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The dignity of work – The relationship between labour and private property

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What is private property? Private property is land, capital, financial resources, technology, people and knowledge. Why is it important? In order to answer this question we must understand the aspects of private property. The first aspect is the right to private property and the second is how private property is used. "The Church's social Magisterium sees an expression of the relationship between labour and capital also in the institution of private property, in the right to and the use of private property."

An important principle with regard to the right to private property, is that private property should be an opportunity that everyone is afforded, however this should not be at the expense of others, or it should not prevent other persons from working towards their goals and objectives and securing a better life for themselves. "The right to private property is subordinated to the principle of the universal destination of goods and must not constitute a reason for impeding the work or development of others."

Another important principle is that "property, which is acquired in the first place through work, must be placed at the service of work. This is particularly true regarding the possession of the means of production, but the same principle also concerns the goods proper to the world of finance, technology, knowledge, and personnel."

The means of production, which is one form of private property, has special importance. It must, according to the Church's doctrine, be used for the improvement of the society; otherwise it is of no value. Even worse is when it is used to disadvantage others and for exploitation. "The means of production 'cannot be possessed against labour, they cannot even be possessed for possession's sake (*Laborem Exercens*)'.

It becomes illegitimate to possess them when property 'is not utilised or when it serves to impede the work of others, in an effort to gain a profit which is not the result of the overall expansion of work and the wealth of society, but rather is the result of curbing them or of illicit exploitation, speculation or the breaking of solidarity among working people (*Centesimus Annus*).'"

The fact that organisations such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) exist indicates that problems of exploitation and stifling of the rights of others through ownership of private property existed in times gone by and still exist. We therefore have a responsibility to ensure that the goods that we earn and own are not used to the disadvantage of others, but rather promote their development.

"Private and public property, as well as the various mechanisms of the economic system, must be oriented to an economy of service to humankind, so that they contribute to putting into effect the principle of the universal destination of goods. The issue of ownership and use of new technologies and knowledge – which in our day constitute a particular form of property that is no

less important than ownership of land or capital (*Centesimus Annus*) – becomes significant in this perspective.

These resources, like all goods, have a universal destination; they too must be placed in a context of legal norms and social rules that guarantee that they will be used according to the criteria of justice, equity and respect of human rights.

The new discoveries and technologies, thanks to their enormous potential, can make a decisive contribution to the promotion of social progress; but if they remain concentrated in the wealthier countries or in the hands of a small number of powerful groups, they risk becoming sources of unemployment and increasing the gap between developed and underdeveloped areas.”