



January 2013

# Human Alienation and Fulfillment in Work: Insights from the Catholic Social Teachings

Ferdinand Tablan

*Bellevue College*, [ftablan@bellevuecollege.edu](mailto:ftablan@bellevuecollege.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/jrbe>

---

## Recommended Citation

Tablan, Ferdinand (2013) "Human Alienation and Fulfillment in Work: Insights from the Catholic Social Teachings," *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/jrbe/vol3/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Religion and Business Ethics* by an authorized administrator of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact [mbernal2@depaul.edu](mailto:mbernal2@depaul.edu).

---

# Human Alienation and Fulfillment in Work: Insights from the Catholic Social Teachings

## Cover Page Footnote

REFERENCES: Appelbaum, Bernhardt, Murnane., *Low-Wage America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation 2003) Aktouf, Omar., Halford, David., 'The Implications of Humanism for Business Ethics', in Spitzack, Prison, Amann, Khan, (eds.). *Humanism in Business* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2009) Aguas, Jove Jim., 'The Notions of the Human Person and Human Dignity in Aquinas and Wojtyla', *Kritike*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2009, pp. 40-60. <https://www.kritikejournal.org/issue/aguas> (Accessed 21 February 2012) Armstrong, Robert., 'The Rehumanization of Work', *Social Theory and Practice* Vol. 2, No. 4, 1973. pages 459 – 473 Baum, Gregory., *The Priority of Labor : A Commentary on Laborem Exercens* (New York : Paulist Press, 1982) Benedict XVI, Pope., *Caritas in Veritate*. English translation: *On Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth* (29 June 2009) [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20090629\\_caritas-in-veritate\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html) (Accessed 19 January 2012) Biffi, Franco., *The Social Gospel of John Paul II* (Rome: Pontifical Lateran University, 1989) 'Catholic Social Teachings and Migration' <http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org> (Accessed 12 November 2012). Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith., *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* (Rome: Vatican Press, 1989) De Torre, Joseph., *Work, Culture, Liberation The Social Teachings of the Church* (Quezon City: Vera Reyes, 1985) \_\_\_\_\_., *Marxism Socialism and Christianity* (Manila: Sinag-Tala 1982) \_\_\_\_\_., 'Laborem Exercens: Work and Christian Humanism', *Boletin Ecclesiastico de Filipinas* Vol. LVI, No. 3, 1990 pp. 628-645 DesJardins, Joseph., 'The Meaning and Value of Work', William Shaw and Vincent Barry (eds.). *Moral Issues in Business* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2010) Diallo, Yacouba., Hagemann, Frank., Etienne, Alex., Gurbuzer, Yonca., and Mehran, Farhad., 'Global child labour developments: Measuring trends from 2004 to 2008', International Labour Organization Office <http://www.ilo.org/global/documents> (Accessed 1 February 2012) DiSanto, Ron., 'The Threat of Commodity-Consciousness to Human Beings', in Regis Duffy and Angelus Gambatese (eds.). *Made in God's Image* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999) pp. 54-82 Engels, Friedrich., 'Preface to the English Edition of 1888', *The Communist Manifesto*. Samuel Moore (trans.). ( New York: Washington Square Press, 1964) Escriva, Josemaria., *Christ is Passing By* (Manila: Sinag-Tala, 2000) Fichtner, Joseph., *A Christian Anthropology Man the Image of God* (New York: Alba House, 1978) Francisco, Roklyn., *Karol Wojtyla's Theory of Participation* (Manila: St. Paul Publications, 1995) Fromm, Erich., *To Have or To Be?* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1976) Gibbons, John., ' I Can't Get No..Job Satisfaction, That Is', January 2010 <http://www.conference-board.org/publications> (Accessed 10 December 2011) Gibson, Katherine., Julie Graham., 'Rethinking Class in Industrial Geography: Creating a Space for an Alternative Politics of Class' *Economic Geography*, Vol. 68, No. 2, April 1992, 109-127. Gini, Al., *My Job My Self*, (New York: Routledge, 2001) \_\_\_\_\_., *Why Its Hard to be Good*, (New York: Routledge, 2006) Gomez, Fausto., *Social Ethics Doctrine and Life* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas, 1992) Gregory, David., 'Reflections on Current Labor Applications of Catholic Social Thought,' *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*, Vol. 1, Issue 2, 2004, pp. 647-683 \_\_\_\_\_., 'Catholic Labor Theory and the Transformation of Work', *Washington and Lee Law Review*, Vol. 45, Issue 1, 1988, pp. 119-157 George, Francis Cardinal., *God in Action* (New York: Doubleday Pub., 2011). Jayson, Sharon., 'At Work, No More Mr. Nice Guy. Researchers: Up to 80% Cite Incivility at Office', *USA Today*. 8 August 2011 John XXIII, Pope., *Mater et Magistra*. English translation: *On Christianity and Christian Progress* (15 May 1961) [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_enc\\_15051961\\_mater\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-xxiii_enc_15051961_mater_en.html) (Accessed 15 January 2012) \_\_\_\_\_., *Pacem in Terris*. English Translation: *On Establishing Universal Peace in Truth* (11 April 1963) [---

This article is available in \*Journal of Religion and Business Ethics\*: <http://via.library.depaul.edu/jrbe/vol3/iss1/5>](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_j-</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

---

xxiii\_enc\_11041963\_pacem\_en.html (Accessed 20 December 2011) John Paul II, Pope., Centessimus Annus. English Translation: On The Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum (1 May 1991) [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_01051991\\_centesimus-annus\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus_en.html) (Accessed 15 January 2012) \_\_\_\_\_, 'Sanctifying Work in the Land', in Documentation Service (Manila: Sinag-Tala, 1989) \_\_\_\_\_, Laborem Exercens. English Translation: On Human Work (14 September 1981) [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) (Accessed 20 December 2011) \_\_\_\_\_, Redemptor Hominis. English Translation: The Redeemer of Man (4 March 1979) [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_04031979\\_redemptor-hominis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_04031979_redemptor-hominis_en.html) (Accessed 20 December 2011) Leo XIII, Pope., Rerum Novarum English Translation: On Capital and Labor (15 May 1891) [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/leo\\_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_l-xiii\\_enc\\_15051891\\_rerum-novarum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/leo_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum_en.html) (Accessed 19 December 2011) Mackinnon, Barbara., Ethics Theory and Contemporary Issues (Boston: Wadsworth, 2011) Marx, Karl., The Capital, Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (trans.). Great Books of the Western World, Encyclopaedia Britannica, Volume 50 (New York: William Benton Press, 1952) \_\_\_\_\_, Early Writing, Rodeney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (trans.) (New York: Vintage, 1975) Marx, Karl., and Engels, Friedrich., The Marx-Engels Readers, Robert Tucker (ed.). (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1972) Michaelson, Christopher., 'I Want Your Shower Time! Drowning in work and the Erosion of Life', Business & Professional Ethics Journal, Vol. 24, No. 4, pp. 7-26 Muirhead, Russell., Just Work (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) O'Toole., James., 'Work in America: Report of a Special Task Force to the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare', 1972 <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED070738.pdf> (Accessed 1 December 2011) Office of the Human Development., Human Work World Development (Manila: Claretian Publications, 1990) Overell, Stephen., 'The Meaning of Work', The Good Work Commission (London: The Work Foundation: 2009) Palley, Thomas., 'Financialization: What It Is and Why It Matters' The Levi Institute Working Paper no. 525 (December 2007) [http://www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp\\_525.pdf](http://www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp_525.pdf) (Accessed 13 November 2012) Paul VI, Pope., Populorum Progressio. English Translation: On the Development of Peoples (26 March 1967) [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-vi\\_enc\\_26031967\\_populorum\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum_en.html) (Accessed 21 December 2011) Pius XI, Pope., Divini Redemptoris. English Translation: On Atheistic Communism (19 March 1937) [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/pius\\_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_19031937\\_divini-redemptoris\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19031937_divini-redemptoris_en.html) (Accessed 15 December 2011) Pius XI, Pope., Quadragesimo Anno. English Translation: On Reconstruction of the Social Order (15 May 1931) [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/pius\\_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_19310515\\_quadragesimo-anno\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno_en.html) (Accessed 15 December 2011) Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace., Vocation of the Business Leader (February 2011) <http://www.stthomas.edu/cathstudies/cst/VocationBusinessLead/> (Accessed 5 July 2012) Salgado, Pedro., Social Encyclicals Commentary and Critique (Quezon City: R. P. Garcia Publishing, 1992) Schumacher, E.F., Small is Beautiful (New York: Harper Perennial, 1973) Shaw, William., Barry, Vincent., Moral Issues in Business (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2010) Spinello, Richard., The Genius of John Paul II (New York: Sheed and Ward, 2007) Stres, Rev. Aton., 'Work as Key to the Social Question', [www.stthomas.edu/cathstudies/cst/conferences/le/papers/stres.pdf](http://www.stthomas.edu/cathstudies/cst/conferences/le/papers/stres.pdf) (Accessed 1 December 2011) United States Conference of Catholic Bishops., Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity, 2000. <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity> (Accessed 10 November 2012) Vatican Council II., Gaudium et Spes. English Translation: Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World (7 December 1965) [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_cons\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html) (Accessed 15 December 2011) Velasquez, Manuel., Business Ethics (New Jersey: Pearson, 2012) Wray-Lake, Laura., Syvertsen, Amy.,

---

---

Briddell, Laine., Flanagan, Constance., Osgood, D. Wayne., 'Young People ' s Changing Meaning of Work', Policy Brief, 2009, Issue no. 42 Wolf, Edward., 'Recent Trends in Household Wealth in the United States: Rising Debt and the Middle-Class Squeeze—an Update to 2007,' Levi Economic Institute Working Paper No. 589 [www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp\\_589.pdf](http://www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp_589.pdf) (Accessed 15 March 2012) Zweig, Michael., What's Class Got To Do With It? (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002) \_\_\_\_\_., The Working Class Majority (New York, Cornell University Press, 2000)

## INTRODUCTION

Job dissatisfaction among American workers has been reported since the publication of *Work in America* in 1972.<sup>1</sup> The more recent survey released by the Conference Research Board in 2009 confirms that job satisfaction is on the decline (only 45% of Americans express satisfaction with their jobs).<sup>2</sup> People's value about their work has changed substantially and "Since the mid-1980's, teens have become less likely to see work as a central part of their lives."<sup>3</sup> Most Americans perceive the workplace as a depersonalized or even a hostile environment.<sup>4</sup> Many tend to withdraw from work by limiting their personal involvement and focusing only on financial benefits rather than self-fulfillment. For on-call workers who are paid hourly, labor time is not anymore a natural part of their lives but a saleable product. Poor and unskilled individuals who have few career options may have to endure jobs that they do not find satisfying; some engage in economic activities that are detrimental to their well-being or contrary to their dignity such as prostitution or pornography.<sup>5</sup>

The thesis that there is a dialectical relationship between humans and work has its roots in Karl Marx's theory of alienation. According to Marx, we do not only control our work, the latter also affects and shapes us to the extent that we experience in our work either our own fulfillment or degradation. He describes several forms of alienation (religious, metaphysical, juridical, political, etc.) but in whatever usage, the concept conveys a basic meaning: it is a non-human objectification of the person, i.e. a separation of something that inherently belongs to the person and her estrangement from her own nature. For the purposes of this

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. James O'Toole, *Work in America: Report of a Special Task Force to the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare* (1972) <http://www.eric.ed.gov/PDFS/ED070738.pdf> (Accessed December 1, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See John Gibbons, *I Can't Get No...Job Satisfaction, That Is* (January 2010) <http://www.conference-board.org/publications> (Accessed December 10, 2010). The results of 2011 survey show a slight increase in job satisfaction (47.2%) compared to data gathered in 2009 when the global economy was still in recession. See Rebecca Ray and Thomas Rizzacasa, *Job Satisfaction: 2012 edition* (June 2012) <http://www.conference-board.org/publications> (Accessed December 20, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Wray-Lake et al., "Young People's Changing Meaning of Work," *Policy Brief*, 42 (2009), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Sharon Jayson, "At Work, No More Mr. Nice Guy. Researchers: Up to 80% Cite Incivility at Office," *USA Today*, August 8, 2011. "More than a thousand people are now murdered on the job every year – 32 percent more than the annual average in the 1980s. Murder has become the number-one cause of death for women in the workplace, and for men it is the third leading cause (after machine-related mishaps and driving accidents)". Al Gini, *My Job My Self* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 69.

<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that the worth of porn industry in United States is 12 billion dollars a year. See Barbara Mackinnon, *Ethics Theory and Contemporary Issues* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2011), 122.

research, the discussion is limited to work alienation – that which takes place in the process of production. Marx claims that the worker incorporates her being in her work, that is why every human product carries her imprint and is made into a human image. “The product of labour is labour that has solidified itself into an object, made itself into a thing, that [is the] objectification of labour.”<sup>6</sup>

But in a capitalistic society, the outcome of one’s work is too distorted to be an expression of the individual worker. Alienation according to Marx is an obstacle to human flourishing and fulfillment; it is the estrangement of humans from themselves, a distortion of their personality and a reduction of their nature to a non-human level. In failing to realize their creative potentials, the workers are also prevented from experiencing the social world as the objectification of their productive activity. The worker is not only alienated from the product of her labor, but also from the act of production itself for alien products can only be produced by an alien activity. “How could the worker come to face the product of his activity as a stranger, were it not that in the very act of production he was estranging himself from himself? The product is after all but the summary of the activity, of production.”<sup>7</sup>

This paper tackles the modern-day problem of human alienation and fulfillment in work from the perspective of Catholic social thought. It focuses on the conditions of contemporary American working class, also called the “new collar” class, which comprises 62% of the labor force.<sup>8</sup> This includes blue-collar and lower white-collar as well as lower or semi-skilled workers in the major sections of the economy (manufacturing, retail, agriculture, service industry, and public sector) whose primary source of income comes from regular hourly/monthly wages. The basis of inclusion in this roughly categorized socio-economic group is not income per se, but the absence of power over the production process. “For all their differences, working class people share a common place in production where they have relatively little control over the pace or content of their work, and aren’t anybody’s boss.”<sup>9</sup> This paper analyzes the various symptoms and causes of work alienation, the meaning of work and its significance in the individual’s quest for fulfillment, and how the Church teachings can shed light on some of the problems involved in humanizing the world of work.

---

<sup>6</sup> Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1972), 78.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Zweig, *What’s Class Got To Do With It?* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2002), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Zweig, *The Working Class Majority* (New York, Cornell University Press, 2000), 3. See also Gini, 36-37. The term working class excludes those who own their business or are self-employed, middle and upper level managers, independent creative artists, and highly skilled professionals (e.g. doctors, academics, or consultants).

## ALIENATION IN WORK

The Catholic Church recognizes alienation as the central problem of our time that affects every type of worker in all societies. John Paul II defines alienation as the loss of the authentic meaning of life. It happens in economic activities whenever people are used as means to an end and human dignity is negated. Work can be a dehumanizing element in life – not because it is so by nature, but a certain ideology can make it so. The result is alienated work, i.e. the separation or estrangement of work from the human subject. While human alienation also occurs in non-economic spheres, it is the phenomenon of alienation in work which is the focus of the pope's analysis. "Because labor is the axis of human self-making, it is also by labor that people are most vulnerable to wounds and distortions."<sup>10</sup>

The historical experience of the West, for its part, shows that even if the Marxist analysis and its foundation of alienation are false, nevertheless alienation — and the loss of the authentic meaning of life — is a reality in Western societies too. This happens in consumerism, when people are ensnared in a web of false and superficial gratifications rather than being helped to experience their personhood in an authentic and concrete way. Alienation is found also in work, when it is organized so as to ensure maximum returns and profits with no concern whether the worker, through his own labour, grows or diminishes as a person, either through increased sharing in a genuinely supportive community or through increased isolation in a maze of relationships marked by destructive competitiveness and estrangement, in which he is considered only a means and not an end.<sup>11</sup>

Changes in the 21<sup>st</sup> century global economy have made the teachings of *Centessimus Annus* on work alienation still relevant after more than 20 years of its publication. International free trade has created a broader and more efficient market by encouraging the production of goods wherever it can be done at the lowest cost, thereby increasing the purchasing powers of consumers. However, it appears to have some negative consequences such as lowering of wages, job insecurity, wider social inequality, and exploitative working conditions as multinational corporations move their factories to countries with cheap labor and few government regulations. The *financialization* of the economy<sup>12</sup> facilitates the

---

<sup>10</sup> Gregory Baum, *The Priority of Labor : A Commentary on Laborem Exercens* (New York : Paulist Press, 1982), 10.

<sup>11</sup> John Paul II, *Centessimus Annus* (1991) no. 4.

<sup>12</sup> "Financialization is a process whereby financial markets, financial institutions, and financial elites gain greater influence over economic policy and economic outcomes. Financialization transforms

conversion of economic products into exchangeable and traded goods, which results in increased mobility of funds and easy access to credit and capital, but it also encourages businesses to focus on their short-term gains at the expense of a stable market, and “undervalue the downside risk of excessive risk-taking and strategic failure.”<sup>13</sup>

As a result, economic insecurities, recessions, collapse of the stock markets, bankruptcies, and corporate takeover continue to plague most countries creating high levels of unemployment. In the United States for instance, the Department of Labor reports that there are 12.7 million who are unemployed in 2012.<sup>14</sup> Unemployment does not only cause poverty, it also isolates workers socially by severing the personal and professional ties and commitments that are established and strengthened by employment. The high rate of unemployment leads to fewer job opportunities and low wages for young employees who have just joined the workforce, which is one of the reasons why American workers who are 25 years and below have the lowest job satisfaction level.<sup>15</sup> Enterprises that have no other motive than to earn as much profit as possible allocate to themselves all the fruits of production, leaving to the workers what is barely essential for their subsistence.<sup>16</sup> Revenue losses are absorbed by the laborers in terms of lay-offs, longer working hours, chronic understaffing, increased workload, and reduced benefits.

In many industrialized countries, the application of computer technology to production has made the work process easier, efficient, and more productive, but what seems to be intended as a human ally becomes another instrument of alienation.<sup>17</sup> For many, the use of computers does not lessen their regular working hours. The extensive utilization of machines for production and automation make some types of work too monotonous and uninteresting, almost mechanical.

---

the functioning of economic systems at both the macro and micro levels.” Thomas Palley, *Financialization: What It Is and Why It Matters* The Levi Institute Working Paper no. 525 (December 2007) [http:// www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp\\_525.pdf](http://www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp_525.pdf) (Accessed November 13, 2012), 2.

<sup>13</sup> Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Vocation of the Business Leader* (February 2011) [http:// www.stthomas.edu/cathstudies/cst/VocationBusinessLead/](http://www.stthomas.edu/cathstudies/cst/VocationBusinessLead/) (Accessed July 5, 2012), no. 23.

<sup>14</sup> United States Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://www.bls.gov/lau/> (Accessed July 5, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Gibbons.

<sup>16</sup> A total of 46.2 million Americans in 2011 (15 percent of the population) live in poverty. <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/about/overview/index.html> (Accessed June 15, 2012).

<sup>17</sup> Globalization, financialization, and changes in technology are deeply interrelated. “For example, advances in information technology have made possible many aspects of globalization, including the development of worldwide markets in the delivery of services such as data entry and customer support. At the same time technological changes would not have had such large influences on the finance and air travel industries if deregulation had not taken place.” Eileen Appelbaum et al., *Low-Wage America* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation 2003), 4.



Technology likewise generates unemployment and decrease in wages as it renders some acquired skills obsolete or unnecessary. On account of this, *Centessimus Annus* calls for continued re-training of workers to update their skills so that they can cope with the rapid improvement in the method of production. The problem as the encyclical explains is that many people have no possibility of acquiring the “basic knowledge which would enable them to express their creativity and develop their potential. They have no way of entering the network of knowledge and intercommunication which would enable them to see their qualities appreciated and utilized.”<sup>18</sup> Thus, the application of technology to production worsens the condition of poor workers who have always been vulnerable to exploitation and marginalization.

Furthermore, the threat of unemployment and constant business reorganization are some of the leading causes of *workaholism* in the United States today. A study done by Cornell University shows that Americans are one of the most productive workers on earth, putting in more hours of work compared to an average Japanese or European.<sup>19</sup> But this leaves ordinary Americans less time to devote to family life, leisure, spirituality, culture, volunteerism, and other non-economic pursuits. Because technology aims to decrease the labor required in the performance of a particular task, it increases and diminishes human aptitudes at the same time. “The computer can be a tool to actuate the functioning of our higher powers, but the mere functioning of these powers are not enough.”<sup>20</sup>

Even office personnel who work with computers often complain of being ‘locked to their desks’. “More and more programmers are writing routine code under close supervision. Many are brought as temps. They have little control in what they do, little room for initiative or independence.”<sup>21</sup> They somewhat feel that they are easily replaceable and that their jobs do not provide personal growth and active participation. Reinforcing the teachings of Paul VI, Benedict XVI warns of the dangers of “entrusting the entire process of development to technology alone, because in that way it would lack direction. Technology, viewed in itself, is ambivalent.”<sup>22</sup>

The nature of modern large business organizations makes it difficult for rank-and-file employees to develop personal involvement in what they do and a sense of participation to the collective effort as they feel “reduced to muscular or

---

<sup>18</sup> *Centessimus Annus*, no. 33.

<sup>19</sup> See Al Gini, *Why Its Hard to be Good* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 121-124. David Gregory defines workaholics as “people who work compulsively without reflection on the deeper meaning of life and of their actions.” David Gregory, “Catholic Labor Theory and the Transformation of Work,” *Washington and Lee Law Review*, 45, 1 (1988): 121.

<sup>20</sup> Ron DiSanto, “The Threat of Commodity-Consciousness to Human Beings,” in *Made in God’s Image* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 71.

<sup>21</sup> Zweig, *The Working Class Majority*, 25-26.

<sup>22</sup> Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009) no. 14.

mental stores of energy who accomplish tasks that are never their own but always dictated and imposed by bosses, assembly line speed, and corporate goals and strategies.”<sup>23</sup> While they are responsible for the day-to-day operations of the company, more credit is given to the few who make significant contributions to increase in sales or revenue. Most of the time, these employees have no control over the end and the means of their functions, much less over the profit that is derived from their productive activities. Instead, they are directed or even compelled to suppress individuality or creativity in the work environment by such practices as division of labor, work standardization, assembly lines, or brand imaging.<sup>24</sup> Occupations that involve little use of mind through responsible decision-making and cooperative planning do not constitute self-expression.

The foregoing analysis demonstrates how alienation happens in concrete historical situations as human workers are affected by the technological, economic, and organizational conditions of their employment. The basic premise of radical capitalistic ideology is that human work is a material instrument of production. Labor is commoditized and priced according to the law of supply and demand, without taking into account the minimum living requirements of the workers and their families. Rather than being a subject of labor, the worker becomes subject to labor. The goal of economics is the satisfaction of the individual’s unlimited wants through the creation of material wealth, with total disregard of moral principles. “This preoccupation with wants, often so called ‘consumerism,’ severs production and consumption from the common goods and impedes the development of the person.”<sup>25</sup> Human fulfillment is confined to physical well-being and temporal happiness rather than viewed within the context of integral human development.

In addition, there are Christians within the world of business who, “while not committing illegal or scandalous activities, have accommodated themselves to the world, living as if God does not exist.”<sup>26</sup> The rights and interests of the workers are neglected in the pursuit of the highest production efficiency, as the capital becomes the dominant force in an economic system characterized by cutthroat competition, maximization of shareholders’ profit, and abuse of economic freedom. John Paul II correctly foretold that the collapse of Communist

---

<sup>23</sup> Omar Aktouf and David Holford, “The Implications of Humanism for Business,” in *Humanism and Business* (Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 2009), 113. See the work of E.F. Schumacher, *Small is Beautiful* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1973), 67-82 for further analysis on the dehumanizing tendencies of organizations and bureaucracies that have grown at tremendous proportions.

<sup>24</sup> Brand imaging is a broad concept encompassing the company’s mission and vision, advertising strategies, communication procedures, workplace design, the employees’ overall appearance and gestures as well as proper verbiage and brand words or phrases.

<sup>25</sup> *Vocation of the Business Leader*, no. 42.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 63.

states in Eastern Europe would only result in the deterioration of the condition of workers as the social questions remained unsolved “in the *a priori* belief that any attempt to solve them is doomed to failure, and which blindly entrusts their solution to the free development of market forces.”<sup>27</sup>

In the Marxist analysis of alienation, work occupies a principal role. It is that which defines human life and measures the dignity of the person, the main reason for individual and social existence. The fundamental fact of human life is that people produce the means of their subsistence by adding the value of labor to natural conditions. In the process, human beings distinguish themselves from animals. They produce consciousness of human products and in doing so, they acquire consciousness of their own authentic selves and of their own species. To be human for Marx is not simply to be born with a rational nature. “Man as he sprang originally from nature was only a mere creature of nature, not a man.”<sup>28</sup> Human nature is a product of human activity, not heredity.

Resembling 20<sup>th</sup> century existentialist philosophies that view the concrete individual as a being-in-the-world who creates herself through actions, Marxism argues that the loss of meaning in work results in the loss of meaning in human life. Authentic existence is possible only if human beings work and find fulfillment in it. To be human means to work, to produce something, to imprint a human image in something that is non-human. Work is a species-activity for human beings, i.e. it is not just an activity of a person, but also, at the same time, a self-activity actualizing one’s humanity in the process. The Marxist critique of history demonstrates how a specific historical stage of production prevents the full development of the workers’ potential or *telos*, alienating them not only from their own selves but even from one another.

*Laborem Exercens*, in comparison to *Centessimus Annus*, is Thomistic and personalist in its philosophical framework. Following the principle *agere sequitur esse* of Aquinas, work is the expression of human dynamism. It is a manifestation of human nature, a self-realizing process on the part of the workers by which they accomplish their goals and bring their potentialities to actualization, but it is not that through which persons could objectify their authentic essence. While it is correct to say that the person is a historically situated being for “man does not develop through his own powers, nor can development simply be handed to him,”<sup>29</sup> human essence cannot be reduced to an ‘ensemble of social relations’ as Marx claims. “Human essence understood as potentiality is the ground for the self-actualization of man. Rather than a hindrance for man’s self-expression and freedom, it provides the ontological ground by which all these human

---

<sup>27</sup> *Centessimus Annus*, no. 42.

<sup>28</sup> Marx, “The Grundrisse,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 261.

<sup>29</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 11.

determinations are possible.”<sup>30</sup> The person is the subject of work, but it is not the latter which creates the being of the former. Work is an activity that follows from the person and as such, it is not something which is added to human existence. It does not precede the human essence but follows from it.

*Centessimus Annus* contends that alienation is not ultimately caused by socio-economic factors, although they can foster alienation even more. Alienated work is still possible even in the wealthiest or most progressive socio-economic system. Marx views human alienation from a material level, having its roots in industrial production and ownership of capital, but the Church teaches that the ultimate origin of alienation is human selfishness and sin. “A man is alienated if he refuses to transcend and to live the experience of self-giving and of the formation of an authentic human community oriented towards his final destiny which is God.”<sup>31</sup> Wounded by sin, humans have tendencies to be selfish and to satisfy their unlimited wants even if it implies infringement of the rights of others.

*Laborem Exercens* considers human sin as the distortion of the moral order and the cause of false economic, political, and social ideologies. “The denial of God deprives the person of his foundation, and consequently leads to reorganization of the social order without reference to the person’s dignity and responsibility.”<sup>32</sup> In this case, ignorance of God is the ignorance of the human person properly understood. A complete understanding of human nature is not possible without reference to God and God’s revelation. Social problems cannot be solved without the light of faith and the recognition of the moral order that is rooted in God. In the final analysis, alienation is not simply the loss of meaning in human activities. It is the loss of life’s meaning and the human estrangement from her own authentic nature, including her reason for being and her final end.

Alienated work is but a part of the general condition of human alienation which results from humanity’s rejection of God and His teachings. The crux of alienation, from the perspective of John Paul II, is deeper and more personal than what Marx originally had imagined “because it is man who experiences alienation and he is also the one who creates systems which foster it.”<sup>33</sup> The evil of

---

<sup>30</sup>Jove Jim Aguas, “The Notions of the Human Person and Human Dignity in Aquinas and Wojtyla,” *Kritike* 3:1 (2009), 5.

<sup>31</sup>John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (1981) no. 41. “Sometimes modern man is wrongly convinced that he is the sole author of himself, his life and society. This is a presumption that follows from being selfishly closed in upon himself, and it is a consequence — to express it in faith terms — of original sin. The Church’s wisdom has always pointed to the presence of original sin in social conditions and in the structure of society: ‘Ignorance of the fact that man has a wounded nature inclined to evil gives rise to serious errors in the areas of education, politics, social action and morals.’” *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 34.

<sup>32</sup>*Centessimus Annus*, no. 13.

<sup>33</sup>Dean Edward Mejos, “Against Alienation: Karol Wojtyla’s Theory of Participation,” *Kritike*, 1:1 (2007), 79.

alienation lies in its negation of the person as a subject who is capable of fulfilling and transcending herself through her actions. Modification of the material conditions of work by itself will not eradicate alienation, and the growing complexity of the contemporary world of work makes alienation intractable.

#### CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHINGS ON HUMAN WORK

The guiding principle of the Catholic social encyclicals is a holistic understanding of the person that is grounded on the Biblical truth that God created the human person in God's own image and likeness.<sup>34</sup> For this reason, the person acquires an inherent dignity that surpasses the material universe and takes primacy in both natural and social orders. This does not mean however, that the person is a closed structure. Human beings are incomplete or contingent not only because they are created, but also because they are in the process of self-actualization or self-determining, both in terms of their activity and subjectivity. They are constantly striving for fulfillment and perfection, which cannot be satisfied in an individual manner due to the quality of human needs (physical and non-physical), and their natural limitations to satisfy all these needs. "For by innermost nature man is a social being, and unless he relates himself to others he can neither live nor develop his potential."<sup>35</sup>

The person has the natural capacity to participate in social life, to interact with other people and promote their welfare in such a manner that self-fulfillment is achieved. In actions that are directed toward the benefits of others, persons become more fully themselves because only persons are capable of making a disinterested gift of themselves to others. "The human being is made for gift, which expresses and makes present his transcendent dimension."<sup>36</sup>

*Laborem Exercens* presents human vocation in terms of work. "In carrying out this mandate, man, every human being, reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe."<sup>37</sup> God did not create humans to be idle. "The Lord God then took the man and settled him in the Garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it"<sup>38</sup> That this commandment is given before the original sin is committed shows that work is not a punishment from God or a consequence of sin. It naturally belongs to human beings as their personal obligation and a fundamental dimension of their

---

<sup>34</sup> Various interpretations of the phrase *image and likeness* have been given but one thing is clear: that God, in creating Adam and Eve, established a personal relationship with them. "Perhaps, this is the most fundamental fact about him, corroborated by psychology, ethnology, and philosophy, that he is a man-in-relation-to-God, that he is, in a word, a religious being." Joseph Fichtner, *A Christian Anthropology Man the Image of God* (New York: Alba House, 1978), 35.

<sup>35</sup> Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) no. 12.

<sup>36</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 34.

<sup>37</sup> *Laborem Exercens*, no. 4.

<sup>38</sup> Gen. 2:15.

existence. But due to human disobedience in relation to the Creator, the pristine harmony in all aspects of God's creation is destroyed. The human person is alienated from God, from the natural world, and from our own original nature. Human activities cease to be a joyous fulfillment of our nature and our divine vocation, and work becomes associated with pain, weariness, and exhaustion.

Labor also belongs to the person as a subjective being. It is a fundamental fact of our real, concrete, and historical existence. Relying on the Thomistic-Boethian definition of the person as an individual substance of a rational nature, *Laborem Exercens* asserts that as a rational being, a person is also a subjective being who can plan and calculate one's actions, "capable of deciding about himself and with a tendency for self-realization."<sup>39</sup> A subjective being is one who possesses oneself by having consciousness of oneself and one's actions.

Work is a conscious and a teleological act that is always accompanied by reason. It is not simply a transitive action that enables humans to produce things that they need, it is also an immanent or a self-perfecting act. When people work, they move out of themselves towards an object, but such an act affects them as their subject because by using their faculties, they acquire mastery over the objects of their work and this develops persons to perfection. In work, one experiences oneself as a person. It is an extension of human personality and dynamism, a self-realization of the workers by which they accomplish their objectives or goals, express their creativity, actualize their potentials and energize their being. Work is good not only because it is useful but more importantly, it is something worthy in itself. It has an objective excellence because it is an activity of a free and rational subject.

Work is inseparable from the person. In all types of work, it is the person who acts and human faculties are the ones that are utilized. The primary basis of the value of labor is not the kind of activity nor the quantity or quality of the output, but the dignity of the person who carries it out. "Thus work bears a particular mark of man and humanity, the mark of a person operating within a community of persons. And this mark decides its interior characteristics".<sup>40</sup> As a subject, the person cannot be an object. Being an end in herself, she cannot be subordinated to other lesser ends or values. As an *actus personae*, work cannot be considered as a material commodity, much less valued according to the mechanism of the free market.

Moreover, it is not only work as an activity that has a personal character, but even the product itself which manifests the personality, talents, skills, and intent of the workers. Through work, natural objects are transformed according to human design. "In a sense, the person stamps the things of nature with his seal

---

<sup>39</sup>*Laborem Exercens*, no. 6.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, no. 1.

and subdues them to this will.”<sup>41</sup> The goods and services that result from labor have an intrinsic relation to the human worker. The person is not only the efficient cause of production but its final cause as well for the end of work is the overall welfare and fulfillment of the worker.

As a social being, the person has the ability to foresee the needs of others as she satisfies her own. Work has both personal and social dimensions for the very fact that it is essential for the physical maintenance of the individual and the society. It transforms the natural world, making it a suitable home for human beings. Work creates wealth through well-developed natural resources and advanced instruments of production for all generations. But as work sustains community, it likewise creates a community. In their productive activities, human beings enter into a network of relationships. Individual work “is naturally interrelated with the work of others. More than ever, work is *work with others* and *work for others*: it is a matter of doing something for someone else.”<sup>42</sup> Human production creates material and intentional links between the workers and their predecessors whose work they perpetuate, their contemporaries with whom they hasten development, and their successors for whom they lay the foundation of progress. Work generates solidarity among workers everywhere, enabling them not only to help one another but also to develop a sense of belongingness.

Since the person is an embodied spirit whose immaterial soul is directly created by God, the ultimate end of one’s being and operations cannot be found in temporal or the finite – it is a share in the life of the triune God. It is not only human relationship that is established through work, the latter also relates the person to the Creator. This relationship is first, one of dependence, for God is the giver of all human talents and abilities and the efficient cause of all natural goods. The Book of Genesis depicts the creation of the universe in a form of God’s labor accomplished over time. God wanted all men to be co-creators, so He commanded them to cultivate, explore, and bring to the fullest the resources and treasures of nature.<sup>43</sup>

By preserving, protecting, and utilizing the natural resources given by God and transforming them into something more useful, human beings in their own way continue the creative act of the Divine. Labor is a divine-human phenomenon by which people participate in God’s “salvific plan for man and the world and to deepen their friendship with Christ in their lives by accepting, through faith, a living participation in his threefold mission as Priest, Prophet and King”.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 67.

<sup>42</sup> *Centessimus Annus*, no. 13.

<sup>43</sup> Gen. 1:26-28.

<sup>44</sup> *Laborem Exercens*, no. 24.

The Gospel of Mark depicts Christ as a son of an ordinary laborer who spent long years of his private life as a carpenter.<sup>45</sup> “Through His life, Christ announces and accomplishes an authentic *Gospel of Work*.”<sup>46</sup> The physical exhaustion that accompanies human labor is not considered by Catholicism as meaningless or punitive. It was through the utilization of human powers that Jesus completed the Divine work of creation and redemption. In the same manner, by patiently and selflessly bearing the pain and weariness that come with labor in the service of others, humans become collaborators with Christ’s redemptive action. “[S]ince they are united in mind and spirit with the divine Redeemer even when they are engaged in the affairs of the world, their work becomes a continuation of His work, penetrated with redemptive power.”<sup>47</sup>

The capacity of Christians to carry the small crosses that come with their daily struggles in their working lives is a way of witnessing their faith and becoming disciples of Christ when such sacrifices are made as an offering to God and to their neighbors. Finally, human work is analogous to the Divine creation. As God created the human person according to His image, the fruits of human labor are transformed into the image of the person, for they bear with them vestiges of human powers. This is the ultimate foundation of work, that in working, the person shares in God’s creative action.

#### HUMAN FULFILLMENT IN WORK

According to *Centesimus Annus*, the error of Marxism and Capitalism lies in their perspectives on human work. They both deny the inherent value of work and reduce the person to an economic animal whose ultimate goal is labor and physical satisfaction. Capitalism only recognizes the transitive character of work. It gives emphasis on the material wealth that work can create, especially when it is combined with technology. Marxism, on the other hand emphasizes the immanent character of work. It values work in terms of self-fulfillment that results from it as it relates the individual to her own nature and to the social world. Hence, work takes priority over capital. But rather than being valued in itself, work is still valued by Marx in a pragmatic and utilitarian way like any other article of commerce. Since work has value in so far as it is the principal source of life’s meaning and satisfaction – materially and psychologically – some types of work that do not accomplish this end because they are too simple

---

<sup>45</sup>Mark 6:3.

<sup>46</sup>John Paul II, “Sanctifying Work in the Land,” in *Documentation Service* (Manila: Sinag-Tala, 1989), 42.

<sup>47</sup>John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra* (1961) no. 259.



requiring little use of our rational capacities, or because they are performed under unsatisfying conditions, are alienating and meaningless.

Marxism fails to rise above capitalism's commodification of labor, which it criticizes. The importance that it gives to the instrumental or economic value of work<sup>48</sup> is not incompatible with the view of the latter as a necessary evil, which the Catholic labor theory rejects. Thus for Marx, an important measure to solve the problem of alienated work is to reduce the working hours to the shortest time possible in order to give workers ample opportunities to fish or hunt, to rest and recreate, and to enhance their artistic or literary talents.<sup>49</sup>

Lastly, while acknowledging that work is both transitive and immanent, the encyclicals value work in its transcendent or spiritual aspect. But while the Catholic Church stresses the dignity of work, it also warns that people should not be completely absorbed by work and economic pursuit, otherwise this might be an obstacle to the attainment of their final end. Work cannot be the ultimate meaning of human existence – work is for the person, not the person for work. “Human activity takes its significance from its relationship to man. Just as it proceeds from man, so it is ordered toward man.”<sup>50</sup> Workers cannot be considered as mere instruments of production whose final destiny lies in the creation of economic goods and services.

In as much as work is not a mere economic activity, not every economic activity can be considered work. From the Catholic perspective, any human activity that compromises human dignity by seriously harming or degrading people is not work, regardless of how much economic value it generates. For examples: prostitution, human trafficking, and drug dealing cannot be considered work, even in situations when the subject's consent is present. Production in international sweatshops is a form of exploitation and the poor workers are its victims. In these cases, the human activity involved is separated from the working person by being valued solely for its transitive aspect, used merely as a means to an end, and employed against humanity itself through its direct and indirect consequences.<sup>51</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> See Karl Marx, “The Capital,” in *Great Books of the Western World* vol. 50 (New York: William Benton Press, 1952), 99-102.

<sup>49</sup> Armstrong correctly explains that this is not the solution to the problem of alienation in work. “If our systems of work should somehow provide more time for play – for the enjoyment of hobbies for example – by demanding less of our time in work, only the symptom of our discomfort would be alleviated, not its cause. For happiness or self-fulfillment we would still have to look to work that requires all the abilities, talents, intelligence, and creativity and that contributes to the welfare of the whole community.” Robert Armstrong, “The Rehumanization of Work,” *Social Theory and Practice*, 2:4 (1973), 473.

<sup>50</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 35.

<sup>51</sup> See John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979) no. 15.

It is beyond the competence of the Church to lay down practical and technical solutions to the existing problems on human labor, for such solutions “can only arise within the framework of different historical situations, through the efforts of all those who responsibly confront concrete problems in all their social, economic, political and cultural aspects.”<sup>52</sup> There are indeed, a lot of specific issues in the financial order affecting the condition of work that need to be addressed urgently, especially in the light of the recent global economic crisis. They have technical dimensions that require scientific analysis of empirical data. But the Church believes that socio-economic problems will perpetuate unless the moral and human contexts of economic production and exchange are clarified and resolved, for they are offshoots of freedom cut off from the truth about the person and her relationship to her Creator. The dangers of commoditizing work “always exist, especially when the whole way of looking at the question of economics is marked by the premises of materialistic economism.”<sup>53</sup> Regardless of how much wealth is created and how equitably it is distributed, the whole socio-economic structure is unacceptable if it fails to honor the dignity of the workers.

The objective of the Catholic social teachings is to point out moral values and ethical principles that must be observed if we want to transform the world of work into one that is just and humane. Many of these principles are incorporated in the Church’s teachings on the primacy of the person – eloquently pronounced by the Vatican Council II, that “Man is the source, the focus and the aim of all economic and social life”<sup>54</sup> – and on the rights of the workers which include the right to decent work, to just wages and other social benefits, to humane working conditions, to rest, to form trade unions and bargain collectively, and to strike.<sup>55</sup> These rights are categorical expressions of the fundamental moral characteristic of every person, i.e. his dignity.

The personalistic value of work gives it priority over capital.<sup>56</sup> From this follows an important moral principle in the social magisterium of the Church: the priority of labor. This implies that machines and equipment are only human instruments, they are not meant to replace labor. “Even when we work through satellites or through remote electronic impulses, our actions always remain human, an expression of our responsible freedom.”<sup>57</sup> Understood as the collection of all material factors for production, capital is also a product of labor. “Everything contained in the concept of capital in the strict sense is only a

---

<sup>52</sup>*Centessimus Annus*, no. 43.

<sup>53</sup>*Laborem Exercens*, no. 7.

<sup>54</sup>*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 63.

<sup>55</sup>See *Laborem Exercens*, no. 1; *Centessimus Annus*, nos.43, 23, 22; Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) nos. 68 and 78.

<sup>56</sup>*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 25.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, no. 70.

collection of things. Man, as the subject of work, and independently of the work that he does-man alone is a person.”<sup>58</sup>

As a human person, the worker signifies that which is the most perfect in nature. The transformation of matter, which results from work, is less significant compared to the transformation of persons as they work. Despite the extensive use of advanced manufacturing machines and automation, the person remains the proper subject of work and the efficient cause of production. Physical capital formation or increase in profit should not be the only index of corporate expansion and economic growth. Success in business and economic progress must generate employment, better working conditions, and satisfaction of authentic human needs.

*For Government Leaders and Policy Makers:*

John XXIII observes that “Where, on the other hand, the good offices of the State are lacking or deficient, incurable disorder ensues: in particular, the unscrupulous exploitation of the weak by the strong.”<sup>59</sup> The rights of the workers need political and judicial recognition and support so that they can be effectively implemented or enforced. John Paul II states that when we consider the rights of the worker, the first one to be defended and promoted is the right to find a suitable employment for all who are capable of it, for this is derived from the fundamental human right to live.<sup>60</sup> The social encyclicals condemn two extreme views: the opinion that the government must never intervene at all in the economic affairs of its citizens on the one hand, and the other which declares that the government must have absolute control in all aspects of our socioeconomic life. The Church calls for a responsible balance between these two extremes so that the state may exercise its authority to promote the common good in the economic order, while respecting the freedom of the people and the autonomy of private institutions.

Under the principle of subsidiarity enunciated by Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* which teaches that the government should not attribute to itself functions and duties which can be performed well by private individuals and institutions, the encyclicals call on the state to ensure meaningful employment and just remunerations for all. This should be accomplished, not by means of a direct control of every aspect of the economy, but indirectly, i.e. by creating a social environment that is conducive to economic growth and capital investment while at the same time, protecting the exercise of human rights in the economic sphere through sensible regulations.<sup>61</sup> Subsidiarity mandates the state to respect and

---

<sup>58</sup> *Laborem Exercens*, n. 12.

<sup>59</sup> *Mater et Magistra*, no. 58.

<sup>60</sup> See *Laborem Exercens*, no. 18.

<sup>61</sup> “The absence of stability, together with the corruption of public officials and the spread of improper sources of growing rich and of easy profits deriving from illegal or purely speculative

support intermediary civic groups and private institutions as agents and organizing principles of social life. Relatedly, John Paul II asserts that:

States should also facilitate the discovery of the right proportions between the different kinds of employment: work on the land, in industry, in the various services, white-collar work and scientific or artistic work, in accordance with the capacities of individuals and for the common good of each society and of the whole of mankind.<sup>62</sup>

This will provide new job seekers with more freedom or flexibility in choosing the career that fits their needs, reasonable preferences, and competencies.

National economic planning must include the creation or preservation of certain types of occupation that can help individuals develop their creativity and talents, and government support for independent producers, for those who are self-employed, for traditional agriculture, and for handicraft/cottage industry workers as they face serious challenges from “the presence of aggressive competition, and the effects of a loss of diversity through the global marketing of standardized products.”<sup>63</sup> Independent micro-industries not only provide employment to people living in the rural areas, but also are sources of income to those who do not have full-time jobs as well as alternatives to some individuals who do not find fulfillment working in a highly competitive and stressful corporate business setting.

Aware that without a multi-sector cooperation in the international level, unscrupulous investors in collusion with corrupt politicians will continue exploiting workers, especially the low-paid ones, in regions where there is a very high rate of unemployment or labor standards are so low because laws protecting the rights of workers are either absent or not implemented, Benedict XVI echoes the call from his predecessor to all government leaders, international agencies, labor organizations, and civic groups to form a ‘global coalition for a decent work’<sup>64</sup> that will ensure that the working people would have their fair share of the benefits of globalization.

---

activities, constitutes one of the chief obstacles to development and to the economic order.”  
*Centessimus Annus*, no. 48.

<sup>62</sup>*Laborem Exercens*, no. 18.

<sup>63</sup>*Vocation of the Business Leader*, no. 18.

<sup>64</sup>“What is meant by the word “decent” in regard to work? It means work that expresses the essential dignity of every man and woman in the context of their particular society: work that is freely chosen, effectively associating workers, both men and women, with the development of their community; work that enables the worker to be respected and free from any form of discrimination; work that makes it possible for families to meet their needs and provide schooling for children, without the children themselves being forced into labor, work that permits the workers to organize themselves freely, and to make their voices heard; work that leaves enough

Close to the center of global problems today that politicians and policy makers need to address is the issue of international migration. The wide gap between the poor and developed countries induces the movement of numerous workers from the latter to the former. With less skills and language difficulties, most of these immigrants increasingly fill the low-paying and oftentimes difficult jobs, especially in agriculture and service industries. Undocumented migrant workers are systematically denied legal protection and secured working environment by most states, which make them more vulnerable to exploitation. Yet, some policy makers view immigrant workers, not as human persons with dignity or victims of abuse, but as a threat to the nation's integrity or as economic burdens.

This is contrary to the stand taken by the Catholic Church. The U.S. Conference of Bishops declares that "the presence of brothers and sisters from different cultures should be celebrated as a gift to the Church."<sup>65</sup> This statement is true, not only in its cultural or religious contexts, but in economic terms as well. Having left their homeland to find jobs, most immigrants are hardworking and law abiding, they pay their taxes, remit money to their families, and contribute to the common good. Yet, most of them have no social security or health benefits. The right to emigrate and take up residence elsewhere is recognized by the Church as an inalienable human right.<sup>66</sup> Immigrant workers, regardless of their legal status must be treated with respect and dignity as persons. In labor policy terms, this involves offering working protection to all employed immigrants and creating a system that "provides legal avenues for persons to enter the nation legally in a safe, orderly, and dignified manner to obtain jobs and reunite with family members."<sup>67</sup>

*For Business Leaders and Employers:*

The divide between market and morality, faith and business, and truth and freedom, are some of the fundamental errors of our time according to Vatican Council II. Economic freedom is but a part of human freedom in general that needs to be guided by morality. "When it becomes autonomous, when man is seen more as a producer or consumer of goods than as a subject who produces and consumes in order to live, then economic freedom loses its necessary relationship

---

room for re-discovering one's roots at a personal, familial and spiritual level; work that guarantees those who have retired a decent standard of living." *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 63.

<sup>65</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Welcoming the Stranger Among Us: Unity in Diversity*, (2000) <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/cultural-diversity> (Accessed November 10, 2012).

<sup>66</sup> John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris* (1963) no. 25.

<sup>67</sup> "Catholic Social Teachings and Migration," <http://www.justiceforimmigrants.org> (Accessed November 10, 2012).

to the human person and ends up by alienating and oppressing him.”<sup>68</sup> *Caritas in Veritate* points out the inherent relationship between morality and economics: “*Human costs always include economic costs, and economic dysfunctions always involve human costs.*”<sup>69</sup> Although its main concern is not to provide means for material enrichment, Catholic morality influences people to respect the rights of all, to be just and compassionate in treating others, to be content with a moderate livelihood, and to refrain from vices or socially harmful practices. Catholicism argues that respect for the workers’ rights and the dignity of work is accompanied by material progress, while their neglect leads to poverty and economic stagnation

either because the opportunities for human 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.<sup>70</sup>

Alienation in work is both a moral concern and an economic one. To succeed in the current highly competitive marketplace, businesses need employees who are dedicated and productive because they find their jobs worthwhile and fulfilling. Compared to those who are unsatisfied with their occupations, these employees also tend to be more innovative and willing to take responsible risks for the sake of productivity. It has been proven that successful business leaders are those who truly love and care for their employees, thereby earning their loyalty and commitment. While accumulation of profit is a legitimate end as it leads to business expansion, increase in employment, and higher benefits for the workers, the ethical legitimacy of employment conditions cannot be based simply on the narrow libertarian view of free contract. “If through necessity or fear of a worse evil the workman accepts harder conditions because an employer or contractor will afford him no better, he is made the victim of force and injustice.”<sup>71</sup>

A business establishment is not only a market utility. There is a danger in large business firms of today to see the organization simply as an amalgamation of subsidiaries, buildings, departments, offices, and numbers – rather than a community of persons where individual members can be fulfilled or alienated. *Mater et Magistra* emphasizes the importance of giving all employees the opportunities to participate actively in the management of the corporation.

This demands that the relations between management and employees reflect understanding, appreciation and good will on both sides. It demands, too, that all

---

<sup>68</sup> *Centessimus Annus*, no.39.

<sup>69</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 32.

<sup>70</sup> *Laborem Exercens*, no. 8, see also Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (1891) no. 66.

<sup>71</sup> *Rerum Novarum*, no. 45.

parties co-operate actively and loyally in the common enterprise, not so much for what they can get out of it for themselves, but as discharging a duty and rendering a service to their fellow men.<sup>72</sup>

The principle of subsidiarity discussed earlier, which guides the state, also applies to business organizations. Subsidiarity requires managers to respect their employees as autonomous subjects and ‘co-entrepreneurs’, which involves giving them access to necessary information so that they can make responsible decisions without going beyond the limits of their positions. Subsidiarity is not synonymous with delegation. It is a way of empowering employees by providing them with organizational designs and tools (including knowledge and training) that will enable them to excel in their professional vocation.

In the complex work environment of today, it is difficult for ordinary workers to experience the subjectivity of their work as they perform functions that are only a miniscule part of the whole system, and most jobs involve routine or repetitive tasks. The result is workers’ apathy or the lack of interest in their jobs, and most managers think that the only way to combat this in order to increase productivity is by giving additional workload and/or incentives. However, as Erich Fromm points out, “if workers can be truly active, responsible, and knowledgeable in their work role, the formerly uninterested ones change considerably and show a remarkable degree of inventiveness, activity, imagination, and satisfaction.”<sup>73</sup>

Because work is inseparable from the person, it is a moral imperative for managers to explore innovative measures for providing their employees with the kind of occupational environment and design that will make it possible for them to find meaning and fulfillment in their working lives. This can be accomplished in various ways such as competent job matching, job rotation, employee recognitions and company celebrations, a conducive workplace, career advancement opportunities for all, and corporate engagement in community outreach or charitable projects – in addition to respecting the fundamental rights of the workers. Organizing workers into smaller units would foster better interaction and cooperation that would minimize the anonymity of the work process.

When opportunities for substantial changes in the work design are limited, employers must do their best so that employees can live a satisfying life outside of the workplace by instituting flexible schedules, providing adequate vacations and competitive compensations, and accommodating workers’ request for a particular day of the week to be their day-off, if such is essential so that they can attend to their family and religious duties. Opinions and complaints of employees must be

---

<sup>72</sup>*Mater et Magistra*, no. 92, see also *Laborem Exercens*, no. 14.

<sup>73</sup>Erich Fromm, *To Have or To Be* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1976), 101.

heard and addressed by instituting independent grievance procedures and through mechanisms such as management evaluations, employee feedback, and satisfaction surveys.

Since workers are fulfilled when they realize that their jobs take part in something that is socially useful, business leaders are called upon to produce goods and services that truly meet the needs of society and contribute to authentic human progress. Pornography, prostitution, and gambling centers are a few examples of economic activities that may be highly profitable or socially accepted, but do not serve any genuine human need. They are even socially harmful.

*For Employees:*

Catholic social teachings acknowledge the hardship and exhaustion that come with labor. It is impossible to eliminate all forms of sacrifice or dissatisfaction in work and for such reason, it cannot be the primary want of life. Not all jobs can be re-designed or altered, and some occupations that are socially necessary may not meet one's expectation of a fulfilling employment. Work is also a moral obligation. "Work is, as has been said, an obligation, that is to say, a duty, on the part of man. This is true in all the many meanings of the word."<sup>74</sup> The process of work may at times be painful or difficult but there is no other alternative – everyone must work in order to live.

Work is also a social duty since it is the foundation for the formation of the family, which is the basic unit of society. Individuals who can work but refuse to do so are not only a social burden; they also fail to contribute to the common good. Finally, work is a duty to God who commanded humans to subdue the earth and develop their talents.<sup>75</sup> Because work is the rule of life, it must never be considered shameful, lowly, or worthless. Even if work is done with distress or boredom, it is still precious because it is dignified by the acting person.

Catholic social theory promotes the notion that duty enhances, rather than diminishes the ethical value of work and the dignity of the person. "The dignity of work comes less from the ideal promise than from the way we show, through it, a determination to endure what is difficult for the sake of discharging our responsibilities and contributing to society."<sup>76</sup> The worth of any type of decent work is confirmed by Jesus who "though He was God, became like us in all things, devoted the greater part of his earthly life to manual labor."<sup>77</sup> Because most people tend to focus on their rights rather than their duties, and the

---

<sup>74</sup> *Laborem Exercens*, no. 16.

<sup>75</sup> Matt: 25: 14 – 30; Luke 19: 12 – 28.

<sup>76</sup> Russell Muirhead, *Just Work* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 175.

<sup>77</sup> Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* (Rome: Vatican Press, 1989), no. 82.



obligatory character of work goes against the liberal ideal that citizens should be free to act from their own conception of good, the notion of work as duty is not given much attention in the discussion of human fulfillment. However, “*rights presuppose duties, if they are not to become mere license.*”<sup>78</sup> The concept of duty connotes sacrifice, which, for some people, is in tension with the idea of self-fulfillment. But there is no empirical evidence that establishes a direct correlation between human fulfillment and physical pleasure or comfort. In most cases, the ‘unhappiness’ or sacrifice involved in overcoming obstacles and challenges in order to succeed or accomplish ones obligation is central to an emotionally healthy and balanced living.

Work as a duty does not imply that every individual is morally compelled to do any type of work and endure any sort of working conditions. Since *Rerum Novarum*, the social encyclicals have strongly encouraged and supported the right of the working class to organize and unionize in order to bargain collectively and effect a radical change in their conditions. Together, workers can exert pressure on powerful businesses to refrain from inhuman labor practices and exploitative strategies, especially in regions where these are legally allowed. Oftentimes, labor unions are the mouthpiece of social justice and the prime mover of social development. Benedict XVI encourages union leaders to form global alliances in order to address labor issues of transnational concerns. In recent years, the proportion of unionized workers in the United States is diminishing. This is unfortunate for “unionized employees have been better able than the nonunionized to cope with alienation in the world of work and to deal with the vicissitudes of ownership and the frightening uncertainty”<sup>79</sup> in the labor market.

#### CONCLUDING REFLECTION

From the previous analysis, it is evident that work has a central reference point in human life. The solution to many socio-economic problems is to promote an authentic culture of work where the latter is valued for its own sake, and to give primary considerations to the welfare and rights of the workers both in the management of business enterprises and in the formulation of state programs and policies. But more fundamentally, from a personal or subjective standpoint, work is the key to the question of life’s meaning. This is true not only because of the fact that people spend most of their time doing their jobs, but because work is a human and a humanizing activity, a personal and social duty, a religious vocation, and a means towards human perfection and spiritual redemption.

---

<sup>78</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 43.

<sup>79</sup> Gregory, 119.

Business and state leaders must confront the underlying moral and spiritual dimensions of work if the overall quality of life of the workers is to be improved. To build a humanistic economic order, there is a need to have an integral vision of the human person, that which regards her as a being with body and soul, who works not solely for material satisfaction, but also for the actualization of her nature as a rational and subjective being, and for the fulfillment of her vocation to be God's co-creator. "God is the guarantor of man's true development, inasmuch as, having created him in His image, He also establishes the transcendent dignity of men and women and feeds their innate yearning to 'be more'."<sup>80</sup>

*Populorum Progressio* states that true development is the pursuit of the individual's personal and collective fulfillment.<sup>81</sup> Work is one's fulfillment in so far as it is essential to human flourishing. There is indeed the feeling of satisfaction when workers actualize their powers, express their personality, achieve their goals, and gratify their desires. Alienation prevents the person from experiencing fulfillment in her working life because work is done under dehumanizing conditions, or because she does not find her job important, engaging, meaningful, or worthy of her talents and energy.

Human fulfillment in Catholicism however, goes beyond ego satisfaction or self-indulgence. Work is also a duty. Even under alienating conditions, the acting person remains the subject of work who is "summoned to responsibility."<sup>82</sup> A holistic understanding of human fulfillment must include (1) the development of human potentials and the satisfaction of the spiritual aspirations of the person and (2) the human need to seek others due to one's incompleteness, and the sociality of humans that enable them to experience fulfillment in the acts of self-giving. While people have self-satisfaction as the immediate goal of work, their action acquires greater fulfillment when it is accomplished as an offering to God and to others. What Catholicism provides is a combination of economic, psychological, moral, social, and spiritual motives for work that will make it personally fulfilling.

The problem of alienation in work cannot be solved by simply modifying the production process or the wage system, although these are factors that reinforce alienation. There are human shortcomings and imperfections that cannot be eliminated through economic progress or technological advancement alone. It is indeed important to identify and ameliorate such factors, but the reason why they alienate is because they are outcomes of human sinfulness and their transformation will not take place if such is undertaken by people who are drawn from the same pool of human beings wounded by sin. Alienation exists every time

---

<sup>80</sup> *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 29.

<sup>81</sup> Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (1967) nos. 18-21.

<sup>82</sup> Baum, 17.

“people use one another, and when they seek an ever more refined satisfaction of their individual and secondary needs, while ignoring the principal and authentic needs which ought to regulate the manner of satisfying the other ones too.”<sup>83</sup> Social change can only be brought about by individual conversion. We must all try to overcome our pride, egoism, worldliness, hedonism, and greed from which alienating structures emanate. This renewal is a continuous process that demands selfless sacrifices, painstaking effort, and most of all, cooperation with the grace of God.

---

<sup>83</sup>*Centessimus Annus*, no. 41.