

Work and Employment

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A Theological and Ethical Approach

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Legend

- MM** *Mater et Magister*, Christianity and Social Progress, Pope John XXIII, 1961.
- PT** *Pacem in Terris*, Peace on Earth, Pope John XXIII, 1963.
- GS** *Gaudium et Spes*, The Church in the Modern World, 2nd Vatican Council, 1965.
- DH** *Dignitatis Humanae*, On Religious Freedom, 2nd Vatican Council, 1965.
- PP** *Populorum Progressio*, On the Progress of Peoples, Pope Paul VI, 1967.
- OA** *Octogesima Adveniens*, Apostolic Letter on The Eightieth Anniversary of Rerum Noverum), Pope Paul VI, 1971.
- EN** *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Apostolic Letter on Evangelisation in the Modern World, Pope Paul VI, 1975.
- LE** *Laborem Exercens*, On Human Work, 90th Anniversary of Rerum Novarum, Pope John Paul II, 1981.
- SRS** *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, The Social Concern of the Church, 20th Anniversary of Populorum Progressio, Pope John Paul II, 1987.
- CA** *Centesimus Annus*, The 100th Anniversary of Rerum Novarum, Pope John Paul II, 1991.

PART I

THE FUNDAMENTAL DIGNITY OF WORK AND EMPLOYMENT

Though the terms "work" and "employment" are often used interchangeably, the difference between them needs to be noted. Work has a dignity which is prior to, and not dependent on, whether or not it is paid for. This is based on the premise that human persons and their actions cannot be reduced to their economic value.

It follows, of course, that remuneration cannot be the only way of recognizing the value of a person's work. The tendency to perceive unpaid work as somehow inferior is itself

based on the premise that the real value of work is its economic value.

I will come to the point that persons have a right to employment. But I want to establish that the value of work cannot be reduced to its economic value. Work is first of all an expression of human personhood and human dignity. In proper conditions, it can help people find their sense of self-worth. It puts people into a collaborative relationship with other persons, and it gives us ways of contributing the good of society. (Cf GS 67, CA 43).

Over and above that, it is a means of earning one's living, and provides the person with a buffer against total dependence on others. The damage caused to people's self-esteem and relationships and lives through lack of opportunity for work and employment is its own horrific evidence that work and the opportunity for employment belong to the dignity and well-being of persons.

Even when it is paid for, work still has a value that is more than its economic value. This is based on the primacy of persons over material things. This in turn is based on the fact that persons are made in the image of God. Our topic is ultimately theological. It is also fundamentally ethical, for it means that work is for persons, not persons for work (LE 6); Production and profits are for the good of persons, persons are not for the sake of production or of profits. Social and economic planning, creating the opportunities for employment, the appropriate conditions for work, and the proper distribution of the fruits of industry are *ethical* requirements.

It doesn't follow that we can derive a social and economic blueprint from religious faith. The Second Vatican Council and recent Popes have emphasised the methodological autonomy of the sciences, which includes the social, economic and political sciences. I only wish they could have found a way of dissociating the name "Christian" from all political parties.

Faith comes into the picture because work is related to the dignity of persons, and the true dignity of persons is known from divine revelation. God's plan, revealed in Christ, not only reveals what kind of God God is, but also what kind of beings we are. Our true worth is what we mean to God, which is what the gospel and Christian faith are all about. In his latest encyclical, the present Pope has reiterated that "to teach and spread her social doctrine pertains to the Church's evangelizing mission and is an essential part of the Christian message." (CA 5)

It has been claimed, with some historical justification, that focusing on a destiny beyond this world can lead to neglecting the needs and responsibilities of our present earthly life. But properly understood, it works the other way round: after all, what dignity is left to anyone, and what reason for serious commitment even to present needs, if a person's ultimate destiny is the dust to which they will return? It is not irrelevant to ask whether as voters we too casually entrust our social and economic well-being to people who side-line transcendent values with the slogan that religious faith is a purely private matter and is not expected to make any difference to our social and economic relationships?

For its part, Catholic social teaching is based on the absolute dignity of each and every person from the moment of their conception and thereafter for all eternity. Being made in the image

of God is what specifies human nature. And so being cut off from that transcendent dimension means being cut off from our own nature - our humanness. We become something less (cf CA 41). That is how we reduce ourselves to the measure of our usefulness as producers and consumers (cf CA 40), our world to the status of a quarry, and social and economic planning to the status of a power struggle, which only the strong can win.

There's a lot at stake, then, on whether we really are made in the image of God and whether that makes a difference across the board. I hope to show just what a difference it does make even to social and economic planning.

PART II

THE CONTEXT IN WHICH THE RIGHTS TO WORK AND EMPLOYMENT BELONG

The rights to work and to employment belong within a whole complexus of rights and corresponding responsibilities which all derive from the dignity of personhood:

- the right to life and to the means of subsistence (PT 8)
- the essential equality of all persons and their strict right to share the world's resources, including cultural and educational resources, through equitable opportunities (PT 13)
- the right to work, including the right of disabled people to work according to their capacity (LE 22)
- the right to employment, including the right of women to equal opportunities (OA 13, LE 19)
 - the right to form associations and to collective bargaining, including the right to form trade unions. (GS 68, OA 14, LE 20, CA 7, 15, 35)
- the right to strike. (Because strikes and lock-outs very easily infringe other rights, they are justified only when (1) there is an actual and serious injustice to be redressed, and (2) there is no other way of effectively redressing it. When strikes or lock-outs are used only to press for some advantage they become tools of injustice.) (cf LE 20)
- the right to migrate in search of work (PT 25, OA 17, LE 23)
- the right to the freedoms of speech and information and assembly, as well as political and religious freedom (PT 23, DH 1)
 - every person's right to participate, as far as practicable, in forming the decisions that affect their own lives in industry and politics (PT 26, 92, 94, GS 65, OA 47)
- the strict right of workers to share in the management and the profits of industry (human labour being a more personal and therefore more significant contribution to industry than is capital), (MM 32, 75-77, GS 67, LE 12, 14).

- the right to have scope for exercising personal responsibility (which is why higher or centralised authorities have no right to make decisions that can be made at lower or more local levels, in other words, subsidiarity) (MM 53, PT 140-141, CA 48)

- the right to personal ownership (because it provides a bulwark against becoming totally dependent on the State) (MM 109-112, GS 71)
- the right of each ethnic group to function within the framework of its own culture (GS 58, EN 20)
- the right of people to be participants in the processes of their own personal, social and economic development, and partners of equal dignity even when receiving assistance (PT 89, GS 86).

Such is the context in which the rights to work and to employment belong. The next step is to recognise an order of priority among all these rights (and their corresponding responsibilities). Those which pertain more directly to the life and survival and dignity of persons are of a higher order than those which derive from them. In situations of conflict, the ethical requirement is that more fundamental rights take precedence over those which are more derived. Not even the rights to ownership and free enterprise are absolute, (MM 43, GS 69, PT 22-24, LE 14, CA 35, 43).

It is the responsibility of the State, on behalf of society, to co-ordinate and enable the exercise of people's rights. This is the context in which Pope John Paul II discusses the right to employment. High unemployment signals a moral disorder, and the State (and other agencies) must "act against unemployment" in ways that are planned, pro-active and positive - all the while respecting subsidiarity; (cf LE 18). (Cf also MM 54, LE 18, CA 14, 40)

Creating the conditions which maximise the opportunity for each person to live and to function in relationship to other persons is precisely what we mean by the common good. It doesn't mean subordinating persons to some collective value, or reducing their opportunities to some kind of highest common factor. The common good is about enhancing, not diminishing, *persons*. Otherwise it isn't the common good.

PART III

APPLICATION TO AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

This brings us to the difficult role of the State in creating the conditions necessary for people to work and to earn their living as far as possible through their work. In an economy like ours, this includes establishing the proper relationship between sometimes competing values, such as international competitiveness, full employment, economic growth, population growth, controlled inflation, interest rates, profitability, efficiency, and so on.

In the light of what has been said already, we can come quickly to the conclusion that the proper relationship between these different factors cannot be simply a matter of "market forces" or even careful mathematical calculations. Our management of market forces and our mathematical calculations must refer beyond themselves to the good of persons. Some factors relate more closely to the dignity of persons than others. The right to work and as far as possible to earn one's living from that work, are higher values than some of the other components of social and economic planning. The right of persons to the freedoms of speech, information, assembly and collective bargaining, and the right to participate in the

processes of decision-making, relate intimately to the right to work and to earning one's living.

I don't pretend that the proper co-ordination of all the factors relevant to work and employment is easy. Nor can we overlook the fact that their inevitable context includes overseas levels of inflation, international conflicts, the needs of poorer nations (PP, SRS passim) new technologies (OA 38-40, CA 32-33) tariff and trade arrangements (PP 56-65), the conservation of resources and the environment (OA 21, SRS 34, CA 37 ff), and the wastage of resources caused by militarism (PP 53, SRS 23, 24) and consumerism (CA 36).

At the time the Employment Contracts Bill was before Parliament, the NZ Catholic Bishops asked that it be withdrawn for re-drafting or, if that were not to be, that employers not take unfair advantage of the more vulnerable situation of employees. Some of our worst fears have since proved to have been well-founded.

I believe the position we took was right, but for the sake of being more willingly heard, it might have helped if we had said in our statement what was taken for granted, viz that some things did need to change. It was necessary to make New Zealand internationally competitive, and this did require market-place efficiencies and lower inflation. It wasn't in industry's best interests or workers' best interests for wage demands to be made often with lemming-like disregard for levels of productivity; it wasn't sensible to make demands which threatened the viability of industries with consequent loss of jobs (cf OA 14), and many jobs were already being lost because of excessive demands and inflexibility; creative thinking did need to be applied to how better to achieve worker solidarity and collective bargaining, these concepts being wider than trade unions as such (cf LE 20, CA 7); we did need to reverse the nonsense of living beyond our nation's means and borrowing beyond our ability to repay; we did need to reverse the mentality which too easily surrendered personal initiative and personal responsibility in exchange for an over-dependency on welfare (cf SRS 15). (Of course there needs to be equal, indeed greater, zeal in acting against dishonesty in the professions and against shameful profiteering through excessive interest rates.)

Having acknowledged the legitimacy and necessity of such aims, the NZ Bishops could still have taken, and perhaps more credibly taken, our basic position, which was - and still is - our opposition to unethical *means* of pursuing those goals. To treat human labour as a mere commodity which might be bought or sold or dumped without regard for other, higher, human values, is to subvert the moral order (cf GS 67, LE 7).

Twelve months later, the architects of the Employment Contracts Act are congratulating themselves on its success. It depends, doesn't it, on how you define success. The bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was spectacularly successful. Current levels of unemployment resulting directly from chosen policies involve huge waste and under-utilization of human resources, related losses in productivity, unaffordable losses in tax revenue, and the need for more expensive spending on welfare at the same time that revenue diminishes. In other words, policies which sacrifice employment for the sake of other economic goals are themselves uneconomic, even before we consider their fall-out in damaged people, damaged lives, destroyed relationships, destroyed hopes, and the on-going, self-perpetuating effect of this damage.

But all this empirical evidence only shows post eventum what could have been predicted, and avoided, on the basis of a more ethical approach. To accept some unemployment as the unwanted side-effect of some necessary reforms, while positively "acting against unemployment" on a broader scale, is one thing. But to regard unemployment as an economic necessity, or to generate unemployment *as a means* of obtaining other economic goals, is to subvert the order of values based on what it means to be persons, i.e. the moral order.

It is an ethical requirement that full employment be the primary objective of economic planning, with other economic goals subordinate to that. Production is for people, not people for production.

There is something deceptive and manipulative about a policy which tries to justify massive job losses for the sake of other economic objectives, which, it is claimed, will eventually benefit everyone, but in reality can benefit only a few. Even if it is true that market-place efficiency and lower inflation will make our country more competitive, and that this in turn will generate new wealth and new jobs, it still has to be asked: who benefits, and at whose expense? Are they even the same people? And if not, did the losers consent to this plan? Were they even meant to be deceived by the claim that the benefits would "trickle down" to them?

Those who advise the government that "most OECD governments have moved away from spending substantial amounts on work schemes....." (Treasury, Briefing, 1990, p.13) are perhaps being selective. In their study on Unemployment in New Zealand, (Dunmore Press, 1977) I. Shirley, B. Easton, C.Briar, and S. Chatterjee come down firmly in favour of

"...a national development strategy which identifies employment both as a political priority and as the dominant ethic of economic policies. This means in effect, establishing full employment as the primary goal of social and economic management, thus ensuring that all sectors of society are able to participate in, and belong to, and contribute towards their own development as well as the development of their society."

They go on to say:

"To those who will say that this objective is not feasible, we suggest that they examine the international evidence. Despite the fact that countries such as Austria, Sweden, Norway and Japan have all been forced to confront similar international conditions as New Zealand in the post-war period, these nations displayed a capacity and resolve to resist redundancies by institutionalising a state commitment to full employment. In contrast to New Right policies in Belgium, The Netherlands and Britian, which resulted in mass unemployment, the successful nations opted for an emphasis on productive investment, economic sovereignty, a secure domestic market and a range of interventionist policies which were designed to promote full employment." (p.167)

PART IV

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

A government's responsibility for creating employment must respect the principle of subsidiarity mentioned above (p.3), (cf LE 18, CA 48). This means, in the present context, that a government will try to help the direct employer, especially small firms, to afford to employ more people. Job subsidy schemes are one way of doing this, provided it is work that contributes to the good of the economy, or at least in some way to the good of society.

For the purposes of our discussion, I offer a scenario which, on the face of it, would have (1) kept more people in employment, (2) provided appropriate levels of remuneration without jeopardising the viability of small businesses willing to offer employment, (3) stimulated the domestic economy, (4) avoided the significant reductions in tax revenue which were given as the main reason for the budget blow-out, and (5) cost the Government less in welfare and unemployment payments.

The scenario is based on the premise that providing employment is the highest priority in the equation, and on the further premise that it should not be necessary to choose between wage levels which industry can't afford to pay (resulting in further job losses) and rates of pay and conditions of work that would cause hardship.

The scenario is simply an extension of those employment schemes which involve "topping up" the wages which businesses can afford to pay by adding a contribution from tax revenue. The concept is consistent with the twin responsibilities of a government to create employment and to meet the needs of the unemployed and their families (LE 18), but it goes beyond the classic position of Catholic Social Teaching concerning the "just wage" which the employer was expected to pay. It is a "social wage". B. Easton has asked whether Catholic Social Teaching can accept this concept. (cf *The Listener & TV Times*, June 17, 1991). I think this development is implied in LE 19.

The extension of this practice more widely into the economy, would, of course, need proper controls to avoid abuse by both employers and employees, and to avoid the subsidising of non-viable industries.

To raise taxation to levels which would make this concept a reality, would, I believe, be a just and socially responsible policy. I would call it an investment. It would involve a shift from "non-productive" expenditure on the flow-on effects of unemployment (including unemployment related sicknesses and unemployment related crime), to productive expenditure on utilising human resources, activating consumer demand, and producing tax revenue. I am not competent to assess this scenario economically. I do not know what else would need to be built into it to prevent inflation