

# Work as Key to the Social Question

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



## On Some Important Novelties of *Laborem Exercens*

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In the paper the opinion is expressed that the Encyclical *Laborem exercens* (1981) by John Paul II may be considered as the most original and interesting social Encyclical by the present Pope.

While related to the entire tradition of the *Social Doctrine* of the Catholic Church, as well as (ideally) connected with the two successive social Encyclicals by Pope John Paul II (the *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 1987, and the *Centesimus annus*, 1991), the *Laborem exercens* is a very profound and innovating document. In particular, the author's position is that in the Encyclical the roots are to be found with regard to the establishment of a new 'crucial' principle for the Church social doctrine: the principle of *reciprocity*. This point is argued in three steps.

First, at the level of the fundamental distinction between the "objective dimension" and the "subjective dimension" of human work. Secondly, in connection to the distinction between "indirect labour" and "direct labour" conditions. Thirdly and particularly, by analysing the problems touched upon in the last sentences of paragraph n° 14 of the Encyclical. In the paper, it is shown that in those sentences the crucial problem of "socialisation *versus* collectivisation" of the means of production is dealt with in connection to co-operative and partnership experiences both between workers and entrepreneurs and among workers themselves. According to the author, it is clear that in very few words the Encyclical seems to put forward the foundations of the *Social Doctrine* of the Church as to the nowadays much thought about problems of the (so called) "economics of reciprocity". More specifically, the "economics of reciprocity" may represent a really good answer to the questions raised in relation to the well-known assertion about "the priority of labour in comparison to capital" which is one of the key statements in the *Social Doctrine* of the

Church.

## Text

Let me start by saying that, in my opinion, *four* basic principles may be found at the roots of the Catholic Church social doctrine.

Two such principles are installed into the very heart of the Christian message, that is to say within some fundamental parables of the Gospel. The *first* can be called the *principle of responsibility*: it refers to the “warrant” that Jesus delivered to human being to the effect that each of us must act in such a way that his/her own talents will bear ‘adequate’ fruit (Mt 25, 14-30; Lc 19, 11-27; Mt 24, 45-51; Lc 12, 42-48; Lc 16, 1-12). Indeed, the root of such endeavours as social initiative, economic enterprise, political undertaking, must be traced out into those precepts.

The *second* principle of human behaviour performed according to the Gospel entrenched into Jesus fundamental ‘revolution of love’ and it is the well-known *principle of solidarity* (Mt 5, 3-12; Lc 6, 20-28; Lc 10, 25-37). Such a principle has rightly been thought of as the basis of most teachings and actions in the Church social doctrine as can be found in its entire development (from *Rerum novarum*, 1891, by Leo XIII to *Gaudium et spes*, 1965, by Vatican Council II, to *Populorum progressio*, 1967, by Paul VI, to *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 1987, and *Centesimus annus*, 1991, by John Paul II).

In referring to the other two basic principles of the Church social doctrine, we move one, so to say, to deal with moral principles of human behaviour which have been elaborated (in one case) or else hinted upon (in the other case) in the Pontifical magisterium relating to social matters. Thus, the *third* principle is a well-known one: it is the *principle of subsidiarity*. It was originally stated by Pius XI in his social Encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*, 1931 (in particular, *QA* 80), then it was restated by John XXIII in his *Mater et magistra*, 1961 (*MM* 55-56 and 121-123), as well as expanded by Vatican Council II in *Gaudium et spes*, 1965 (in particular, *GS* 86).

Although this is not the place to dwell upon it, I cannot but remind here that there are two different and equally important meanings and implications that the *principle of subsidiarity* has had since its very first statement by Pius XI. Actually, the so called *horizontal subsidiarity* is to be clearly distinguished from the *vertical subsidiarity*: the first refers to the fact that measures of public intervention in economic and social matters are justified in so far as individual initiative and effort are not able to cope with the people needs, whereas the second one refer to the fact that any *higher* levels of social and political institutions must act only in so far as *lower* levels are unable to do so. Anyway, both such ‘versions’ of the *principle of subsidiarity* are relevant principles in relation to the argument

of the present paper.

A *fourth* principle of the Church social doctrine, which though has not, or anyhow not yet, been stated as a formal principle, has not usually been taken as a separate and independent one; rather, generally speaking, it has been thought of as coincident with, and synonymous for, the *principle of solidarity*. I am referring to the so called *principle of reciprocity*.

Hence, the question to be put and discussed here is whether such a principle represents a different and more articulate way of expressing the *principle of solidarity* or, on the contrary, it is a really different and autonomous *fourth* principle of the Catholic social doctrine, being a proper and valid moral principle on its own and having to pursue a specific and relevant task by itself.

According to some authoritative thinkers, in particular economists, who adhere to the Catholic social thought, the case is that the *principle of reciprocity* is indeed a way of actually performing the *principle of solidarity* (see, in particular, S. Zamagni 1995a and 1998). The idea is that solidarity does not coincide with charity, the former showing a larger 'coverage' of situations than the latter does, as it may *also* include cases in which somebody does something in favour of somebody else in the expectation that sometimes in the future this one may 'return' or 'reciprocate' a similar action.

However, I am *not* convinced that a behaviour such as that of the solidarity-minded person is really and intrinsically different from that of the charitable one; *nor* do I agree that that behaviour may be identified by means of the concept of 'reciprocity'. So that, if we are really interested in enlarging the 'coverage' of the concept of charity/solidarity, we must, so to speak, 'free' the concept of reciprocity from its dependence from, and coincidence with, that of solidarity. As I shall argue in the following paragraphs of the paper, there are 'hints' in the present state of the Church social doctrine, and in particular in several passages of the social Encyclical *Laborem exercens*, 1981, by the great living Pope, in which relevant traces can be found out whereby a new *principle of reciprocity* can clearly be expressed as an additional and important principle of the Catholic social thought.

On the one hand, consider that he who performs an action for solidarity reasons cannot really be said to behave differently from a person who is moved by a ('narrower') *spectrum* of motives as is the case with charitable actions. Both people seem to be equally whole-hearted persons. For, the fact that the former does something in favour of another person in the expectation of a 'reciprocation' does not have any different *practical* consequences in comparison with those related to an act of charity. On the other hand, *if and in so far as* a similar action takes place from the previous 'receiver' and in favour of the previous 'donor', then we can certainly speak of a 'reciprocation'; but it is clear enough that we can only express a *ex post judgement*. Hence, in cases such as these, the concept of 'reciprocity' does not have any *ex ante* significance and thus it is *not* such that it can be taken as a *general* principle for moral actions.

In conclusion, only when a *principle of reciprocity* can be thought of as an independent

and thorough principle for social behaviour, we will be allowed to regard it as a proper way of ‘enlarging’, in a *ex ante* sense, the possible range of cases in which social actions may be put under a further and specific moral judgement from the point of view of the Catholic social doctrine.

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As I have already pointed out, in the present paper my ambition is to try to show that substantial traces for expressing an ‘independent’ and ‘fruitful’ *principle of reciprocity* may be found in the *Laborem exercens*, 1981, the great Encyclical that John Paul II issued in the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Rerum novarum*.

Before doing that, let us ask the following question: what social actions do I intend that the *principle of responsibility* should refer to? In trying to identify such a *fourth* basic principle of the Catholic social doctrine, my purpose is to arrive at a principle on the basis of which a *larger* range of cases can be judged; and this *in practice* means that a proper theory of the functioning of the so called ‘third sector’ or ‘*non profit* sector’ of the economy may be elaborated on a larger ‘basis’ and ‘coverage’ than we have been able to do so far.

In fact, so far, at the root of the functioning of such a sector – which, by the way, is a *third* sector besides the two other ‘traditional’ ones, the private or *market* sector and the State or *command* sector – it is the *principle of solidarity* that, in conjunction with the *principles of responsibility* and *of subsidiarity*, has largely been thought of as the pervasively explanatory principle to be put as to its *raison d’être*. Obviously, in so far as the *principle of reciprocity* is not thought of as an ‘independent’ principle, but as a sort of synonymous for that *of solidarity*, there would be non space for any enlargement of the ‘coverage’ of socio-productive activities in the economy that may be ‘attributed’ to the *non profit* sector. In such a perspective, though, an economy would see no ‘adequate’ exit from the ‘strictures’, so to say, into which the convergent crisis of both the market and the command sectors does keep most economies at the present times.

My opinion is that, if we agree that – far various technological as well as distributive reasons, particularly at the international level – generally speaking, even if owing to different causes, nowadays economies suffer from such a ‘transition’ crisis, then the development of the *third* or *non profit* sector does appear to be the ‘solution’ out of the *impasse*. But in order that that may materialise, the need is that that sector will undergo, so to speak, a sort of ‘structural enlargement’ and, in turn, the further need is that the basis on which both the economic theory and the value axioms on which such an enlargement be established should be enlarged as well.

In addition, from the point of view of the Catholic social doctrine, this means that the further ‘enlargement’ that is needed will imply the establishment of a new and consistent principle for moral actions. Hence, we have come to the conclusion that what we (urgently) need in this respect is to make reference to a really independent and converging principle of social ethics such as a ‘proper’ *principle of reciprocity*.

In so far as I can convincingly argue that such a principle does have its roots in that fundamental document of the Catholic social doctrine which is the *Laborem exercens* (*LE*), I think I can perform a rather useful duty.

My argument will gradually be built up in *three steps*. First, I shall look at the crucial distinction that John Paul II makes between the ‘objective’ and the ‘subjective’ dimensions of human work (*LE* 5-6) and shall consider it a proper development of the basic tenet in Catholic social thought represented by the so called ‘priority of labour in comparison to capital’. Secondly, I shall enquire into the meaning of the distinction between the ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ job-creation opportunities and its relation to the distinction between ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ labour control conditions (*LE* 17-19). Thirdly and conclusively, I shall move into the analysis of the ‘co-operative’ and ‘partnership’ work experiences and their (to me) clear implications for the identification of an ‘independent’ and ‘fruitful’ *principle of reciprocity* (*LE* 14-15).

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In the *first* place, the Encyclical calls upon us to consider, on the one hand, that, through work ‘in the objective sense’, man will perform the task of both mastering (*dominium*) and preserving (*custodia*) the world-creation; and that this will be done by means of productively combining human labour with such other ‘factors of production’ as natural resources, capital, technology, etc. On the other hand, the Pope stresses the fact that labour’s ‘subjective dimension’ means that man is a person and thus, through work, each person is related to other persons *from a specific point of view*; so that – this must particularly be stressed – the combination of one type of labour with another one is *much more* than a combination between ‘factors of production’, actually being a relationship between one labourer and another one, between one person and another person or more other ones.

In my understanding, whereas consideration of the ‘objective dimension’ of work brings the Pope to affirm the special role of the *principle of solidarity* among men *vis-à-vis* material ‘factors of production’, its ‘subjective dimension’ is to be looked at in a different light and, hence, in the light of a related, but *separate*, principle of social morality. It is just such a principle which I take to be the *principle of reciprocity*, rather one ‘version’ of this principle.

*Secondly*, in underlining both duties and rights of labourers, John Paul II introduces the very original and deep distinction between ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ work opportunities.

Actually, whereas the Pope speaks of the distinction between ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ employers (*LE* 16-17), my understanding of the entire argument is that such a distinction is *also* to be referred, more generally, to that between ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ employees or labourers *as well*. For, owing to the fundamentally equal dignity of human beings, both employers and employees are, first and foremost, labourers; and *also* all sorts of *institutions* – from corporate firms to various public bodies, even to the Legislative Power of the State –

are primarily to be seen as made up by persons.

Again, in my opinion, whereas when looking at the relationship among workers (e.g. within Unions, *LE 20*), from the point of view of social morality, reference is to be made to the *principle of solidarity*, when coming to the relationship between labourers *qua* employees and labourers *qua* employers (e.g. when dealing with such problems as employment or wage bargaining, as well as employment or minimum salary or social welfare policies, *LE 18-19* and *passim*), reference must be made to a similar, but quite distinct, principle, which is 'bound' to be the separate *principle of reciprocity*.

In the *third* place, and most importantly from the point of view of the plausibility of building up 'personalist' foundations for an 'enlarged' socio-economic theory and policy for the *third* or *non profit* sector, a somewhat more detailed mention is to be made to the very relevant passages of the Encyclical in which John Paul II deals with the 'perennial' problems of the relationship between labour and the ownership of 'means' or 'factors of production' (*LE 14*). By making ample references to essential passages of previous documents of the Church social doctrine (in particular, our mind goes to *RN 5-7* and *18-19*), the Pope underlines the 'crucial' importance of the various proposals that can be made, and have been made, concerning the *common ownership* of 'means of work', the *participation* of labourers to the management of firms or their profits, the so called *labour partnership*, and similar productive organisations.

In my opinion, here the main elements to be stressed in this matter are the following *two points*. The first refers to what seems to me to be a real *leit motiv* of the entire Encyclical, that is to say the 'socialisation of the means of production' can only make sense *if and when* the 'subjectivity of society' be safeguarded in such a way that, on the basis of his/her own work, every person be entitled to the *common ownership* of both the social work and the total product of such work. The second point refers to what for the Pope seems to be a 'natural' consequence of the first one, that is to say the fact that, *therefore*, labour (and the 'ownership of labour') must be 'associated' to capital (and the 'ownership of capital') so that a rich range of *intermediate* socio-productive bodies may be established in different economic, social and cultural fields. In the Popes' words, such bodies should be 'autonomous' organisations with respect to public bodies (the 'State') as well as – I would add and I think I am well entitled to do so, in the light of the whole argument of the Pope – with respect to the private, or employee-based, or wage-based, sector of the economy ('the market').

Note that, at the end of the paragraph (*LE 14*), John Paul II explicitly adds that such *intermediate* socio-productive bodies should pursue their own purposes on the basis of faithful relationships of *mutual co-operation* (my italics), given the general goal of the common good and in full respect of the equal dignity of all persons and their full participation to socio-productive activities. In my opinion, here we could not have a clearer and better indication of the new and specific principle of social morality for the Catholic social doctrine I have been making reference to throughout this paper, that is the *principle of reciprocity*. Let me finally add two further notes: 1) obviously enough, such a principle is to be seen in strict links with the other three principles I have made reference to too, the

*principles of responsibility, subsidiarity, and solidarity*; 2) the idea of ‘reciprocity’ is to be looked at from both the point of view which can be called ‘*ad intra*’ and that which can be called ‘*ad extra*’ (this argument is a quite relevant one, but I cannot deal with it in the present paper).

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As is well-known, it is *not* up to the Church, to her mission on earth, to her duties, to provide specific *theories* or *policies* in any of all matters or disciplines with respect to which she intervenes in order to single out moral principles or criteria that can and must represent the firm tracks meant to guide both human behaviour and scientific thought.

Always, in the history of Christianity, on the one hand theologians, on the other hand philosophers and scientists who also were people of Christian faith, have produced reflections, scientific discoveries, general or specific theories in one or the other discipline of their interest. In particular, social scientists and more especially economists – who, in their work, have been supported by adherence to Christian faith and hence to ethical motivations of Christian and, more particularly, Catholic nature – have tried to put forward theoretical elaborations meant to both understand and guide the socio-economic life in accordance to those teachings. From this point of view – apart from the great tradition of Saint Thomas Aquinas and the theologians who have also been incipient economists through the centuries – in our times the merit for elaborations of that type goes to the approach to economics which has been called ‘personalist economics’ or ‘humanist economics’. By deriving its basic principles from both the teachings of the Church social doctrine and two strands of Catholic thought – that of the von Ketteler (1844) and many other thinkers’ writings on social morality issues and that of the Maritain-Mounier philosophical personalism – and combining those principles with different, but ‘congruent’, lines of economic thought, a specific body of ‘personalist’ or ‘humanist’ economics has been built up: perhaps, the most significant author in this respect, at least in the Italian context, is to be considered the well-known economist F. Vito (in particular, 1930, 1949, 1968).

In more recent years, an encouraging revival has been taking place on these same lines in various branches of the scientific community of economists in the world. Of course, this is not the place for making any reference to such interesting developments. Let me only say, in the way of conclusion of this paper, that I myself have been thinking along those lines, in particular as far as the ‘economics of reciprocity’ is concerned, to be thought of as a specific contribution to the analyses and policies of the *third* or *non profit* sector (F. Marzano 1998, 2000, 2001). The idea is that – by building upon the *principle of reciprocity* according to the argument I have pursued in the present paper, as well as the other basic principles of the Catholic social doctrine – a much larger ‘coverage’ can be provided for the role of that sector than it is the case in most analyses thereabout which are available in the specific literature nowadays.

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