glaubens. Das «Credo» im Katechismus der Katholischen Kirche*, Wien 1994; p. 41 (my translation).

[22] *Redemptor hominis*, 14.