

INTRODUCTION

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Since *Rerum novarum* (1891) the Catholic Church has seen the issue of work “at the very centre of the social question”! The magisterium has dealt with this issue in many ways. Through the articulation of principles and virtues it has developed a moral horizon which has moved the Church to advocate for a just wage as well as for specific rights related to work, including the natural right to association, the right to leisure, the right to safe and just working conditions and the right to participation at different levels of economic life.

The Church has continuously defended the rights of specific and often vulnerable groups in the economic system (poor, disabled, migrants, people who have no access to the levels of knowledge required for employment). Via the distinction between the direct and indirect employer, she has clarified the moral duties of policymakers and institutions. The Church has strongly affirmed the priority of labour over capital and has related the right to private property and the creation of wealth to the duty of contributing to the creation of useful goods and the distribution of wealth.

This rich moral framework has been deepened philosophically, anthropologically and theologically by John Paul II in his Encyclical *Laborem exercens* (1981). The key to his argument is the subjective dimension of work. John Paul II has seen that too often our objective triumphs and achievements, those discoveries, techniques and outcomes, which have increased the efficiency, productivity and profitability of work, can easily become forces that corrupt the human soul. Rather than being conquerors, we have been conquered – by our own objective achievements. Rather than developing us, work corrupts us, precisely because we have become inattentive to work’s subjective effect on our souls. He points out that the work of teachers, executives, technicians, carpenters and farmers is not only an activity that terminates in objects. Workers change not only the world, but also themselves. When people work, they not only make a choice about what they work on, that is, the objective dimension of work, but they also simultaneously make a choice about themselves. Work, then, is an essential expression of the person, an “*actus personae*”. In the words of John Paul II, “As a person, man is... the subject of work. As a person he works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfill his calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity”?

The Holy Father’s affirmation of “the pre-eminence of the subjective meaning of work over the objective one” was the point of departure and the focus of the Conference from which the essays of this book are taken, the aim of which was not repeating the existing doctrine but deepening and clarifying the implications of the subjective dimension in light of the great transformations since 1981.

The essays of this book were delivered at a Conference held in Rome and Vatican City celebrating the 20th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's Encyclical *Laborem exercens*. The Conference was held between September 12-14, 2001. In spite of the tragic events of September 11, more than 200 participants from over 33 countries participated in the Conference. From over 60 seminar papers, 15 have been selected for publication in this proceedings (the other papers can be acquired from the conference web site at <http://www.stthomas.edu/cathstudies/cst/mgmt/le/>). These essays are structured according to the four Conference topics mentioned below and published together with all the contributions of the plenary sessions. The essays do not necessarily express the views of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. The proceedings begin with a Message of the Holy Father to Conference participants; a Message given at the conclusion of the Conference.

The four themes of the conference were:

- (1) Exploring the theoretical implications of the “subjective dimension” and the meaning of work. What does this dimension mean in light of contemporary theology and philosophy, especially the theology of creation?
- (2) Analysing the great transformations in the world of work since *Laborem exercens* and discerning in what regard they have a positive or negative influence on the very condition of human work.
- (3) Exploring constructive responses and opportunities for more humane work today and in the future.
- (4) Discerning how collective actors contribute to the humanization of the world of work.

The idea to organize this Conference on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of *Laborem exercens* was first suggested by His Eminence Cardinal Francois-Xavier Nguyen Van Thuan to Michael Naughton (Director of the John A. Ryan Institute for Catholic Social Thought from the University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, USA). Michael Naughton was soon joined by Johan Verstraeten (Director of the Centre for Catholic Social Thought, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium) and Simona Beretta (Professor at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart, Milan, Italy) and together they started developing the program. Along with the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, the other organizers of the Conference invited high-ranking officials from the political and economic worlds as well as scholars from various areas, to examine the question of work from a multidisciplinary perspective.

1 Pope JOHN PAUL II, *Laborem exercens*, 2.

2 Ibid., 6.