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ETHICS AND PUBLIC POLICY CENTER. JOHN PAUL II: HUMAN WORK AND THE WORK OF THE CHURCH¹

Thank you for inviting me to join you. I wish I could be with you in Krakow and in person, but we are united in the bonds of faith and in our devotion to St. John Paul the Great.

I wish to share three sets of thoughts with you today, which I hope will form a unity in diversity on the theme of human work and the work of the church.

First, I want to summarize the key points in John Paul II's first social encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, which addresses the phenomenology, theology, and spirituality of human work. Then I want to suggest how the analysis of human work in *Laborem Exercens* was amplified and developed in the Pope's third social encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*. And then I want to turn to the work of the church, drawing on John Paul's final encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, "The Church [Born] from the Eucharist," both for what he teaches us about the essential nature and mission of the Church and to challenge some misconceptions about the Church's work that have arisen in recent years.

So, first, *Laborem Exercens*. Although modern Catholic social doctrine traces its intellectual roots to mid-19th century Germany and France, it begins in earnest with Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. Pope Pius XI marked this historic document's fortieth anniversary in 1931 with the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, and Pope John XXIII extended the tradition of an anniversary encyclical with his 1961 letter, *Mater et Magistra*. John Paul II had intended to

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continue that custom on Rerum Novarum's 90th anniversary, but that fell on May 15th, 1981, just two days after the attempt on his life. During his convalescence, the Pope continued to develop the text of the *Laborem Exercens*, which we know as "On Human Work," and the encyclical was finally published on September 14th, 1981.

In *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul II took the discussion of the social question in a more humanistic direction than his papal predecessors by focusing on the nature of work and the dignity of the human worker. In this respect, *Laborem Exercens* is the most tightly focused social encyclical in the history of modern Catholic social doctrine. It's also the most personal, as John Paul brought his own distinctive experience as a manual laborer during the Second World War to bear in analyzing the moral and spiritual meaning of human labor. The most theologically creative sections of *Laborem Exercens* unfold John Paul's teaching that, through work, men and women participate in the very action of the creator of the universe, in fulfillment of God's initial command to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it. In work, human beings are called to share in the ongoing divine creativity that sustains the world. Work is thus a vocation to which all human beings have been called from the beginning.

And our work is about who we are, not simply what we do and produce, whether we be agricultural, industrial, post-industrial or artistic laborers. Workers are above all persons, which means that work, properly understood is a matter of human beings always becoming more, not just making more. This spiritual and moral character, this subjectivity, gives work its genuine value and gives workers their special and specific dignity.

Work can often be hard. Yet in spite of this, and perhaps in a sense because of it, work is a good thing for human beings. For in work, John Paul writes, man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs; he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed in a sense becomes more a human being, deepening and ennobling his humanity. Work is thus a signal of transcendence, an ordinary reality on the far side of which is an extraordinary truth about human dignity.

That is why, following the tradition of Catholic social doctrine, John Paul teaches the principle of the priority of labor over capital, and rejects what he terms economism, i.e., considering human labor solely according to its cash value, so to speak. The priority of labor over capital also touches the question of ownership. John Paul affirms the right to own private property, but places it under what we might call a "social mortgage:" what we own should be understood as an invitation to freedom and creativity, and what we own should be held in advance of the common good. Thus workers enjoy certain rights, because they are sharers in responsibility and creativity at the work bench to which they apply themselves.

Sharing in decision making and profits in a corporation are expressions, the Pope concludes, of an economic system that recognizes the worker as “a true subject of work with an initiative of his own.” In discussing the rights of workers, John Paul defends a right to employment, a right to a just wage and appropriate benefits, and a right to organize free associations of workers, which includes the right to strike: a teaching that, in 1981, had a particular resonance in Poland, after the formation of the free and self-governing trade union, Solidarity.

These were traditional Catholic themes, as was the Pope’s affirmation of what the social doctrine had called a “family wage.” i.e., one sufficient to sustain a family without both parents working simultaneously. John Paul gave this teaching a modern twist by proposing as an alternative certain social benefits, such as family allowances or grants to mothers devoting themselves exclusively to their families.

John Paul’s argument that society will benefit when mothers are primarily engaged in child rearing may have offended proponents of some forms of feminism, but it was based on the experience of the communist attempt to erode family life by requiring both parents to work. In any case, the Pope insisted that mothers should not be penalized or suffer what he called psychological or practical discrimination if they devoted themselves to raising children for various periods of their lives. The argument, as was always the case with John Paul II, was a humanistic one, and paralleled to proposals for flex time arrangements and generous maternal leave policies that were already being developed in Western societies.

Catholic social doctrine had always regarded unions as what the Pope calls movements of solidarity or instruments for promoting social justice. Unions, the Pope taught, should not only agitate for better wages and conditions, important as these are; they should also promote the subjective dimension of work so that workers will not only have more but will realize their humanity more fully in every respect. Throughout the encyclical, John Paul uses the phrase, “the Gospel of work” to suggest that work has a spiritual dimension born, as noted previously, from human work’s participation in God’s ongoing creation of the world.

Work has also been ennobled by Christ, who spent the greater part of his earthly life as a worker. Work touches the mystery of redemption when the worker identifies his or her toil and suffering with the passion and death of the Lord. In doing so, the worker participates, John Paul writes, not only in earthly progress, but in the development of the kingdom of God.

As this bold theological ending suggests, *Laborem Exercens* is another chapter in the unfolding book of John Paul II’s Christian humanism. *Laborem Exercens* also breathes deeply of the spirit of Cyprian Kamil Norwid, the poet who taught the redeeming power of “work accepted with love” as the highest manifestation

of human freedom. Thus, *Laborem Exercens* is the first social encyclical in which a Polish poet was a major theological inspiration.

The encyclical's brief discussion of the world economic situation in 1981 is perhaps its least persuasive section. The economy in *Laborem Exercens* remains the economy of the industrial revolution. The dramatic transformation of the global economy through the digital and information technology revolutions is not on the encyclical's horizon. The encyclical is also empirically questionable at some points. It deplores the increasing costs of raw materials and energy, many of which would fall over the next decade. It worries that the world is becoming intolerably polluted, when at least part of the world, the free world was becoming less polluted than it had been in decades. John Paul's vigorous defense of free associations of workers was without a doubt a powerful endorsement of Solidarity; but the encyclical's failure to discuss the ways in which unions in free economies can become status quo institutions weakened its analysis of contemporary trade unionism.

When it was issued, *Laborem Exercens* was taken to be the pope's philosophical defense of the Solidarity movement. It was that, but it was also more. Its enduring value lies in adding a richly-textured analysis of the dignity of work to John Paul's comprehensive project of revitalizing humanism for the 21st century.

If *Laborem Exercens* suffered from a certain materialistic view of economic life (viz., that wealth is "stuff" either the land or materials extracted from the earth that are then turned into goods), *Centesimus Annus*, the encyclical issued in 1991 for the hundredth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum* corrected that deficiency in a most creative way. From *Rerum Novarum* to *Laborem Exercens*, there was a curious materialism in Catholic social doctrine. The social doctrine seemed to imagine wealth as a kind of static pie, if you will. There is a finite amount of stuff, a finite amount of wealth, in the world, and therefore the primary moral question becomes the equitable distribution of that fixed amount of wealth. In the years between *Laborem Exercens* and *Centesimus Annus*, however, John Paul II came to understand that that was a far too static view of post-industrial life; that the new information-driven economy was different; and that this meant that wealth, poverty and work all had to be reimagined. In the 1980s, John Paul came to understand that wealth was no longer to be considered simply as the ground, or stuff extracted from the ground. Wealth was created, wealth was grown by the application of human imagination, human creativity, and entrepreneurial skill to the material world.

The perfect example of this is silicon. Silicon existed on this planet for hundreds of millions of years. It was essentially worthless until someone's creative imagination figured out how you could print circuitry, electronic circuitry, on a silicon chip. The result was the IT revolution that has changed all of our lives

and that has led to the greatest explosion of wealth in history. these things. From which John Paul drew an important conclusion: wealth is human creativity applied to material objects, material things, which once seemed to have no value. The “Wewalth of nations” resides, not in the ground, but in the human mind and its creative capacities.

This shifts the moral question. Yes, private property remains important, as does the “social mortgage” on it. But what is at least as important is one’s capacity to participate in those local, national, and global networks of creativity where wealth is developed and exchanged. And in a world of expanding wealth, the moral question shifts from an equitable distribution of a fixed amount of wealth to promoting access to, and participation in, those networks of productivity and exchange where wealth is created. This also helps us understand poverty in a new key. Yes, poverty still means a lack of the material necessities of life. But it also means exclusion from those networks of production and exchange where wealth is created. And anti-poverty work means, not only remedial efforts to give the poor the means to sustain themselves, important as they are, but education and training that foster the skills and the virtues necessary to enter the worlds of production and exchange in which wealth is created and distributed. This is actually not a particularly new idea. I’m sure we’ve all heard the old saying, give a man a fish and he eats for a day, teach a man to fish and he eats for a lifetime. To empower the poor means to empower the poor to enter the networks of production and exchange where creativity, imagination, and skill are applied to the material world in order to create an expanding amount of wealth. That’s the task of genuine work to alleviate poverty: bringing people into those networks of production and exchange by allowing them to develop the God-given talents for imagination and creative work that are theirs.

One aspect of this development in *Centesimus Annus* was anticipated in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, John Paul II second social encyclical, where he wrote of a “right of economic initiative” or if you will, a right to entrepreneurship. Once again, human creativity, reflecting that spark of the divine creativity in each of us, is a distinctive characteristic of genuinely human work. Human creativity has a spiritual dimension in that, as discussed above, we become more even as we participate in the growth of wealth and as our work fosters the inclusion of more and more people in the networks where wealth is created and exchanged in productive ways.

Finally, let’s think a bit about the work of the Church. The work of the Church, I believe, was defined by the Lord himself in Matthew 28:18: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, teaching them all that I have commanded you, and baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” The Church exists for evangelization.

And evangelization was the great theme of the second half of John Paul's pontificate, as he constantly called the Church to a "New Evangelization" in which every Catholic understands himself or herself to be a missionary disciple, and everywhere is understood to be mission territory. It's essential that the Church throughout the Western world grasp the truth of this. For in this twenty-first century, there is no more ethnic transmission belt of Catholic faith; there is no more what might be called "DNA Catholicism." Ten, fifteen, twenty years from now, for example, no one in Poland is going to be able to answer the question, "why are you a Catholic?" by saying, well, of course I'm a Catholic because I'm Polish and my grandparents were Catholics. In the post-modern world in which we live, transmitting the faith through familial relationships, or through ethnic or national identity, is over. In the postmodern world, the Gospel must be proclaimed and proposed, and lifelong catechesis — lifelong learning of the truths of Catholic faith — must be the work of the Church.

Yet John Paul would insist, I think, that the ultimate aim of the New Evangelization is not simply to grow the church numerically. The ultimate aim of the New Evangelization is to expand the circle of those who offer right worship to the Thrice-Holy God: true worship, worship in spirit and truth, worship "in memory of me" (Luke 22:19), because to remember the Lord Jesus, the incarnate Son of God, is to embrace the Trinity.

That is what humanity was created for. And it is worshiping truly, worshiping the one who alone is worthy of worship, that humanity is most itself: most truly human, most fully attuned to the divine grace inviting us into fellowship with Father, Son and Holy Spirit. That, in turn, means that the ultimate work of the Church is the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

As John Paul II wrote in the encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, the Church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth does not express simply a daily experience of faith; it recapitulates the heart of the mystery of the Church. The church was born of the Paschal Mystery. For this reason, the Eucharist, which is in an outstanding way the sacrament of the Paschal Mystery stands at the center of the church's life. For at every celebration of the Eucharist, we are spiritually brought back to the Paschal Triduum. Evangelization and eucharistic worship thus constitute the essential work of the Church. For without evangelization and the Eucharist, the Church's work of service to the world is simply that of another international non-governmental organization. Moreover, evangelization and the Eucharist as the essential work of the church are mutually supportive. The Eucharist is "viaticum," "food for the journey," not only at the time of our dying; it is also food for the journey. For the Eucharist empowers us for that great work. By the same token, evangelization enlarges the eucharistic community, the gathering of those who give right worship to the one who alone

is worthy of worship. And in both the Eucharist and evangelization, the Church sanctifies the world, for the world's eternal salvation, to be sure, but also for the here-and-now. If the world worships that which is not worthy of worship, it is because it is not worshiping in spirit and truth, which means it has not been properly evangelized. And false worship inevitably leads to distress both for individuals and for society.

John Paul II was the most publicly consequential pope since the High Middle Ages. On this thirty-fifth anniversary of Poland's auto-liberation from communism, on this thirty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, we should remember with gratitude and pride that it was a son of Poland and a son of the Church who ignited the revolution of conscience, that made possible the "when" and the "how" of the revolution of 1989. We should also remember that he could do this great work because he was a radically converted Christian disciple who lived "*de Eucharistia*," who lived from the Eucharist, which was the food for his extraordinary life's journey and the nourishment that enabled him to work for the healing of the world through the ministries of the Church and through his great work of evangelization: of proclaiming the truth about the dignity of the human person who finds the truth about himself in Jesus Christ, the incarnate son of God.

Human work and the work of the Church; work, evangelization, and Eucharist: it was all of one piece in the life thought and action of John Paul the Great. And that unity can be ours, too, if we follow his example.

Thank you for inviting me to join you.

Abstract

Ethics and public policy center. John Paul II: human work and the work of the Church

This lecture explores St. John Paul II's profound reflections on the dignity of human work and the mission of the Church, drawing from his key social encyclicals. Firstly, it examines "*Laborem Exercens*," where John Paul II centers the phenomenology, theology, and spirituality of human work, affirming that through work, each person participates in God's creative action. The encyclical's personal tone, inspired by the Pope's experience as a laborer, articulates work as a path to human fulfillment and spiritual growth, stressing the priority of labor over capital and the moral imperative of workers' rights. Next, building on "*Centesimus Annus*" to the evolution of Catholic social doctrine and the Eucharist as the foundation of the Church, the analysis follows John Paul II's shift from viewing wealth as static to recognizing wealth's creation through human ingenuity, with poverty redefined as exclusion from creative networks. The lecture

highlights the importance of education and economic participation as antidotes to poverty. Finally, it draws from “Ecclesia de Eucharistia” to present the Church’s principal work: evangelization and the celebration of the Eucharist. The address underscores that true worship and missionary discipleship are inseparable, and the celebration of the Eucharist empowers the Church’s mission in the world. In John Paul II’s vision, human work and the Church’s work form a unified vocation—a call to fulfill human dignity through creative labor, fellowship, and faith. The legacy offers a Christian humanism that integrates work, social justice, and sacramental life.

Keywords: John Paul II, human work, Catholic social teaching, evangelization, Eucharist

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