

Work as Key to the Social Question

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



General Introduction

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Benvenute a tutti, Welcome! How I wish we could welcome you to this conference in different circumstances. The next couple of days have been structured to call us to reexamine and rethink our motives and actions on work. The recent terrorist attacks in the US have stunned many of us, and it makes this call to reexamination and rethinking all the more critical and necessary. As we move through these next couple of days let us pray for peace and for those who suffer from violence and injustice. Let us especially pray to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, of which this university is named, that our hearts will be converted to His Way and that the hearts of our enemies will be open to more peaceful means of resolution. Come Lord Jesus, Send Us Your Spirit and Renew the Face of the Earth!

Many of you have come a great distance to be here. And for this we are very grateful for your presence. There are 36 countries represented at this conference along with various academic disciplines and work related experiences. We have a rich diversity of people here creating conditions for robust dialogue and debate to tackle the complexity of how work can collaborate with the ongoing activity of our Creator.

As colleagues and friends back in St. Paul, Minnesota have found out about this conference, they ask the invariable practical question: “So what do you hope will result from the conference?” “Why would so many of people travel such great distances to be here, besides the enjoyment of wine, food and the wonders of Rome?” My response has been two-fold.

My **first response** focuses on developing a Community of Scholars. That this conference will contribute to the growing community of scholars who deepen, develop and expand the Catholic social tradition. Such a community cannot be sustained in the isolation of our individual offices, but must be fostered through face to face contacts and conversations over substantive issues through which personal relationships can be developed.

This community, I tell my friends, needs to contribute to the rich moral and spiritual framework given to us in the Church's social tradition, which has been uniquely deepened philosophically, anthropologically and theologically by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Laborem exercens* (1981). As Johan Verstraeten, Simona Beretta and I mention in our background paper, the key to John Paul's argument and a major focus of this conference is the subjective dimension of work. All too often the objective triumphs and achievements of work—those discoveries, techniques, and outcomes which have increased the efficiency, productivity and profitability of organizations—can too easily become forces that corrupt the soul of the subject. Rather than being conquerors, we, the workers, have been conquered – by our own objective achievements, whether compiling great assets, organizing great numbers of people, climbing political ladders or publishing a great number of books.

This subjective dimension work, particularly as it interacts with the objective dimension of work is a complex phenomenon that crosses and connects theology, organizational theory, economics, managerial practice, government policy, and other academic and practical areas. Precisely because of this complexity, we need a community of people not simply to repeat the existing social teachings of the Church, but to deepen and develop our understanding of what it means [today], and to explore and clarify the interpretations of the subjective dimension in the context of the massive transformations in the world of work.

By this time my friends have usually had enough of my response and some are even sorry they have asked the question! But I continue on and the **second part of my response** focuses on Institutional Change.

People at this conference represent many different institutions-- businesses, unions, governments, and churches and based on their deeper understanding of the Catholic social tradition and new partnerships that can emerge from conferences such as this, they will shape the practices and policies of their institutions to foster more humane work.

I hope that this conference will help universities, and in particular, Catholic universities, to be who they are meant to be. As universities have become more specialized and departmentalized, they have produced a wealth of information and knowledge, while also fostering a way of thinking that is disconnected from any moral or spiritual tradition. As Christopher Dawson explained.

Instead of the whole intellectual and social order being subordinated to spiritual principles, every activity has declared its independence, and we see politics, economics, science and art organising themselves as autonomous kingdoms which owe no allegiance to any higher power.

A conference that fosters interdisciplinary dialogue among academics, practitioners, and activists will help to build bridges between these autonomous kingdoms. This is critical if we are to educate students for the common good and not just their own individual career success.

So we gather to deepen and expand our understanding of work as key to the social question. We gather to discern our own vocation of work and examine ways to humanize our

organizations. We gather to collaborate with each other and with God to work toward the kingdom.

These are lofty goals no doubt, but the Gospel and the Church's social tradition does not call us to mediocrity, but to dignity and nobility. As John Paul explained *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, I quote,

Anyone wishing to renounce the difficult yet noble task of improving the lot of man in his totality, and of all people, with the excuse that the struggle is difficult and that constant effort is required, or simply because of the experience of defeat and the need to begin again, that person would be betraying the will of God, the creator. In this regard, in the encyclical "*Laborem Exercens*" I referred to man's **vocation** to work, in order to emphasize the idea that it is always man who is the protagonist of development (John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 30).

May our vocation as academics, businesspeople, union and government officials, and activists be renewed and strengthened through this conference, and that our work together will bear rich fruit toward making this world a better place.