

# Work as Key to the Social Question

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



## On The Anthropology of Laborem Exercens

---

by [Sergio Bernal, R.s.j.](#)  
Pontifical Gregorian University (Rome)

### Abstract

Traditional anthropology, especially that which is contained in the SDC is characterized by a certain individualism that is the result of its being produced in a social cultural context dominated by this ideological conception of the person. In order to understand man and woman we have to reflect upon their origins and their vocation which is that of caring for creation and transforming it through their activity.

The positive contribution of LE is its renewed anthropological approach based on a return to the original sources of inspiration. The new perception presents man and woman as persons that are active in a community, as someone that reaches full realization through his/her activity in a world marked by sin. We find the definition of man and woman, no longer in reference to reason, but to work, which does not mean denying that reason is precisely one of the constitutive elements of the person that make it possible to define his or her activity as work, in contrast with the activity of other creatures.

LE also contributes to a better understanding of the social dimension of the person. In this sense the previous perception is liberated from the sociological and utilitarian approach.

The relevance of *Redemptor Hominis* for the correct understanding of LE is also stressed. Only through the reflection of the mysteries of Creation, Incarnation and Redemption is it possible to fully grasp the meaning of men and women as acting persons and, more concretely, as subjects of work in the transformation of the world and of their own selves.

The renewed anthropology calls for a revision of social order, of the economic system of production and consumption, of the concept of private ownership of the means of production. In one work, of what it means to practically accept the priority of labor over

capital.

## Paper

Catholic social teaching is the point of intersection where the social sciences and anthropology meet. The Church derives her conception of work as a fundamental dimension of human life from human sciences: anthropology, paleontology, history, sociology and psychology. "But the source of the Church's conviction is above all the revealed word of God (LE 4) and this conception of man and woman offered by Revelation becomes for the Church the key for the interpretation of reality.

The correct understanding of LE, which is not an easy document if compared to other expressions of the Church's social teaching, requires a reference to the Pope's programmatic Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis*. The Pope describes in RH the mission of the Church as that of helping all men and women to "to find Christ, in order that Christ may walk with each person the path of life, with the power of the truth about man and the world that is contained in the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption and with the power of the love that is radiated by that truth" (RH, 13). And again, in LE, which offers us a good example of the way this mission is accomplished, the Pope repeats the same thought: "As I said in the Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis*, published at the beginning of my service in the See of Saint Peter in Rome, man 'is the primary and fundamental way for the Church (*Redemptor Hominis*, 14), precisely because of the inscrutable mystery of Redemption in Christ; and so it is necessary to return constantly to this way and to follow it ever anew in the various aspects in which it shows us all the wealth and at the same time all the toil of human existence on earth" (LE, 1).

It must be noted that the reference here is to real men and women in the fullness of the truth of their historical existence. In this sense we can discover a sort of "detour" from the traditional abstract metaphysical discourse, even though the Pope claims that he is in organic connection with the whole tradition but that he makes his reflections on work according to the indications of the Gospel (2). This is why this departure from tradition is rather in the sense of stressing certain aspects that made part of it but had been ignored or relegated to a position of lesser importance. In fact, Christianity contributed to the right understanding of work especially by the fact "that the one who, while being God, became like us in all things devoted most of the years of his life on earth to manual work at the carpenter's bench" (6). The discourse in the Encyclical is not about the "rational being", nor even about the abstract concept of person. We are dealing with each and every one of the billions of people that inhabit our planet today. Each one of them has a name and a history of his/her own.

The core of the question in the context of this presentation is that the mystery of man and woman can be understood only under the light of the mystery of the Incarnate Word. The proper conception of man and woman acquires a peculiar relevance under such light. The scope of this paper is not the elaboration of a theological anthropology that would lead to a

better understanding of the Man, Jesus Christ, but rather to try to grasp the mystery of the Incarnate Word in order to somehow understand the mystery of man and woman in a world dominated by the conception of the "homo faber", in the culture that shapes the process of globalization. Such analysis will contribute to the proper understanding of work.

John Paul's Magisterium contains a continuous reference to the great mysteries of Creation, Incarnation and Redemption. In these we see God at work. We contemplate his action from which we benefit. We could say that the center of the attention is the work of God that has shaped the human nature in such a way that it could not be understood without a reference to work. For the Pope, work is a "basic dimension of human existence: man's life is built up every day from work, from work it derives its specific dignity, but at the same time work contains the unceasing measure of human toil and suffering, and also of the harm and injustice which penetrate deeply into social life within individual nations and on the international level" (1).

This perception explains the importance of LE and its meaning within the context of evangelization. Today the proclamation of the Christian conception of man and woman is of paramount importance. The fact that man and woman no longer are the criterion that should inspire progress explains much of what is happening at all levels of human interaction in today's world. This is clear in the Pope's mind to the point that the proclamation of Christian anthropology occupies the core of his teaching ministry. For this reason it is only obvious that John Paul II has dedicated *Laborem Exercens* to human work "and even more, to man in the vast context of the reality of work" (1). Therefore LE is an Encyclical about man, more than simply a document on work even if it is seen under the light of the redemption operated by Jesus Christ.

### **The renewed anthropology**

The anthropological conception that has dominated the social teaching of the Church up to John Paul II, is characterized by a certain individualism, that can be explained in part by the fact that this teaching was produced in a social cultural context dominated by this ideological conception of the person. Again, the excessive emphasis on objective knowledge lead to consider creatures, work included, as objects of our perception thus placing the subjective nature of the person in a second place. If we add to these factors the apologetical approach that maintained social documents in a continuous confrontation with socialism and capitalism, we understand, at least to some extent, why the perception of the real man in the fullness of his/her subjectivity escaped Catholic social thinking. The perception of man and woman as pure objects of our knowledge together with the methodological process of abstraction lead to the elimination of the subjective aspects of human experience, which are the most important (cf. Buttiglione, 25-26).

What actually interests the Pope is not abstract reasoning but real men and women as perceived through their experience in life. It is not simply a matter of giving an abstract answer to the question: "Who is man? It is a matter of the whole of the dynamism of life and

civilization. It is a matter of the meaningfulness of the various initiatives of everyday life and also of the premises for many civilization programs, political programs, economic ones, social ones, state ones, and many others" (RH 16).

In an attempt to grasp the full meaning of human experience, considering work as a constitutive dimension of human existence, John Paul II goes back to the origins and uses Scripture as the source of his discourse on work thus discovering that the essence of work is not its material (objective) outcome but its subjective dimension, that is, the person that performs work as an expression of the vocation received from the Creator to continuously transform and perfect him/herself and creation through work.

This way of perceiving work does not mean that the traditional and obvious conception is completely disregarded. Sacred Scripture tells us that work will provide for our needs and will make us happy and prosperous (cfr. Psalm 128, 2). This conception, however, is enriched through the perception that the person needs "not only the daily bread by which his body keeps alive but also the bread of science and progress, civilization and culture" (LE, 1). Work is a process of production of things necessary for life. It demands great effort and toil and thus it is true that man eats the bread produced by the work of his hands but it is also true that he "eats his bread by the sweat of his face (Gen 3,19), that is to say, not only by personal effort and toil but also in the midst of many tensions, conflicts and crises, which, in relationship with the reality of work, disturb the life of individual societies and also of all humanity" (LE 1). It is precisely this reality that generates the concern of the Church and this is one more reason why the Encyclical is not dedicated only to work but, as we have seen, to "man in the vast context of the reality of work" (Ibid).

The great contribution of LE, thus, is its renewed anthropological approach based on the return to the original sources of inspiration. The implicit truth from which the whole discourse will assume its full meaning is that of a God who is at work and creates the world calling it into being by the word of his mouth. In this sense we have to admit that God's work is essentially different from human work although, with due respect to some biblical scholars, we can make an analogical use of the term "creation" when referring to the result of human activity. Man and woman are created by God after his own image, as subjects, and are entrusted with the mission of maintaining that creation and perfecting it in a way that differs from that of other creatures by the fact that only man and woman act responsibly and freely and, in a certain sense, creatively, inasmuch as they do not limit themselves to follow an instinctive behavior. But men and women not only transform the world around them. Through their work they perfect and actualize themselves.

Another positive contribution of LE to a better understanding of man and woman regards the social character of the person. The human person, as opposed to the vision that prevailed in previous documents, is not social because he/she needs others (sociological and utilitarian vision), but because one attains the plenitude of being, the fullness as subject, only through self-gift. This is the concept of work in LE: working with others and for others.

Thus we go back to the origins of the NT where the extreme expression of love is the gift of oneself to others. Love is the expression of man that "cannot live without love. He remains a

being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it" (RH 10). I think that here the Pope adds one more element to the subjective dimension of work. It is not only the fact that he or she who acts is a responsible (rational and free) agent, but it is one who needs and experiences love through interaction with other persons as well as through his/her endeavor to subdue the earth with others and for others.

It is precisely its social character that differentiates human work from that of other creatures. Cardinal Wysinski, whose thought has probably influenced that of the Pope, expresses this concept in a lucid way: "There is no work in the performance of which man can be shut up wholly in himself. In every type of human work there is a bond with some other work that has already been done – a connecting link in the work itself: work done before this binds together the past and the future. Whatever we take up in the course of our work, we see, enclosed in its complete form, the incarnated work of the past. The work which we add to the work already done, will itself be taken up by our successors, who will develop it, improve it, perhaps, and bring it one stage further. In the same way, a man at work now is linked with the man who worked before him and with the man who will come after him. There exists a sort of special 'communion of saints' in work and through work. This is the historical bond [...] in almost every work we try to find out its principal motives, the thought contained in it" (Wyszinski, 37). There is a remarkable resemblance in this paragraph with the language of John Paul II in LE when he speaks of working with others and for others (see 12).

The revealed word speaks of persons whose nature calls for communion not only with the Creator, but with others and so the renewed vision in LE presents man and woman as persons that are active in a community and attain their full realization through their activity in a world marked by sin. Precisely in this world, together with others, man and woman must manifest their value in sharing in God's dominion over creation, even experiencing the fatigue which is proper of human toil.

But there is more to it. Man and woman acquire consciousness of themselves only in the encounter with one another and through this encounter one grows in humanity. Work is, precisely, the meeting point and the privileged means for such encounter.

The conception of work as the "power" to dominate over the earth is already present in RH. This ability and vocation to subdue the earth should allow men and women to develop a harmonious relation with nature and among themselves. This power to dominate cannot be seen as permission to exploit, but rather to subdue with intelligence in order to attain progress or development, which is the purpose that the Creator intended in creating the world. Progress seen this way is wonderful and it is an expression of the greatness of man and woman as well as a reflex of the greatness of the Creator. Being the work of man and woman, progress should go parallel to the development of those conditions that will allow every single person to grow in humanity. In other words it should be accompanied by moral growth.

This vision of RH completes and perfects in depth that contained in previous teachings. Man and woman at work further the progress of creation and thus do become truly better "that is to say more mature spiritually, more aware of the dignity of his humanity, more responsible, more open to others, especially the neediest and the weakest, and readier to give and to aid all" (RE 15). Contributing to the progress of creation man and woman fulfill themselves and seen under this light, not as an abstract concept, they can be defined by their activity, by their work. "Thus work bears a particular mark of man and of humanity, the mark of a person operating within a community of persons and this mark decides its interior characteristics; in a sense it constitutes its very nature" (LE, Intr.). A complete vision of man and woman is offered, one that helps us grasp the fullness of their existence in their every day reality.

### **“Ens rationale” or “ens laborans”?**

As it has been stated, LE makes a great contribution to a better understanding of man and woman, correcting at the same time some "deviations" of the past. The concrete person, historical man and woman, are at the center of concern of the Church, they are "the way" of the Church. But it should not be forgotten that the author of the Encyclical is the same philosopher who discovered in his early years as a scholar, that human praxis contributes to a fuller understanding of the person. Therefore it is not surprising that we find the definition of man and woman, no longer in reference to reason, but to work, which does not mean denying that reason is precisely one of the constitutive elements of the person which makes it possible to define his or her activity as work, and offers another element to differentiate it from that of the other creatures. Reason, in fact, plays an important part. "Reason will guide man in undertaking the work by which he has to earn the indispensable means for the maintenance and preservation of life. As a result of this, everything by which man is served is prepared by work for direct use" (Wyszinski, 30). Therefore we do not claim that the “ens rationale” and the “ens laborans” are in open contradiction. Our claim is that Catholic traditional social thought, and perhaps a good deal of Moral theology, should be put to the test under the light of John Paul’s anthropological conception which, in turn, constitutes a good synthesis of tradition and modern thought. But above all, that metaphysically action has the priority over reason (see Fitte 256).

This conception finds its explanation from the return to the sources of Christian inspiration. The emphasis is not laid on a God whose science and intelligence stand above all creatures, but as a God at work who creates man and woman after his image and gives them the mandate to dominate the earth. "In carrying out this mandate, man, every human being, reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe" (LE 4) because he/she is a person "that is to say a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself, and with a tendency to self-realization" (6). Catholic theology, heavily influenced by Greek rationality and objectivity, privileged the image of the rational being instead of that of the working person. The Pope, albeit respecting profoundly Scholastic tradition, somehow breaks away from it following a line of thought that brings him much closer to a Marxian view of men and women in society recognizing the

paramount importance of human activity and its impact on shaping human relations and society as a whole.

One of the reasons for the relative weakness of Catholic thought as confronted with Marxism is the emphasis that the latter conferred to praxis, to history and to human work, while Catholic thought stressed the being, theory and ideals. Marxism seems to have offered better tools to render ideals reality. Marxism has thought of work as the force that transforms nature and thus doing transforms man himself (Cfr Buttiglione, 1982). There is a radical difference between Marxist thought and that of John Paul II. According to Marx nature transforms the worker whereas for the Pope it is not nature that transforms the person but rather the act of working itself that transforms man and woman.

However the way the Pope conceives work and the working person and that of Marx present some extraordinary resemblances. Baum says that Pope John Paul II follows in the direction indicated by Marx. "He does so because he believes that the understanding of man as worker corresponds to the letter and the spirit of Scriptures, especially the Book of Genesis. At the same time, the Pope significantly expands Marx's notion of labor and, moves far beyond a Marxist anthropology" (Baum, 13).

Marxism stressed class solidarity as the way to overcome the situation of alienation of the proletariat. The Pope insists on solidarity too, but he does not conclude to solidarity of class but to a type of solidarity that should comprehend all men and women without discriminations of any sort. The appeal to solidarity is based on a conception that is radically different from the Marxian anthropology. While the Marxist dialectic is based on conflict, according to John Paul II the full realization of the person can be accomplished only through self-gift. Furthermore, there is no room for discriminations of any sort because all men and women are the children of God and therefore brothers and sisters that should try to relate to each other as such.

This reality of the Christian follower of Jesus Christ finds a modern expression from the perspective of work: "Man must work out of regard for others, especially his own family, but also for the society he belongs to, the country of which he is a child, and the whole human family of which he is a member, since he is the heir to the work of generations and at the same time a sharer in building the future of those who will come after him in the succession of history. All this constitutes the moral obligation of work, understood in its wide sense" (LE 16).

As it has been stated from the beginning of this presentation, in order to understand John Paul's thought thoroughly various documents have to be considered. LE comes after the trilogy on the Trinity of which *Dives in Misericordia*, despite the fact that it is an Encyclical dedicated to the Father and, more concretely to His mercy, some thoughts contained in it have a decisive influence on LE. Naturally, what is already stated in *Gaudium et Spes* is the starting point of John Paul's social doctrine. The reference to the regard for others in work finds its deep foundation in the revelation of the Trinitarian communion of which human society should be a mirror image. Work constitutes a formidable instrument for the

construction of such communion among men and women.

The construction and liberation of society is and has been from the beginning a common task of the human kind. However it is not the task of one class in opposition to the other or to nature seen as an alien object. "It is by working together, constructing, organizing, planning, by jointly building the world that people are faithful to their subjectivity and thus actualize their true nature. For the encyclical, freedom is social and therefore ultimately indivisible. We cannot be free if others are still oppressed" (Baum, 20).

In the Old Testament work was regarded as the lot of mankind and as part of the divine ordering of the world. In no sense was manual labor degrading. The negative perception of work entered through the Greek tradition. "All through the Scriptures, work is regarded as a divine ordinance for human life, not as something that must be emphasized in terms of positive law, but as something given by way of what we today might perhaps speak of as 'natural law': man is so made that not only can he not satisfy his material needs without working but also he cannot satisfy his spiritual needs, or fulfill his functions as human being" (Richardson, 22). Man and woman were created as workers. Work is not explained in reference to sin, but rather to the Creator's original plan. Man and woman cannot be fully understood outside of their activity in the world, only a part of which is intellectual. Man and woman fulfill their mission and realize themselves fully through work.

All that we have said so far is synthesized by the Pope in a few lines: "And work means any activity by man, whether manual or intellectual, whatever its nature or circumstances; it means any human activity that can and must be recognized as work, in the midst of all the many activities of which man is capable and to which he is predisposed by his very nature, by virtue of humanity itself Man is made to be in the visible universe an image and likeness of God himself, and he is placed in it in order to subdue the earth. From the beginning therefore he is called to work. Work is one of the characteristics that distinguish man from the rest of creatures, whose activity for sustaining their lives cannot be called work. Only man is capable of work, and only man works, at the same time by work occupying his person operating within a community of persons. And this mark decides its interior characteristics; in a sense it constitutes its very nature" (LE intr.).

### **Some practical conclusions**

The renewed conception of work and of the working person leads necessarily to the conclusion of the absolute priority of labor over capital. In line with the commitment to reality and the respect for the subjectivity of the person some practical conclusions can be drawn.

1. If, as we have seen, the person cannot attain his/her completeness without work it is obvious on the one hand that we are dealing with the issue of human rights, of fundamental rights that flow from work and on the other hand that, whatever impedes the person to work is unethical, immoral. The person that cannot exercise his/her ability to work remains

mutilated, he/she is in a situation of alienation. Work is not just an opportunity among the many that society can offer. It is an obligation, a basic need, a fundamental human right whose satisfaction is demanded by the very nature of man and woman. “[i]t is respect for the objective rights of the worker - every kind of worker: manual or intellectual, industrial or agricultural, etc.- that must constitute *the adequate and fundamental criterion* for shaping the whole economy, both on the level of the individual society and State and within the whole of the world economic policy and of the systems of international relationships that derive from it” (15).

The economic system that dominates the process of globalization has as one of its present trends, that of growing unemployment. Such situation is “an evil which, when it reaches a certain level, can become a real social disaster” (18). And those levels are being reached even in those nations that lead the economy. Recent reports tell us that “[t]he hardest hit sectors were telecom, computers and electronics, which have slashed 358,375 jobs since January. Along with automotive and industrial goods, which severed 171,685 jobs since January, the five industries accounted for more than half of the total cutbacks [...] Last month companies announced plans to cut 205,975 jobs, pushing the 2001 total so far to nearly 1 million. This tops the previous job-cut record set in 1998” (New York’s *Daily News*, August 7, 2001 p.42).

An economy left absolutely to itself as the new ideology demands, can only render the situation of men and women capable of working increasingly desperate. It is then, not just a matter of developing benefits for the unemployed but one of rethinking the whole system allowing for some State policies to the defense of the weaker members of society. What the Pope stated twenty years ago acquires a new meaning and becomes a strong criticism to the ruling system: “In order to meet the danger of unemployment and to ensure employment for all, the agents defined here as “indirect employer” must make provision for *overall planning* with regard to the different kinds of work by which not only the economic life but also the cultural life of a given society is shaped; they must also give attention to organizing that work in a correct and rational way. In the final analysis this overall concern weighs on the shoulders of the State, but it cannot mean one sided centralization by the public authorities. Instead, what is in question is a just and rational *coordination*, within the framework of which the *initiative* of individuals, free groups and local work centers and complexes must be *safeguarded*, keeping in mind what has been said above with regard to the subject character of human labor. The fact of the mutual dependence of societies and States and the need to collaborate in various areas mean that, while preserving the sovereign rights of each society and State in the field of planning and organizing labor in its own society, action in this important area must also be taken in the dimension of *international collaboration* by means of the necessary treaties and agreements. Here too the criterion for these pacts and agreements must more and more be the criterion of human work considered as a fundamental right of all human beings, work which gives similar rights to all those who work, in such a way that the living standard of the workers in the different societies will *less and less show those disturbing differences* which are unjust and are apt to provoke even violent reactions” (18).

The trend that is becoming generalized, of considering unemployment an inevitable element

of the process of globalization, a minor and transient situation, cannot be accepted because it is intrinsically evil for it causes serious harm to people. It must be noted that among other reasons for not taking this issue seriously is the fact that the subjectivity of the person is ignored and thus unemployed men and women are seen statistically with an absolute ignorance of the human drama hidden behind cold numbers. This aspect of growing structural unemployment would require a deeper analysis, being a good example of the structures of sin which are the result of human interaction, but end up making people the victims of their own inventions.

2. The advancement of technology at the service of the economy has to be reversed and placed at the service of men and women. It is morally wrong to use technology as a means to reduce labor in order to lower the costs of production. Such trend becomes even more intolerable by the fact that the reduction of the cost of production will not benefit the consumer but will simply increase the already exorbitant returns of transnational corporations. "The progress in question must be made through man and for man and it must produce its fruit in man. A test of this progress will be the increasingly mature recognition of the purpose of work and increasingly universal respect for the rights inherent in work in conformity with the dignity of man, the subject of work" (18).

The Pope thinks that the equity of a system of production is measured by the way workers are paid. It must be accepted as a fact that, so far, no better way of compensating for human work has been found. "Hence, in every case, a just wage is the concrete means of *verifying the justice* of the whole socioeconomic system and, in any case, of checking that it is functioning justly. It is not the only means of checking, but it is a particularly important one and, in a sense, the key means" (19).

Not ignoring the difficulty in assessing the fair wages, the millions of men and women who have to live with wages that do not allow them to satisfy even the most elementary needs, constitute, again, a clear sign that the economic system needs a radical, structural transformation placing the human person at the center and as the parameter that should orient the organization of production at national and international levels.

3. However, the justice of the system is not measured only in strictly economic terms. Just wages are not enough to render a system morally acceptable. "But here it must be emphasized, in general terms, that the person who works desires *not only* due remuneration for his work; he also wishes that, within the production process, provision be made for him to be able to *know* that in his work, even on something that is owned in common, he is working *"for himself"*. [...] The Church's teaching has always expressed the strong and deep conviction that man's work concerns not only the economy but also, and especially, personal values (15).

There is much talk today about the progress of democracy throughout the world. However there seems to be a generalized consensus about the fact that participation regards only the political domain. Such approach disregards that essential dimension of the person that is work. How can a person become more human through work when he/she has to work under conditions that negatively affect him/her morally or physically? It is true that both workers

and employers are strongly conditioned by those circumstances that the Pope has rightly called the “indirect employer”. However it is becoming ever more evident that persons and unions are losing bargaining and decision power under the ruthless domination of the big corporations.

Serious consideration has to be given to this aspect of democracy. The present state of affairs is immoral for it denies persons their right to participate in decisions that affect them.

4. Closely related to the issue of democracy is that of the Unions. Great progress has taken place from the times when Leo XIII assessed the right of workers to associate, always in the context of confrontation with socialism thus softening the conflicting character of syndicates. John Paul II has to receive credit for his frankness in encouraging the Union Movement to struggle for justice, for the defense of the rights of the workers. It is startling to read in LE the praise of the struggles of workers in the nineteenth century. The Pope accepts the Unions as “associations for the purpose of defending the vital interests of those employed in the various professions” (20) and admits that they grew up from the struggle to protect the just rights of the workers. This struggle should be seen as a normal endeavor for the good of the working people, but not against a class, nor as an end in itself. However John Paul II has finally accepted conflict as a component that has always been present in the history of humanity.

Unions today are called to play a decisive role. However the process of globalization is bringing about a weakening of their bargaining power under the pressure of supra national powers that stand above politics and that are shaping all aspects of human life today. In this sense the political dimension of Unions is today more relevant than in the past and there should be a renewed commitment on the part of the Church to back a just struggle for justice especially considering the need to protect the rights of the immense numerical majority of people who have been silenced and thus become a political minority. What does the option for the poor mean at this practical level of commitment?

5. The thought of creating the conditions that will allow the person to realize that he/she works for him/herself, which does not mean giving into an individualistic and selfish approach, leads also to the issue of property as it has been traditionally presented in Catholic Social Teaching. Pope John Paul II has some quite strong pronouncements in his Encyclicals, much more radical than the usual statements of previous documents. The interesting part of it is that the Pope takes as his starting point the doctrine of Thomas Aquinas. Yet he reaches certain conclusions that go far beyond its traditional interpretation. In perfect logic with the personalist approach to work the conclusion at which we arrive is that “property is acquired first of all through work in order that it may serve work” (14) The traditional way of considering private property needs a serious rethinking under the light of the renewed anthropology and of the historical results of the present form of ownership of the means of production which completely ignores the good of the person at work." Isolating these means as a separate property in order to set it up in the form of «capital» in opposition to «labor»-and even to practice exploitation of labor-is contrary to the very nature of these means and their possession. They cannot be *possessed against labor*, they cannot even be *possessed for possession's sake*, because the only legitimate title to their

possession- whether in the form of private ownership or in the form of public or collective ownership-is *that they should serve labor*, and thus, by serving labor, that they should make possible the achievement of the first principle of this order, namely, the universal destination of goods and the right to common use of them” (Ibid.).

Radical changes are required in industry and in the enterprise in order to create the conditions that will allow every person to work on his/her own respecting the priority of the person, of work over capital. Not only: “From this point of view the position of «rigid» capitalism continues to remain unacceptable, namely the position that defends the exclusive right to private ownership of the means of production as an untouchable ‘dogma’ of economic life. The principle of respect for work demands that this right should undergo a constructive revision, both in theory and in practice” (Ibid.).

6. Finally, the renewed conception of the person at work constitutes a serious challenge to Moral Theologians to review some traditional concepts accepting the enlightenment that social sciences offer, well aware of the fact that “[t]hey could thus assist Christian social morality, which no doubt will see its field restricted when it comes to suggesting certain models of society, while its function of making a critical judgment and taking an overall view will be strengthened by its showing the relative character of the behavior and values presented by such and such a society as definitive and inherent in the very nature of man. These sciences are a condition at once indispensable and inadequate for a better discovery of what is human. They are a language which becomes more and more complex, yet one that deepens rather than solves the mystery of the heart of man; nor does it provide the complete and definitive answer to the desire which springs from his innermost being” (OA 40). Catholic Moral Theology must open itself to an open dialogue with Catholic Social Teaching as well, mostly now that the latter has been recognized as part of Moral Theology.

## References

Baum Gregory, *The Priority of Labor: A Commentary on Laborem Exercens Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II*. New York, Paulist Press, 1982.

Buttiglione Rocco, *L'uomo e il lavoro. Riflessioni sull'enciclica 'Laborem exercens'*. Bologna, CSEO Biblioteca, 1982.

Fitte Hernan, *Lavoro umano e redenzione. Riflessione teologica dalla Gaudium et spes alla Laborem exercens*. Roma, Armando Editore, 1996.

Richardson Alan, *The Biblical Doctrine of Work*. London, SCM Press, 1965.

Wyszynski Stefan card., *Work*. London, Scepter Publisher, 1960.