



Catholic Social Thought and Workers

The rights and duties of workers are woven throughout modern Catholic doctrine. In *Rerum Novarum*¹ (1891), Pope Leo XIII built upon the concepts of human dignity and that work is not just a market commodity, in order to articulate specific workers' rights. These include: freedom to receive and spend wages [9]²; integrity of family life, including support of children [19-20]; and wages sufficient to support "thrifty and upright" workers and, by implication, their families [63]. Leo also enunciated the right to form workers' associations (unions) and to strike [69-72].

Leo underscored rights to reasonable hours, rest periods, health safeguards, safe working conditions, and special provisions for women and children [59, 60, and 64]; freedom to attend to religious obligations [31]; and not to work on Sundays or Holy Days [58]. Workers also must work well and conscientiously, not injure employers or their property, refrain from violence, and be thrifty and prudent [30 and 65].

As it closed in 1965, Vatican II underscored the dignity in human labor, as it both supports workers and families and is a way in which humans "are a partner in bringing God's creation to fruition" and are "associated with the redemptive work itself of Jesus Christ, who conferred an eminent dignity on labor when at Nazareth He worked with His own hands."³ The council confirmed a "family wage" in these words:

Finally, payment for labor must be such as to furnish a man with the means to cultivate his own material, social, cultural, and spiritual life worthily, and that of his dependents.⁴

In 1981, Saint John Paul II in *Laborem Exercens*⁵ focused again on workers. His theme was work: "the essential key, to the whole social question" [3]⁶. John Paul argued that through the *Genesis* work-mandate "to subdue the earth," humans image their Creator and share God's creative action. This makes people the "subjects of work," and labor is neither a tool in the productive process nor a commodity. All other facets of the economic system belong to the "objective" order and are intended to serve humanity and our calling to be persons [6].

The pontiff clarified many rights drawn from Catholic teaching. First was "suitable employment for all who are capable of it," and, when unavailable, provision of unemployment benefits by employers or, upon their failure, the state [18]. Just remuneration for work by a head of family must "suffice for establishing and properly maintaining a family and for providing security for its future" [19]. This means a family wage or other measures such as family allowances for child-raising parents.

John Paul insisted that there must be no age or gender discrimination. Benefits must include health care, coverage of work accidents, inexpensive or free medical assistance for workers and families, old age pensions and insurance, and appropriate vacations and holidays [19]. Trade and professional unions retain the right to organize, act politically, and to strike "within just limits" [20]. The pope affirmed the dignity of agricultural labor [21], rights of disabled persons to appropriate training and work [22], and the right to emigrate to find work [23].

Three decades later in *Caritas in Veritate*,⁷ Pope Benedict underscored workers' centrality in the economy: "...the primary capital to be safeguarded and valued is man, the human person in his or her integrity..." [25]⁸ Further, work must be freely chosen, workers respected without discrimination, workers' organizations (unions) allowed, and child labor prohibited. Work must allow family needs (including education) to be met, provide "enough room" for personal and spiritual development, and guarantee a decent retirement [63].

ENDNOTES

- 1 Pope Leo XIII. (1891) *Rerum Novarum: On the Condition of Labor*, 1891.
- 2 Numbers in brackets refer to paragraphs in *Rerum Novarum*.
- 3 Vatican Council II. (1965) *Gaudium et Spes: The Church in the Modern World*, 67.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Pope John Paul II. (1981) *Laborem Exercens: On Human Work*.
- 6 Numbers in brackets refer to paragraphs in *Laborem Exercens*.
- 7 Pope Benedict. (2009) *Caritas in Veritate: Charity in Truth*.
- 8 Numbers in brackets refer to paragraphs in *Caritas in Veritate*.