

Work as Key to the Social Question

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



The Meaning and Dimensions of Human Work in John Paul II's Theology of Human Work: Challenges on Nigeria

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The Holy Father, Pope John Paul II writes in the Document *Laborem Exercens*:

“We are celebrating the ninetieth anniversary of the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* on the eve of new developments in technological, economic and political conditions which, according to many experts, will influence the world of work and production no less than the industrial revolution of the last century. There are many factors of a general nature: the widespread introduction of automation into many spheres of production, the increase in energy costs and raw materials, the realisation that resources are limited, the problems of environmental pollution, and the emergence of peoples who, after centuries of subjection, are demanding their rightful places among the nation” [1]

A summary of the legacy of *Laborem Exercens* and its impact on the world of work in Nigeria and Africa as a whole leads us in this paper to study the underlying tenets of this document and provide a summary of its guiding principles which we consider a legacy for the people of Africa. Many initiatives on the continent have been guided by these principles and the Church hierarchy of the continent continues to seek for appropriate means to adapt these teachings to the apostolate in Africa, understood as “integral evangelisation”.

1. It is a man’s duty to work. It is by his work that he must procure his daily bread; by his work that he must contribute to the continuing development of the technical arts and sciences; by his work - of particular importance, this - that he must help to raise ever higher moral and cultural standards of the society in which he shares his life with the human family. In so far as we fail in realizing this, we frustrate our lives and fail in what we owe

the common good, offending against the virtue of social justice which bids us to do habitually whatever is necessary for the common good. Since it is man's duty to work, Nigerians may need to change their attitude to work, which since the colonial experience has become exteriorised. Work should not simply mean "Meal thicket", but must be more for a country with the potentialities to elevate Africa.

Work must be understood as necessary, creative, corporate, painful and redemptive.

2. Man alone is adapted to work. Indeed, work is one of the signs by which man is distinguished from other living creatures. Although active in sustaining themselves, animals cannot be said to work. Work is a fundamental dimension of man's existence on earth, and through work fulfils his life on earth. Wherefore, work bears man's signature, the distinctive mark of his humanity and nature, the mark of a person who is created in God's image to act within a community of persons. We must keep always before our eyes the subjective nature of work. First man, then the rest.

If we do this we shall never neglect or deny the threefold external purpose of work, namely family, nation and mankind; nor shall we neglect the dignity of the working person and unique individual.

3. The Encyclical *Laborem Exercens* extols the unique worth, value and dignity of man, and asserts that economics must serve man, not otherwise. Man's special relationship to God his creator and his endowment with reason, Faith and an eternal soul make him superior over work itself, the objects of work and the tools and equipments used as working materials. Such an attitude will help rescue Nigeria and entire Africa from the impending economic secularism or materialism facing modern nations.

4. The conflict between labour and capital is superfluous and based on false views of man. The undoubted source of the conflict lay in the fact that when the workers offered their labour for sale, they put their powers at the disposal of a class of entrepreneurs who tried strenuously to establish the lowest possible wage for the work done.

Apart from this, men's work was abused in other ways for the sake of profit, among the evils being the neglect of safety precautions and of provision for the health, living conditions of the workers and their fundamental human rights as well as their families. The Pope offers the basic thesis that there is a priority of labour over capital, and at the same time no inherent opposition between both. While recommending the sharing of profit between capital and labour, the Pope warns that both capitalism and socialistic communism, that is, between economism and materialism have erred in setting mankind in an antimony of ideologies to the left and right. Nigeria must reject all ideologies whether to the left or to

the right. African policy-makers are thereby helped to strike a balance between rigid capitalism and extreme collectivism. We must maintain the primacy of man over things including ideologies.

5. The 'personalist argument' is offered as a valid alternative to all forms of work which deprive worker participation in the means of production, or bureaucratise his personality. As the document points out, the man who works rightly expects something besides a firm wage for his labour. He wants also to have the process of production so arranged that he works, even on something which is owned in common, he can be aware that he is working 'on his own account'. This awareness is extinguished by excessive bureaucratic supervision which centralises everything and makes the worker feel that he is just a cog in a huge machine directed from above; may rather, that he is for more reasons not just a mere instrument of production rather than the true subject of work endowed with an initiative of his own. Failure in this respect inevitably does incalculable damage to the running of the economy, harm which is not confined to economic consequences but has for its first victim man himself.

6. On the ownership of private property, *Laborem Exercens* maintains that this right is a natural one and is in order with the will of God. Ownership of property, whether individually owned or in the hands of the community as title holder must be strictly differentiated from rigid capitalism or extreme collectivism. Christian traditions has never held that the right to ownership is absolute and untouchable, rather, the right has always been understood within the broader context of the right which is common to all men to use the goods of the whole of creation. The right to private disposal is plainly subordinate to the right of common use of goods that are intended for all mankind. In the context of Nigeria, we are guided from the above assertions to learn that one man cannot live in super-abundance when the entire masses around him live in poverty and squalor. An adequate method of distribution of the goods of the nation must be undertaken to ensure that the majority of the citizens have their rightful share in the nation's resources.

7. *Laborem Exercens* rightly points out to African leaders as well as workers and employers everywhere, that some of our problems in labour and productivity are controlled by factors beyond the workers and his direct employer. Such factors which cause dependence in economic relations may be factors which cause dependence in economic relations may be social attitudes and institutions, domestic labour policies as well as international trade policies and relations, multinationals, and other economic determinants which need adequate examination. Policy makers and economic experts are thus helped from the Pope's research to know where the problems lie and to take necessary steps to curb them for the good of the worker.

8. The rights of the worker are inalienable. By guaranteeing him these rights, the charter of the United Nations which calls for the respect of human dignity and guaranteeing of human rights are recognized. In the words of the Pope:

“As the Magisterium of the Church has pointed out several times, especially since the publication of *“Pacem in Terris”*, respect for this great body of human rights constitutes the primary condition for peace in today’s world: peace within states and social groups as well as between states. The human rights that flow from work fall into the broad context of these principal rights of the person” (LE, n. 26).

Among the many rights of the workers which any serious nation must guide and guarantee are: the right of citizens to work; the right to just wages for work done; the right to form trade unions for the defence of workers rights from all sorts of exploitation; the right to strike when this becomes inevitable; the right to own property and to participate in the ownership of the means of production; the rights to various social benefits and insurance such as health, education, leisure and rest, pension and old age, protection against threats to personality and property; rights to practice of religion, freedom of movement, speech, thought and existence.

Other rights include the protection of women from chauvinistic elements of exploitation; guaranteeing the rights of migrant workers, technical workers, the disabled and unemployed; and last but not least, protecting the dignity of agricultural work by granting farmers essential support, services, loans and encouragement.

In a developing nation such as Nigeria, official state policy must be aimed at achieving the full realisation of these rights for the common good of all its citizens.

9. Finally, the spiritual orientation offered by *Laborem Exercens* confirms and elevates the traditional African conception of work, which if properly understood, contributes to the development in Africa, as well as in other continents, the conception of work as a God-given vocation to help in creation. Work will thus be understood as a human obligation in the complex meaning of the word, for the Creator has commanded it and man cannot live and grow in his humanity without it. Properly understood, work has before all else the property of bringing people together, uniting them in the oneness of God’s supremacy. For through work, man cares for his family and those closest to him; he cares for the wide range of his human society, that is, the nation which is his mother, and the whole human family of which he is a member.

CHALLENGES ON THE CHURCH

1. The Nigerian Church is challenged to defend human worth and dignity, to call for a just economic order and to insist that all persons have rights in the economics and political spheres. The Nigerian Church must insist that society has a moral obligation to take the necessary steps to ensure that no one among us is hungry, homeless, unemployed or otherwise denied what is necessary to live with adequate dignity. In a country with just about 10% rich poor and more than 60% poor the Church cannot keep quiet. Today in Nigeria, there is unequal distribution of income, education, wealth, job opportunities and other economic goods as well as discrimination on the basis of religion, sex, tribe, and other arbitrary standards. In such a situation, the Nigerian Church must call and act for social justice and for distributive justice too. It is the duty of the Church to make it clear that the dignity of the human person is the criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured.

This dignity can only be realised in relationship and solidarity with others.

2. The Church must stress three spheres of economic values in Nigeria: namely

- that the economy must enable people find self-realisation; fulfil their material needs through adequate remuneration; and enhance unity within the family, the nation, and the world community.
- that meeting human needs and increasing participation should be priority targets in the investment of wealth, talent and human energy. In other words, the fulfilment of the basic needs of the people is of the highest priority, namely, water medicine, light, roads, food, schools, transport, jobs.
- that management and workers should develop new forms of partnership and co-operation, such as co-operative ownership of the means of production, and worker participation in ownership and decision making, thereby broadening the sharing of responsibility in economic society.

3. Of much importance is the political area. The Church in Nigeria must insist that government is not a reserved right of any group of people, because they have the power of the gun or the economic power alone, but government is a right for every individual. Therefore, democracy which allows participation for all citizens and checks dictatorship has to be supported. Above all, the Churches in Nigeria must remind the government of its basic duties towards the citizens, its moral obligation and the reason for its continued existence, namely:

- that of protecting basic rights as guaranteed by the Constitution, the United Nations Charter on Human rights and the Organisation of African Unity charter for Human

rights.

- ensuring economic justice for all
- enabling citizens to strike a balance towards these ends by encouraging individual initiatives and social responsibility.

However, while Christian Social Principles provides a positive affirmation of the role of government, it does not advocate a “*statist*” approach to political or economic activity. The principle of “*subsidiarity*” is the primary norm for determining the scope and limits of state and government action.

4. Finally, all the moral principles that govern the just operation of any socio-economic endeavour apply to the Church itself and its agencies and institutions. All Church institutions, both the hierarchy and individual Christians in Nigeria, as elsewhere must realise that the Church as a community can make very important contributions to achieving greater economic justice. This can only be done if we have adequate knowledge of the Social Teachings of the Church.

In the words of Pope John XXIII, we conclude this presentation:

“It is therefore our urgent desire that this doctrine be studied more and more. While we note with satisfaction that in many Institutes it has been taught for some times and with outstanding success, we urge that such teaching be extended by regular, systematic courses in Catholic schools of every kind, especially in seminaries. It is to be inserted into the religious instruction programmes of parishes and of Associations of the Lay Apostolate. It must be spread by every modern means at our disposal: daily newspaper, periodicals, popular and scientific publications, radio and television. The laity can do much to help this diffusion of Catholic Social Teachings by studying it themselves and putting it into practice, and by zealously striving to make others understand it. They should be convinced that the best way of demonstrating the truth and efficacy of this teaching is to show that it can provide the solution to present-day difficulties.. They will thus make converts of those people who are opposed to it through ignorance of it. Who knows, but a ray of its light may one day enter their mind” [2]

[1] John Paul II., *Laborem Exercens*, 1, 3.

[2] John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, nn. 223 - 225

