

COMPENDIUM ON CHURCH'S SOCIAL TEACHING PART 62

The dignity of work - Subjective and objective dimensions of work 1

By Nadine Bushell 20.08.06

Member of the Catholic Commission for Social Justice

Many of us have had countless conversations with friends and acquaintances, who after attaining their various professional qualifications and securing their “dream job” have asked themselves if this is really what they want to do or is this all they want out of life.

Many young professionals in particular have not received the sense of accomplishment or rather joy, out of their jobs. This feeling of dissatisfaction goes beyond the increased stress levels that are affecting all vocations and professions. Many wonder if they have actually chosen the right career path. This highlights what the compendium tells us today that there are two dimensions to work.

“Human work has a twofold significance: objective and subjective. In the objective sense, it is the sum of activities, resources, instruments and technologies used by men and women to produce things, to exercise dominion over the earth, in the words of the Book of Genesis. In the subjective sense, work is the activity of the human person as a dynamic being capable of performing a variety of actions that are part of the work process and that correspond to his personal vocation: “Man has to subdue the earth and dominate it, because as the ‘image of God’ he is a person, that is to say, a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself, and with a tendency to self-realisation. As a person, man is therefore the subject of work (*Laborem Exercens*)”.

“Work in the objective sense constitutes the contingent aspect of human activity, which constantly varies in its expressions according to the changing technological, cultural, social and political conditions.”

Relating this to the current working population – many persons have the most up to date physical tools and resources (i.e. chairs, computer hardware and software, vehicles etc) to complete the work they are assigned to do; please note however, there are instances when this may not be entirely true.

The objective part is basically well taken care of, but the most important part of the job is not this; it is the subjective aspect that experiences the most challenge, which is reflected in the sentiments of the young adult professionals referred to in the first paragraph.

The *Compendium* tells us “work in the subjective sense, however, represents its stable dimension, since it does not depend on what people produce or on the type of activity they undertake, but only and exclusively on their dignity as human beings. This is the crux of the matter.

We all must feel a sense of purpose in the work that we do, it is only minimally about what activities we engage in; it is about how these activities make us feel as individuals, are we proud of what we do, do we think we have done something valuable? For us as individuals it highlights the importance of giving critical consideration to our career paths – we must not only concentrate

on what the world or our parents or society think we should be; we must select what we think will give us the greatest joy.

The distinction between the objective and the subjective “is critical, both for understanding what the ultimate foundation of the value and dignity of work is, and with regard to the difficulties of organising economic and social systems that respect human rights.”

“This subjectivity gives work its particular dignity, which does not allow that it be considered a simple commodity or an impersonal element of the apparatus for productivity. Cut off from its lesser or greater objective value, work is an essential expression of the person, it is an *actus personae*.

Any form of materialism or economic tenet that tries to reduce the worker to being a mere instrument of production, a simple labour force with an exclusively material value, would end up hopelessly distorting the essence of work and stripping it of its most noble and basic human finality. The human person is the measure of the dignity of work: ‘In fact there is no doubt that human work has an ethical value of its own, which clearly and directly remains linked to the fact that the one who carries it out is a person’ (*Laborem Exercens*).”

This highlights the critical role that human resource management has to play in the workplace today to ensure that workers are allowed to experience the dignity that work can bring. It must be all encompassing, taking into account the entire person.

There is therefore a critical role for areas such as compensation management and job design which ensures that workers’ basic human rights are achieved and areas such as organisational behaviour, motivation theory and employee assistance programmes which ensure that the person who does the work is happy and experiences the joy of working.

“Human work not only proceeds from the person, but it is also essentially ordered to and has its final goal in the human person. Independently of its objective content, work must be oriented to the subject who performs it, because the end of work, any work whatsoever, always remains the human person.

Even if one cannot ignore the objective component of work with regard to its quality, this component must nonetheless be subordinated to the self-realisation of the person, and therefore to the subjective dimension, thanks to which it is possible to affirm that work is for man and not man for work.

‘It is always man who is the purpose of work, whatever work it is that is done by man – even if the common scale of values rates it as the merest ‘service,’ as the most alienating work (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*).’”

Next week we move into part two of this topic which deals with the social dimension of work.