

Industrial Relations Now

Pastoral Statement for the Feast of St Joseph the Worker, 1998

At the centre of the Christian story is Jesus Christ, a working man from Nazareth, the son of Joseph the carpenter. On the first of May the Church celebrates the feast of St Joseph the Worker. It is a good time for us to recall the teaching of the Church about the nature and dignity of work, about the rights and duties of workers and employers, and about the role of trade unions, governments, and industrial relations processes and institutions.

Work is the key to building a just society.¹ This is why teachings about work and the rights and duties of workers and employers have been central to the teaching of the Church about social justice.

Work is important for many reasons. It is our right and our vocation, it is a way in which we express ourselves and grow as persons. It is a way in which we come into relationship with others and contribute to the common good. And it is how most of us have access to the necessities of life.²

Workers, employers and governments all have different roles to play in the world of work. Their rights and duties are interconnected, and all have a part to play in the resolution of industrial disputes.

The nature and dignity of work

Work is a vocation

We are all called to work. It is part of our vocation as Christians to participate with God in the ongoing act of creation.³

Work should not be defined or valued by whether or not one is paid for one's efforts. Those who without pay care for children, the elderly or the infirm, those who are volunteers in all kinds of community activities, are workers too. This often unpaid work is of great importance to our society, and it is frequently done by women who do not necessarily see themselves (and are unfortunately often not seen by others) as workers.⁴

People need to work, not just to earn money for the necessities of life, but also to fulfil their calling to share in the creative activity of God.⁵

Work is to serve people

People are central to the Church's teaching about work. They are not just instruments, or providers of labour, they are important in themselves. They are always more important than things. This is why John Paul II and previous Popes talk about the dignity of work and the priority of labour over capital.⁶

Work should be for the benefit of people rather than people being at the service of work.⁷ Work and employment opportunities should be structured around human needs, and the whole economy should be harnessed to the service of the human person.⁸ Work should be organised so that it provides opportunities for self expression and growth rather than being mindless, soul-destroying drudgery. It should support rather than hinder family life. To put 'the needs of the economy' before people is fundamentally to confuse means and ends.

Work is for the whole community

Work is not just a private matter for individuals. We work not only for our own benefit but also for our families and communities. Our work is a way of making a contribution to society.⁹

Our work brings us into relationship with other people. Our relationships with colleagues, supervisors or subordinates, and employers or employees make a big difference to our lives and to the life of our society. Problems of industrial relations and unemployment are not private, individual matters, they concern the whole community.

This is what John Paul II means when he speaks of work being communal.¹⁰

Work provides necessities

We earn our bread by the sweat of our brows. In a non-subsistence economy like ours it is critically important that just wages be paid.¹¹ From the dawn of the industrial era the Church has recognised the importance of just wages to ensure that everyone has access to the goods of the earth that were intended by God for the use of all.¹² In more recent years the Church has also recognised the important place of the 'social wage' in ensuring that everyone is adequately provided for.¹³

Australia is a great country because working people like yourselves go about their tasks day after day with both cheerfulness and seriousness, earning their bread by the sweat of their brow

*producing goods and services for their fellow citizens, and thus gradually bringing to perfection a world that was created by a good and loving God.*¹⁴

The roles of workers, employers and governments

Rights and duties of workers

The Church teaches that we have a right and a duty to work, and that workers have a right to a just wage, safe conditions of work and adequate time for rest, recreation, family life and religious observance.¹⁵ Workers have the right to form and to join, or not to join, trade unions. Since 1891 the Church has clearly stated that collective action is needed to give most workers some hope of bargaining with employers on an even footing.¹⁶ Workers have the right to strike, but should only do so as a last resort in grave circumstances.¹⁷

Workers have a duty to provide a fair day's work for a fair day's pay, and to respect the person and property of their employer. They should comply with all reasonable instructions.¹⁸

Rights and duties of employers

Employers have a right to a fair day's work from their workers in return for a fair day's pay. They have a right to expect that their reasonable instructions are complied with and that their persons and property be respected.

Employers have a duty to provide their workers with a just wage and a safe and healthy workplace. They must treat workers with respect and dignity and not squeeze the wages of the poor for the sake of profits.¹⁹

The role of governments and the 'indirect employer'

Workers and employers are influenced by the broader social and economic structures that shape the availability of employment opportunities and the organisation of work. They aren't free just to do as they please. Responsibility for justice in the world of work is therefore shared by governments and other institutions that shape employment and industrial relations policy.²⁰

The role of government is to assist, support and coordinate the efforts of individuals, families and groups in society to ensure that each of them is oriented to the good of all. It should not take away from them their own proper roles.²¹

... government is often required to intervene in social and economic affairs, by way of bringing about conditions more likely to help citizens and groups freely attain to complete human fulfilment with greater effect.²²

Governments must protect, foster and promote the human rights of all people and all groups. Such rights are civil and political as well as economic, cultural and social. Governments must act not only in the interests of particular groups, but for the good of all.²³ They must intervene in social and economic life to establish conditions that help each person and each group to achieve their potential as freely and fully as possible. This includes providing an appropriate legal framework for the settlement of industrial disputes which harmonises the rights of workers, employers, and of the whole community.

These have been the teachings of the Church for a very long time.

Industrial relations now

Australia is now experiencing more intense division and conflict around issues of employment than it has seen in many years. Opinions are divided in many families, workplaces and parishes.

All of us Catholics, no matter what our political affiliations or place in the world of work, must strive to see the Church's teachings on work honoured in the ways in which industrial disputes are settled, and in the way in which work is organised, and in the laws of our land.

As a Bishop I am not an expert on corporations law or industrial relations. The waterfront dispute is characterised by legal and technical complexity and conflicting claims about facts. It is difficult for 'lay' people like me to judge the situation. Further, these matters are still subject to the full determination of the legal system. Appropriately qualified people in the Australian Catholic Commission for Industrial Relations are monitoring the situation closely and providing Church leaders with advice.

Despite the complexity of the problem we cannot give up. All the resources of human inventiveness and good will must be brought to bear, in order to help solve the social problems of our day connected with work. It is important to have clear ideas of the principles and priorities to be followed.²⁴

As a Church leader it is my role to provide moral reflection rather than technical solutions. The legal proceedings so far have identified some serious issues for trial. The Full Bench of the Federal Court stated, 'Just as it is not unknown in human affairs for a noble objective to be pursued by ignoble means, so it sometimes happens that desirable ends are pursued by unlawful means.' It is not morally legitimate to sack workers for belonging to a trade union or to deny a person work because they choose not to join a trade union. Nor would it be legitimate to organise one's corporate structure in such a way as to avoid responsibilities to workers.²⁵ On the other hand, neither is it morally legitimate to do serious harm to the common good in pursuit of one's own rights.

Respect for people and their rights and needs, and concern for the common good of the whole community, are fundamental to the resolution of any dispute. We need industrial relations structures and processes that bring disputing parties together and that harmonise their various claims under the common good. It is the role of government to provide such structures and processes.²⁶

... industrial relations require a spirit of understanding and cooperation rather than one of opposition and conflict. In all disputes, a just and peaceful solution will only be possible if all parties are, and remain, ready to talk. Always keep open lines of communication, and remember that if disputes are not solved quickly, it is above all the weak and needy who suffer.²⁷

I urge all Catholics to pray today on the Feast of St Joseph the Worker for a just and equitable resolution to the conflict on the waterfront.

On the Feast of St Joseph the Worker I would like to thank all of you who do so much work for the Church and the community on a voluntary basis. I especially thank the women engaged in these tasks who have, at times, not been accorded the respect and courtesy that their dignity as human beings and workers demands.

I thank too those in the employment of Church organisations who so frequently put in extra time and effort without any reward. Your dedication and generosity are appreciated.

*Bishop Kevin Manning
Chairman, Australian Catholic Social Justice Council*

Notes

1. John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, n 3.
2. Cornish, S.J., 'Work: A Christian Vision', in Smyth, P, (ed.) *The Employment White Paper: A New Social Charter?* (Melbourne Seminar), Uniya Discussion Papers No. 3, January 1994.
3. *Genesis* 1:28; Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n 34; John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, n 31.
4. For discussion of this point see *Laborem Exercens*, n 19.
5. John Paul II, Address to Industrial Workers, Seven Hills, NSW, 1986. The text of this address can be found in *The Pope in Australia: Collected homilies and talks*, St Paul Publications, Sydney, 1987, pp. 60–65.
6. John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, n 12.
7. *Laborem Exercens*, n 6.
8. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n 2426.
9. *Catechism*, n 2428.
10. *Laborem Exercens*, n 10.
11. *Catechism*, n 2434.
12. *Catechism*, n 2402.
13. *Laborem Exercens*, n 19.
14. John Paul II, Address to Industrial Workers, Seven Hills, NSW, 1986.
15. Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, n 16.
16. *Rerum Novarum*, n 34, 36–44.
17. *Catechism*, n 2435.
18. *Rerum Novarum*, n 16.
19. *Rerum Novarum*, n 17.
20. *Laborem Exercens*, n 17.
21. *Catechism*, n 1905–1912.
23. *Catechism*, n 1908.
24. John Paul II, Address to Industrial Workers, Seven Hills, NSW, 1986.
25. *Catechism*, n 2409–2411.
26. *Catechism*, n 2430–2431.
27. John Paul II, Address to Industrial Workers, Seven Hills, NSW, 1986.