

Catholic Social Teaching Theme 5

The Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

The **economy must serve people**, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God's creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected--the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to the organization and joining of unions, to private property, and to economic initiative.

Scripture

- **Genesis 2:1-3**
God rests on the seventh day.
- **Genesis 2:15**
God settles man in the garden of Eden to cultivate and care for it.
- **Deuteronomy 5:13-15**
The Sabbath is for everyone—all are allowed to rest from their work.
- **Deuteronomy 14:28-29**
The Lord blesses our work so that we may share its fruits with others.
- **Deuteronomy 24:14-15**
Do not withhold wages from your workers, for their livelihood depends on them.
- **Sirach 34:20-22**
To deprive an employee of wages is to commit murder.
- **Isaiah 58:3-7**
To observe religious practices, but oppress your workers is false worship.
- **Jeremiah 22:13**
Woe to him who treats his workers unjustly.
- **Matthew 20:1-16**
All workers should be paid a just and living wage.
- **Mark 2:27**
The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath.
- **Luke 3:10-14**
Practice integrity in your work.
- **Luke 12:13-21**
One's worth is not determined by an abundance of possessions.
- **James 5:1-6**
Those who become rich by abusing their workers have sinned against God.

Tradition

Work is, as has been said, an obligation, that is to say, a duty, on the part of man. . . Man must work, both because the Creator has commanded it and because of his own humanity, which requires work in order to be maintained and developed. Man must work out of regard for others, especially his own family, but also for the society he belongs to, the country of which he is a child, and the whole human family of which he is a member, since he is the heir to the work of generations and at the same time a sharer in building the future of those who will come after him in the succession of history.

On Human Work (Laborem Exercens) Pope John Paul II, 1981 #16

Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfilment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes "more a human being."

On Human Work (Laborem Exercens) Pope John Paul II, 1981, #9

The obligation to earn one's bread by the sweat of one's brow also presumes the right to do so. A society in which this right is systematically denied, in which economic policies do not allow workers to reach satisfactory levels of employment, cannot be justified from an ethical point of view, nor can that society attain social peace.

The Hundredth Year (Centesimus Annus) Pope John Paul II, 1991, #43

In many cases, poverty results from a violation of the dignity of human work, either because work opportunities are limited (through unemployment or underemployment), 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."

Charity in Truth (Caritas in Veritate) Pope Benedict XVI, 2009, #63

All people have the right to economic initiative, to productive work, to just wages and benefits, to decent working conditions, as well as to organize and join unions or other associations.

A Catholic Framework for Economic Life, U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1996, #5

All these rights, together with the need for the workers themselves to secure them, give rise to yet another right: the right of association, that is to form associations for the purpose of defending the vital interests of those employed in the various professions. These associations are called labor or trade unions.

On Human Work (Laborem Exercens) Pope John Paul II, 1981, #20

As the Church solemnly reaffirmed in the recent Council, "the beginning, the subject and the goal of all social institutions is and must be the human person." All people have the right to work, to a chance to develop their qualities and their personalities in the exercise of their professions, to equitable remuneration which will enable them and their families "to lead a worthy life on the material, social, cultural and spiritual level" and to assistance in case of need arising from sickness or age.

A Call to Action (Octogesima Adveniens) Pope Paul VI, 1971, #14

The economic sphere is neither ethically neutral, or inherently inhuman or opposed to society. It is part and parcel of human activity and precisely because it is human, it must be structured and governed in an ethical manner.

Charity in Truth (Caritas in Veritate), Pope Benedict XVI, 2009, #36

I would like to remind everyone, especially governments engaged in boosting the world's economic and social assets, that the primary capital to be safeguarded and valued is man, the human person in his or her integrity: "Man is the source, the focus and the aim of all economic and social life."

Charity in Truth (Caritas in Veritate), #25, quoting *The Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* Pope Paul VI, 1965, #63

Discussion Questions

1. Along with the right to form unions comes the responsibility to act in accord with the common good. Unions often oppose increased international trade and so called "free trade" treaties. Is this a violation of this responsibility? What should unions do regarding international trade?
2. As stated in *Caritas In Veritate*, the mobility of labor and unemployment can have a big psychological impact on an individual and put strains on a family. As we are becoming a globalized society, are we being attentive enough to the core of American society, the family?
3. *Caritas In Veritate* #40 states: "Moreover, the so-called outsourcing of production can weaken the company's sense of responsibility towards the stakeholders — namely the workers, the suppliers, the consumers, the natural environment and broader society — in favour of the shareholders, who are not tied to a specific geographical area and who therefore enjoy extraordinary mobility. Yet there is also increasing awareness of the need for greater social responsibility on the part of business"

What effects does this have on worker's rights and responsibilities and our global community?

4. *Support of private ownership does not mean that anyone has the right to unlimited accumulation of wealth. "Private property does not constitute for anyone an absolute or unconditional right. No one is justified in keeping for his exclusive use what he does not need, when others lack necessities (Economic Justice for All #115)"*

There has been an ongoing debate in our nation over the tax rate for the wealthiest citizens of our country. How does this debate compare with what the Bishops call us to do? Are there any other ways we could implement the Bishops' suggestions?

5. How often do we "work so that the divine message of salvation may be known and accepted by all men throughout the earth (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*)" in the realm of our occupations?

6. The catechism states, "²²¹ In determining fair pay both the needs and the contributions of each person must be taken into account.... Agreement between the parties is not sufficient to justify morally the amount to be received in wages."

Does this statement imply that a person's life circumstances, in addition to his skill and performance, be taken into account when a fair wage is determined? Would this be plausible in our society, and if so, how would it be exercised?