

Work as Key to the Social Question

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



Human Work and its meanings

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One of the innovations of John Paul II's Encyclical *Laborem exercens*, an innovation which cannot go unnoticed, is the fact that the Pope not only considers the question of work as the source of every other social question but that he places work itself within the context of modern anthropology, an anthropology that is clearly personalist. He thus casts questions of social relationships and social justice in an anthropological and personalist light, a light that is at the same time philosophical and theological. In this way, he avoids and actually moves beyond materialistic economic ideologies that tend to consider work only as a social force, an anonymous force, that produces income and merchandise, rather than seeing it above all as a self-expression of the person and the "realization of his humanity", of his subjectivity and personality as a concrete individual who works. "As a person, man is therefore the subject of work" [i]. The Pope emphasizes the subjective dimension of work, that is, its function of enhancing the humanity and personality of the one who works.

As individual subjects, workers are in the first place both the agents and the source of work. Nonetheless, it is more important that they should be seen as the purpose and end of work. The purpose of work in the first place is not to increase wealth, whether individual or collective. The purpose of human work is to fulfil man's fundamental vocation, which is in the order of "being" and not in that of "having".

This means that man has a vocation that he is called to discover and not to invent, a vocation that is given to him in order that he might fulfil it. It is this that provides the fundamental and principal meaning for man and his work, as well as for his leisure activity and free time.

In this sense we can say that the philosophical and theological anthropology underlying the Encyclical *Laborem exercens* takes the classical axiom "*agere sequitur esse*" in its strictest sense. All human activity, and not only work in the strict sense of the term, is the expression and consequence of the dynamism involved in being a human person. For

man, "being" means aiming at and tending to increase in being. Thus, human activity is not something added to man's existence: it is existence itself. It is for this reason that man not only "is", but he "is" in order to "be" and he makes himself "be": he "creates" himself. This is the ontological source of his subjectivity and of his personality, and also of his freedom, his responsibility and his dignity.

Classical ontology distinguishes two types of human activity [ii]. The first type is distinguished by its object. If this object coincides with the subject itself in a perfect reflexivity it is called "immanent". If, on the contrary, the object of this activity is found entirely outside the subject, it is called "transitive".

Now, in the case of man, the possibility of a completely transitive activity — without any kind of repercussion whatsoever on the subject who engages in it — is purely theoretical and formal. All human activity, since it is an expression of man's innermost being, has psychological, spiritual and moral repercussions on the subject who engages in it. In a certain sense, then, we could reverse the classic philosophical adage and say: "*esse sequitur agere*". Man is what he makes himself to be. The manner in which he engages in his activities and his work determines his very being.

Everything that man does has an effect and a consequence on him: this observation is not conjectural or conditional; it is linked to the very essence of being a subject and being a person. Since the days of antiquity, since the time of Aristotle himself [iii], being a subject and being a free person means being an end unto oneself. Those who are free are distinguished from slaves by the fact that they do not work for others but for themselves. What the Pope calls the subjective dimension of work is therefore linked to the very essence of the dignity of the human person who, in his being and activity, is not a means but an end. Being a person, remaining a person and becoming ever more a person is the deepest meaning of all that man does.

When we speak of work, we distinguish it from all other forms of activity that are characterized by this reflexivity, by this repercussion on self. There are other activities besides work; work is not even the most basic of human activities. In relation to other forms of activity, it suffices for our purposes here to mention three specific traits of work.

First of all, work is characterized by *transitivity*. The object of work, in the strict sense of the term, is always found outside the subject. Secondly, work is a *transforming* force. Man makes changes in things by work. For this same reason, work is very often tiring. We are aware of the importance that Hannah Arendt gave to the human ability to make changes in things, to create something new and original. Although man does not create *ex nihilo*, he is a true creator in that he makes something that did not exist before. In his analysis, H. Arendt looks to Saint Augustine, who placed the creative force of God and human creativity in close relationship with one another: in order that there might be something on earth that begins from nothing, God created man [iv].

Lastly, work is not an ultimate end in itself. We do not work for the sake of working; work is not a game. We work in order to achieve a result. That is why work is

placed in the order of means and does not pass to that of an end. Although man cannot do without work, he has not been made for work. Consequently, work is not his proper end, it does not have ultimate meaning in itself as such. It needs therefore to be made meaningful. In fact, it can become meaningful just as much as it can, unfortunately, become meaningless. It is precisely here that we touch upon the crucial and critical point of the question of work and of its meaning in the past and in the world of today. It is necessary that work find suitable and appropriate meaning, since by itself it has none.

However, it is one thing to know what meaning work should have *a priori* — by virtue of the fact that it is one of the most basic expressions of human subjectivity and personality — and it is quite another thing to know what meaning work should effectively have *de facto*, in concrete historical situations.

The first point concerns the meaning that work can and should have *de iure* for the human person. The very brief analysis that we have just made — which coincides with modern personalist anthropology, the same which is found also in the Encyclical *Laborem exercens* — gives us an insight into this question. The answer is drawn from what man is as a person, as an end unto himself. Since work has no ultimate meaning in itself, its meaning must be found in the person who engages in it.

Therefore, work has first of all a humanizing function. Through work, man makes changes in man himself. But these changes are not immediate. Man introduces transformations in man by transforming nature. He directly modifies the natural and cultural objects that he finds already present. We say that he humanizes nature and that he creates culture, which corresponds fairly closely to the biblical command to subdue and dominate the earth. But this does not exhaust the meaning and effects of work. In transforming nature, in participating in and extending the creative work of the Creator, man also changes himself, both as an individual and as a group. He also changes human culture and the overall society in which he lives and works. In the Encyclical *Laborem exercens*, the Pope places much emphasis on the role that work plays in the personal growth of each person, in the life of the family and in national and worldwide cultures.

Now, in the course of history as we know it, concrete work has not always had the same meaning, in particular, the same decisive meaning. The meaning that people give to their work depends on several factors: on the nature itself of the work, but also and above all on their understanding of man and of his destiny and place in the natural order. In brief, it depends on their material culture and especially on their spiritual culture.

In the subsistence economy that has characterized more or less all of traditional and pre-industrial culture, work was experienced above all in its objective dimension: as a means by which nature is transformed in order to produce goods for living, goods for human use. In ancient culture, this work was reserved to slaves. This was connected also to the fact that material and bodily needs — the need to feed oneself, to clothe oneself and protect oneself from the harshness of the climate — were experienced as a kind of slavery to the needs imposed on man by his bodily nature. Consequently, satisfying these material and

bodily needs became itself the task of slaves.

Christian spirituality brings changes to the meaning of human work although the technical dimension of work does not change. In the light of biblical revelation, nature was created as something good; matter is not evil and the command to work and to subdue the earth was given before man's fall. Therefore, work cannot be something negative, despite the arduous nature that characterizes it under the technological conditions of the Ancient World and the Middle Ages.

It is the Industrial Age that brings great changes in technology, and at the same time brings changes also in the understanding of man, of his place in nature and of his destiny. Without ignoring the advent of machines and various technologies, we must focus our attention above all on the fundamental phenomenon of the division of labour. As this division became more and more pronounced, it highlighted in a very particular fashion the socialization and solidarity among men that work calls for and encourages. The ever growing complex of social relationships, cooperation, solidarity, complementarity and mutual interdependence that work creates were not as well perceived in ancient times as in the modern era, where the division of labour and specializations continue to increase. Nonetheless, in industrial society people no longer work primarily to produce goods for use but rather goods for exchange, merchandise. Not only does this presuppose and foster multiple social ties, but it also launches competition and exploitation, accompanied on the spiritual plane by a materialism and individualism that make work itself a kind of merchandise. It is already possible today to assess the extreme consequences of this materialism, in that the absolute value of the human person tends to be more and more openly reduced to his relative economic usefulness, proof of which is seen in the practice of abortion and euthanasia.

This notwithstanding, we can also see a more positive phenomenon. In our Post-Industrial Age people are becoming more and more aware of the humanizing function of work, that is, of its prospects for development, personal growth and quality of communication in business enterprises. The causes of these changes in the value of work are many. First of all, our modern age is characterized by a very heightened consciousness of the dignity of each human person. Then, in our consumer society, we have an abundance of goods available for use and exchange. The most recent technological advances have made human labour less and less necessary for the production of these goods. At the same time, the resulting unemployment is seen as a problem not only because of the poverty that it can entail for those who are without work but also, and perhaps more importantly, because of the personal degradation that it can cause and the exclusion from the many social relationships and responsibilities that our society links to having a job. Moreover, the infrequency of classical employment situations, unemployment, and above all the disappearance of a great part of the jobs for unskilled labour have all served to heighten the professional requirements of instruction and training. This has great impact on the experience of work, on its value and on human relationships in businesses. The value of self-fulfillment and the value of human communication in the work process are seen more and more as authentic values, and even as something more important than a large salary.

When we talk about the many social relationships that are built or strengthened by work, moving from the level of family and business to that of nations and — today with globalization — the entire world, it is not enough to think in trite and obvious terms that, as has always been known, we all need each other. Rather, it is a matter of a more profound solidarity that, paradoxically, was emphasized by the liberal intellectual John Rawls[v]. Man's richness, the vast extent of his abilities and potentials is such that it cannot all be fully realized in just one human existence. In the effective fulfillment of our abilities and gifts, each of us necessarily remains incomplete. It is therefore in others and through the work that they undertake that I am enabled to become aware of the all the richness inherent in human beings and to recognize also my own richness, by which I am one with others. In this context, the ancient adage of Publius Terentius Afer — "*Homo sum et nil humanum a me alienum puto*"— is given particular significance.

Accordingly, the meaning that work takes on in specific situations for those engaging in it depends to a large extent on material, technological and organizational conditions, therefore on material culture. But even more than this, it depends also on spiritual culture. In antiquity, technological conditions and material culture underwent no change when Christianity came on the scene, but the meaning of labour gradually changed to the point that slavery was abolished [vi]. In like manner, the importance of the cultural and spiritual environment is confirmed in the well-known writings of Max Weber concerning the Protestant ethic and its influence on the spirit of capitalism. The issue raised for us today is knowing what our cultural and spiritual environment is and what meaning it gives to the labour performed by the workers of our day.

The problem of human labour and its meaning are intimately connected today with Western culture, with questions raised as to the meaning of man and his life and as to the values that should be sought and brought about.

In industrial society, labour was considered above all as a source of material wealth, indeed as the only source of this wealth. People worked in order to accumulate wealth and to make progress in an ever more ruthless competition. It has been noted in several quarters how much this culture of economic success has diminished the meaning that labourers give to their work and, because of this, diminished the very meaning of human existence. Work, and therefore man, has become *merchandise* [vii].

To rediscover the authentic and personalist meaning of work, it is not enough to think only in terms of its material, technological and organizational aspects. We have already said that the ultimate meaning of work is not found in work itself. Work belongs to the order of a means and not to that of an end. The question then becomes: a means in view of what? Where can one see and experience the ultimate meaning of man if not in work as such?

The meaning of work can be found beyond work itself, in the spiritual culture. In this sense, people have emphasized the importance of holidays. Holidays represent an alternative to work. They are days on which people do not work. People do not work because there are values that are more important than work. And it is these that give

meaning to work and to all of existence.

It is therefore clear that we are not speaking here of the holidays established by the spirit prevailing in our secularized societies. These civil and secularized holidays attempt to imitate more ancient holidays, religious holidays, but they do not really represent a true alternative to work days. The holidays established by our modern societies celebrate man. Man celebrates himself, to savour his own progress, victories and successes [viii]. Consequently, the same mentality that underlies work — the mentality of success, domination and exploitation — also underlies the holidays that society gives itself. It is religious holidays alone that are true holidays, that represent an alternative. Religious holidays bring to human life the contemplation of something that does not belong to the order of production but to the order of gift and grace. They transcend the commercial environment and logic of production-oriented labour.

Now, in our post-industrial and secularized society, holidays are more and more taking on another function that, by itself, falls quite short of the ultimate meaning that holidays should bring to people's lives and their work. The expectation placed on holidays today is that they provide free time or leisure. In our Western societies, the amount of free time tends to increase. But leisure, compared to work, is even more void of meaning. Free time is empty time. Man must use his creativity and inventiveness all the more to fill it. Only through sensible activities can free time come to make sense. By itself, it has no meaning, even less than work has by itself.

This is why — if modern man is to grow personally in his work and in his leisure time, which is becoming an ever more important counterpart to work — it is necessary to allow him to develop a spiritual culture permeated with authentically humanist and personalist values. If Pope John Paul II was able to remark twenty years ago that "the general situation of man in the modern world ... calls for the discovery of the *new meanings of human work*. It likewise calls for the formulation of the *new tasks* that in this sector face each individual" [ix], the situation today requires as well that meaning be given to leisure and free time also. The task that, in this area, lies before the men and women of Western society is that of filling free time with activities that are highly personalizing and humanizing.

ENDNOTES

[i] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem exercens*, 6.

[ii] Cf. LB. Lotz, *Ontologia*, Barcinone 1963, 98-99; J. de Finance, *Connaissance de l'être. Traité d'ontologie* (Paris: 1966), 395-406.

[iii] Cf. Aristotle, *La métaphysique A* (Metaphysics A), 2, 982 b, 25; I (Paris: 1974), 18.

[iv] Cf. H. Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: 1958), 177.

[v] Cf. J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: 1971), 520-529.

[vi] Cf. H. Thomas, *Von der Arbeitsideologie zur Arbeitskultur. Über die Freizeitgesellschaft und den Wert der Arbeit*, in *Die neue Ordnung* 52 (1998): 1,14.

[vii] Cf. J. Schasching, *The Originality and Importance of Laborem Exercens*, in "Rerum Novarum — Laborem Exercens" Towards the Year 2000 (Rome: Pont. Comm. Iustitia et Pax, 1982), 139.

[viii] Cf. H. Thomas, *op. cit.*, 1,14. i[ix] John Paul II, *Laborem exercens*, 2.
