

# ACSJJC SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION GUIDE: *Laborem Exercens (On Human Work)*

The 1980s in Australia, as in other industrialised nations, were years of rapid economic and industrial change. They were characterised by the combined impact of economic recessions, heralded by the oil crises of the 1970s, the decline and restructuring of manufacturing and agriculture, the increased automation of production, the globalisation of local markets and rise of the multinationals.

Those most affected were workers whose skills were replaced by technology and those in urban and rural communities reliant on traditional industries hit by international competition and with limited alternative employment.

In this context of change, regarded by many as being no less challenging than those of the industrial revolution, Pope John Paul II issued the encyclical *Laborem Exercens* in 1981.

## The priority of labour over capital

Central to any response to new demands of the modern economy must be a respect for the dignity of the worker. The Pope noted how Jesus spent most of his earthly life working at the carpenter's bench:

*This circumstance constitutes in itself the most eloquent 'Gospel of work', showing 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 who is doing it is a person. (# 6)*

While the materials and processes of production are the objects of work, the worker is the subject and is owed a greater importance. The dignity of the worker highlights the 'very ethical nature of work'. The Pope emphasised that this must be the case for every worker – even those in jobs that society considers 'the merest "service", as the most monotonous even the most alienating work'.

He warned of the re-emergence of a very narrow economic valuation of work:

*... the danger of treating work as a special kind of 'merchandise', or as an impersonal 'force' needed for production (the expression 'workforce' is in fact in common use) always exists, especially when the whole way of looking at the question of economics is marked by the premises of materialistic economism. (# 7)*

The Pope warned of a 'reversal of order', where human labour is given the same value as any factor of production or, worse, made secondary or inferior to material things. He said that this error of early capitalism – addressed when Leo XIII issued *Rerum Novarum* in 1891 – can be repeated wherever there is rapid economic change driven by a 'onesidedly materialistic civilisation'. (# 7, 13)

He identified the casualties of what he referred to as 'materialistic economism':

*And the 'poor' appear under various forms; they appear in various places and at various times; in many cases they appear as a result of the violation of the dignity of human work: either because the opportunities for work are limited as a result of the scourge of unemployment, or because a low value is put on work and the rights that flow from it, especially the right to a just wage and to the personal security of the worker and his or her family. (# 8)*

He called for solidarity with workers wherever they are degraded or exploited, and a concern as well for their families and communities subject to poverty and even hunger.

## Work – key to the whole social question

Work has significance at a number of levels: in terms of applying human skill and achieving personal fulfilment; in providing the means to start a family and to raise and educate children; and to contribute to the life and the common good of broader society (# 9, 10). The negative consequences are obvious at all levels of society where work is exploitative, devalued or denied.

Pope John Paul II highlighted the central message of this encyclical:



... that work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question, if we try to see that question really from the point of view of man's good. And if the solution ... must be sought in the direction of 'making life more human', then the key, namely human work, acquires fundamental and decisive importance. (# 3)

He also spoke of the importance of just wages and adequate conditions:

... wages, that is to say remuneration for work, are still a practical means whereby the vast majority of people can have access to those goods which are intended for common use ... 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. (# 19)

In addition to this concern for the common good, the Pope expressed a special concern, a 'preferential option', for unemployed people, young people, impoverished agricultural workers, people with disabilities and immigrant workers – and highlighted the special assistance that should be provided (# 18, 19, 21–23).

## The state as 'indirect employer'

The emerging economic program of neo-liberalism espoused free markets, unhindered competition, non-intervention on the part of government, and the withdrawal of protections and benefits. Pope John Paul, however, spoke of the role of all agents of economic policy, principally the state, as being the 'indirect employer' and having the responsibility to address imbalances in the distribution of wealth, employment and social welfare.

The indirect employer has responsibility 'to meet the danger of unemployment and to ensure employment for all' through 'overall planning with regard to the different types of work by which not only the economic life but also the cultural life of a given society is shaped.' (# 18)

Particular responsibilities include:

- conducting a just labour policy in the context of the broader operation of the economy
- finding suitable employment for all who are capable of it
- acting against unemployment in order to avert individual and social disaster
- providing unemployment benefits for the subsistence of unemployed workers and their families
- operating a suitable system of instruction and education for labour market participation
- coordinating employment, wages, infrastructure and industry policies to ensure a healthy balance of employment in communities. (# 17–19)

The Pope reaffirmed the vital importance of work to the life of the community and emphasised how 'these new conditions and demands will require a reordering and adjustment of the structures of the modern economy and of the distribution of work' (# 1).

## For reflection and discussion

Consider your own experience of work. How has it enhanced your dignity as an individual, a worker and member of society? Are there circumstances where your dignity has been undermined?

Discuss how work is a key to building a just, inclusive society.

Identify some of the most vulnerable regions and communities in Australia? What role can you see for the 'indirect employer' in supporting these communities?

## Documents

The encyclical *Laborem Exercens* can be found at:

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091981\\_laborem-exercens\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens_en.html)

Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission, 1999, *Regional Unemployment and the Indirect Employer: Beyond the principle of self-reliance*, COMMONWeath Vol.7 No.2: [http://www.catholicsocialservices.org.au/publications/COMMON\\_Wealth/2of7](http://www.catholicsocialservices.org.au/publications/COMMON_Wealth/2of7)