

The Dignity and Creativity of Work

Pastoral Letter for the Feast of St Joseph the Worker, 1 May 1999

The feast of St Joseph the Worker provides an opportunity for all of us to appreciate the dignity and creativity of work, and, at the same time, to reflect on the need to provide every member of our community with the opportunity to undertake meaningful work.

Through our work we participate in God's work of creation. By our work we serve our sisters and brothers and we praise our God. We are mindful of this every time we celebrate the Eucharist when, at the preparation of the gifts, we name the bread and wine as gifts of God and the fruit of human labour.

As we gather for the Eucharist at the time of the feast of St Joseph the Worker, let us be especially mindful that all of the faithful, whether employed, unemployed, or working on an unpaid basis, have an equal place at the banquet of Jesus Christ.

Too often people who are unemployed feel invisible, or even unwelcome in our parishes. Perhaps some of us judge people too readily for failing to contribute their work to society without judging the structures, processes and priorities of a society that excludes many of its members from paid work. In rural and regional centres all over Australia communities are diminishing and even dying from a lack of adequate employment opportunities. These people are not personally responsible for the lack of adequate regional development policies.

Many young people are struggling to find their place in society and are hindered by the lack of a secure job with adequate pay. Young people are not responsible for the failure of our labour market policies. Some asylum seekers are actually prevented by our laws from contributing their work to the community, even on a voluntary basis.

Maybe some of us simply avoid unemployed people because we are awkward, embarrassed, or afraid of touching painful experiences in a clumsy manner. Maybe some of us are angry or ashamed about being unemployed and find it easier to avoid contact. It takes courage to share one's difficulties and risk being judged or patronised when reaching out for support. Everyone has a part to play in ensuring that unemployed

people in our Church communities are included, acknowledged and treated as sisters and brothers.

Many people who are employed are being placed under pressure to work longer hours, to accept lower real wages and less favourable conditions. The unemployed may even be used as a weapon to ensure compliance – if you don't like it, there are plenty of other people looking for a job. This pressure is being experienced right across the workforce, from people in middle management to people who are outworkers. This dynamic treats both unemployed and employed people as instruments rather than ends in themselves. It sets people against one another and promotes fear, insecurity and self-interest. We all have a responsibility to stand up against behaviour, processes or policies that treat people as instruments. We all have a responsibility to reject division and fear and to build instead community.

Many people in our Church communities are neither employed nor unemployed. Women working in the home raising families and managing households, retired people, the great army of volunteers – these people too are doing meaningful and important work. Work that is not paid for is often taken for granted and accorded little esteem. It seems that many people see work and employment as the same thing, implying that only paid work is 'real' work. Church communities sometimes ask for a lot of voluntary work without valuing this work or honouring the people who provide these services. How many times have you heard people say that they are '*just* a housewife' or '*only* a volunteer'? The value of each person in the eyes of God is not dependent on what they do or how much they get paid for it. Each one of us can take action to ensure that those who contribute to our society on an unpaid basis know that we value and respect them and appreciate the work they do. We must reject any tendency to devalue or disregard our own unpaid work.

Every suburb and parish contains people who are employed, people who are unemployed and people whose work is not paid for. All are equally invited to the banquet of Jesus Christ. We must work to build a society that is inclusive and in which everyone has the opportunity to take part in meaningful work.

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