

Work as Key to the Social Question

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



Presentation of the Task

by Simona Beretta
Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan

Eminence, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the organising committee that, in the past few months, has circulated the Call for Papers and subsequently organised the seminars' program, let me thank the institutions that sponsors this initiative, those who planned the practical aspects of the Conference, and thank all of you participants, coming from many different countries (we know of 33). We never could have imagined this Conference would start in such tragic circumstances and suffering, and we offer our work here to the Lord, our Saviour and Saviour of the world.

Participants to this Conference represent different approaches to the issue of human work: scholars in various disciplines, people with significant experiences in social work, members of institutions dealing with work. But all participants have in common the desire to share in a reflection about work, in the tradition of catholic social teaching: we understood that very well in our correspondence with many of you. So I am very grateful to all of you, that can make it possible to have this Conference.

We will have four important plenary sessions, which are organised around the following topics:

- Human work and its meaning
 - The great transformations in the light of the subjective dimension of work
 - Constructive response
 - Collective actors and human work

We thank the distinguished speakers of the plenary sessions for their contribution.

As you know, there will also be the possibility to participate in a more personal and active way to the works of the Conference. We will be able to dialogue and debate in smaller groups, during the seminars. The parallel seminars will be held in the New Synod Room and in the rooms from 1 to 7, according to the program that you have received or that you can find at the registration desk. In this Synod hall there will be simultaneous translation, while in the other rooms we will manage to understand each other. Since all the papers to be discussed in the parallel seminars were available in advance on the web site of the Conference, presentations will be short (15 minutes) so that there is enough time for debate, which will be stimulated and facilitated by respondents.

I must say I have been impressed by the enthusiasm which the launch of the Call for Papers produced, which is easy to understand, since *Laborem Exercens* is such a fresh and stimulating document. We had to select, out of a large number of proposals, the subset of papers to be presented in these days. We wish to particularly thank those participants to this Conference who have submitted a paper but will not be able to present it during the Conference. Their papers are also available on the web site. We thank respondents, especially those who prepared discussion on papers written by people who had to cancel their participation for sorrowful reasons.

We do hope that this Roman Conference will be a significant event in developing, throughout the world, a community of scholars, really friend to each other, interested in deepening and expanding the catholic social tradition, grateful for the *Magisterium* of the Church, ever rich of old and new treasures.

This Conference, *Work as Key to the Social Question*, has a subtitle: *The Great Social and Economic Transformations and the Subjective Dimension of Work*. The impressive transformations which are evident now, 20 years after *Laborem Exercens* was issued, still need to be understood. The form of work, its time frames, its physical space have changed; new tensions have emerged: between local and global, between "old" and "new" economy, between technological change and unemployment, between economic growth and environmental sustainability. The social question today, has many dimensions. But a common root.

In a sense, we are facing the crash of a paradigm: it used to be the dominant scientific paradigm and unfortunately it still remains influential and powerful in everyday practice, in everyday mentality, in many firms, institutions, organisations: let's call this paradigm economism, or mechanicism. This paradigm, severely unrealistic, considers the objective dimension of human work as prevalent, or absolute. And hence it is doomed to fail, but while it lingers it makes work objectively less human.

If you look at work only considering its objective dimension you might be able to register, ex post, social and economic transformations. But you cannot **understand** change, hence you cannot take its opportunities and you cannot correct the wrongs that it brings about.

For understanding and shaping change in social and economic life, the personal dimension of work is really the key. This personal dimension implies a relational dimension of any

human effort. This begins to be recognised in the most advanced economic and social research, but daily working conditions, policy making and institutional design are still conceived as if society were formed by interchangeable individuals.

We realise this paradigm is unrealistic and dangerous by its fruits, both in industrial countries and in developing countries. In industrial countries, we seem to have no recipe for unemployment, new forms of poverty, workaholism, lack of sense, fear of the future; in poor countries, no recipe for development.

In the subjective dimension of human work we can find the root for understanding change and for fostering development. I would like to use the word "generation" for this: a dynamic of gift, of giving; acting persons which explore new answers to new needs relating to each other, persons which participate to the great work of creation, as it is our calling.

May it be that our common work in this Conference be blessed by the grace of generation.