

# Work as Key to the Social Question

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



## Collective Actors and Human Work

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I. The atrocious terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, also raise the following question: what exactly do we mean when we talk about our civilisation? One answer should certainly be: our idea of man. This image of man is inconceivable without the Christian tradition, in which the human being is seen as the “image of God” and as a person.

The crucial point of Christian social ethics lies in the principle of personalism. This principle is so important because, on the one hand, it considers the human being in a comprehensive way, both as a self-reliant individual as well as in his or her relationships with others, and, on the other hand, it provides a normative orientation for the formation of a rational community of human beings: a so-called good society. Understanding the human being as a person avoids collectivism and individualism. Both of these “departures” from the straight and narrow are not only normative “dead ends”, but also make very little sense in terms of their political and economic impact on the respective social systems. It has been shown that the basic orientations of Christian social ethics do not oppose the social and economic progress of all people, but ultimately promote them.

It remains important to point out again and again that the Christian view of the human being, the crux of which lies in the principle of personalism and in the definition of man as a person, has developed in the Christian context, but it is by no means an insight typified by Christianity alone. It is, rather, a universal cognition which can be understood by all people of good will. And above all, this view of the human being has proven more worthwhile in practice than all others that have been presented to us in the past 200 years.

II. A leitmotiv of the encyclical *Laborem Exercens* is to a certain degree the close link between work and the human person: “As a person, man is therefore the subject of work” (*LE* n. 6). This attaches a personal dignity to human work (cf. *LE* n. 9). Some economists have criticised the statements made in *Laborem Exercens*, because the subjective nature of work and the priority attached to work, reasoned as it is in terms of social ethics, is said not to correspond to realities within the economy. The encyclical, however, is intended precisely to avoid defining “work” too narrowly, and this is why it defines work in personal terms. The personal nature of work always means to embed work in a social context in which also capital and technology take on an important, even if instrumental role, whilst man and his work, according to Kant, may never be only a means to an end, but always must also be an end in themselves.

In any case, the economic construct of the *homo oeconomicus*, even if it consists only of methodological individualism, is much less well suited to describe the reality of the working human being in the context of economy and society. This is, after all, a reduction which must remove many points of view of human life, and hence may have only a very limited heuristic function for the scientific understanding of the economic activities of man. Neither does the encyclical deny the existence of the objective aspect of work, but it takes a more comprehensive view by emphasising the subjective nature within the meaning of personalism.

III. Work was embedded from the outset in an interpersonal web of relations. This interwoven nature of work within the community of family and nation (cf. *LE* n. 10) grew in intensity by virtue of the dynamics of the market economy, and now led, through economic globalisation, to an interdependence of work at the global level. Since work became more productive through the division of labour, its efficiency increased in a manner hardly imaginable, and its connection with capital reached an extremely high level of complexity in markets that now operate internationally, the social ethical perspectives of *Laborem Exercens* should now be evidenced even more.

Incomprehensibility has increased for those working as well as for those investing capital in work. On principle, this can be made to agree with the personal nature of work, since personalism means individuality and interrelation (*substantia et relatio*), that is, it is always part of a web of relations. However, it is becoming increasingly difficult, in an incomprehensible chain of acts, consequences of acts and unintended side-effects, to allocate responsibility and to keep an eye on the normative orientations of economic and social actions, because “in the first place work is ‘for man’ and not man ‘for work’” (*LE* n.

6). Yet, this applies not only to those who work, but also to those who might have to bear the consequences of the work of others. In order to be able to allocate responsibility here in a manner that, in economy, makes sense logically and morally, there is a need for collective agreements and rules as well as collective actors on the various levels, without which the demand for maintaining the dignity of human work remains a pure parenthesis, and the call for responsibility remains unheard.

IV. Twenty years after *Laborem Exercens*, the question therefore arises as to how, in a process of human work that is becoming increasingly intertwined worldwide, the personal nature of this work can be maintained without reducing the positive impact of the linking of work within the market economy, and hence its efficiency and productivity, something that can be in no one's interest. Maintaining personal dignity in return for accepting poverty is certainly not an outlook that is justified in terms of social ethics. As soon as social ethical responsibility for the dignity and personal character of work comes into view, collective actors and collective rules are called for. It has been also revealed that such rules and the interplay of various actors do not reduce the result of work, but sustainedly increase it in the long term. Here too it has been shown once more that there does not need to be an unbridgeable antithesis between the fundamental recognition of social ethics and the perspective of economics.

It is possible to distinguish between three levels in order to work out the normative levels somewhat more clearly. The respective actors are named and their responsibility becomes clearer. A fundamental precondition must be that a market economy without a framework order cannot be morally justified (cf. *CA [Centesimus Annus]* n. 42) and is also untenable from an economic and political point of view. This recognition must be interpreted in the context of an economy which is becoming more and more linked globally. Some economic moral philosophers even say that the framework order is the systematic location of morals in the market economy. It is certainly an important place where the normative goals are decided, such as in this case of how to maintain and promote the dignity of the human being in his or her work. It is possible to refer to the levels, at which the actors are called on to act responsibly, as macro, meso and micro-levels.

a) *The macro-level*

There is no doubt that, in spite of all the problems, the nation-state of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was a social jump towards modernisation. Amongst other things it gave rise to the social welfare state in Europe and America -even if with differing "philosophies"- as a

corrective and a framework order of a market economy that was in a state of development. Since, in a complex market economy, the result of work in terms of productivity cannot simply be allocated to only one work, but is embedded in a varied work process, it was also necessary to ask anew the question of distribution, that means, a more complex solution to the problem of distributive justice.

An attempt is made to use taxes and social legislation to create a balance which the market itself does not provide. The state corrects the results of the market in a manner justified by politics and social ethics, and it also regulates the working conditions, in order to prevent work, which is closely linked to individuals, from becoming an item of “merchandise”. The fact that such a development took place, of course presupposes democracy, social movement and a political process, and is therefore inconceivable without a well-functioning civil society. One result of the developments that took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is that it is impossible to safeguard the dignity of work without collective actors such as the state and society, political parties, trade unions and social movements.

This macro-level of the nation-state is however becoming increasingly brittle, because it is losing relevance in a global context. Globalisation urgently requires a rethinking of the macro-level as a global level, where the nation-state can no longer simply delegate certain responsibilities. But who are the new actors? We naturally have the UN, the WTO, the G8, the IMF, the World Bank, the ILO, but it would certainly be an exaggeration to already speak of a world order or policy such as the social teaching of the Church has actually called for quite some time. If John Paul II speaks repeatedly of a “globalisation of solidarity” or “globalisation without exclusion”, he basically refers to the task of creating a world order that would organise capitalism, as it is developing worldwide, in such a way that serves human work, and ultimately the good of all human beings.

I would like to briefly mention here only three aspects: The collective actors at world level must be better interlinked, and must become more transparent. A reform of the UN, the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank and the ILO is needed if they wish to only start to take on the task that can lead to a framework order at world level. One should particularly take into account here the fact that the relationship between capital and work has developed to the disadvantage of work. Capital is mobile worldwide, but work is linked to families, homelands and languages. Rules for the international financial markets can help to avoid further intensifying the imbalance against work. The dignity of work also includes giving it the possibility of productivity and the highest possible yield. This means creating fairer conditions for competition and opening up new markets, especially for the poor countries. Such a framework order also naturally includes a discussion on minimum social and ecological standards, so that the exploitation of work and of Creation does not worsen. At

the macro level, rules also have to be found so that what is performed by civil society in a nation-state can also take place at this level. This requires free trade unions, a critical public, positive recognition of the Church and others who act as a voice for the poor. (With respect to the WTO, the German Commission *Justitia et Pax* has made several propositions to be borne in mind.)

*b) The meso-level*

The framework order is a necessary but not sufficient starting point on which to base the protection of the dignity of work. At meso-level, the collective actors, such as enterprises and trade unions, are called upon to use their scope for activity through agreements and undertakings. The multinationals in particular are obliged to pursue the ethical perspective of the priority of work. If the realisation becomes common that exploitation of work does not make economic sense, it may also be easier for some enterprises to take this path. It is more difficult for trade unions to act collectively at world level. There are attempts to form works councils at the international level, but the balance of forces possible at nation-state level has not yet been created in this field. Here, the ILO has an important function.

*c) The micro-level*

This level is concerned with the responsibility of the individual, especially of the management in an enterprise, and hence with the task of combining work and capital in a creative manner so that capital serves work in the long term (cf. *CA* n. 42). For a responsible and clever entrepreneur it is actually normal to regard work as the enterprise's most valuable asset ("man's principal resource is man himself", *CA* n. 32). For this reason, co-determination, co-ownership and participation on the part of working persons makes sense from an ethical point of view as well as from that of industrial management (cf. *LE* n. 14). Therefore, ethically and economically, it is not an isolated shareholder model of entrepreneurial action, but the stakeholder approach including all groups interested in the enterprise that has future potential.

V. Maintaining and promoting the personal nature of human work, including also the promotion of its potential yield and hence overcoming poverty, can only be possible if the collective actors on the various levels that have been described, are ethically motivated and orientated and act in an economically screwed way. However, it is a "*conditio sine qua non*" that the political order, that is the order in which the major targets of a social community are

formulated, provide the framework for economic development. The priority of politics over the economy remains important. Where this is not achieved, one can only prevent misuse in a highly fragmentary manner by means of agreements, or set an example through individual initiatives undertaken by enterprises and trade unions.

The task of the Church is to call for this political order and to show ways of achieving it step-by-step. The encyclicals of John Paul II have shown themselves to be extremely helpful for this fundamental orientation, but we as members of the Church must not let the Pope act alone at the global level; the Church is also a collective actor. There are many who, in a coordinated and cooperative way, can do a lot in their countries and at global and other levels, equipped with the Pope's encyclicals.