

Care is Work, Work is Care¹

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I borrow the title of this presentation from the report published in 2020 by the international research project called “The Future of Work – Labour after *Laudato Si'*,” after more than three years of work. The basic idea behind the project was to use integral ecology as the framework within which to imagine the future of work. The Future of Work was also the name of the initiative launched by the International Labor Organization (ILO) to prepare the celebration of the centenary of its foundation in 2019. In a way, the ambition of our Project was to come up with a contribution to the ILO Initiative from the perspective of the Catholic Church and its social teaching. On the other hand, we also wanted to offer “food for thought and action” to Catholic-inspired organizations active in the world of work, many of which hold a consultative status at the ILO.

Carrying out the project required the study of Pope Francis’ teachings on work and labour in depth, in *Laudato Si'* and not only there. The first fruit was the publication of *Il lavoro è dignità*² in 2018, an organised selection of the Pontiff’s documents and speeches on work and labour issues in the first five years of his pontificate. The abundance of the material considered in the book shows how strong a concern work is for Pope Francis. For example, a meeting with the world of work is scheduled in most of his apostolic journeys. For reasons of time, this presentation will try to explore the main features of Pope Francis’ teachings on work by focussing on the most significant and authoritative documents, namely:

- The encyclical *Laudato si'*³ (henceforth LS), which dedicates a section consisting of nos. 124-129 to work, under the title “The need to protect employment.”⁴
- The encyclical *Fratelli tutti*⁵ (henceforth FT), in which references to work and labour issues are scattered throughout the whole text, with a significant concentration in chapter 3 (nos. 110, 116, 123, 127), which sketches the profile of an inclusive and solidarity-based society, and in chapter 5 (nos. 162, 168-169), dedicated to outlining “a better kind of politics.” In both cases, work appears closely connected to the promotion of common good, and therefore to politics.
- The *Message to Participants in the 108th Session of the International Labour Conference*⁶.
- The *Video Message on the occasion of the 109th Session of the International Labour Conference*⁷.

¹ This presentation picks up some elements that are dealt with more extensively in Foglizzo P. – Martinot-Lagarde P., «The Future of Work after *Laudato Si'*», in AZETSOP J. –CONVERSI P., *Foundations of integral ecology*, G&B Press, Rome 2022.

² G. COSTA – P. FOGLIZZO (a cura di), *Il lavoro è dignità. Le parole di Papa Francesco*, Ediesse, Roma 2018.

³ POPE FRANCIS, Encyclical letter *Laudato si'*, 24 May 2015. In the text, references will appear in round brackets. For all papal and Church documents, quotes and references point to the official English text available in the Vatican website.

⁴ Considering the actual content of the section and the original Spanish title “*Necesidad de preservar el trabajo*”, the English translation appears inaccurate: “The need to protect labour” or “The need to protect work” would be better alternatives.

⁵ POPE FRANCIS, Encyclical letter *Fratelli tutti*, 3 October 2020. References will appear in the text in round brackets.

⁶ POPE FRANCIS, *Message to Participants in the 108th Session of the International Labour Conference*, 10 June 2019.

Even though in the available time there will be no chance to touch upon them, the four Addresses to the World Meetings of Popular Movements (2014, 2015, 2016, 2021) need to be at least mentioned here, given the relevance of the underlying approach.

Rethinking work

The opening paragraph of the section of work in LS clearly situates its reflection within the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and Christian anthropology: “Any approach to an integral ecology, which by definition does not exclude human beings, needs to take account of the value of labour, as Saint John Paul II wisely noted in his Encyclical *Laborem exercens*” (LS, no. 124). The goal is to explore the meaning and relevance of that tradition within a context that requires a new paradigm and approach, namely integral ecology. In the same sense, the Benedictine spirituality of *Ora et labora* is recalled in no. 126, and Charles de Foucauld in no. 125.

Reference to theology, spirituality and CST is a way to remark that the first challenge regarding work is not “practical” or “technical” – providing a decent job to all those who lack one – but theoretical. It is a matter of “understanding,” of reflecting on the anthropological meaning of work. Otherwise, any measure or reform we undertake could create a backlash: if we are not clear on the ends, only by a happy chance can we choose the right means. In our context of accelerating change, we need to “rethink work.”⁸ This is the first point made by no. 125:

If we reflect on the proper relationship between human beings and the world around us, we see the need for a correct understanding of work; if we talk about the relationship between human beings and things, the question arises as to the meaning and purpose of all human activity. This has to do not only with manual or agricultural labour but with any activity involving a modification of existing reality, from producing a social report to the design of a technological development. Underlying every form of work is a concept of the relationship which we can and must have with what is other than ourselves (LS, no. 125).

An innovative notion of work is presented here: “any activity involving a modification of existing reality,” without any reference to financial compensation, which is normally considered the key element of work. This is a radical departure from dominant labour market discourse, which defines work as the contractual exchange between the worker’s activity and its remuneration by the employer. In the *Message to Participants in the 108th Session of the International Labour Conference* and with a reference to LS, no. 128, Pope Francis emphasized the poverty of the latter approach: “Work is not just something that we do in exchange for something else. Work is first and foremost ‘a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfilment.’” He reiterates this broader vision of work in FT:

⁷ POPE FRANCIS, *Video Message on the occasion of the 109th Session of the International Labour Conference*, 17 June 2021.

⁸ See DE LA ROCHEFOUCAULD A. – MARENGHI C. M. (eds.), *Rethinking Labour. Ethical Reflections on the Future of Work*, FCIV, Chambésy (CH) 2018, available at www.fciv.org/downloads/WP10-Book.pdf (consulted on 03/01/2022). The volume is the result of a joint effort of The Caritas in Veritate Foundation and “The Future of Work – Labour after *Laudato si*” Project.

In a genuinely developed society, work is an essential dimension of social life, for it is not only a means of earning one's daily bread, but also of personal growth, the building of healthy relationships, self-expression and the exchange of gifts. Work gives us a sense of shared responsibility for the development of the world, and ultimately, for our life as a people (FT, no. 162).

In contrast, a reductionist vision of work eliminates the richest human experiences, linked to action in a spirit of gratuitousness: via work, we express the meaning of existence and grow toward human flourishing. In his encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, Benedict XVI had already warned against the risk of impoverishment implicit in the expulsion of the principle of gratuitousness from the economy, including the world of work:

The great challenge before us, accentuated by the problems of development in this global era and made even more urgent by the economic and financial crisis, is to demonstrate, in thinking and behaviour, not only that traditional principles of social ethics like transparency, honesty and responsibility cannot be ignored or attenuated, but also that in commercial relationships the principle of gratuitousness and the logic of gift as an expression of fraternity can and must find their place within normal economic activity. This is a human demand at the present time, but it is also demanded by economic logic. It is a demand both of charity and of truth⁹.

Rethinking work requires questioning its relationship with remuneration, which cannot constitute its only purpose. But this is no pulling back from the fight for workers' rights. Decoupling the notion of work from financial remuneration can be no excuse for exploitation.

A second very relevant element in no. 125 is the idea that work is a form of relationship "with what is other than ourselves." We can say that LS proposes a relational notion of work. Work involves many links: with people, but also with creation. This vision differs from the prevailing concept of work in our strongly individualistic culture. In the *Message to Participants in the 108th Session of the International Labour Conference* Pope Francis insists on this relational notion of work and its various dimensions:

As well as being essential to the realization of the person, work is also fundamental to social development. My predecessor Saint John Paul II put it beautifully, when he explained that "work is work with others and work for others;"¹⁰ and as its fruit, labour offers "occasions for exchange, relationship and encounter."¹¹ [...] Yet our vocation to work is also inextricably connected with the way we interact with our environment and with nature. We are called to work, to "till and to keep" the garden of the world (cf. *Genesis* 2:15), that is, to cultivate the ground of the earth to serve our needs without failing to take care of and protect it. Work is a path to growth, but only when it is an integral growth that contributes to the entire ecosystem of life: to individuals, societies and the planet.

⁹ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical letter *Caritas in veritate*, 29 giugno 2009, no. 36.

¹⁰ JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical letter *Centesimus annus*, 1 May 1991, no. 31.

¹¹ PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, 2004, no. 273.

Taking up a keyword of Pope Francis' magisterium (also appearing in the previous quote), we may call this notion of work "integral" as opposed to "reductionist." Again, this is no novelty, but a vision which is deeply grounded in the tradition of Catholic Social Teaching: "Since work in its subjective aspect is always a personal action, an *actus personae*, it follows that the whole person, body and spirit, participates in it, whether it is manual or intellectual work."¹² As it involves the whole person, work can also become a path to personal integration, and therefore fulfilment.

Care, work and dignity

Work is a factor of humanization because it offers opportunities to build and cultivate relationships. This is why it needs to include a dimension of care: without care, relationships die and become toxic for the people involved. Work is care, we can legitimately say, at least a work that is fully human, that is really *actus personae*.

The reverse sentence "care is work" is also true. As LS insists, care for our common home requires radical transformation of the economic system. Such transformation cannot take place without work, and without a lot of it! While serving as a transformative power, work and the world of work will undergo major changes throughout the process. Work has to become more and more capable of caring, but it also needs to be taken care of. In particular, the burden of the transformation cannot fall mainly on the shoulders of the weaker, namely marginal workers who may fail to adapt their skills or acquire new ones, and risk being expelled from the labour market.

This work-care link has deep theological rooting. In the very first page of the book of *Genesis*, God is introduced as someone who works, and rests on the seventh day. Creation is God's work, at the very beginning, but also in sustaining and protecting the life of all creatures, as we can read in many passages, e.g. *Psalms* 104. In other words, we can say that work is what God does when he takes care of His creation. And He does not want to work alone. Since the very beginning, He invites human beings to cooperate in taking care of creation: "The Lord God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it." (*Genesis* 2:15) *Laborem exercens* expresses this vision very clearly and powerfully:

The word of God's revelation is profoundly marked by the fundamental truth that man, created in the image of God, shares by his work in the activity of the Creator and that, within the limits of his own human capabilities, man in a sense continues to develop that activity, and perfects it as he advances further and further in the discovery of the resources and values contained in the whole of creation. We find this truth at the very beginning of Sacred Scripture, in the Book of *Genesis*, where the creation activity itself is presented in the form of "work" done by God during "six days," "resting" on the seventh day.¹³

Laborem exercens invites us to go further and deeper, and experience the Christological meaning of work. Actually, work is not only God's plan for women and men, but the option He made for Himself. When He became a man, the Son of God spent most of His life working as a craftsman: "the eloquence of the life of Christ is unequivocal: he belongs to the 'working world', he

¹² JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical letter *Laborem exercens*, 14 September 1981, no. 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, no. 25.

has appreciation and respect for human work.”¹⁴ This tells us that work has a specific place in the plan of salvation, which is the accomplishment of God’s caring love for men and women and the whole of creation. For Jesus’ disciples, work is a way to walk in his footsteps: “Sweat and toil, which work necessarily involves in the present condition of the human race, present the Christian and everyone who is called to follow Christ with the possibility of sharing lovingly in the work that Christ came to do.”¹⁵

In this light, a striking and spiritually very enriching parallelism binds *Laborem exercens* and LS. The former presents work as a road to meet Jesus Christ and follow him. LS proposes care for our common home as the pathway to meet the same Jesus Christ as the Logos mysteriously filling the whole universe.

Taking up the work-care link is the latest development of Pope Francis’ teaching on work. He does it in his *Video Message on the occasion of the 109th Session of the International Labour Conference*, with a direct reference to the report *Care is Work, Work is Care* and with a strong emphasis on the dignity of workers:

if work is a relationship, then it must include the dimension of care, because no relationship can survive without care. Here we are not just referring to the work of assistance: the pandemic reminds us of its fundamental importance, which perhaps we have overlooked. Care goes further; it must be a dimension of all work. Work that does not take care, that destroys Creation, that endangers the survival of future generations, does not respect the dignity of workers and cannot be considered decent. On the contrary, work that cares, that contributes to the restoration of full human dignity, will help to ensure a sustainable future for future generations.¹⁶ And this dimension of care involves, first and foremost, the workers. In other words, a question we can ask ourselves in our daily lives: how does a business, for example, take care of its workers?

An important element of this text is the reference to the notion of “decent work,” which is the cornerstone of the activity of the ILO (the body he is addressing). Later it has been adopted as a kind of platform for action by actors of very different backgrounds such as trade unions, NGOs, grassroots and civil society movements and other international organizations. The Church has recognised the potential of this notion since the very beginning; Saint John Paul II endorsed it on the occasion of the celebration of the Jubilee of Workers (May 1st 2000) and later Benedict XVI took it up in no. 63 of *Caritas in veritate*. The ongoing dialogue among CST, social sciences, and social action is carried on by Pope Francis.

CST receives a notion that resonates very much with its tradition, and at the same time offers a contribution to widen its scope. This is true in many senses and in many ways, and it is not possible to show them all here. But reading the quote from the 2021 Message to the International Labour Conference shows very clearly that a relational notion of work pushes for an extension of the Decent Work Agenda. Respect for workers’ rights in terms of pay, hours, security or freedom to unionize are not enough to define decent work, as most people are accustomed to thinking. Work cannot be deemed decent when it produces death or suffering for others; or when it causes

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 26.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 27.

¹⁶ Cf. *Care is work, work is care*, Report of “The Future of Work – Labour after *Laudato si*” Project, <https://futureofwork-labourafterlaudatosi.net/> (appearing as footnote no. 4 in the original text).

environmental degradation or excessive consumption of non-renewable resources that jeopardize the opportunities for future generations to live in dignity

The wording and the vocabulary may sound very different, but the basic idea is very close to the one expressed by Leo XIII at the beginning of the encyclical *Rerum novarum*. From the concern for the miserable conditions of the working class, which are a violation of their human dignity, stems the conclusion that a production system in which “greed” (in *Rerum novarum* terms) or the obsession “with maximizing profits” (with the words of LS, no. 190) crowd out care – and care for workers in the first instance – quickly becomes inhumane.

In any case we clearly see, and on this there is general agreement, that some opportune remedy must be found quickly for the misery and wretchedness pressing so unjustly on the majority of the working class: for the ancient workingmen’s guilds were abolished in the last century, and no other protective organization took their place. Public institutions and the laws set aside the ancient religion. Hence, by degrees it has come to pass that working men have been surrendered, isolated and helpless, to the hardheartedness of employers and the greed of unchecked competition. The mischief has been increased by rapacious usury, which, although more than once condemned by the Church, is nevertheless, under a different guise, but with like injustice, still practiced by covetous and grasping men. To this must be added that the hiring of labor and the conduct of trade are concentrated in the hands of comparatively few; so that a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the laboring poor a yoke little better than that of slavery itself.¹⁷

Work, care and dignity have been at the core of Catholic Social Teaching since its first steps, and continue to be major drivers of its development. The publication of *Rerum novarum* in 1891 opened a season of renewed commitment of Catholics within the world of work, which brought to life a variety of approaches, institutions and organizations, such as trade unions, workers’ associations and cooperatives. Integral ecology, with the relational notion of work it includes, and the vision of fraternity and social friendship put forward by FT, can hopefully have the same mobilizing effect.

¹⁷ LEO XIII, Encyclical letter *Rerum novarum*, 15 maggio 1891, no. 3.