

Work is Sacred



A young lady—too young to embark upon her career yet—concluded her introduction at a Faith-Labor meeting by telling a story about her father, who came from another country many years ago searching for work. She ended by sharing the words she often heard her father say "work is sacred...that's how you feed your family"

We work for food. We work for shelter. But yes, so do animals. We humans also work as means to participate in the creation of God — to cultivate and care for creation. The dignity of work is not dependent on what you do, how others define it, or how much you earn (though "[w]ork has a place of honor because...it is an effective instrument against poverty {*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church* [CSD], 257}). This participation in God's creation alone dignifies work.

In 1891, Pope Leo XIII issued *Rerum Novarum*, considered the foundational papal encyclical on Catholic social teaching and social justice. *Rerum Novarum* specifically focused on the Catholic teaching of the "Dignity of Work", workers, the **rights of workers to a just wage** — "wages ought not to be insufficient to support a frugal and well-behaved wage-earner." (44) "sufficient to enable him comfortably to support himself, his wife and children" and with thrift to save enough to own private property. (45)—and the **rights of workers to unionize** (49). In the 120 years since, every pope has supported the rights of workers. The stately tree of workers' rights has its roots deep in the soil of the Catholic Church.

Endemic to social justice are right relationships—relationships that are equal. Charity (direct service) is necessary but charity alone without addressing the root cause of the need for charity creates an unequal relationship—he or she who receives the handout is dependent upon the grace and philanthropy of the giver.

Creating equal relationships — right relationships — or reconciling relationships is Justice and is rooted in Christianity. Unequal relationships are not just. Unequal relationships may meet our legal standards of justice but they are not just.

Money and capital are not bad; neither is inherently evil. Money and capital are tainted only when ill-gotten, when ill-used, when they have become the objective, the focus. Money talks but when money yells and people listen then society has become imbalanced.

Money is power and when money is used powerfully—to influence a vote, to affect a decision, to leverage relationships that are imbalanced—then a just society requires a counterbalance.

The relationship between an individual worker and the owner may be unbalanced. The relationship may be respectful, generous, honoring each other's dignity, but it still remains discolored by the stains of inequality: the quiet voice of a lone worker is muted by the power of capital and ownership. The rights of workers are based on their dignity as humans, not to be decided by employers, owners, or the State. (Cf. CSD, 301) (We can apply the same reasoning to favoring democracy, where every adult citizen has the right to vote, over a benevolent dictatorship.)

Unions are one structure that seeks to balance the relationship between the worker and the owner by uniting the quiet voices of each single worker (who chooses to join).

Unions, however, do not exist to be *against* ownership. Unions exist *for* its individuals and *for* their rights. "Individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution." (Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 291, 1961)

Unions exist to ensure that the rights of workers are met, including: working in a healthy environment and receiving a just wage. "[Just wage] remuneration is the most important means for achieving justice in work relationships." (CSD, 302)



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