**THE DIGNITY OF WORK**

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Grocery clerks, shelf stockers, gas station attendants, truckers, garbage collectors: Almost overnight, all these people—and many more—have become the “heroes” of our global crisis. These are the people who are running risks daily to keep us fed and our supply chains functioning while we self-isolate at home. Just weeks ago, workers like these were viewed quite differently—and often taken for granted—by many in our society. But suddenly we have realized that these individuals and their work are “essential.”

Of course, it always *was* essential, pandemic or no pandemic. But now, for the first time, we are forced to stop and take notice of what we have taken for granted. This is one of the strange but welcome benefits coming out of this crisis—that our eyes have been opened to the value of all honest work, even that of the humblest sort.

**Work and the common good**

The Catholic Church has always emphasized the great dignity and necessity of work. As the *Catechism* states: “Human work proceeds directly from persons created in the image of God and called to prolong the work of creation by subduing the earth, both with and for one another. Hence work is a duty: ‘If anyone will not work, let him not eat.’ Work honours the Creator’s gifts and the talents received from Him.”

In our highly decadent society, the dignity of work is often obscured by the naked greed that motivates a great deal of our work. Wealth, of course, is not in itself evil. Indeed, to the extent that wealth-creation lifts people out of abject poverty and enables humans to live more dignified lives, it is a positive good. However, the Church’s social teaching is replete with reminders that all work must first and foremost be oriented toward building up the common good.

The *Catechism* defines the common good as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily.”

In a humane economy, the profit-motive always takes a back seat to ethical considerations. Work is only good to the extent that it supports the common good, and the common good is built up only to the extent that our work is consonant with and protects the dignity of the human person.

As Pope Benedict XVI wrote in *Caritas in veritate:* “I would like to remind everyone, especially governments engaged in boosting the world’s economic and social assets, that the primary capital to be safeguarded and valued is man, the human person in his or her integrity: ‘Man is the source, the focus and the aim of all economic and social life.’” (para. 15)

Work is for man, and not man for work.

**Work as service**

St. John Paul II celebrated work, writing in *Laborem exercens*: “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 fulfilment* as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes ‘more a human being.’” *(Emphasis in original)*

The millions of temporarily unemployed are learning the truth of this statement in a painful way. Many people spend their days dreaming about having nothing to do but sit at home watching TV. Now that they have been laid off, they are confronted with the fact that human beings, as images of the Creator, are *creative* beings, and without the creative activity of work in our lives, we wither away. It is for this reason that governments must strive to get as many people back to work as soon as possible. There is a very real risk that widescale unemployment could prove to be nearly as catastrophic for physical and mental health as the virus that caused the unemployment.

However, on a more positive note, many of us are suddenly seeing, for the first time, the various ways our work makes us “more human” by putting us in service to our fellow human beings. That grocery clerk may have taken that part-time job simply because she wanted to earn a little extra cash to fund a sought-for vacation. However, now that she is faced with the decision of whether to continue this work during a pandemic, she has come face-to-face with what her work has been all along—a form of service that contributes to the common good.

Honest work always has this communal, service-oriented aspect to it. However, nowhere has this been made more manifest than in our hospitals and long-term care facilities. Many healthcare workers, on the front lines of this pandemic, are being reminded of the truly *sacred* aspect of medical work. They are being reminded that healthcare is not just a job. It’s a *vocation*.

*“In work, the person exercises and fulfils in part the potential inscribed in his nature. The primordial value of labour stems from man himself, its author and its beneficiary. Work is for man, not man for work. Everyone should be able to draw from work the means of providing for his life and that of his family, and of serving the human community.” —* Catechism of the Catholic Church, *2428.*