

Work as Key to the Social Question

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



A Spirituality of Work: The Genesis and Inspiration of a Document Issued by the World of Work Committee of the Episcopal Conference of England and Wales

by John Jukes, O.F.M. Conv.
Bishop of Strathearn

The great Encyclical on work, **LABOREM EXERCENS**, delayed in its proposed issue by the hospitalisation of Pope John Paul II after the attack on him in St Peter's Piazza, was eventually published on the 14th of September 1981. It therefore missed the 90th anniversary of the famous encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII by a few months. *Laborem Exercens* came to the attention of the English and Welsh bishops as they were preparing to welcome Pope John Paul to the United Kingdom. But as these preparations went forward the Conference was engaged in a demanding exercise. It was that of modernising and re-organising the Secretariate by which the Conference and individual bishops were served. The results of that work were seen in 1983, the year after the Pope's visit. A completely new Secretariate was put in place with new staff and a new arrangement of the Committees of the Conference.

Among The newly formed Committees was that of the **WORLD OF WORK**. Its remit was left rather open. This was to permit a flexibility in having regard to the developments in industrial relations, economic opportunities and the growing realisation that globalisation was presenting new challenges to the understanding of the role of the bishops to teach that the values of the Gospel are to be applied to work. To establish the Committee the Bishops were asked to submit lists of individuals from their dioceses who could be considered for membership of the Committee. The outcome of that process is that the Committee has been composed almost entirely of laity over its eighteen years of existence. Only the Chairman has been the one continuing clerical member. One or two clergy have served for limited periods because of their particular expertise on matters under consideration by the Committee.

The Committee has understood its duty to include a general service of the Bishops' Conference by information and advice on all matters to do with the World of Work; assistance as requested by individual bishops on matters that are of particular significance to their diocese; to represent catholic teaching and the views of the Conference to the national

government, the trade Unions and the employers' associations. To carry out these tasks the Committee and its members have initiated various activities and publications. These activities and publications have been shaped to meet the need of the Church in England and Wales to respond to the profound developments in the world of Work in our countries.

The Committee members understand that its central duty is to offer assistance to the Bishops in their teaching role on the subject of **WORK**. The Pope in *Laborem Exercens* had described work as "a key, *probably an essential key*," to the whole social question. Almost from the beginning of the Committee's existence, its members indicated that they were very conscious of the lack of knowledge and understanding by the Catholic people of the Church's teaching on work. The publication of *A Spirituality of Work* represents the most recent in the publications of the Committee to meet the challenge of the faithful's need of catechesis in the matter of work. It is a small but direct response to the invitation of Pope John Paul II contained in paragraph 24 of *Laborem Exercens*, of the duty to form a spirituality of work.

In England and Wales as a whole Catholics are less than 12% of the total population. Committed Christians apart from Catholics are difficult to estimate [\[1\]](#). Some research suggests that there are about twenty seven million Anglicans, about just under six million Catholics and perhaps about the same number of other Christians with various church and community allegiances. These figures simply serve to illustrate the ecumenical nature of the field to which the Catholic Church's teaching on work may be presented. But it must be understood that the primary target of *A Spirituality of Work* is the Catholic community of England and Wales. The ecumenical dimension is important and was in the mind of the Committee but did not have a direct influence on the final text of the document.

The discussions prior to the writing of *A Spirituality of Work* occupied many meetings of the Committee. Many different suggestions were considered before agreement emerged that the general arrangement of the material should follow the sequence of Scripture, Doctrine, Experience and Reason to be followed by a section focussed on Prayer. The members of the Committee made this choice out of their own experiences of the power of reflection upon life and work, given an input of the Scriptures and the teaching of the Church, to bring about a dynamic understanding and orientation of their working lives. With the exception of one member of the Committee, recently retired, all were currently in work. A number had had an experience of unemployment. All were conscious of the need to produce a document, which would be accessible to workers while being intellectually respectable and accurate in its presentation of the teaching of the Church.

Under the guidance of the Committee on the sequence that the document should follow, a member of the Committee wrote the first three chapters. Another Committee member sought and collated the experience elements that are found in Chapter Three together with the material received from Committee members on Prayers and material for meditation. In order to ensure accessibility to the general reader all this material was given to a Catholic journalist (who had himself had experience of a forced and unjust redundancy) to write a text that would be open to the general reader. This text was circulated to the members of the Committee for comment. Some amendments were introduced and the final result is found in

A Spirituality of Work. Because the document had to be financed from the Committee's own budget there were no funds spare to embark upon extensive and costly investigations on design and layout. In any case it was thought that a relatively straightforward publication with no frills would have the long-term effect at which we were hoping. So the design was done very well in house by the Catholic Media Office of the Bishops Conference. It is priced at under \$5 and has sold well and its production costs have been recovered. [2]

It will appear obvious to those who have read *A Spirituality of Work* and have heard this explanation of the genesis of the document that *Laborem Exercens* was a major factor in its origin and composition. In order to contribute to this Conference which marks twenty years elapsed since the publication of the Encyclical I propose asking for purpose of debate and reflection, a number of questions which I hope will have relevance to this international audience. These questions will naturally start with the circumstances of society and the Church in England and Wales. Yet I hope that they will provoke a response from those present who represent other countries and societies whose culture may markedly diverge from that obtaining in my own country.

The first question I put in the following terms: **Is the identification of a dichotomy in the minds of the Catholic people between Religion and Work accurate?** In the introduction to the document I put this matter as "a discontinuity in the perception of many workers between the experience of work (or unemployment) and the fulfilling of God's purpose for them." Of course I did not intend to suggest that unemployment is part of God's direct purpose for any worker. Rather I wanted to indicate that it is the whole experience of work that is under examination and this must include the possibility of unemployment with all its attendant sorrows.

In the United Kingdom in the post-war years there has been a growth of Christian presence in industry in the form of chaplains appointed by and to firms, a development of Codes of business ethics which have at least some reference, often implicit only, to gospel values, and the development of various associations which have as their purpose the promotion of ethical action at work and by firms and workers [3]. But this growth is seen as a response to a sense of loss of Christian presence and values in enterprises and society. It is this, which has occasioned such appointments. The common experience of Committee members coupled to that of the clergy in their parish duties, is that of a clear separation in the minds of their contemporaries between the day to day experience of work and a dedication to serving and praising God. Such an association is found in a very small minority of the workers. It is apparently totally absent in the minds of the majority.

No workplaces in our experience, apart from some ecclesiastical offices, show any external signs or images of Christ or the Christian thing. In fact there are no express statements of God's purpose being fulfilled in the place of work. Even those establishments, such as hospitals, where the direct service of our suffering fellow human beings is the principal work, in our culture no direct reference to God or His service is seen [4]. Indeed the one relic of past formal acknowledgement of the Christian religion still to be found is the compulsory appointment of chaplains (not always ordained) to our armed forces and our prisons. This minuscule deference to a God slot indicates how absent is the recognition that

this is God's world and that work is part of it. These appointments are expressive more of pastoral care rather than a testimony to the significance of work in the divine purpose for mankind.

The absence of external signs of Christianity is indicative of the absence in the minds of the workers at every level of the notion that work is an integral part of the divine purpose in establishing mankind as the crown of His creation. Even in our highly developed technological society most people want to work. But when asked why do they have this desire their responses, as received by the members of the Committee in response to their enquiries, are directed at material provision of their needs and those of their family, of social standing or of simply wanting something to do. Only occasionally were responses made about fulfilling social responsibilities to society or the community. Practically never did an individual reply that in working God's will was being done.

I ask: is this British experience replicated in your own cultures? If not what are the indications that give evidence that the message and teaching of *Laborem Exercens* have taken root in the minds and hearts of your community.

Granted the diagnosis in the response to our first question the second question I put to this gathering is as follows: **In the case of Catholic workers how far has an inadequate catechesis contributed to the dichotomy between work and religion?**

As stated in *Laborem Exercens*, par.4, the revolution in the past two hundred years of the style and manner of work across the globe has not destroyed the validity of the Church's teaching of the part work plays in God's plan for humanity. However this revolution has provoked further examination and questions about this teaching. The Church, especially through its pastors, led by the Roman Pontiffs, has responded by indicating the opportunities and solutions to problems that are to be found by applying gospel values to the developing scene of work. Yet this response to be effective requires that it be adopted by the work force as true and valid. From this follows a start for an effective response to the challenges and opportunities presented in work. My Committee found that much of this teaching is unknown or not seen as relevant even to Catholics in the work force. But this ignorance is only part of a general malaise in the Catholic Community of England and Wales in field of catechetics.

This malaise was well set out by the late Cardinal Winning, Archbishop of Glasgow in Scotland in the Gonzaga Lecture on the Church in the Third Millennium delivered at St Aloysius College Glasgow on the 3rd of April 2001.^[5] In his far ranging review speaking about the generation of young adults and parents he said, "This generation suffered because RE text books were too quickly shelved because they seemed to be out of date, but there was nothing to replace them. There was widespread confusion among teachers about what they were expected to teach. This was a worldwide phenomenon. . . This period of confusion, coinciding as it did, with the widespread cultural changes of the 1960s and '70s, means we now have a generation who cannot pass on values to their own children. . . . This phenomenon is not confined to young people. Sometimes the older generations too, seem disillusioned about their traditional values and hesitate - in fact sometimes refuse - to pass

them on." These comments of the Scottish Cardinal matched the experience of the individual members of the World of Work Committee. For this reason part of *A Spirituality of Work* is expressly instructional and catechetical in style.

Only time will tell whether the style and content we have chosen in our document on work and the spirituality to be associated with it produce the desired outcome. It must be remembered that in England and Wales we are addressing in the first instance Catholics who constitute a minority in a community which in the judgement of many is now non-Christian or pagan in its approach to life on the part of a majority of its members. Despite the intrinsic value of *Laborem Exercens*, with its approach including many elements of the natural law to the challenge of work, there is no probability of it being even listened to or accepted by the majority of the members of the English and Welsh communities. So it becomes even more essential for the Catholics to be firmly based in their convictions about the divine purpose in giving mankind the blessing of work. Thus in part *A Spirituality of Work* was designed with an apologetic and evangelical scope in its arrangement and text. How does this approach relate to your own home situation?

One of the benefits to be gained from this Conference on *Laborem Exercens* is the comment from other experiences and cultures on the challenge presented by modern societies to the effective propagation of the teaching contained in the Encyclical. So my final question to the participants in the Conference is: **To what extent do you find *A Spirituality of Work* a usable document in your own community or how does it cast light upon the challenges you face at home?** Your responses to this question will be closely considered by my Committee of the World of Work.

We are too close to the publication of *Laborem Exercens* and *Centesimus Annus* to be able to pass secure judgements upon their consequences and effectiveness in the life of the people of God. These are matters that must be left to future generations to evaluate. What is certain in this our own time is that without this teaching enshrined in these documents the Church of God would have been lacking in clear statements of the joy and wonder at the mercy of God who has placed man as crown of this Creation to embellish and adorn it and so give praise to the fruitful and dynamic Trinity that we adore.

NOTES

[1] Religions in the UK. 1997. University of Derby and the Inter Faith Network, pp.29-32.

[2] Catholic Media Trust, January 2001. © Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales.

[3] CABE (Christian Association of Business Executives); IBE (Institute of Business Ethics); etc.,

[4] Once England and Wales saw themselves as communities, which were essentially

Christian. The manifestations of that understanding are still in place but to a diminished degree. The advent of substantial numbers of persons of other Faiths has resulted in a certain caution in making assumption about Christianity in society.

[5] Briefing (official documentation of the Catholic Bishops' Conferences of England Wales and Scotland) June 2001, Vol 31.pp.22-28.