

## Finding Dignity and Purpose in Work

by Daniel S. Mulhall

What is your attitude toward work? Do you work in order to live, or do you live in order to work? How do you express yourself through your work? Do you feel that you accomplish something of value most days, or do you feel that your labor is meaningless toil that only achieves your minimal paycheck?

These questions reflect some of the many attitudes that people have toward work.

Catholic social teaching has much to say about the importance of work for the human person. While recognizing that people often perform jobs that may seem unimportant or even meaningless, the Church's teaching also notes that work helps to shape our character. Work also helps us to participate more actively in God's creative activity.

The importance of work is found throughout the first social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (*On Capital and Labor*), published by Pope Leo XIII in 1891. The document was written when workers were moving from farming and crafting to being cogs on factory assembly lines.



Pope Leo identifies a series of rights that every worker is owed, including the right to a fair wage, reasonable work hours, decent working conditions and being able to form unions to negotiate for them with business owners.

According to the pope, these rights flow from the worker's dignity: "Now, when man thus turns the activity of his mind and the strength of his body toward procuring the fruits of nature, by such act he makes his own that portion of nature's field which he cultivates—that portion on which he leaves, as it were, the impress of his personality; and it cannot but be just that he should possess that portion as his very own, and have a right to hold it without any one being justified in violating that right."

The fullest presentation of the Church's social teaching about the dignity of work is found in St. John Paul II's 1982 encyclical, *Laborem Exercens* (*On Human Work*). In this magisterial teaching, St. John Paul II builds upon the foundation laid down by *Rerum Novarum*, published 90 years earlier.

The encyclical begins by stating the importance of work for society. For it is only through work that we earn a living, not just for ourselves but for a family. It is where we increase knowledge, where we help advance society through science and technology, and elevate "unceasingly the cultural and moral level" of society.

Through work we fulfill our God-given responsibility to make the world a better place and to make visible "the invisible God." According to St. John Paul II, it is through work that we are distinguished from the rest of creation and fulfill our "very nature."

St. John Paul II writes that the Church finds the source of the conviction that “work is a fundamental dimension of human existence” in the first few lines of the Book of Genesis. Being created in God’s image and likeness, men and women are charged with being fruitful and filling the earth. The pope further states that in carrying out this mandate, “every human being reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe.”

What makes work valuable is that it is done by the efforts of a human being, and not by the quality of what is produced or whether it involves great toil. When we turn our minds to work, we imbue it with dignity. The most meaningless of jobs can have great worth simply by the dignity of the workers who labor.

St. John Paul II writes, “The primary basis of the value of work is man himself, who is its subject.”

Thus, work “is for man” and not man “for work.” Finally, “it is always man who is the purpose of the 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 monotonous, even the most alienating work.”

In *Laborem Exercens*, St. John Paul II notes how work today is often dehumanizing, treating what the worker produces and sells to the employer for a wage as “merchandise.”

According to St. John Paul II’s writings, such thinking misapplies the teaching of Genesis. What is important is the person doing the work, not what the work produces. Work exists as a way for humans to express their God-given dignity; their dignity is not determined by the work they do.

That said, work is most valuable when it allows us to express this dignity and helps us to recognize that we are created with this dignity:

“If one wishes to define more clearly the ethical meaning of work, it is this truth that one must particularly keep in mind. Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes ‘more a human being.’”

In so doing, we share in God’s work of creation.

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This article was originally published on Catholic News Service’s *Faith Alive!*

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