

# Work as Key to the Social Question

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



## Back to the Person: The Anthropology of *Laborem Exercens* and its Significance for the Social Question

---

by Dr. Samuel Gregg

Acton Institute (Grand Rapids, USA), and

John Paul II Pontifical Institute for the Study of Marriage and Family (Melbourne, Australia)

### Abstract

This paper illustrates that *Laborem Exercens*' development of Catholic social teaching directs the Church's attention to the moral dimension of human work, specifically the moral-spiritual goods that are created within a person through work-acts that reflect a person's free choices for the good. It demonstrates how John Paul II develops these themes by drawing upon both the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, and its teaching on human action, as well as Thomistic natural law ideas about human action that are explored in his pre-pontifical philosophical writings. The paper then explores the implications of this development occasioned by *Laborem Exercens* for the social doctrine's approach to questions of wealth-creation. It will suggest that the attention to wealth-creation that is manifest in John Paul II's social teaching proceeds primarily from this focus on the moral dimension of work. In the very act of creating things, people also effectively "create themselves," either by becoming the person that we-ought-to-be, and thus embarking upon the life of holiness, or by turning away from God and His call to the moral life.

### Introduction

The eminent natural law theorist, Germain Grisez, points out that while classical moral thought dealt at length with responsibilities regarding property, it paid little attention to responsibilities regarding work. [1] Rodger Charles. S.J., agrees, adding that labor was accorded greater respect in the Jewish world than in Romano-Hellenic cultures. Christianity, he

suggests, inherited and maintained this regard throughout the ages. [2]

Catholic social teaching continues this tradition, with John Paul II commemorating *Rerum Novarum*'s ninetieth anniversary with an encyclical on work in 1981. To grasp, however, the deeper significance of this text for the social question, it should be understood as representing, in part, the application of distinct themes developed during his time as a bishop-philosopher prior to his election as Pope, as well as sustained reflection upon that key document of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965). In this light, we see that the Pope shifts the emphasis of Catholic social teaching toward a more explicit affirmation of the centrality of the human person, as well as man's destiny to self-realize himself as the creature that he ought to be.

Notwithstanding Christianity's traditional emphasis on work's dignity, one is bound to ask why John Paul devotes an encyclical to the topic. The pope himself indicates that he is responding to profound social changes. The world, he states, is "on the eve of new developments in technological, economic and political conditions which . . . will influence the world of work and production no less than the industrial revolution of the last century." Whilst noting that "it is not for the Church to analyze scientifically the consequences these changes may have on human society," the pope insists that it is the Church's task "to help to guide the changes so as to ensure authentic progress by man and society" (LE 1). A sense that man is losing a proper understanding of what constitutes true progress permeates, we recall, Karol Wojtyla's later writings. It soon becomes apparent that *Laborem Exercens* underlines what John Paul regards as "fundamental truths" about work, as if to remind people what constitutes the most important progress that man ought to realize through work: the acquisition of moral good and dominion over himself as a person. In this sense, Stanley Hauerwas points out, John Paul's teaching about work challenges not only Marxists, but also "'liberals' and 'conservatives' [who have] become so enamoured with issues of distribution that they forget that work has a moral purpose." [3]

The key to understanding John Paul II's teaching on work is to recognize that work is a human action involving the exercise of rational free choice. This being the case, it shapes not only the world, but the author of the action. To this extent, John Paul II brings to the fore a truth about human action and the significance of choice that has always been taught by the Catholic Church. A contemporary neo-Thomist, John Finnis, points out that the whole tenor of St. Thomas Aquinas' work leads to the conclusion that

human actions, and the societies constituted by human action, cannot be adequately understood as if they were merely (1) natural occurrences, (2) contents of thoughts, or (3) products of techniques of mastering natural materials. . . . True, there are elements in human life and behavior. . . . such as the workings of one's digestion, or one's instinct and emotions, which can and should be understood as objects (subject-matter) of natural science. . . . But human actions and societies cannot be adequately described, explained, justified, or criticized unless they are understood as also, and centrally, the

carrying out of free choices. [4]

Nevertheless when *Laborem Exercens* appeared, some were unsure as to why John Paul had promulgated an encyclical on work. Peter Hebblethwaite for one was puzzled. It was, in his opinion, “a long time since anyone has dared to address the Church and ‘all men of good will’ on a topic of such vast generality.” [5] This statement is not, however, strictly true. Pre-conciliar magisterial teaching certainly considered work in detail. [6] The Council also examined the issue, placing it at the heart of *Gaudium et Spes*’s theological anthropology of man.

## **Work, Creation, and the Moral Life**

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, much was written about the meaning of human action by existentialists, phenomenologists, Marxists, and liberals. It is not surprising, then, that *Gaudium et Spes* spends much time explaining the Church’s view of human activity. In doing so, it outlined a paradigm of human action that would be deepened by *Laborem Exercens* in terms of the moral significance of human acts for man. Here the Pope underlined distinctly Thomistic natural law themes. But the same encyclical was also to provide a basis for John Paul II to re-think the nature of entrepreneurship and to direct attention to the moral and economic significance of wealth-creation.

One of *Gaudium et Spes*’ dominant motifs is that the pace of change in modern society is increasing. The Council states quite explicitly that “History itself is accelerating [*acceleratur*] on so rapid a course that individuals can scarcely keep pace with it. . . . And so the human race is passing from a relatively static conception of the nature of things to a more dynamic and evolutionary conception” (GS 5). In short, rapid change is understood as a new constant. This, however, is balanced by the Council’s stress that in the midst of this seemingly perpetual acceleration some things remain fixed and immutable: “the Church affirms, too, that underlying all that changes there are many things that do not change, and that have their ultimate foundation in Christ who is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (GS 10).

The Council traces the modern world’s dynamism to the essentially *creative* nature of human activity, especially that of human work:

Throughout the course of the centuries, men have labored to better the circumstances of their lives through a monumental amount of individual and collective effort. To believers, this point is settled: considered in itself, such human activity accords with God’s will. For man, created to God’s image, received a mandate to subject to himself the earth and all that it contains, and to govern the world with justice and holiness [refers to Genesis 1:26-27]; a mandate to relate himself and the totality of things to Him who was to be acknowledged as the Lord and Creator of all. Thus, through the dominion of

all things by man, the name of God would be made wonderful through all the earth.

This holds good also for even the most ordinary every-day activities. 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, serving their brothers and sisters, and contributing by their personal industry to the realization in history of the divine plan. (GS 34)

The reference to Genesis in this extract is important. On one level, it provides the text above with its understanding of man as the *imago Dei* given dominion over the world. Made in the Creator's image, people are charged with the responsibility of unfolding the Creator's work. This dominion, however, is not absolute, as the "mandate" given to man involves relating himself and all things towards the One who endows him with dominion. It is in realizing this dominion that work is critical. No matter how "ordinary" its character, work permits man to actualize his dominion over the world by unfolding the Creator's work. Human acts of work are therefore understood by the Council as *proceeding from* and *co-operative with* God's creative Act.

In another sense, however, the passage above provides us with a biblical insight into the inner dynamics of human activity itself. The word "Creator" implies a free person. This suggests that the Act of creation was a free act, an act that did not flow from necessity. Moreover, it was an act of intelligence. God knew what He was doing and He willed it. On this basis, it is possible to draw the following conclusions. One is that nothing is inevitable. In carrying out their mandate to subdue the earth, people need to be *attentive* to the possibilities for change. Second, it is the fact that human acts involve the use of reason and free will that makes them creative. Creativity, in short, comes from within man; it is one of those things that distinguish human beings from the animals.

Having established this biblical and theological framework, the Council begins to focus upon man himself. *Gaudium et Spes* explains that the human act simultaneously shapes not only the world in which man lives, but also its immediate initiator:

Just as human activity proceeds from man, so it is ordered to man. For when a man works, he not only alters things and society, he develops himself as well [*se ipsum perficit*]. He learns much, he cultivates his resources, he goes outside of himself and beyond himself [*extra se et supra se*]. Rightly understood, this kind of growth is of greater value than any external riches which can be garnered. (GS 35)

Marie-Dominique Chenu, O.P., interprets this passage as indicating that in building up the world, man can simultaneously perfect himself. [7] Chenu omits to note, however, that the

words above portray work's transforming effect upon man as more important than its external impact.

Precisely what the Council believes man should "become" through acts of work is obviously more than some vague notion of "personal development." It involves some degree of transcendence "beyond" himself (*extra se et supra se*). What the Council primarily has in mind is man's realization of moral good. This is apparent from its identification of true human progress with the spreading "on earth [of] the fruits of our nature and our enterprise – human dignity, brotherly communion, and freedom" (GS 39). By portraying these goods as the products of human nature and enterprise, the Council indicates that they are integral to man, but must be realized through his actions. This is, of course, the classic natural law position expressed in the Aristotelian-Thomistic proposition that people must actualize their potential.

Already it should be apparent that there is ample scope within the Council's paradigm of human action for developing Catholic teaching about entrepreneurship. Apart from the obvious potential of the creativity motif, *Gaudium et Spes*' picture of man freely actualizing the potentialities of the world and his own nature conveys the same sense of human dynamism and continuous discovery that is commonly associated with entrepreneurship. But instead of developing these points, the Council prefers to speak more generally of the need to "encourage technical progress and the spirit of enterprise. . . . eagerness for creativity and improvement and. . . . adoption of production methods and all serious efforts of people engaged in production" (GS 64).

## **The Truth About Work**

Following *Laborem Exercens*'s promulgation, Michael Novak described it as rooting the magisterium's understanding of work "in the biblical category of creation or, more precisely, co-creation." [8] The preceding section shows, however, that this view of work was integral to magisterial teaching about work before *Laborem Exercens*. Indeed, to underline this encyclical's continuity with the Council, John Paul incorporates the first part of *Gaudium et Spes*'s paragraph 34 into his text under the heading, "Work as a sharing in the activity of the Creator" (LE 25). [9]

Like the Council, John Paul defines work as a divinely ordained activity:

work means any activity by man, whether manual or intellectual, whatever its nature or circumstances; it means any human activity that can and must be recognized as work, in the midst of all the many activities of which man is capable. . . . Man is made to be in the visible universe an image and likeness of God himself [refers to Gen 1:26], and he is placed in it in order to subdue the earth [refers to Gen 1:28]. From the beginning therefore he is *called to work*.

(LE 0)

The second half of this citation underlines the importance of Genesis's first chapter for *Laborem Exercens's* statements about man and his work. Indeed, John Paul stresses how well "the very first pages" of Genesis encapsulate the truth about man:

An analysis of these texts makes us aware that they express . . . the fundamental truths about man. . . . 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. (LE 4)

*Laborem Exercens* then focuses upon the two Genesis verses in which man is described as created "in the image of God . . . male and female" (Gen 1:27) and told to "Be Fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it" (Gen 1:28). These verses, John Paul states, "indirectly indicate [work] as an activity for man to carry out in the world." They also specify that "[m]an is the image of God partly through the mandate received from his Creator to subdue, to dominate, the earth. In carrying out this mandate, man, every human being, reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe" (LE 4). John Paul's position is thus the same as the Council's. As Alberto Gini states: "Although *Laborem Exercens* never uses the terms 'co-creation' or 'co-creator', John Paul II makes it clear that the divine action of creativity and human work are dynamically interrelated." [10]

It is, of course, theologically risky to link human work directly with God's activity. Karl Barth, for one, maintains that while man can in some sense participate in God's activity, this "does not mean that he becomes a kind of co-God." [11] To this, one may add that viewing human work as "co-creative" risks trivializing God's creative Act.

John Paul, however, avoids such objections:

As man, through his work, becomes more and more the master [*dominus*] of the earth, and as he confirms his dominion over the visible world, again through his work, he nevertheless remains in every case and at every phase of this process within the Creator's original ordering [*ordinatio*]. And this ordering remains necessarily and indissolubly linked with the fact that man was created, as male and female, "in the image of God." (LE 4)

The message here is unambiguous. Man and his work remain dependent upon God because God is and remains first cause: *Actus Purus*. Thus there can be no question of a "co-Godship." Moreover, the extract above presents man's subordination to God and His divine order as a theological-anthropological truth about his nature as *imago Dei*. For if man is the *imago Dei* then, by definition, both he and his work remain subject to God's original ordering—indeed, this ordering permeates man's very nature. It follows that if human work is

to reflect this truth about man, then it must at all times and in each instance conform to God's original ordering. While such a position is surely implicit to the Council's statements, John Paul uses it to underline the moral significance of *every* work-act for man.

In a piece critical of *Laborem Exercens*, Stanley Hauerwas asks why John Paul bases his arguments upon Genesis "when other texts of scripture might be equally relevant or even more appropriate." [12] Part of the answer should already be evident. The pope believes that these texts are fundamental if man is to arrive at a truthful understanding of his nature and his work. In this connection, there is much to suggest that Wojtylan emphases have influenced *Laborem Exercens*.

## Creation and Truth

Though they do not refer to Genesis, Wojtyla's pre-conciliar writings explore the relationship between human and divine creativity. *Love and Responsibility* stresses that if man harmonizes his activity with God's created order, then he affirms his dignity and participates in God's eternal design:

God is the Creator, and so all beings in the universe, creatures in general and man in particular, owe their existence to Him. Not only is God the Creator, the constant renewer of existence, but the essences of all creatures derive from Him and reflect the eternal thoughts and plans of God. . . . Man, by understanding the order of nature and conforming to it in his actions, participates in the thought of God, becomes *particeps Creatoris*, and has a share in the law which God bestowed on the world when He created it at the beginning of time. (LR 246–247)

Whilst Wojtyla's reasoning proceeds from a more overt natural law basis, it closely resembles that of *Laborem Exercens*. God is first cause of everything and has ordered all things, including man, in a particular way "from the very beginning." Man's uniqueness lies in the fact that he can understand this order of nature and thus his own place in it. He can therefore conform his actions to this original ordering. This confers upon man the ability to participate in God's thought and plans: the dignity of *particeps Creatoris*.

Though this expression does not quite conceptualize man as a "co-creator," it falls not far short of this. In his article, "Thomistic Personalism," Wojtyla moves closer to this position:

In creating we also fill the external material world around us with our own thought and being. There is a certain similarity here between ourselves and God, for the whole of creation is an expression of God's thought and being.  
[13]

Several of these pre-conciliar ideas mature in Wojtyla's post-conciliar writings. In *Sources of Renewal*, Wojtyla claims that for the Council

[t]he idea that "material being does not depend on God" is basically at variance with the truth and message of creation, as if one were to say that "created things are not created." . . . The dogma of creation defines reality itself in the profoundest way. Not only does the concept of "creation" make no sense without that of a Creator, but the reality which we thus define cannot exist without Him who gave it life and continually keeps it in being . . . Hence the "autonomy of earthly affairs," if conceived as a negation of God the Creator, is at the same time a negation of creatures and a denial of their ontological character . . . this leads to a fundamental disorientation of man's cognitive and active powers. (SR 50–51)

On one level this passage suggests that logical inconsistencies underlie the rejection of God as first cause. But it also provides us with a clue as to why *Laborem Exercens* is so insistent upon this point: the denial of God as Creator leaves man bereft of a *truthful* understanding of what he *is*. This profoundly disorders human knowledge and acts.

Wojtyla's Lenten Lectures, *Sign of Contradiction*, continues this assertion of a God-centered order via a commentary upon the same chapter of Genesis from which the Council derives its anthropology of human work. To grasp Genesis's significance for Wojtyla, one need only note his comment that

unless one does reflect upon that fundamental ensemble of facts and situations it becomes difficult—if not impossible—to understand man and the world. . . . I think it is true, that today one cannot understand either Sartre or Marx without having first read and pondered very deeply the first three chapters of Genesis. These are the key to understanding the world of today, both its roots and its extremely radical—and therefore dramatic—affirmations and denials. (SC 24)

The use of the word "fundamental" in regard to Genesis reappears in *Laborem Exercens*'s description of this text. Indeed, some of the "fundamental facts" that Wojtyla identifies in Genesis prefigure the encyclical's emphasis that man's dominion over the world does not mean that he is somehow "beyond" God's original ordering.

For a start, Wojtyla contends that Genesis 1:26 (cited by both the Council and *Laborem Exercens*) demonstrates that man's dominion is dependent upon God: "This dominion extends over all that man little by little succeeds in deriving from the earth." "But," Wojtyla cautions, "even when . . . man reaches the moon, he can only do this by virtue of the first covenant, from which and thanks to which he received the prerogative of dominion" (SC 23). Nor is there any doubt in Wojtyla's mind that Genesis underscores the "secondary" character of human acts:

“And God saw that it was good.” This divine “seeing” is in every way primary, because it creates being and good and also ensures their continuance within time: *conservatio est continua creatio*. Human seeing and human doing are always secondary because they are always concerned with something already provided: they always encounter pre-constituted being and value. (SC 21)

These words not only depict God as first cause, but stress that human reason and acts (seeing and doing) *always* encounter the pre-constituted order of good and being. This is precisely the position underscored by *Laborem Exercens* in relation to acts of work.

Given, then, John Paul’s emphasis that man is eternally subject to God’s original ordering, it is little wonder that he explains *how* man, through work, may freely conform to this order and thereby realize moral good. Whilst *Laborem Exercens*’s development of teaching on this matter owes much to *Gaudium et Spes*, distinctly Wojtylan influences are also detectable.

## Inner Person and Outer World

The Council’s attention to the good attained through work is replicated in *Laborem Exercens*. According to John Paul, work is “probably the *primary* [*primarium*] key, to the whole social question, if we try to see that question really from the point of view of man’s good” (LE 3). But *how*, one may ask, does man become good through work?

In this respect, the encyclical’s description of the creative process whereby man confirms his dominion through work becomes important. According to the pope, this process is

*universal*: it embraces all human beings, every generation, every phase of economic and cultural development, and *at the same time* it is a process which takes place *within each human being*, in each conscious human subject. (LE 4)

Here John Paul indicates that by working, each man may realize dominion not only over the world but also *over himself*: the “conscious human subject.”

*Laborem Exercens*’s use of the adjective “conscious” in this context is revealing. It suggests that man cannot help being *aware* of his work’s internal and external effects. This, of course, underlines man’s responsibility for his work and its impact on himself and the world. The encyclical goes on to state that the ethical value of work “remains linked to the fact that the one who carries it out is a person, a conscious and free subject, that is to say a subject that decides about himself [*de se ipso deliberans*]” (LE 6). Thus it is not only the fact that man is a knowing subject, but also the reality that this subject makes *free choices about himself* when working, that makes work morally significant for man and responsible for himself. This is critical for comprehending John Paul’s teaching on how man shapes himself through work.

Before explaining this, however, it is necessary to distinguish between what the pope calls work's "objective" and "subjective" dimensions.

*Laborem Exercens* initially describes work in the objective sense as "[w]ork understood as a 'transitive' activity, that is to say an activity beginning in the human subject and directed towards an external object" (LE 4). Whilst these words parallel *Gaudium et Spes*'s position that work shapes the outside world, they add precision to the teaching about how this occurs. The identification of man as subject distinguishes man as the *support* and *predicate* of his work. [14] It is on these ontological and logical premises that one can say, as the Council does, that "work proceeds from man." Moreover, John Paul's specification that work's transitive dimension involves its direction to an external object, indicates that work proceeds from the human subject when he freely chooses an object, perhaps from a range of possible objects.

Paragraph 5 of *Laborem Exercens* elaborates upon the meaning of work as a "transitive" activity. Here the pope speaks of "the meaning of *work in an objective sense*, which finds expression in the various epochs of culture and civilization." He then details how man has gradually progressed through history to cultivating the earth and transforming its products through agriculture, industry, service enterprises, and his use of technology (LE 5). Work in the objective sense, then, expresses man's dominion over the world and the ensuing material progress. *Laborem Exercens* itself denotes work's transitive-objective dimension as presupposing "a specific dominion by man over "the earth," and, in its turn, it confirms and develops this dominion" (LE 4). It is therefore something to be valued.

*Laborem Exercens* then considers what may be called work's *intransitive* dimension: work in the subjective sense.

Man has to subdue the earth and dominate it, because as the "image of God" he is a person, that is to say, a subjective being [*animans subiectivus*] capable of acting in a planned and rational way [*capax ad agendum ratione praestituta et rationali*], capable of deciding about himself [*capax ad deliberandum de se*] and with a tendency to self-realization [*eoque contendens ut se ipsum perficiat*]. *As a person, man is therefore the subject of work.* As a person he works [*opus facit*], he performs various actions [*actiones*] belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfil the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity [*vocationi, ex qua est persona quaeque vi ipsius humanitatis eius et propria*]. (LE 6)

This paragraph is crucial. First, it grounds work's "interior effect" in Genesis's dominion motif. Secondly, it explains that man's work has an "intransitive" effect upon him, an effect which begins with man's use of his unique capacities as a person and a subjective being; that is, *acting* (the property of a subject) as his *reason* tells him and making decisions, or what one may call exercising his *will* (properties of a person). In other words, when the person-subject

acts, he not only chooses an external object; he simultaneously makes a choice about himself.

The above extract also indicates that fulfilling oneself through work-actions is not doing whatever one wills. Free will is certainly important because man is identified as only having a “tendency to self-realization.” However, *Laborem Exercens* also defines self-realization in terms of man attaining that which is his by virtue of his very humanity—“his calling” to be a *person*. To use an Aristotelian-Thomistic analogy, self-realization through work involves man as the subject of work actualizing his potential as a person. It means *always* choosing to do what one *ought* to do as a person, as the *imago Dei* called upon to realize dominion over the world and oneself.

The word “person,” of course, features in Catholic social teaching long before *Laborem Exercens*. What is significant, however, about the above extract is its emphasis upon the link between man’s status as the subject of work and his status as a person. Not only do the human subject’s acts of work suddenly assume a significance beyond their objective effects, but the reader is reminded that man’s spiritual dimension—of which his intellect and free will are aspects (see GS 14, 15, 17)—is part of the subject from which work-acts proceed. One might say then that the human subject’s work-acts are always an act of the person. Indeed, John Paul makes precisely this point: “Since work in its subjective aspect is always a personal action, an *actus personae*, it follows that *the whole person, body and spirit*, participates in it” (LE 24).

This attention to man’s nature as the person-subject is not as evident in *Gaudium et Spes*’s teaching on human activity. For John Paul, however, it serves to deepen understanding of why work’s “inner-subjective” dimension (what the Council calls “developing oneself”) is more important than its “outer-objective” aspect (the Council’s “altering of things”). To cite him at length on this matter:

the basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done but the fact that 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 the objective one. . . . This does not mean that, from the objective point of view, human work cannot and must not be rated in any way. It only means that *the primary basis of the value of work is man himself* who is its subject. . . . Through this conclusion one rightly comes to recognize the pre-eminence of the subjective meaning of work over the objective one. (LE 6)

In light of these statements, we may say that since the human subject’s work in the intransitive-subjective sense always involves the formation of man’s character as a person, it is *always* more significant than work’s transitive-objective dimension. Man’s achievement of dominion over himself through work is, in short, more important than the same work’s effects upon the world. As if to underline the point, John Paul states that “in the final analysis it is always man who is the purpose [*scopus*] of the work, whatever work it is . . . even if the common scale of values rates it as the merest ‘service,’ as the most monotonous, or work

which puts one on the margins of society” (LE 6). [15]

These words are consistent with the Council’s insistence in *Gaudium et Spes*’s paragraph 35 that just as activity proceeds from man, it is also ordered towards him. They also suggest that, besides being the subject of work, man is also its final object. For when the subject freely directs his work to an object, he simultaneously makes a choice which is “directed to” himself as a person, as it is only by “passing through” the subject that an act of will is able to “reach” an object.

In *Laborem Exercens*’s ninth paragraph, the pope specifies that man’s self-realization as a person through work involves the acquisition of moral good. John Paul begins by stating that Genesis 3:19 “refers to *the sometimes heavy toil* that . . . has accompanied human work.” This aspect of Genesis is mentioned by neither the Council nor Paul VI. Whilst it features in the teachings of Pius XI and Pius XII about work, their emphasis is upon explaining toil in terms of the consequences of original sin. [16] Whilst John Paul does not ignore this aspect (LE 27), he also places it in the context of acquiring virtue:

in spite of all this toil—perhaps, in a sense, because of it—work is a good thing for man. Even though it bears the mark of a *bonum arduum* in the terminology of St. Thomas [refers to ST, I-II, q.40, a.1c; I-II, q.34, a.2, ad 1], this does not take away the fact that, as such, it is a good thing for man. It is not only good in the sense that it is useful [*bonum utile*] or something to enjoy [*bonum fruedum*]; it is also good as being something worthy [*dignum*], that is to say, something that corresponds to man’s dignity, that expresses this dignity and increases it. If one wishes to define more clearly the ethical meaning of work, it is this truth that one must particularly keep in mind. Work is a good thing for man [*bonum hominis*] . . . because through work man *not only transforms nature . . . but he also achieves fulfillment* as a human being [*se ipsum ut hominem perficit*] and indeed, in a sense, becomes “more a human being.”

Without this consideration it is impossible to understand the meaning of the virtue of industriousness, and why . . . industriousness should be a virtue: for virtue, as a moral habit, is something whereby man becomes good as man [refers to ST, I-II, q.40, a.1c; I-II, q.34, a.2, ad 1]. (LE 9)

“Toil” in this context indicates that the person’s self-realization through work in the subjective sense is not easy. Nevertheless, partly because of the toil, the good achieved through work is precious. The good, however, that the pope has in mind is more important than the utility or pleasure that work may bring. Work *itself* is understood as a good because in and of itself it lets man fulfil himself as he meant to: that is, by freely choosing to develop virtues, understood in the Thomist sense of the word, such as industriousness. These moral-spiritual goods are the most worthy [*dignum*] of man, because they express man’s potential for

perfection.

Summarizing, then, *Laborem Exercens*'s contribution to the teaching on work, one may say that George Huntston Williams's contention that this encyclical is built to an extraordinary degree on scriptural revelation and not natural law thinking [17] is simply incorrect. The two sources would actually seem to complement each other. Even John Paul's use of Genesis has a strong natural law undertone. But to list the primary developments of teaching about the effects of work:

- *Laborem Exercens* specifies that in achieving dominion over the earth through work in the objective sense, man can realize dominion over himself through work in the subjective sense.
- By stressing that man is the free human subject of work, John Paul deepens the teaching about how work proceeds from man: i.e., work is logically predicated upon man and, ontologically speaking, he is its support. John Paul's attachment of the word "conscious" to the phrase "human subject" emphasizes that man—again by reason of what he is—is aware of what occurs inside and outside him when he works. This underlines man's responsibility for his work.
- Having characterized work as an act of the human subject, John Paul directs attention to the role played by the spiritual qualities of free will and reason in this action, both of which are facets of man's personhood. This endows each work-act proceeding from the human subject with a significance greater than its objective effect. The greatest value of the human subject's work-acts lies in their capacity to contribute to man's struggle to fulfil himself as a person by developing morally virtuous habits. It is for this reason that work in itself is described as "a good thing for man" and an *actus personae*. Every work-action, no matter how marginal, involves man making choices about himself and therefore either confirming or diminishing his self-dominion. Work in the intransitive-subjective sense, then, is always more important than its transitive-objective dimension.
- John Paul's distinction between "object" and "subject" adds precision to magisterial teaching about how work is simultaneously directed to the world and man's inner dimension. The subject's act of work is directed to external objects, but, in the final analysis, the subject from whom the work proceeds is always the work's ultimate object.

## **Work, Action, Person**

Looking at *Laborem Exercens*'s teachings, one must agree with Gregory Baum when he says that, for a Catholic document, the encyclical's use of the terms "subjective" and "objective" is unusual. [18] Catholic moral teaching looks upon the world as a given: as the objective reality. To know the truth, the mind has to discern what constitutes objective reality.

Conversely, “subjective” is often used to describe the purely personal and idiosyncratic. [19] As the subjective may be an obstacle to ascertaining the truth, it must be minimized. In this context, it is normal to speak of the priority of the objective over the subjective.

On one level, *Laborem Exercens*’s particular employment of these expressions proceeds from its use of the words subject and object. “Objective” reflects the idea of work being directed to objects and shaping the objective reality around man. “Subjective” corresponds to the concept of work affecting the subject from whom it proceeds. If, however, we turn to Wojtyla’s writings, it becomes apparent that the pope’s use of these terms reflects the influence of Wojtylan ideas.

As a Polish Catholic thinker, Wojtyla was not alone in having an intellectual interest in work. In 1946, for example, Stefan Wyszynski, then a professor of social ethics, wrote a book which presented work in terms of man’s participation in the act of creation. [20] More contemporarily, Jozef Tischner’s *The Spirit of Solidarity* explored work from a variety of ethical and theological perspectives. [21]

It was not until the late 1970s that Wojtyla’s writings began to focus upon work as opposed to human acts per se. Wojtyla did, however, compose poems about work in the 1950s, and these, along with his inquiries into the nature of human action, closely parallel aspects of *Laborem Exercens*’s teaching about work. To demonstrate the influence of these thoughts upon developments in magisterial social teaching, we will examine the relevant Wojtylan texts in three groupings: the poems about work; other relevant pre-conciliar writings; and the post-conciliar texts.

In one sense, poetry is “opposed” to philosophy. The latter takes the long way around, claims rationality, and does not eschew lengthy exposition. Poems work more directly through image and evocation. There is no reason, however, why ideas expressed in one medium cannot be articulated and deepened in another. Interestingly, Krzysztof Dybciak notes that the cross-fertilization of literature and philosophy has always been a strong tradition in Polish intellectual life. [22]

Between 1946 and 1979, Wojtyla published many poems. [23] While one may describe them as “religious poetry,” their phraseology is by no means devotional or superficially religious. The translator of Wojtyla’s plays describes the poems as intensely personal and dealing mainly with the inner life and man’s contemporary problems. [24]

Poetry, of course, arises from sources not always within the reach of logical discourse. René Darricau, however, argues that Wojtyla gradually “transcended” poetry in the sense that only some formal aspects like rhythm or line pattern remained. [25] The suggestion is that his poems evolved into philosophical and theological reflections in poetic form. If true, then it is all the more surprising that no commentator has considered magisterial development in light of these poems.

For present purposes, the most significant of Wojtyła's poems are those published under the collective title "The Quarry." Though written in 1956, the year in which the riots of workers in Poznan led to significant internal upheaval in Poland, these events seem not to have made an impression. Instead, "The Quarry" is more evocative of the four years that Wojtyła spent working in a limestone quarry and a chemical factory during the German Occupation.

When considering the patterns of images contained within "The Quarry," we discover a hymn to work of such profundity that one is no longer surprised that John Paul devotes an encyclical to the topic. In the first stanza of the first of these poems, "Material," Wojtyła writes:

A thought grows in me day by day:  
the greatness of work is inside man. [26]

An obvious parallel may be made between these words and the stress upon the greater importance of work's internal effect in *Gaudium et Spes* and *Laborem Exercens*.

The second poem, "Inspiration," describes work's effect upon man and the world:

Work starts from within, outside it takes such space. . . .  
Look—your will strikes a deep bell in stone,  
thought strikes certainty, a peak  
both for the heart and for hand.

For this certainty of mind, this certainty of eye,  
for this vertical line  
you pay with a generous hand.  
The stone yields you its strength,  
and man matures through work  
which inspires him to difficult good. [27]

These sentences encapsulate various themes developed by *Laborem Exercens*. Work proceeds from man's interior and permits his will to shape the external world. But it also involves man's reason ("thought") and will "striking certainty": that is, *truth*. Although it is hard, even costly, this aspect of work has transcendental significance ("this vertical line"), as it enables man to mature and aspire to "difficult good." Parallels may be drawn between these words and *Laborem Exercens*'s teaching about toil and man's acquisition of virtue through work.

The theme of transcendence is echoed in "Material." Its closing verses depict man toiling, his "hands drooping with the hammer's weight." In the midst of this, however, man's "thought [is] informing his work." Thus,

for a moment he is a Gothic building

cut by a vertical thought born in the eyes.  
No, not a profile alone,  
not a mere figure between God and the stone  
sentenced to grandeur and error. [28]

Through the toil of work shaped by the use of his inner faculties, then, man can transcend, if only for a short time, his position as a creature existing between God and matter, and dominate himself.

The third poem, “Participation,” complements these motifs:

The light of this rough plank,  
recently carved from a trunk,  
is pouring the vastness  
of work indivisible into your palms.  
The taut hand rests on this Act  
which permeates all things in man. [29]

What *Laborem Exercens* defines as objective-transitive work is captured here in the plank recently formed from a tree through work. Long after the act of carving, however, the same work-act continues to affect the man from whom it came. The similarity between these words and *Laborem Exercens*'s description of work's intransitive effect seems clear.

The attaching of a capital “A” to “Act” in the extract above seems odd, until one realizes that it recalls *the Act*: that is, God, the pure Act of being, free from all mere potentiality—*Actus Purus*. The insistence that this Act permeates all things in man anticipates John Paul's emphasis upon God as the first and continuing cause of man and his work. “Material” also contemplates this theme:

Passerbys scuttle off into doorways,  
someone whispers: “Yet here is a great force.”  
Fear not. Man's daily deeds have a wide span,  
a strait riverbed can't imprison them long.  
Fear not. For centuries they all stand in Him,  
and you look at Him now  
through the even knocking of hammers. [30]

Modern work, then, is not to be feared. Like all true work throughout the centuries, it proceeds from God (“Him”) and reflects His work. The words above even hint at work's co-creative character and imply that work expresses man's nature (“you look at Him now”) as *imago Dei*.

Nowhere in “The Quarry” are terms such as “subjective” employed. Conceptually, however, these poems encapsulate features of *Laborem Exercens*'s teaching on work, several

years before *Gaudium et Spes* was even drafted.

Whilst work itself is not addressed in Wojtyła's other pre-conciliar writings, Wojtyła's long fascination with the human act has already been highlighted. One characteristic of Wojtyła's pre-conciliar texts are their efforts to integrate the modern notion of "consciousness" into an essentially Thomist anthropology of man and human acts.

## Man and Action in Wojtyła's Pre-Conciliar Writings

As early as 1957, Wojtyła was using the phrase "conscious act" and placing it within a Thomist context. "A conscious human act," he stated, "is for St. Thomas not merely a stage upon which ethical experience is enacted. It is itself an ethical experience because it is an act of will." [31] The references to "experience" surely reflect Wojtyła's assimilation of Scheler's emphases. Nonetheless, Wojtyła is careful to ground the conscious act in man's will because this is the key to its moral significance. Another pre-conciliar article links consciousness with human reason. Here Wojtyła argues that in the Thomist tradition, "consciousness and self-consciousness are something derivative, a kind of fruit of the rational nature that subsists in the person. . . . The person acts consciously because he is rational." [32]

These two articles, then, seem to anticipate *Laborem Exercens*'s use of the word "conscious" to stress that man cannot help being aware of the significance of his work-acts. *Love and Responsibility* uses this word in a similar manner. It specifies, for example, that "man, acting in the way proper to him, consciously selects means and consciously adapts them to an end of which he is conscious" (LR 46). Here "conscious" highlights man's knowledge of his responsibility for his actions. This point is made more explicitly in an earlier piece in which Wojtyła states: "The consciousness of performing a determinate act, of which one is the author, carries with it a sense of responsibility for the moral value of this act." [33]

But there is much more in *Love and Responsibility* that prefigures *Laborem Exercens*. This is especially true of the former's use of the words "object" and "subject." "The word 'object,'" Wojtyła states, "means more or less the same as 'entity.'" However, this does not capture the full meaning of "object" because "an 'object,' strictly speaking, is something related to a 'subject.'" What, then, is a subject? Wojtyła says that while "[a] 'subject' is also an 'entity,'" it is nevertheless "an 'entity' which exists and acts in a certain way." Hence, he maintains, "[i]t would indeed be proper to speak of 'subjects' before 'objects'" (LR 21).

In these sentences, we find an understanding of subject and the relationship between subject and object that reappears in a modified form in *Laborem Exercens*. "Subject" describes that from which action proceeds—it is the "support" of action. Though Wojtyła does not specify here that the subject's acts are directed to external objects, this is surely implicit to his understanding of the relationship between subjects and objects. It is also clear that Wojtyła considers subjects to be objects, for the subject is defined as an entity, albeit one which acts.

*Love and Responsibility* stresses this very point: “We must, then, be clear right from the start that every subject also exists as an object, an objective ‘something’ or ‘somebody’” (LR 21).

Of course, it hardly need be said that Wojtyla regards man as a subject, for man is unquestionably an entity from which action proceeds. But he also specifies that “man is not only the subject, but can also be the object of an action (LR 24). The context of this remark is the claim that one person can make another person the object of his action. Thus Wojtyla has yet to depict man as the primary object of his own action as *Laborem Exercens* does. This transition occurs in Wojtyla’s writings after the Council, spurred on, it seems, by *Gaudium et Spes*.

Having clarified the subject/object distinction, *Love and Responsibility* states that something else makes man distinctive as a subject of acts—the fact that man is a person. It is not enough, Wojtyla claims, to define man solely “as an individual of the species” (LR 22) (a phrase which recalls the medieval scholastic term “*suppositum*”: that is, an individual subsisting in any given species). [34] As a subject and object, “there is something more to [man], a particular richness and perfection in the manner of his being, which can only be brought out by the use of the word ‘person’” (LR 22). *Laborem Exercens*, we recall, makes this very point when explaining man’s uniqueness as a subjective being.

According to Wojtyla, man’s personhood endows him with several special qualities as a subject of acts. The first is “the ability to reason.” This makes man “the only subject of its kind in the world of entities.” Another is the fact that “the person as a subject” has “a specific inner self, an inner life, characteristic only of persons” (LR 22). In Wojtyla’s view, “*Inner life means spiritual life. It revolves around truth and goodness*” (LR 23). On this basis, Wojtyla intimates that reason and decision-making are aspects of man’s spiritual dimension: “a person is a thinking subject, and capable of making decisions: these, most notably, are the attributes we find in the *inner self* of a person” (LR 26–27).

The last unique feature which the human subject derives from his personhood is, according to Wojtyla, “the power of self-determination, based on reflection, and manifested in the fact that a man acts from choice. This power is called free will”; it makes man “his own master” (LR 24). But what man *should* freely will, in Wojtyla’s view, is not a matter of opinion. He specifies that since human reason is directed to objective good, “we must demand from a person, as a thinking individual, that his or her ends should be genuinely good, since the pursuit of evil ends is contrary to the rational nature of the person” (LR 27).

While these ideas could not be described as “new” for Catholic thinking of the time, [35] their configuration in *Love and Responsibility* anticipates lines of reasoning which pervade *Laborem Exercens*. By stressing that the human subject is also a person, both texts identify the acts proceeding from man-as-subject as central to his achievement of self-mastery as a person. Secondly, each text’s attention to man’s personhood highlights the critical role played by man’s spiritual nature, specifically the qualities of reason and will, in directing the subject’s acts to

this end of self-dominion.

When it comes to the good which man may realize through human acts, Wojtyla directs attention to the acquisition of virtue. Wojtyla, we recall, was convinced that modern man is disinclined to this task because it is difficult, sometimes painful, and often means renunciation of pleasure (LR 35, 36, 143). In short, acquiring virtue involves what *Laborem Exercens* calls toil. It is therefore possible that John Paul's stress that the acquisition of virtue through work is difficult, but nevertheless rewarding, reflects this Wojtylan conviction.

But more directly prefiguring *Laborem Exercens* is *Love and Responsibility*'s definition of self-fulfillment:

The statement that something is really good and correct awakens a sense of duty in man and inspires him to act so as to realize that good. The superiority (transcendence) of the person in relation to its own dynamism and the objects of its endeavors brings about a realization of the good and hence the "self-fulfilling" of the person. (LR 305 n.54)

The free choice of true good is thus underlined as central to man's transcendence over himself and his acts: what *Laborem Exercens* understands as self-dominion. The extract above also defines man's fulfillment as his self-realization of goods truly worthy ("really good and correct") of the person. Aside from terminological similarities, the same logic underlies *Laborem Exercens*'s position that man may acquire goods worthy of him through work and thereby fulfil himself as a person.

Certain aspects of several developments in teaching occasioned by *Laborem Exercens* may thus be said to be anticipated in *Love and Responsibility* and other pre-conciliar Wojtylan works. These texts do not, however, prefigure the encyclical's important differentiation between a work-act's subjective and objective dimensions. It is in Wojtyla's post-conciliar texts that this distinction is made in earnest.

## **Man and Action in Wojtyla's Post-Conciliar Writings**

In the post-conciliar period, Wojtyla's writings on human action became more extensive and complex. To simplify matters, these will initially be considered in terms of their treatment of two broad topics: man as subject; and man's fulfillment through action. We then illustrate how Wojtyla's later post-conciliar texts began to translate his ideas about man and human acts into a Catholic philosophy of work.

### *1. Man as Subject*

*The Acting Person* begins by "relativizing" consciousness within the person. It does so

because Wojtyla regards consciousness as useful in conceptualizing how acts shape man:

man not only acts consciously, but he is also aware of both the fact that he is acting and the fact that it is he who is acting. . . . Consciousness accompanies and reflects or mirrors the action when it is born and while it is being performed; once the action is accomplished consciousness still continues to reflect it. (AP 31)

This, we suggest, partly prefigures *Laborem Exercens*'s use of the word "conscious": the fact that when man works, he is aware of the significance of these acts. However, consciousness is also used in the above extract to assist in explaining how the act's effect persists within man. This is less evident in *Laborem Exercens*, perhaps because discussions about consciousness are arguably beyond the magisterium's remit.

More significant in this regard is *The Acting Person*'s attention to man as subject. Wojtyla accepts the essential accuracy of Boethius's definition of the person: "*persona est rationalis naturae individua substantia*" (AP 73). But in Wojtyla's view, "neither the concept of the 'rational nature' nor that of its individualization seems to express fully the specific completeness expressed in the concept of the person" (AP 73–74). It does not adequately capture the person's "basic ontological structure" (AP 74). Nor does it sufficiently underline the significance of human acts for that person. For these reasons, Wojtyla employs the concept of subject because "[i]t is in the subject as a being that every dynamic structure is rooted, every acting and happening" (AP 72). Man as a person, according to Wojtyla, "is the subject of both existence and acting." He immediately qualifies this by specifying that the "existence proper to [man] is *personal* and not merely individual." Consequently, "the action . . . is also personal" (AP 74).

By drawing attention to the person's ontology as a subject, Wojtyla is able to rethink the nature of man in terms of being the support and author of actions which are of profound significance for him as a person. *Laborem Exercens*'s depiction of man as the subject of work reflects a similar reasoning. Apart from allowing the Pope to root work-acts even more firmly within man, it permits him to stress that because all work-acts proceed from the human subject, each work-act is significant for that subject as a person.

## 2. *Self-Determination and Fulfillment*

*The Acting Person*'s exposition of why human acts are important for man as a person appears to reflect contemplation of the Council's teachings concerning how one goes outside and beyond oneself through action. Fulfillment, Wojtyla claims, is "the person's transcendence in the doing of an action" (AP 149). Further explanation of what this means may be found in *The Acting Person*'s distinction between "horizontal" and "vertical" transcendence. The latter

takes place in the context of the former and is central to fulfillment.

In a clear echo of the Council's words, horizontal transcendence is defined as man's capacity to "[reach] out and beyond the subject . . . or the directing of acts out of the cognizing subject beyond the objectifiable realm" (AP 179). It concerns man's ability to surpass his limits as subject and perceive, know, intend, and will objects beyond himself (AP 131). Both of these statements parallel *Laborem Exercens's* definition of work in the transitive-objective sense.

The vertical transcendence which man may attain whilst "horizontally transcending" himself is understood as "the fruit of self-determination; the person transcends his structural boundaries through the capacity to exercise freedom; of being free in the process of *acting*, and not only in the intentional direction of willings towards an external object" (AP 119). It is the person's "ascendancy over his own dynamism" (AP 138) and "associated with self-governance" (AP 131).

In other words, vertical transcendence is the realization of what *The Acting Person* understands as freedom, previously identified as being achieved by man when he freely does what he ought to do. It also closely corresponds to *Laborem Exercens's* understanding of what man can achieve through work in the subjective sense: the realization of dominion over oneself—"ascendancy over one's own dynamism"—by freely choosing moral good when working.

Turning, then, to *The Acting Person's* discussion of action in the "transitive" and "intransitive" senses, it soon become apparent that this too has influenced *Laborem Exercens's* distinction between work's subjective and objective dimensions. Here Wojtyla states:

[action] is both transitive and intransitive with regard to the person. . . . In the inner dimension of the person, human action is at once both transitory and relatively lasting, inasmuch as its effects, which are to be viewed in relation to efficacy and self-determination, that is to say, to the person's engagement in freedom, last longer than the action itself. . . . [For] [h]uman actions once performed do not vanish without a trace: they leave their moral value, which constitutes an objective reality intrinsically cohesive with the person, and thus a reality profoundly subjective. (AP 150–151)

The importance of action's intransitive effect lies in its persistence within man long after the action has occurred. As observed, the same idea appears in Wojtyla's poem, "Participation." The text above primarily has in mind man's self-realization of freedom or lack thereof. But in a more general sense, it uses the word "intransitive" to indicate that every human act proceeding from man morally shapes him as a person. Their inner effect is an inescapable objective reality for man; yet because the person is also the subject of his acts, these acts simultaneously constitute a "profoundly subjective" reality.

Although these words foreshadow *Laborem Exercens's* subjective-objective distinction, it

should be said that the extract above essentially anticipates the encyclical's refinement of the Council's teaching that just as human activity proceeds from man, so it is ordered to him. Further evidence that this is the case may be found in one of Wojtyla's later post-conciliar writings:

[the] [h]uman action or act has various aims, objects, and values towards which it is directed. Turning to these, man cannot fail in his conscious action to direct himself towards his own self as a goal, for he cannot refer to various objects of action and choose various values without determining himself and his value, through which he becomes an object for himself as subject. In this particular dimension the structure of the human act is auto-teleological. [36]

In part, this extract represents logical progression upon *Love and Responsibility's* specification that while man is subject, he can also be the object of others' acts. The words above maintain that man cannot help being the primary object of his *own* acts, a claim similar to *Laborem Exercens's* insistence that man is always the final end of his work.

Finally, it is also significant that Wojtyla's later post-conciliar writings defined fulfillment in terms of man's acquirement of virtue:

I fulfil myself through good; evil brings me non-fulfillment. . . . Self-fulfillment is actualized in the act by its moral value, that is, through good which occurs only in the act as such (*per modum actus*). The experience of morality indicates further possibilities of further grounding and consolidating in the subject both good as a moral value and evil. The ethics of Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas . . . speak of habits which are moral abilities which may be either virtues or vices. In all this there are the manifold forms of self-fulfillment, or, on the contrary, of non-fulfillment of the self. [37]

Here we need only recall that in *Laborem Exercens*, fulfillment through work is understood as man self-realizing moral good, which John Paul associates with the development of virtue in the Thomist sense of moral habits.

### 3. *A Catholic Philosophy of Work*

Certain Wojtylan post-conciliar texts apply many of the conclusions outlined above to contemporary theories about work. The significance of these texts is that they suggest that certain emphases in *Laborem Exercens* may also, in part, be broadly directed to this discussion. It involves pointing out where, from a Catholic viewpoint, certain conceptions of work are only partly correct because of their inadequate understanding of man.

In *Sign of Contradiction*, Wojtyla posits that "present day philosophy, Marxist especially .

. . . puts *praxis* before ‘theory’ and deduces all its explanation of reality—especially the reality of man—from that *praxis*, that is to say from the work by which man ‘created himself’ within nature” (SC 139). [38] Thus Marxist philosophy, as Wojtyla understands it, perceives man as a creation of work—even the “material” of work. In stating this position, he indirectly highlights the materialist anthropology of man underpinning Marxism’s understanding of work. As Martin Heidegger states: “The essence of materialism does not consist in the assertion that everything is simply matter but rather in the metaphysical determination according to which every being appears as the material of labor.” [39]

Wojtyla then suggests that the Catholic view of work proceeds from different anthropological premises:

Underlying the truth about man by the Church *usque ad sanguinem* lies the conviction that man cannot be reduced to matter alone. If he has mastery over matter, he has it solely thanks to the spiritual element which is inherent in him and which expresses itself in his knowledge and freedom, that is to say in his activity. So one could acknowledge that a partial truth is contained in the assertion that “work creates man.” Yes, it does create; but it does so precisely because it is a work—an activity, a *praxis*—of man: *actus personae*. (SC 139)

The second point that *Sign of Contradiction* makes about work involves stressing its intrinsic moral worth:

all human work, and all that it produces in any field of endeavor, shapes the human personality; but it does so not because of the objective worth of what it produces but because of its own moral worth—a distinctly human and personal element in all man’s activity, man’s *praxis*. (SC 139)

On one level, these words prefigure *Laborem Exercens*’s teaching that work’s most important effect—what truly makes work in itself a good thing for man—is the moral impact of the work-act itself within the person. At the same time, they implicitly highlight deep inadequacies in Marxist thought about work. Not only is this suggested by the context in which Wojtyla makes these remarks (i.e., discussing Marxist ideas about *praxis*), but by similar statements contained in Wojtyla’s 1977 article on human *praxis*. This expands upon the comments above by examining Marx’s claim in his *Theses on Feuerbach* that man creates himself through his work. Responding to this assertion, Wojtyla declares that there is a decisive limit to Marx’s idea that by transforming nature, man transforms himself. Marx, in his view, fails to recognize that it is not only or primarily transformed nature which conditions man. Rather, it is the very act of work which decisively shapes the subject from whom it proceeds. To explain this point, Wojtyla appeals to Aquinas:

As I understand St. Thomas’ thought, human activity is simultaneously *transitive* and *intransitive*. It is transitive insofar as it tends *beyond the subject*, seeks an expression and an effect in the external world, and is objectified in

some product. It is intransitive, on the other hand, insofar as it *remains in the subject*, [and] determines the subject's immanent quality or value. [40]

For Wojtyla, the Marxist view is limited because it emphasizes only one of the two dimensions of action identified by Aquinas. Hence, Marx does not comprehend the significance of the moral effect of human acts *within* the human subject. Interestingly, however, Wojtyla adds: "I am not just engaging in a direct critique of the Marxist thesis that work produces or somehow is at the origin of man." More fundamentally, he wishes to stress that any discussion of work must recognize the importance of the scholastic principle that operation follows being: that "[w]ork . . . is possible to the extent that man already exists: *operari sequitur esse*." [41]

Taken together, the extracts from this article and *Sign of Contradiction* suggest that Wojtyla perceived Marxist thought as reversing the true relationship between work and man. [42] Whilst Wojtyla agrees that Marxist perspectives comprehend work's vital role in man's formation, they fail to recognize that work can only "create man" because, like any other act, work proceeds from man, more specifically, his reason and will. From a Catholic viewpoint, these are part of the person's spiritual essence. It is on these grounds, we recall, that *Sign of Contradiction* insists that it is man's spiritual dimension that makes work an *actus personae* and gives him mastery over matter—a position incompatible with viewing man in purely material terms. This being the case, one may say that Wojtyla's writings about work underline a fundamental difference between Marxist and Catholic anthropologies of man: the latter's conviction that man is, by nature, a partly spiritual being.

In this light, certain statements in *Laborem Exercens* begin to assume the character of a critique of Marxist conceptions of work and man. Both the encyclical's explanation of the priority of work's intransitive dimension and its highlighting of work's moral significance fall into this category. So too does *Laborem Exercens*'s use of the phrase *actus personae* to emphasize that work proceeds from a subject who, by nature, is a material and spiritual being. Whilst work does "create" man—this is the whole meaning of work in the subjective sense—this is only true because man as a person possesses the spiritual qualities of reason and free will which permit him to realize moral good when working. Of course, the encyclical's discussion of these matters makes no explicit reference to Marxist notions of work. One should therefore hesitate before reading too much of a critique of Marxism into the text. Nevertheless the Wojtylan writings considered above indicate that this may have shaped aspects of *Laborem Exercens*'s teaching about work.

## **Towards the Right of Private Economic Initiative**

But what possible significance could the topics considered here have for Catholic social teaching on more obviously political-economic questions? Surely most of what has been

considered here belongs to the “abstract” order of anthropology, ethics, and theology.

The answer is that the focus on the effects of human acts both within and outside the human person allows John Paul II to rethink issues ranging from the nature of ownership, the character of a range of economic systems, and even the role of trade unions, in ways that are quite distinct from orthodox secularist ways of reflecting upon such issues. Perhaps the most striking instance of this, in the long term, has been John Paul’s teaching on the nature and ends of wealth-creation. In Archbishop George Pell’s words: “It must be conceded that in the past . . . the Church has been excessively concerned with the distribution of wealth and paid insufficient attention to its production.” [43] *Laborem Exercens* provided a basis for John Paul II to adjust this imbalance, but by focusing upon what is the most important concern of Catholic social teaching: the self-realization of the human person that occurs when they participate in the basic moral goods the human goods (*bona humana*) to which Aquinas says we are directed by the first principles of practical reasonableness, [44] the basic reasons for action which *Veritatis Splendor* calls fundamental human goods. [45]

In contrast to *Laborem Exercens*, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* expends little time examining labor-capital relations. Instead, the Pope considers what the encyclical calls “the right of economic initiative.” In the context of discussing the denial of human rights, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* states:

It should be noted that in today’s world, among other rights, *the right of economic initiative* [*inter alia iura etiam ius ad propria incepta oeconomica*] is often suppressed. Yet it is a right which is important not only for the individual but also for the common good. Experience shows us that the denial of this right, or its limitation in the name of an alleged ‘equality’ of everyone in society, diminishes, or in practice absolutely destroys the spirit of initiative, that is to say *the creative subjectivity of the citizen* [*subiectivam videlicet effectricem civis*]. As a consequence, there arises not so much a true equality as a ‘leveling down’. In the place of creative initiative there appears passivity, dependence and submission to the bureaucratic apparatus. (SRS 15)

On one level, these words direct the Church’s attention to a grave ethical flaw in state-collectivism. By suppressing personal entrepreneurship, the state denies man’s very nature as a free subject; that is, the *anthropological truth* that humans are creatures capable of choosing how they act. The text above also indicates that state-collectivism necessarily stifles the *creativity* that is implicit to man’s *nature* and *destiny*, as specified by the Book of Genesis. Finally, the Pope points out that the repression of personal economic initiative has negative ethical implications for society as a whole. Put simply, it necessitates the existence of a vast bureaucratic apparatus that maintains this repression while assuming for itself the role of economic development. To this extent, state-collectivism’s denial of the right of economic initiative also constitutes an attack upon the common good.

There is, however, another dimension to *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*’ defense of

entrepreneurship, the significance of which may not be immediately apparent. By characterizing economic initiative as a right [*ius*], Pope John Paul directs attention to its significance for the possessor of rights: man. But by associating this right with man's creative subjectivity, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* indirectly characterizes economic initiative as an *act of work* that flows from man as the *creative subject*. This has two effects. It deepens understanding of *why* entrepreneurship is a right: it expresses the truth that humans are, by nature, creative subjects of work. Secondly, it indicates that economic initiative does more than create things and benefit others. As a work-act of the creative subject, entrepreneurship involves man's *self-realization* of moral good. In the cited extract above, this last point has to be inferred from John Paul's insistence that the denial of economic initiative results in the opposite of personal growth: dependence and passivity. *Centesimus Annus*, however, is more forthright on this matter.

One of the many things for which Pope John Paul's *Centesimus Annus* will be remembered is its recognition of a decisive change in the very basis of modern capitalist economies. The Pope states, for example that

there are specific differences between the trends of modern society and those of the past. Whereas at one time the decisive factor of production was *the land*, and later capital. . . . today the decisive factor is increasingly *man himself*, that is, his knowledge. . . . his capacity for integrated and compact organization, as well as his ability to perceive the needs of others and satisfy them (CA 32).

Looking, then, at the whole structure and origin of wealth, Pope John Paul indicates that land and capital are, in themselves, not enough to create wealth. The *human mind*—what Oswald von Nell-Breuning, S.J., called *intellectus* [46]—is more essential than ever. Indeed, it is fundamental. As George Weigel notes, John Paul seems to regard this as a new “sign of the times.” [47] Economic life is, from the Pope's standpoint, increasingly driven by man's capacity for insight, the habit of discerning new possibilities such as new products and services, or more efficient methods of producing or distributing goods.

John Paul II defines more precisely what he means by this increasingly “mind-driven” state of affairs when he notes that in contemporary economic life “the role of disciplined and creative *human work* and, as an essential part of that work, *initiative and entrepreneurial ability* [is becoming] increasingly evident and decisive [refers to SRS 15]” (CA 32). On one level, these words confirm that Pope John Paul regards economic initiative as an act of work. At the same time, by conceptualizing entrepreneurship in this manner, the Pope overcomes the somewhat tiresome post-Enlightenment juxtaposition of “capital” and “labor” that manifested itself in Catholic social teaching as early as *Rerum Novarum*. What is “essential” and “decisive” is *not* the provision of “capital” or “labor,” but rather entrepreneurial actions. Here John Paul II's words come close to constituting a Catholic affirmation of the view that everyone is, in certain respects, an entrepreneur.

Moreover, by referring to the extract from *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* cited above, Pope John

Paul reminds the reader of the importance of remembering that man is the creative subject of work when thinking about entrepreneurial activities. The Pope's reason for doing so becomes more evident when he specifies that entrepreneurial activity allows people to acquire "important virtues. . . . such as diligence, industriousness, prudence in undertaking reasonable risks, reliability and fidelity in interpersonal relationships, as well as courage in carrying out decisions which are difficult and painful" (CA 32). In an echo of *Laborem Exercens* and *The Acting Person*, John Paul indicates that the human subject's *self-realization* of virtue through *acts* of entrepreneurial work is at least equally important as any resulting material prosperity.

In light of the preceding analysis, it does seem that Buttiglione is correct when he states that *Centesimus Annus* considers entrepreneurship to be a good in itself (Buttiglione 1992: 69). Although the material results of entrepreneurship may be grand, the greatest "wealth" potentially created by such activity is to be found in its intransitive moral effects within human beings.

## Conclusion

The return to the person that is so evident in *Laborem Exercens*'s teaching on human work should remind Catholics who think about the social question that a conversation between the church and the modern world is not necessarily one in which the world sets the agenda for the church. A genuine conversation is a two-way process, and more than one observer would suggest that in recent decades too many Catholics writing about the social question have simply articulated pale imitations of whatever happens to be the latest transitory secular intellectual fashion. As the philosopher Jeffrey Stout—a non-believer—observes:

To gain a hearing in our culture, theology has often assumed a voice not its own and found itself merely repeating the bromides of secular intellectuals in transparently figurative language. . . . The explanation for the eclipse of religious ethics in recent secular moral philosophy may therefore be . . . that academic theologians have increasingly given the impression of saying nothing that atheists don't already believe. [48]

In short, if Catholic thinkers do not have anything to say, or do not want to say anything, or are afraid to say anything that has not or cannot be articulated by secular humanists, then, as John Finnis remarks, "no-one should be surprised to find the Church ceasing to be even an interesting participant in the secular debate, and faltering in its own primary and irreplaceable purpose of leading people to salvation." [49]

It follows that as Catholics engage in the social question, then they ought to think about how the truth about man can be articulated in a way that, while conscious of modern insights, truly draws upon the Church's long tradition of reflecting upon the moral life. Both

in terms of its underlying anthropology as well as its methodology, Catholic moral teaching is utterly contrary to that of the various forms of utilitarianism and consequentialism that dominates contemporary secular culture.

At no stage does *Laborem Exercens* make this mistake of simply producing poor imitations of secularist ideas. That is, perhaps, one of the keys to grasping the depth of its originality. For it calls upon modernity and the modern world of work to open *its* windows to the possibility of transcendence. Humanism, many will agree, is in crisis. Alexander Solzhenitsyn has pointed out that the Enlightenment's secular humanism has left many people rootless, materialistic, and sadly enough, lonely. [50] Catholics, however, need not despair. For as Vatican II reminds us in *Gaudium et Spes*: "it is only in the mystery of the Word made Flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear . . . [and] this holds true, not for Christians only, but also for all men of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly" (GS 22). This is the treasure that Catholicism offers the modern world: a humanism enriched by humanity's encounter with Jesus Christ, who, far from alienating humanity, reveals to us the full truth of our dignity and transcendent destiny *if* we choose to love God and *obey* His commandments. Placing this commitment to Christian humanism and a Christian anthropology of the human person at the heart of their conversation with modernity is surely a noble task and a contemporary priority for Catholic reflecting upon the social question.

## About the Author

Samuel Gregg is a moral philosopher who has written and spoken extensively on questions of ethics in public policy, ethics in business, as well as Catholic social teaching. He has an MA in political philosophy from the University of Melbourne, and a Doctor of Philosophy degree in moral philosophy from the University of Oxford, which he attended as a Commonwealth Scholar. Since 2001, he has been Director of the Center for Economic Personalism at the Acton Institute, and a Visiting Professor of the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and the Family (Melbourne Campus) within the Pontifical Lateran University. In 2000, he was awarded the Friedrich von Hayek Fellowship by the Mont Pèlerin Society, and elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 2001.

## Endnotes

[1]. See Germain Grisez, *The Way of the Lord Jesus*, Vol.2, *Living a Christian Life* (Quincy: Franciscan Press, 1993): 754.

[2]. See Rodger Charles, S.J., *The Social Teaching of Vatican II: Its Origins and*

*Development* (Oxford: Plater Press, 1982): 312–313.

[3]. Stanley Hauerwas, “In Praise of *Centesimus Annus*,” *Theology* 95, no. 768 (1992): 420.

[4] John Finnis, *Aquinas: Moral, Political, and Legal Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998): 22

[5]. Peter Hebblethwaite, “The Popes and Politics: Shifting Patterns in Catholic Social Doctrine,” *Daedalus* 11, no.11 (1982), 85.

[6]. See J-V. Calvez, S.J., and J. Perrin, S.J., *The Church and Social Justice* (London: Burn and Oates, 1961), chp.X.

[7] Marie-Dominique Chenu, O.P., “A Council for All Peoples,” in *Vatican II: By Those Who Were There*, ed. A. Stacpoole, O.S.B. (London: Chapman, 1986), 21.

[8]. M. Novak, “Creation Theology,” in *Co-Creation and Capitalism*, J. Houck and O. Williams, C.S.C. (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983), 17.

[9]. Here one should note the French Catholic contribution to the conciliar magisterium’s focus upon work. The French interest in work may be traced to figures associated with the *nouvelle théologie* of the 1940s and 50s, such as Chenu, Congar, de Lubac and Jean Daniélou, S.J.—all of whom played significant roles at the Council. Their attention to work arose from recognition of the Church’s loss of the French working class, a desire to assist intellectually the French worker-priest experiment, as well as their belief that Catholics had to contribute more to discussion about a subject to which Marxism had directed much attention. On these matters, see M.-D. Chenu, O.P., *Pour une théologie du travail* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1955).

[10]. A. Gini, “Meaningful Work and the Rights of the Workers,” *Thought* 67, no. 266 (1992): 230.

[11]. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Bk. 3, Vol. IV (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1961), 482.

[12]. Stanley Hauerwas, “Work as Co-creation,” in *Co-Creation*, 43.

[13]. Karol Wojtyła, “Personalizm tomistyczny” [Thomistic Personalism], *Znak*, 13, no.5 (1961): 670–671.

[14]. See D. Bigongiari (ed.), *The Political Ideas of St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Hafner Press, 1981), Glossary, 214: “Subject: In the logical sphere it is that concept of which something must be predicated and which itself cannot be a predicate. In its ontological sense it is correlative to accident; the support of an accident, be that support another and more basic accident, or, ultimately, the substance, is called *subject*.” The use of subject in LE conforms to both senses of the word. Man is the “support” of work; at the same time, work is “predicated

upon” man.

[15]. The English translation uses the words “even the most alienating.” This is misleading. Alienation is different from marginalisation. The Italian translation is better, using the word *emarginante*. In any case, the Latin is clear enough: “*in societatis partes secundarias potissimum detrudente.*”

[16]. See Calvez and Perrin, *The Church*, 227.

[17]. George Huntston Williams, “John Paul II’s Concepts of Church, State and Society,” *Journal of Church and State*, 24, no.3 (1982), 475.

[18]. See Gregory Baum, *The Priority of Labor* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982):17–18.

[19]. See, for example, Second Vatican Council, Declaration on Religious Liberty *Dignitatis Humanae*, 7 December 1965, para. 2 in A. Flannery, O.P. (gen. ed.), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, vol. 1 (rev. ed.) (Leominster: Fowler Wright Books Ltd., 1988), 2.

[20]. See S. Wyszynski, *Duch pracy ludzkiej* [The Spirit of Human Work] (Włocławek: Nakł. Katolickiego Ośrodka Wydawniczego ‘Veritas’, 1946).

[21]. See J. Tischner, *The Spirit of Solidarity* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1984), 13–39, 60–71, 84–91, 94–104.

[22]. See K. Dybciak, *La grande testimonianza* (Bologna: CSEO, 1981), 167–186.

[23]. The following extracts are from *The Place Within: The Poetry of Pope John Paul II* (London: Hutchinson, 1995).

[24]. See B. Taborski cited in J. Oram, *The People’s Pope* (Sydney: Bay Books, 1979), 96.

[25]. See R. Darricau, “La poesie de Karol Wojtyła,” *Revue française d’histoire du livre* 32, no. 3 (1981): 402–404.

[26]. “Material,” 63. i[27]. “Inspiration,” 66.

[28]. “Material,” 65.

[29]. “Participation,” 68.

[30]. “Material,” 64.

[31]. Karol Wojtyła, “Zagadnienie woli w analizie aktu etycznego” [The Problem of the Will

in the Analysis of the Ethical Act], *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 5, no. 1 (1955/1957): 132.

[32]. “Thomistic Personalism,” 669–670

[33]. Karol Wojtyła, “Problem oderwania przeżycia od aktu w etyce na tle poglądów Kanta i Schelera” [The Problem of the Separation of Experience from the Act in Kant and Scheler’s Ethics], *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 5, no. 3 (1955/1957): 122.

[34]. See Bigongiari, *The Political Ideas*, 214–215.

[35]. Maritain’s thought may have been influential here. In a post-conciliar article, Wojtyła associates the term “subject” with the medieval-scholastic term *suppositum*. See Karol Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community,” *Review of Metaphysics* 33 (1979): 274. Maritain interprets *suppositum* in scholastic thought as denoting that which has an essence, that which exercises existence and action, that which subsists. In his view, it draws attention to a certain density subsisting in man’s interior from which acts proceed. Maritain then states: “With man the *suppositum* becomes *persona*, that is, a whole which subsists and exists in virtue of the very subsistence and existence of its spiritual soul, and acts by setting itself its own ends.” J. Maritain, *Existence and the Existent* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1956), 70. Both Wojtyła and LE follow a similar line of reasoning. Each understands man’s nature as person as inseparable from his existence as subject, a linkage which endows the human subject’s freely willed acts with profound moral and spiritual significance. See also M. Serretti, “Etica e antropologica filosofia. Considerazioni su Maritain e Wojtyła,” *Sapienza* 38, no. 1 (1985): 15–31.

[36]. Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community,” 282. Cf. Karol Wojtyła, “Rodzina jako ‘communio personarum’ ” [The Family as a ‘Communio Personarum’], *Ateneum Kaplanskie* 83, no. 3 (1974): 331: “man is a being capable of existing and acting ‘for himself’, that is, capable of a certain *autoteleology*, which means capable not only of determining his own ends but also of becoming an end for himself.”

[37]. Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community,” 287.

[38]. See also “Karol Wojtyła, “Teoria e prassi nella filosofia della persona umana” [Theory and Practice in the Philosophy of the Human Person], *Sapienza* 29, no. 4 (1976): 377–384.

[39]. M. Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” *Basic Writings* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 220.

[40]. Karol Wojtyła, “Il problema del costituirsi della cultura attraverso la ‘praxis’ umana” [The Problem of the Constitution of Culture through Human ‘Praxis’], *Rivista de Filosofia Neo-Scolastica* 69, no.3 (1977), 516. Here Wojtyła may be referring to Aquinas’s *Quaestiones Disputatae de Veritate*, q.8, a.6c: “Action is of two sorts: one sort—action [*actio*] in a strict sense—issues from the agent into something external to change it . . . the other sort—properly

called activity [*operatio*]—does not issue into something external but remains within the agent itself perfecting it.”

[41]. Wojtyla, “Constitution of Culture,” 516.

[42]. See also P. Pollini, “Il problema della filosofia della prassi in Marx e Wojtyla,” in *La filosofia*, 61–73.

[43]. George Pell, “Rerum Novarum: One Hundred Years Later,” *Boston Conversazioni*, 1992, 16.

[44]. In Aquinas’s words, ‘The good of the human being is being in accord with reason, and human evil is being outside the order of reasonableness’. ST, I-II, q.71, a.2. Or, as Aquinas states elsewhere, ‘good is the first thing that falls under the apprehension of the practical reason, which is directed to action: since every agent acts for an end under the aspect of good. Consequently the first principle in the practical reason is one founded on the notion of good’. ST, I-II, q.94, a.2. Thus for Aquinas, the way to discover what is morally right (virtue) and wrong (vice) is to ask, not what is in accordance with human nature, but what is reasonable. See also John Finnis, *Natural Law and Natural Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980): 81-99.

[45]. See, for example, VS 48.

[46]. See Oswald von Nell-Breuning, S.J., “Socio-Economic Life,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. H. Vorgrimler, Vol.5, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 291.

[47]. George Weigel, *Soul of the World: Notes on the Future of Public Catholicism* (Leominster: Gracewing, 1996), 139.

[48]. Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1990, 110.

[49]. John Finnis, ‘On the Practical Meaning of Secularism’, *Notre Dame Law Review* 73 (3), 501.

[50]. See Alexander Solzhenitsyn, ‘A World Split Apart’, ed. R. Berman, *Solzhenitsyn at Harvard: The Address, Twelve Early Responses, and Six Later Reflections*, Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1980: 3-22.

---