

## **WOMEN AND THE RECOVERY OF WORK: A REFLECTION ON LABOREM EXERCENS**

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This paper discusses some of the key themes in John Paul II's encyclical *On Human Work*.<sup>1</sup> I will begin with a bit of the historical context of the document, then expand upon what – to me – are his most important ideas and illuminate as best I can what I believe are the points of connection between our questions here and what the Holy Father says about work.

First, *Laborem Exercens*, was promulgated in 1991 to commemorate the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, "The Condition of Labor," written by Leo the 13<sup>th</sup> in 1891 in response to the challenges brought on by the Industrial Revolution. John Paul's encyclical is part of the tradition known as Catholic Social Thought (CST), which was formally inaugurated by Pope Leo and added to by virtually every Pope since.

CST is devoted to understanding and proposing solutions to what has been termed "the social question that is the question of how human persons can live together in community in justice and in peace, where right relationships exist among all persons and especially between labor and capital, not only within nations but throughout the world. More recently, the question has expanded to include the challenges of development and the global nature of economic life. Another and more simple way of putting it is found in one of the foundational documents of the 2<sup>nd</sup> VC, GS and referred to by John Paul in LE is the following: the solution to

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the social question must be sought in the direction of simply making life more human. This question is of particular significance to women. Of further significance for our purposes here, in *Laborem Exercens* John Paul argues that *the key to the social question is work itself*. If he is right, we may make the claim that the role of women in “making life more human” can only be understood by reflecting on the meaning of work.

### **I. Work is a fundamental dimension of human life on earth**

John Paul makes clear in the second chapter of *LE* that work is intimately connected to the meaning of human life itself. Because work is a fundamental dimension of human life, we have no choice but to view it as a vocation, wherever we are, whatever we are doing. It makes the choice of occupation one of the most important in any effort to live a full human life. Let’s see how he derives this conclusion.

John Paul once again returns to the first books of Genesis to consider the nature of human work. I think it can be said that in general, historically, we have thought of work as a burden we bear for original sin, that if Adam and Eve had not fallen we would likely still be laying around in lawn chairs eating grapes in the Garden of Eden. But the Holy Father points out that the call to work comes before the fall, when human beings existed in their natural state of justice. And though it became more toilsome because of the fall, and though man, who should have been the master steward of creation, instead is now required to fight with it in a sense, work must be thought of as a fundamental dimension of human life on earth. We are ordered toward work in our very make-up.

Let’s pause for a moment to consider the implications of this. We are made in the image and likeness of the God who creates. And in working we reflect that aspect of the God who created us in his image; JP tells us that “in carrying out the mandate to subdue the earth,

every human being reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe.”(12) Through their work, both men and women become more and more the master of the earth while remaining within the Creator’s original ordering. And perhaps more to the point, if work is a fundamental dimension of human existence, and if as John Paul points out in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, the woman is another “I” in a common humanity who is to help “subdue the earth” (24), then to deny anyone the opportunity to work is an abridgement not only of a right guaranteed by a political or legal process. It is far worse than this. For it represents an assault on their very humanity.

So when feminists of all persuasions agree that women have not been free to find fulfillment in public activity, there is much more at stake than political freedom. At its root is the freedom of the person, as Noble Laureate Economist, Amartya Sen puts it in an admittedly somewhat different context, to choose a life that has meaning for him or for her. This is our fundamental hope here is it not? The freedom to choose a life that has meaning? Perhaps. But we cannot forget that freedom does not exist apart from relationship and that we deny something just as fundamental if we attempt to marginalize the place of motherhood.

Before moving on, it is worth noting at this point that just as we imitate God in our working, we must also imitate him in our resting. Women and men appear to be for the most part, equally driven in their efforts to subdue the earth so to speak by working 80+ hour work weeks and sacrificing leisure and family to the demands of their professions. Yet, this is certainly contrary to the divine plan and makes virtually impossible a penetration of reality, a deeper understanding of ourselves, and sustained contact with the question of meaning. Authentic leisure is where I rest in the Lord and allow his grace to permeate my intelligence and will, preparing me to face anew the demands of my life not only with renewed vigor but with the insights that enable me to live it as a person.

## **II. A Fundamental Distinction: the objective and subjective dimensions of work.**

By this account, work is both a transitive and an intransitive activity, that is a process that begins in the human subject, though directed toward an external object. The objective dimension is that which refers to the external activity and results of work. The subjective dimension refers to the person. And the important relationship that exists between the person and her work consists in the fact that through any kind of work the person is changed. The objective form work takes and the way it is created not only has external results, but also affects the being of the person. And, the claim is that this is a process that is universal, embracing every person, every generation, every phase of economic and cultural development, while simultaneously taking place within each human being, in each conscious human subject. This subject is powerfully described by JP II as made in the image of God, a person, i.e. "a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself and with a tendency to self-realization."

His point is this, that independent of the objective content of any work process, work must serve to realize the humanity of the person performing the work, to fulfill the calling to be a person that is hers by reason of her very humanity. Let us pause here again and consider the implications of this proposal. This means, says JP II that the basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done, but the fact that the one doing it is a person. *The sources of the dignity of work are to be sought primarily in the subjective dimension, not in the objective one.* This does away with the differentiation of people into classes according to the kind of work done. This does NOT mean we cannot rate or qualify work; it DOES mean we must remember that the primary basis of the value of work is man himself, who is its subject.

The point here is that our deliberations must ultimately be inclusive of all forms of work, whether that be in a restaurant, a factory, an office or university, or in the home. To think even

more comprehensively for a moment – we cannot fall into the same trap that the mainstream feminist movement is now accused of – of forgetting that the vast majority of women on the planet are not white, are not middle-class, educated professional women, and do not share the same concerns. A personalist or a Catholic feminism or whatever we call it must be addressed to the universal community, must consider all women in making its claims and offering its insights. That is our mission here, it seems to me. In terms of John Paul’s suggestion that work is the key to the social question – we can certainly say that everyone works and by this account, work must be designed or include the elements that allow for the fulfillment of the humanity of the person doing it. If it isn’t then that person’s full potential is stunted, is truncated, is forgotten.

The unfortunate truth according to JP II is that our civilization gives prime importance to the objective dimension of work. We can all think of evidence of this fact: consider the value placed on work inside the home, the work of secretaries, garbage collectors, bus drivers. Yet without people willing to do these sorts of jobs and do them well, children would go without lunch, dinners would not be prepared, appointments would never be scheduled or remembered, we would be awash in trash, and many of us would never get where we were going. In many cases, the human person is treated merely as an instrument of production; the subjective dimension of work, the worker, is forgotten. And as we have said certainly again and again, the human person is created for his own sake; he cannot be used as a means, ever, if we are to operate justly, if we are to gradually make life more human. The primary basis of the value of work is man himself, who is its subject. Work is for man, not man for work.

### **III. There is a deep connection between work and personal dignity.**

As I stated earlier, the Holy Father argues that sin did not destroy or cancel our covenant to subdue the earth, though it made our work more toilsome. And toil is known to all, both manual workers and those at the “intellectual workbench.” Work is a universal calling and known to everyone because it is universally experienced. But this is a good thing. *Work is a good thing for man because through it man “achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed in a sense becomes “more a human being.” (LE, #9)*

And now we are ready to consider the word “vocation,” for here is the nub of our question. I would argue that in the largest sense our vocation is to become completely who we are, or more precisely the person God had in mind when he created each one of us. We are called to become fully human and all that that implies; it includes the primary and secondary vocations spoken of on Monday, including both the natural and the supernatural levels, so to speak. It applies equally to all persons, male and female, of whatever race or ethnicity, of whatever state in life, whatever our starting place.

And if we take JPII seriously on this point, that through our work we become “more a human being” then our work is the locus of our becoming and our inner posture toward it will determine to what extent we are engaged in a process of conversion, as Bernard Lonergan says, that is not only religious but is intellectual and moral as well. In fact, leaping ahead a bit in the document, the Pope concludes for reasons we will touch on in a moment, that work enters into the process of salvation on a par with the other aspects of that process. Work is tied to my salvation because it is, in part, through work that I become who I am meant to be. But we will return to this theme.

There is a line of reasoning said to be a part of natural law theory that I cannot yet attribute to anyone but I heard it here from a visiting philosopher so that is good enough for me and it goes like this. When we are born, we are born already in debt to our Creator because of

the gift of life he has given us. He made us with something specific in mind and we are obliged therefore to fulfill ourselves, to become fully ourselves, in order to satisfy our debt to him. Because of that we have certain rights, not in the legal sense, but somehow in the natural sense. We have the right to actualize ourselves because we are obliged to do it. And the Holy Father is pointing to work itself as the means for this fulfillment. We become who we are through the work that we do. Therefore, we must choose our work carefully if we are to become that person we were meant to be.

Imagine the enormity of the crime perpetrated on women, or for that matter, persons of color, and others throughout history by social structures that have prevented them from fulfilling their obligation to their creator. Imagine the devastation writ by chronic unemployment or in countries where mothers and fathers are unable to provide for their children. If work is a fundamental dimension of human existence to the extent that it actually characterizes who we are as human qua human and further, if it is at least in part, through the work that I do that I become who I am meant to be, and if work is actually an aspect of my salvation, then this historical problem is not just a mere sociological phenomenon, an unfortunate mistake. It is contrary to human life itself.

#### **IV. Work enters into the process of salvation.**

John Paul II reminds us here that work in the subjective sense is always a personal action and therefore the whole person – body and spirit – participates in it, whether manual or intellectual work. Therefore the whole person is engaged and all that she is or will be is implicated in that process. Thus, he argues, work enters into the process of salvation, on a par with the other ordinary aspects of this process, since it requires an inner effort on the part of the person, which must be guided by faith, hope and charity. Critical in this regard is the fact that through our

work we share in the activity of the creator and extend it. Awareness of this reality should permeate all of our daily activities. We imitate Christ, who was a worker himself, and whose Gospel refers frequently to work of various kinds.

In working, it is possible to join ourselves to the Cross of Christ, by carrying our own cross in the activity we are called to perform every day.

Finally, I need to offer a few remarks on women and the recovery of work: First, the recovery project has everything to do with grasping the significance of the subjective dimension of work and of seeing work for what it is – a way of personal becoming on both a natural and supernatural level. It means recovering an understanding of leisure and the place it has in the rhythm of daily life. It means pursuing – not balance between competing priorities so much as integration of my whole self so that I am not living in compartments, i.e., Church on Sunday, work on Monday and never the twain shall meet. It means practicing the presence of God in front of my computer or while in a meeting. It means that I keep constantly before me the reality that in the Eucharist what is offered up along with Christ's sacrifice is the work of human hands – *my work* – and it must be worthy of the moment.

What role do women play in this recovery project? While I know we have not proven it to everyone's satisfaction, I am by nature and to some extent by training, a phenomenologist. And I will say that my observations in the workplace as well as in relationships have led me to conclude that there are differences between men and women that must be understood, acknowledged, and appreciated. Women are desperately needed in every arena of public life, except maybe I hope, professional football – to bring their unique gifts - however those cash out - to bear on the questions we face as a culture and as a civilization. Though I am anxious too to put this theory to the test by conceiving of the proper philosophical categories, I do not believe that it serves us to quibble about this over long. Or at least, let's get going while they get

worked out. As Ann told us the other day – it is time to get busy. To be who we are, unapologetically yet lovingly. For it is the human person that is getting forgotten in all of this and as JP says in *Mulieris Dignitatem*:

The moral and spiritual strength of a woman is joined to her awareness that *God entrusts the human being to her in a special way...A woman is strong because of her awareness of this entrusting*, strong because of the fact that God “entrusts the human being to her,” always and in every way, even in the situations of social discrimination in which she may find herself. This awareness and this fundamental vocation speak to women of the dignity which they receive from God himself, and this makes them “strong” and strengthens their vocation. Thus the “perfect woman” (cf. Prov 31:10) becomes an irreplaceable support and source of spiritual strength for other people, who perceive the great energies of her spirit. These “perfect women” are owed much by their families, and sometimes by whole nations. (#30)

I also wish to add that women are increasingly in danger of acquiring habits that go against not only her nature but human nature as well. The greed with which we acquire material goods, the greed with which we pursue our career goals and professional recognition, the greed with which we attempt to take in everything, to do everything, to be everything. These are not the qualities that make anyone human. Whether or not we are designed by God to do this because “only we can” doesn’t matter. If we see it must be done we must do it. And in this regard I would like to conclude with a short passage from noted theologian Karl Rahner. This is a passage from a little essay called: “Self- Realization and Taking Up One’s Cross.”

Today one sometimes has the impression that people very often become unhappy because they want to be happy at any price. They are suffering from frustration anxiety: they think they might miss something, that something might escape them before they have to go; and at the same time they know that very soon they *must* go and that there is not much time left in which anything can happen to bring happiness. That is why they think that the most important things is to take care not to let anything slip past them. But in reality this fear of not having consumed everything spread out on the table of life means that nothing is enjoyed: everything is merely “crammed” in, the digestion is spoilt. In the last analysis everything has escaped one after all, and nothing is really experienced because one wanted to experience *everything*.

I would suggest that at the bottom of all this greed is really a misplaced thirst for being, for becoming. If we could look at our work like this, if we could help others to see its transcendent meaning, perhaps the solution to the social question is within our reach.