

CHURCH RELATED TEXTS ON LABOUR – WORK IN PROGRESS

A *Caritas in Veritate* Foundation Report by

PAUL H. DEMBINSKI

University of Fribourg, Observatoire de la Finance

Christian Social Teaching is dynamic by definition because it has to keep up to date with the changing socio-economic context of daily life of humanity. Thus the methodological challenge facing Christian Social Teaching is to preserve the dialogue between the doctrinal component—deduced from the Revelation—and the practical component derived from real contemporary situations. In the terms of Pope Francis, this dialogue would be a discernment. It requires not only excellent theology but also the deepest possible knowledge and precise understanding of real situations, as well as a life animated by the Spirit of Christ. The ultimate *raison d'être* of Christian Social Teaching is to inspire the action of men and woman of good will actively aiming at transforming these real-life situations and contributing by doing so to the common good and the respect for human dignity. These two components—the doctrinal and the applied—are in constant dialogue and are cross-fertilising each other. This is why Christian Social Teaching always emerges at the juncture of work of theologians, of specialists and of Christians and their communities those with firsthand knowledge of reality. The Catholic Church carries this above-mentioned effort in a very structured way under the name of Catholic Social Teaching (CST).

The XXI century carries new challenges for the human family because of fundamental changes in the labour sector. This requires in-depth reconsideration of what – in present times - labour is and what it means for the economy, society, policy-making, individual and collective decision-makers and the human being in general. This is the reason why CST is trying to address these new challenges, which have been deeply analysed in the first section of this publication, such as, among others, youth disoccupation, and more precisely, youth unemployment, international migration, and the use of new technologies. It does this by using a double lens: on the one hand, the social science lens, and on the other hand the doctrinal approach rooted in faith, with the objective to propose a coherent reading and identify avenues for transformative actions by people of good will. This is why CST is always a “work in progress”.

As an example, in front of the risk of a wave of automatisisation (in developing countries) and digitalisation (in developed countries) that could eradicate thousands of jobs, the Church reminds firmly the centrality of every human person requires that we prioritise people over technology, because the latter is a product of human action. The core message is that technology, but more broadly the economic activity, has to be put at the service of the common good.

The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church states that “work represents a fundamental dimension of human existence as participation not only in the act of creation but also in the act of redemption.”¹ This theological definition is the core of the CST message on work. Every person who contributes to creation (its continuation, transformation, and preservation) or to redemption already accomplished once for all in Christ (and to be fully realised in each and every human being) is doing work. Such actions imply efforts, and in most cases, also intentions, joys and sufferings, consolations, and desolations. In other words, from a CST perspective, humans work not only when they are formally, legally, or economically “at work,” but also every time they do something that contributes to creation or redemption. With such an agenda, CST embraces much more of human life than what social sciences—specifically economics—define as work.

This extensive definition of work derived from a theological perspective is only covered partly in the subsequent selection of Church documents which focus mainly on paid, also because of historic reasons.

Modern CST was born in times of the Industrial Revolution to address the “new things” (*Rerum Novarum* is the title of the first CST document of modern times) of the mid-XIX century, specifically the mounting confrontation between labour and capital around the so-called “social question,” in French, more explicitly, “*la question ouvrière*”. Thanks to the appropriate actions of many people of good will, frontal conflict between labour and capital has been avoided and the tension has been domesticated under the heading and institutional mechanisms for the management of “industrial relations.” Indeed, until the last decades of the XX century, according to the mainstream view, the future of work was expected to be the extension of a classic employment contract to all across the globe. Naturally, this view appears clearly as the socio-economic background of the Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens* (1983).

At that time, however, what Jean Fourastié once called “*les Trente Glorieuses*” were over. English literature refers to the same period (1945-1974) as the “Golden Years of Capitalism”. However, the oil crises of the 70s, has progressively put an end to the period of full employment in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, to economic growth and to rising standards of living. In the late 1970s, Western economies started to give a growing importance to financial techniques and financial logic in the organisation of economic

life. This resulted in greater flexibility and focus on short-term efficiency gains rather than long-term planning. Only recently, the three decades between the mid-1970s and 2007 – the year of financial crisis – have been called “the thirty years of financial euphoria”.

Fragmentation of the classical labour landscape is the key characteristic of the last 30 years. Also, the intellectual framework needed time to adapt to these “new things,” which the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church outlines as trends for the future.² Nowadays, the Church takes stock of these changes and addresses some of the issues related to non-traditional forms of work, such as entrepreneurship and business development (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church³, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987), and *Centesimus Annus* (1991)). This emphasis on the relation between human dignity and economic initiative in the field of enterprise creation comes in CST as a response to the real-life blossoming of micro-enterprises in consequence of fragmentation, digitalisation and subsequent rescaling of traditional industrial mega-enterprises.

This being said, if we keep in mind the CST core definition of work as any activity contributing to creation or redemption, much remains to be covered and addressed by CST despite the fact that, in *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John-Paul II has shown that any work has two complementary and simultaneous aspects: the objective one and the subjective one. The objective one relates to the activity preformed seen through the lens of its effects on the real world. The objective dimension of work related to creation is visible in the realm of physical and socio-economic reality. *Laudato Si'* provides new insights into the objective dimension of work, making explicit that the care and safeguarding of the environment is part of creative activity. As stated by Pope Francis “as Christians, we are also called to accept the world as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbours on a global scale. It is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God’s creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet”.⁴

The subjective dimension of work is related to the internal transformation that the working person is undergoing while working. Those who are fully spiritually committed to make their work contribute to the common good are granted with the fullness of subjective dimension, which belongs on the road to redemption.

It follows from this that as the subjective dimension of work relates to the disposition of the heart, it is potentially present in any human activity. However, CST still predominantly addresses situations where work in economic sense takes place, i.e. where its objective dimension is visible. Three aspects of contemporary “new things” suggest that this perspective is possibly too narrow and should – in the future – be extended.

First—the “shadow work.” This concept encompasses all the activities required from the worker to perform work and to be able to transform the

wage into his subsistence. Shadow work covers commuting time, purchasing time, and the like. These activities absorb an important proportion of time and effort of workers. They are not directly remunerated—and could even have negative environmental effects—but are the necessary complements of paid work. Firsthand experience in urban environments shows that this shadow work takes rising portion of daily time. It is worth debating if CST should acknowledge that these activities carry also an objective dimension.

The second is the work—and its importance for society and the economy—that is performed within the family economy (e.g., caring, educating, maintaining, expanding premises, voluntary work) which are outside of the so-called “labour market.” This work which amounts – at macro level - to many more hours than the paid work has been largely neglected by both sociologists and economists and is also left outside of what CST sees as being the objective dimension of work. This work takes place in a genuinely relational, non-monetary, and inter-generational context. In most cases, it generates a wide spectrum of positive human externalities, as in care and in education. The importance of these activities from a societal perspective should not be underestimated.

The third issue is the productive activity in rural areas of the developing world which, from a statistical perspective, prevails in many of the poorest countries. The level of living depends heavily on market prices for agricultural commodities and, in open markets, on competition from industrial agriculture. Many of these commodities are transformed by complex global value chains before ending up on the shelves of supermarkets. In consequence, the primary growers receive only a tiny fraction of the total bill paid by the end consumer. Pressure on small growers mounts, as prices do not allow families to survive. Migration to cities is the direct consequence of such price trends. While the objective dimension of work is undoubtedly present, the employment relation is ambiguous. Here, what CST calls in other contexts “indirect employers” are anonymous world commodity markets. The role of such “faceless systems” in structuring the objective dimension of work should in the not-too-distant future be addressed by CST, not only in its doctrinal component but also in its applied one.

CST is developing a dynamic response, echoing the “new things.” The documents reproduced here are thus to be seen as steps in a permanent “work in progress” of those who tirelessly observe the ever-changing condition of life of humanity and aspire to pave the way for the upcoming Civilisation of Love.

NOTES

1. The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, paragraph 263
2. *Ibid.*, paragraph 331 ff; published in 2004
3. *Ibid.*, paragraph 336-337
4. Pope Francis (2015), Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si'*, paragraph 18