

# Catholic Social Teaching: John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*

by Thomas Storck, M.A.

(SIXTH IN A SERIES)

**I**n this article, I enter into our own time as I begin the discussion of the social encyclicals of our present Holy Father, John Paul II. I will deal with *Laborem Exercens*, his first social encyclical, issued in 1981.

After the brief pontificate of John Paul I (August to September 1978), John Paul II began his reign in October of 1978. As is well-known, John Paul is the first non-Italian pope since 1523 and the first Pole ever chosen as the Vicar of Christ. John Paul II's encyclicals and other writings have often been longer and more meditative than those of previous pontiffs. In a sense, he has created a body of work which is a consciously interrelated statement of the Faith. He himself often points out the connection of one dogma with another, for example, the relationship between the Church's doctrine of the nature of man and her doctrine of man's rights and duties in society.<sup>1</sup>

Pope John Paul intended to issue *Laborem Exercens* on May 15, 1981, the ninetieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, but because of the attempt on his life on May 13, he was not able to revise it until after he left the hospital, and it was not issued until September 14 of that year. *Laborem Exercens* is a sustained reflection on the meaning of human work, which John Paul considers to be "a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question..." (no. 3). In this document he is more interested in looking at social teaching in the light of the concept of work, than in formulating new norms for a changed social situation. As we examine the main points of his reflections we will be able to see more clearly his insights into the meaning of the Church's social doctrine.

John Paul is interested in work because he is interested in man. For man has been given the task of work from the beginning.

The Church finds in the very first pages of the book of *Genesis* the source of her conviction that work is a fundamental dimension of human existence on earth. An analysis of these texts makes us aware that they express...the fundamental truths about man, in the context of the mystery of creation itself. These truths are decisive for man from the very beginning, and at the same time they trace out the main lines of his earthly existence, both in the state of original justice and also after the breaking, caused by sin, of the Creator's original covenant with creation in man. When man, who had been created "in the image of God...male and female," hears the words: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it," even though these words do not refer directly and explicitly to work, beyond any doubt they indirectly indicate it as an activity for man to carry out in the world. Indeed, they show its very deepest essence. Man is the image of God partly through the mandate received from his Creator to subdue, to dominate, the earth. In carrying out this mandate, man, every human being, reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe. (no. 4)

This quote captures the essence of the doctrine of John Paul about the origins of human work and man's commandment to work. Since it is connected with God's creation of man it is also connected with what man himself is. In other words, we cannot understand work without understanding man, and

since man was created by God, by seeing the original plan for man, as revealed in the opening of the book of Genesis, we can get some insight into man's nature and purpose. And it is there that the Holy Father sees man's call to work.

In his discussion of work, John Paul makes a distinction that will be important throughout his entire argument, the difference between objective and subjective work. Work in the objective sense is simply the external aspects of work, the actual job one does, with its necessary tools or machines. Obviously work in this sense has changed drastically over the centuries, and differs considerably from one worker to another. But work in the subjective sense is something different; it is *man himself*, man as a worker and the subject of work.

As a person he works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfill the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity (no. 6).

Having established this notion of man as the subject of work, John Paul uses it to examine various aspects of work and of the social question. For example, the Pontiff points out that according to certain nineteenth-century theories, work was understood and treated as a sort of 'merchandise' that the worker...sells to the employer, who at the same time is the possessor of the capital, that is to say, of all the working tools and means that make production possible (no. 7).

Any such approach, by which free persons are in a sense equated with the material factors of production, John Paul says is rooted in materialism<sup>2</sup> and is what he calls economism, which is the error "of considering human labor solely according to its economic purpose" (no. 13). This is to look only at the objective aspect of work — the kind of work to be done or the economic value of the job — rather than at the subject of the work, man the worker. The social question arose in the last century as a "reaction against the degradation of man as the subject of work, and against the unheard-of accompanying exploitation in the field of wages, working conditions and social security for the worker" (no. 8).

Thus it is neglect of the subjective aspect of work, man himself, and exclusive emphasis on its objective aspect, that has led to the social question. One can see that in the question of wages, for example, if we look only at the type of work being done or its place in the national economic structure, we might conclude that certain work is worth very little. But if, on the other hand, we look at who is doing the work, free persons made in the image of God, then we

would have to grant them what is their due because of their humanity, namely, the ability to live in human dignity, regardless of the low social status of their objective work.

From the above discussion, we can see how John Paul II deduces an important principle of Catholic social doctrine, "a principle that has always been taught by the Church: *the principle of the priority of labor over capital*" (no. 12). This principle is true because it is based on the fact that man is an efficient cause in the process of production, "while capital, the whole collection of means of production, remains a mere *instrument* or instrumental cause." One can see from this, though, that John Paul is not using "capital" in this case as shorthand for "capitalists." Rather he means any *thing*, whether money, natural resources, tools or machines, with which man works. These things are "placed at man's disposal. However, these resources *can serve man only through work*" (no. 12). Without man and without work, these lifeless things would not serve their purposes and he means to fulfill the commandment to subdue the earth.

If this is the case, how did the opposition arise between those who contribute labor to the production process, and those who contribute capital? This happened, John Paul says, because of the error of economism, the error "of considering human labor solely according to its economic purpose," which I spoke of above. In a time of the birth and

rapid development of industrialization, in which what was mainly seen was the possibility of vastly increasing material wealth ... man, who should be served by [this wealth], was ignored. It was this practical error that *struck a blow* first and foremost against human labor, against *the working man*, and caused the ethically just social reaction already spoken of above (no. 13).

In other words, because of the greed provoked by the opportunities for the unprecedented profits that the industrial revolution brought about, man, the subjective and most important factor in work, was relegated to a subordinate role based on the supposed economic value of his contribution to the productive process. The fact that absolutely no production of any kind could take place without man, man who invents, designs and operates machinery, was hardly noticed. This was a viewpoint caused by a practical materialism that resulted in economism.

The Holy Father is of course aware that in the conflict between capital and labor it is not impersonal forces, but "people, living, actual people" who are involved, and that "on the one side are those who do the work without being the owners of the means of

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production, and on the other side those who act as entrepreneurs and who own these means or represent the owners" (no. 14). This fact then raises the issue of property ownership, its rights, duties and morality.

John Paul, of course, restates the teaching of his predecessors as to man's right to the ownership of private property, "even when it is a question of the means of production" (no. 14). And he notes that this teaching "diverges radically from the program of *collectivism* as proclaimed by Marxism..." (no. 14). But he also notes the following about Catholic teaching:

At the same time it differs from the program of *capitalism* practiced by liberalism and by the political systems inspired by it. In the latter case, the difference consists in the way the right to ownership or property is understood. Christian tradition has never upheld this right as absolute and untouchable. On the contrary, it has always understood this right within the broader context of the right common to all to use the goods of the whole of creation: *the right to private property is subordinated* to the right to common use, to the fact that goods are meant for everyone. (no. 14)

This is exactly the same as Pius XII's teaching, expressed in his address, *La Solennita della Pentecoste*, delivered June 1, 1941.

In our Encyclical *Sertum Laetitiae* directed to the bishops of the United States of America We called the attention of all to the basic idea of these principles which consists, as We said, in the assertion of the unquestionable need "That the goods, which were created by God for all men, should flow equally to all, according to the principles of justice and charity."

Every man, as a living being gifted with reason, has in fact from nature the fundamental right to make use of the material goods of the earth, while it is left to the will of man and to the juridical statutes of nations to regulate in greater detail the actuation of this right. This individual right cannot in any way be suppressed, even by other clear and undisputed rights over material goods....<sup>3</sup>

Since all property is acquired originally by work, and the only purpose of property or capital is the service of work—by furnishing the *means* with which men actually work and produce useful goods or services—it makes no sense to set labor and capital in opposition to each other. But it does make sense to ask questions about the arrangements of property ownership in order that property may in fact serve human work.

And so the Pope reminds us that "one cannot

exclude the *socialization*, in suitable conditions, of certain means of production" (no. 14). It is interesting, however, to see what he means by this statement. Naturally, in the first place he is referring to state ownership, which in some cases is legitimate, as Pius XI likewise taught.<sup>4</sup> He is not, of course, referring to *socialism*, the socio-economic system, condemned by Pius XI as incompatible with Catholicism.<sup>5</sup> But he is also bringing to light a more fundamental truth, often lost sight of in the bitter political debates that characterize this subject, namely, "that merely taking these means of production (capital) out of the hands of their private owners is not enough to ensure their satisfactory socialization" (no. 14). Here John Paul stands both capitalists and socialists on their heads. For although the problem of disregard of the subject of human work is real, it cannot be solved merely by subjecting the worker to state ownership and a bureaucratic boss instead of private ownership and a corporate boss. In both cases he can be equally exploited.

We can speak of socializing only when the subject character of society is ensured, that is to say, when on the basis of his work each person is fully entitled to consider himself a part-owner of the great workbench at which he is working with every one else. (no. 14)

If state ownership is not the automatic solution of the problem, what can be done? The Pontiff suggests many of the same proposals which were made by Leo XIII, Pius XI and Pius XII, such as "associating labor with the ownership of capital" and even makes a clear reference to the occupational groups highlighted by Pius XI, intermediate bodies with economic, social and cultural purposes; they would be bodies enjoying real autonomy with regard to the public powers, pursuing their specific aims in honest collaboration with each other and in subordination to the demands of the common good.... (no. 14)

Those who maintain that simply by one or other type of legal arrangement of property ownership, public or private, all difficulties will be solved, are wrong, for neither the ideologues of socialism nor of capitalism grasp that specific steps must be taken that the worker not "feel that he is just a cog in a huge machine moved from above..." (no. 15). "The Church's teaching has always expressed the strong and deep conviction that man's work concerns not only the economy but also, and especially, personal values" (no. 15). In other words, work is not just an economic action; it is primarily something about the human person. It has economic consequences to be sure, but it arises from and affects man and society at many and deeper levels than the economic.

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Next John Paul introduces the concept of the direct and indirect employer. A direct employer is an employer according to the usual meaning of the word. An indirect employer, on the other hand, "includes both persons and institutions of various kinds, and also collective labor contracts...which determine the whole socioeconomic *system*..." (no. 17). The concept can perhaps be better understood by means of a quotation from Pius XI.

If, however, the business does not make enough money to pay the workman a just wage, either because it is overwhelmed with unjust burdens, or because it is compelled to sell its products at an unjustly low price, those who thus injure it are guilty of grievous wrong; for it is they who deprive the workingmen of the just wage, and force them to accept lower terms.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, an employer or firm does not operate in a vacuum. The ability to pay just wages, in fact the entire labor policy, depends on many things over which an individual owner or corporation has little or no control. These include government policies, the policies of other industries, unions, and even foreign governments and corporations. All these are part of what John Paul calls the indirect employer. And because of their importance and their influence on wages and working conditions, these indirect employers have, to one degree or another, a "true responsibility" (no. 17) for the resulting situation and welfare of the workers. Moreover, this includes the influence which the policies, both public and private, of rich countries can have on the economies of their poorer trading partners and of debtor countries.

After making this distinction between the direct and indirect employer, the Pope begins a discussion of employment and unemployment. He points out the duty of the indirect employers "to meet the danger of unemployment and to ensure employment for all" by making "provision for *overall planning*" (no. 18). "In the final analysis this overall concern weighs on the shoulders of the State..." (no. 18). But he immediately adds, "but it cannot mean one-sided centralization by the public authorities. Instead, what is in question is a just and rational *coordination*..." (no. 18). This puts one in mind of the summary of the state's duties in the economic realm made by Pius XI, "directing, supervising,

encouraging, restraining."<sup>7</sup>

It can hardly be stressed too much that the Church sees a role for the state in the economy different from that proposed by *both* American conservatives and by American liberals. The state is not to step back and merely maintain law and order, nor is she to become directly involved in solving every problem. Instead, as the guardian of the common good of the nation, she must be concerned with the entire life of her citizens, but it by no means follows that the state should *directly* involve herself in every aspect of life.<sup>8</sup> Rather she is to direct, supervise, encourage, restrain, and as John Paul put it, to coordinate, the efforts of other groups, not only businesses, but cooperatives, voluntary associations and occupational groups, who will themselves directly address the various problems that arise in the social order.

The discussion of employment naturally leads to a discussion of wages. "The key problem of social ethics in this case is that of *just remuneration* for work done" (no. 19). This, as we have seen, has been a major theme of papal social teaching since Leo XIII. John Paul reminds his readers of the connection of just wages with the family. "Just remuneration for the work of an adult who is responsible for a family means remuneration which will suffice for establishing and properly maintaining a family and for providing security for its future" (no. 19). This can be done either by means of "what is called a *family wage* - that is, a single salary given to the head of the family for his work, sufficient for the needs of the family without the other spouse having to take up gainful employment outside the home" or by "family allowances or grants," which are common in many European countries. Such arrangements are a way in which a society can ensure that mothers are not forced to leave the home to take up paid work, something which is "wrong from the point of view of the good of society and of the family when it contradicts or hinders [the] primary goals of the mission of a mother" (no. 19).

Then the Pope turns his attention to one important and practical way of securing some of the rights of workers: unions. Many previous popes had, of course, discussed and defended labor unions. Pius XI, for example, had complained about Catholic industrialists who were "hostile to a labor movement that We Ourselves recommended."<sup>9</sup> John Paul points

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out that it is false to say that "unions are no more than a reflection of the 'class' struggle" (no. 20). Rather, they are a necessary type of organization, "especially in modern industrialized societies" (no. 20). Unions are an example of the way in which work "first and foremost unites people" and of its "power to build a community" (no. 20). But the Pontiff then immediately makes a statement, which to one with any familiarity with the tradition of Catholic social thought, is a clear call for the establishment of the occupational groups so strongly called for by Pius XI and Pius XII. "In the final analysis, both those who work and those who manage the means of production or who own them must in some way be united in this community" (no. 20).

John Paul II brings *Laborem Exercens* to a close with some reflections on the spirituality of work. He insists especially on human work as a sharing in the activity of God the Creator, and quotes St. Paul's words, "Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord and not men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward."<sup>10</sup> We can, then, realize that it is the subject of work, the human person, who will live forever, either with God or without Him, and that the eternal aspects of our work will, in the end, be of more importance than the economic products that we create. But, by a kind of paradox, it is in doing our work here well that we can attain that eternal life which, as human persons, God Himself invites us to share.

In the next article in this series I will take up John Paul II's second social encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*.

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#### End Notes

- 1 For example, see the encyclical *Redemption Hominis*, no. 14.
- 2 Materialism here can mean both philosophic materialism — the doctrine that only matter exists, and practical materialism, which is to live *as if* only matter existed or *as if* only material things were important.
- 3 *The Major Addresses of Pope Pius XII*, volume I (St. Paul: North Central Publishing, 1961) p. 30.
- 4 See *Quadragesimo Anno*, no. 114.
- 5 *Ibid.*, nos. 117 and 120.
- 6 *Quadragesimo Anno*, no. 72.
- 7 *Quadragesimo Anno*, no. 80.
- 8 "The gift of authority is from God, and is, as it were, a participation of the highest of all sovereignties; and it should be exercised as the power of God is exercised — with a fatherly solicitude which not only guides the whole but reaches to details as well." Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum*, no. 28.
- 9 Encyclical *Divini Redemptoris*, no. 50.
- 10 Epistle to the Colossians, 3:23-24.