

COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 61

Human work – The prophetic value of *Rerum Novarum*

The importance of labour standards

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The global economy today has grown at a very extraordinary pace, because of the easy movement of people, capital and goods between countries aided by the use of new technologies.

This has created an interdependent global economic network affecting virtually every person on earth. This globalisation has created opportunities and benefits for many, yet at the same time millions of workers and employers worldwide have had to face new challenges.

The globalised economy has displaced workers and enterprises to new locations, resulted in the sudden accumulation or flight of capital, and caused financial instability in certain regions. Despite initial optimism, globalisation has not ushered in an era of prosperity for all. “In 2001 it was estimated that virtually half of the world's population survived on US\$2 or less per day, while some 1.1 billion people, or 21% of the world's population, were living on US\$1 or less per day” (ILO, June 2005).

The *Compendium* says: “The course of history is marked by the profound transformation and the exhilaration conquests of work, but also by the exploitation of so many workers and an offence to their dignity. The Industrial Revolution presented for the Church a critical challenge to which her social Magisterium responded forcefully and prophetically, affirming universally valid and perennially relevant principles in support of workers and their rights.”

“For centuries the Church’s message was addressed to agricultural societies, characterised by regular cyclical rhythms. Now the Gospel had to be preached and lived in a new *areopagus*, in the tumult of social events in a more dynamic society, taking into account the complexities of new phenomena of the unimaginable transformations brought about by mechanization.

At the centre of the Church’s pastoral concern was the ever urgent worker question, that is, the problem of the exploitation of workers brought about by the new industrial organisation of labour, capitalistically oriented, and the problem, no less serious, of ideological manipulation – socialist and communist – of the just claims advanced by the world of labour. The reflections and warnings contained in the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* of Pope Leo XIII are placed in this historical context.”

“*Rerum Novarum* is above all a heartfelt defence of the inalienable dignity of workers, connected with importance of the right to property, the principle of cooperation among the social classes, the rights of the weak and the poor, the obligations of workers and employers and the right to form associations.”

In 1919 the International Labour Organisation (ILO) was created in recognition of the fact that labour conditions involved injustice, hardship and privation to large numbers of people, which

would create unrest that could threaten the peace and security of the world. The ILO sought to establish a system of international labour standards - international conventions and recommendations drawn up by representatives of governments, employers and workers from around the world - covering all matters related to work.

The ILO, like the Church, recognised that the global economy needed clear rules in order to ensure that economic progress would go hand in hand with social justice, prosperity and peace for all. Since 1919, the ILO has maintained and developed a system of international labour standards aimed at promoting opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and dignity.

“The orientation of ideas expressed in the Encyclical strengthened the commitment to vitalise Christian social life, which was seen in the birth and consolidation of numerous initiatives of high civic profile: groups and centres for social studies, associations, worker organisations, unions, cooperatives, rural banks, insurance groups and assistance organisations. All of this gave great momentum to labour-related legislation for the protection of workers, above all children and women; to instruction and to the improvement of salaries and cleanliness in the work environment.”

“Starting with *Rerum Novarum*, the Church has never stopped considering the problems of workers within the context of a social question which has progressively taken on worldwide dimensions (*Laborem Exercens*).

The Encyclical *Laborem Exercens* enhances the personalistic vision that characterised previous social documents, indicating the need for a deeper understanding of the meaning and tasks that work entails. It does this in consideration of the fact that “fresh questions and problems are always arising, there are always fresh hopes, but also fresh fears and threats, connected with this basic dimension of human existence: man’s life is built up every day from work, from work it derives its specific dignity, but at the same time work contains the unceasing measure of human toil and suffering, and also of the harm and injustice which penetrate deeply into social life within individual nations and on the international level (*Laborem Exercens*).

In fact, work is the ‘essential key’ (*Laborem Exercens*) to the whole social question and is the condition not only for economic development but also for the cultural and moral development of persons, the family, society and the entire human race.”

This highlights the need for us as members of the Church to be vigilant of the ever-changing environmental conditions that affect working life. We must ensure that our governments support the international standards for labour as this ensures a level playing field in the global economy; and will help governments and employers to avoid the temptation of lowering labour standards in the belief that this could give them a greater comparative advantage.

It is in everyone's interest to see these rules applied across the board, so that those who do not put them into practice do not undermine the efforts of those who do.

Next week we move into part three of Chapter 6 – The dignity of work - the subjective and objective dimensions of work