Chapter I

Introduction: From the Theology of Human Work to the Ethics of the Worker

On the Method and Philosophy of this Book

The concept of work is a considerably complex phenomenon which can be examined and viewed from a variety of perspectives. It embraces a wide range of meanings and issues, and it cannot be considered in isolation from its main domain of interest that is man and his life. According to the biblical story of Adam, work was man's original destiny. The Bible, regarded as the best source of knowledge about the beginnings of human toil on earth, in the Book of Genesis posed an important question whether indeed men had to work because of a curse laid upon Adam after he disobeyed God. In Genesis, Adam was to eat his bread in sorrow and by the sweat of his face as he was originally set by God in Eden "to till it and to guard it" [Genesis (2:15)].

Elsewhere, the Book of Proverbs recommends frugality and the imitation of the ant which prepares food for winter in the summer: "Go to the ant […], watch her ways and get wisdom. She has no overseer, no governor or ruler; but in summer she prepares her store of food and lays in her supplies at harvest" [Proverbs (6:6–9)]. Another Wisdom Book, Sirach, also known as Ecclesiasticus, insists that everything that is needed for daily life should be earned and not begged for: "Better is he that laboureth and aboundeth in all things, than he that boasteth himself, and wanteth bread;" "My son, lead not a beggar's life; for better it is to die than to beg;" "The life of him that dependeth on another man's table is not to be counted for a life;" "Begging is sweet in the mouth of the shameless: but in his belly there shall burn a fire" [Ecclesiasticus (10:27, 40:28–30)]. The teaching of Jesus also points to the importance of work and natural productivity, mainly in regard to wheat and grapes, whereas Saint Luke criticizes those who by all means avoid working and offer typical excuses, such as the need to visit a field, or the fact of a recent marriage [Luke (14:18–20)].

The biblical tradition was far more ambiguous than the classical one which promoted work not only as a duty toward other people and in accordance with God's order but, most of all, as the essence of human existence

on earth, both providing maintenance in life and establishing one's self-respect and self-worth. Such a philosophical view was explicitly expressed by Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius (A.D. 121–180), one of the most prominent Stoic philosophers. His volume *Meditations*, written in Greek between 170 and 180, reflects the practical philosophical wisdom of Stoicism:

> In the morning when you rise unwillingly let this thought be present—I am rising to the work of human being. Why then am I dissatisfied if I am going to the things for which I exist and for which I was brought into the world? Or have I been made for this to lie in the bedclothes and keep myself warm? But this is more pleasant. Do you exist then to take your pleasure and not at all for action and exertion? Do you not see the little plants, the little birds, the ants, the spiders, the bees working together to put in order their several parts of the universe? And are you unwilling to do the work of a human being, and do you not make haste to do that which is according to your nature?[1]

Thus man cannot live a full life without a personal engagement in any kind of activity as work is the core of the life of both an individual and a whole society. Accordingly, a person who refuses to work or who openly expresses a negative attitude to work is actually admitting his failure as a man, and his inability to fulfill his moral role in society. Such an attitude testifies to the incapacity to achieve and perform a socially useful job and, no less importantly, a denial of basic goals in life, whereas the affirmative response to work is a confirmation and a measure of one's success, and an ability to challenge the demands of life. Admittedly, work in the biblical tradition assumed a profoundly religious significance: Adam was not an idler; he was placed in Eden to work and watch the garden of God whereas the Judeo-Christian God himself "worked" and "rested."

The notion of work as well as a broader psychological, social, religious and economic perspective on the value of work and its meaning to people were thoroughly explored and considerably documented only in the last century. Therefore, there is little or no evidence of how the "common man" regarded work in earlier times. The rare and only clues to the meaning of work that have survived come from the philosophical and religious writers of the day and refer to the ideal of work held by the elite. The common people in traditional societies never contemplated the essence and meaning of work. They were what they produced: a man's work provided him with an identity that was recognized both by himself and by others. However,

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1. Marcus Aurelius, *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius*. Trans. by George Long (Danbury, Conn.: Grolier, 1980), 45.

the attitudes to work can only be considered and understood in a broader context of the social and cultural norms of human societies in which work was performed. Although historical sources provide little information about how people worked and how they perceived their work, even the fragmentary evidence shows that work was constructed in different ways at different times and in different types of societies, and it still remains the most significant factor which determines the form and organization of each society.

In the most traditional communities the terms such as **work** or **occupation** did not exist, at least in their modern understanding and usage. Work in those communities was so pervasive a human activity that it was virtually synonymous with life as it penetrated every sphere of the communal and the individual existence. Thus to work meant to live. Typically, in traditional societies there was no division of labor except for that assigned for the youngest and the eldest members who were given sedentary tasks, such as cooking or picking nuts and berries. There existed no distinction between work and non-work; between labor and leisure. However, women's work, which mostly concentrated on the nursing of the young, was socially recognizable and strictly separated from that performed by men.

The development of agriculture was an important turning point which made work more differentiated and divided into more specialized sectors. Hunting, by then the only "professional" occupation, was joined by specialized food-producers who, in time, became self-sufficient. That provided the basis for class differences as some families produced greater surpluses than the other. In the ancient societies of Egypt and Mesopotamia, the affluent families joined with the nobles and formed the elite whose growing prosperity was based on the slave labor. Thus slavery, which soon came to be regarded as a natural phenomenon, had remained throughout thousands of years the stronghold of the economic system. By that system some avoided manual labor and spent their time following many other pursuits, and some had to perform menial work—the source of their sorrow and suffering. However, the very usefulness of work was never questioned; work was clearly seen as a purposeful effort to gain desired and expected aims, and viewed as the integral part of the life of society.

Historically, the ancient world introduced the class division according to the type of work performed. Similarly, in ancient Greece and Rome work in the sense of physical labor was seen as degrading and dehumanizing. The manual work, which required physical effort and the strength of muscles on the part of the worker, was disgraceful, and performed by slaves. Those whose occupation was physical work could not hold higher governmental of-

fices and were deprived of many rights. Accordingly, in numerous traditional societies work was associated with women, treated as inferiors, rather than with men for whom performing any labor was a disgrace. Consequently, the early Greeks regarded work as a curse. The very word **work** derives from the Greek word for sorrow—*ponos*, denoting drudgery, heavy-heartedness, and exhaustion. The ancient Greeks did not consider work as having an inherent value. They claimed that work enslaved the worker, chaining him to the will of others, corrupting his soul, and depriving him of independence so highly valued by the ancient Greek civilization. Greek writings clearly demonstrate that all the useful work in the Greek city-states, even the occupations related to trade and education, were performed by either slaves or serfs, making it obvious that work was inherently servile and degrading.

However, slavery in antiquity was not merely a device for cheap labor, or an instrument of exploitation for profit; it was rather an attempt to exclude labor from the human condition. Accordingly, labor itself can be defined as ignominious because it resembles the animal's effort to maintain life. Interestingly, men have always distinguished between *labor* and *work* and most of the modern languages have developed different terms for defining the two notions. The term *animal labor* can also be distinguished to describe the work needed for the production of food and for the maintenance of life. On the other hand, however, the term *homo faber* denotes a worker—a craftsman or an artisan. The term is perceived as less degrading than the former because the products of the labor of the *homo faber* have some degree of permanence. Nevertheless, it can be argued that both forms of work are not human enough as both imply man's compulsion to provide himself, similarly to animals, with the necessaries of life. If labor is equal to servility whereas freedom from labor equals nobility, then it becomes noble to be freed from the necessity of work to devote time to the activity in politics or human relations. Accordingly, it seems logical that all institutions and cultural norms arise to support one or another equation. Thus the slave owner of the *ante bellum* American South justified the "peculiar institution" because it freed him from the necessity to labor, giving him possibility to pursue knowledge and culture. For the same reason the contempt for any kind of work was held by the feudal aristocrats in medieval Europe. Clearly, the above Greek example investigates and explains the conditions under which work acquired negative meaning.[2]

2. For the multi-faceted notion of work, see the well-acclaimed volume entitled *The Worker and the Job: Coping with Change* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1974). Ed. by Jerome M. Rosow, President of the Work in America Institution, a non-profit research orga-

In the Hebrew culture the meaning and value of work were equally complex. Work was regarded as atonement and expiation for the original sin of disobeying God. The early Christians, therefore, followed the Hebrews in their understanding of work as God's punishment for man's original transgressions. However, the Christians perceived work as necessary to maintain the health of the body and mind. Remarkably, unlike the Greeks, they looked to work as a defense against despair, rather then the expression of despair itself. Like the Hebrews, the early Christians regarded work as an act of expiation but, at the same time, they believed that through work they could spread charity and share the products of their earthly toil with the needy. Significantly, they did not consider the accumulation of worldly goods as wickedness and perdition.

In the Middle Ages, with slavery on the decline under the pressure of Christian teaching, there could be observed the growing respect for manual labor or rather, the nature of work as well as jobs considered disgraceful and those which enjoyed a higher social rank considerably changed. Although the male members of the nobility were still engaged in hunting and ruling the manors, whereas serfs, as previously, were toiling all days long, religious holidays provided frequent breaks from work. Most importantly, however, two apparently contradictory trends developed in Europe. On the one hand, the decline of cities and the parallel consolidation of agrarian feudalism greatly reinforced the conviction that every kind of work was ignoble. On the other hand, however, new ideas about work began to spread under the influence of the great monastic brotherhoods which gradually developed into the large productive enterprises. Religious people viewed work, and even hard labor, as service to God and the direct way to salvation. Saint Benedict of Nursia (c. A.D. 480 – c. 547), a monk and a Christian saint who, remarkably, was honored by the Roman Catholic Church as the patron-saint of Europe, was widely known as the founder of an order of monks (c. A.D. 530). Benedict's main achievement was his *Rule* containing precepts for his monks in the form of seventy-three short chapters regulating the spiritual life of the brothers and their everyday duties. As the *Rule* of St. Benedict offered a unique combination of balance, moderation, and reasonableness, it was, henceforth, adopted by most religious communities founded in the Middle Ages, making the *Rule* one of the most influential

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nization. Especially Daniel Yankelovich, "The Meaning of Work." In: Rosow, ed., 19–47. Also Walter S. Neff, *Work and Human Behavior* (Chicago: Aldine Transaction. A Division of Transaction Publishers, Rutgers. Third paperback printing 2009). Also Leland Ryken, *Redeeming the Time: a Christian Approach to Work and Leisure* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 1995).

religious precepts in western Christendom monasticism. The wisdom of the *Rule* was both spiritual, advising on how to live a monastic life, and practical, teaching the efficient administration of a monastery. The rules of behavior for the members of the order declared that both manual and intellectual labor was a religious duty. More than half of the chapters described how to be obedient and humble to God and to other brethren of the Order. Chapter XLVIII of the *Rule*, entitled "Of the Daily Work," condemned idle life and leisure: "Idleness is the enemy of the soul; and therefore the brethren ought to be employed in manual labor at certain times, at others, in devout reading. Hence, we believe that the time for each will be properly ordered […]. If, however, the needs of the place, or poverty should require that they do the work of gathering the harvest themselves, let them not be downcast, for then are they monks in truth, if they live by the work of their hands, as did also our forefathers and the Apostles."[3] While the primary duties of the monk were directly religious, in the monastic orders work was perceived as a direct way of serving the Lord, whereas idleness was condemned as leading to licentiousness. Significantly, according to Benedictine monks the function of work was not to secure material wealth but to discipline the soul. Therefore, work began to be perceived as an ennobling rather, than degrading component of human life.

Customarily, the positive ideas about work are attributed to the rise of the Protestant ethic, however, as exemplified above, they were common as early as the sixth century A.D. and came to be regarded as an essential element of Roman Catholicism. The only difference was that in the early Middle Ages those new ideas were confined to the members of the monastic brotherhoods and they started waning when the monastic orders came to be richer and more powerful, while monks began immersing in sinful and idle life. Then, in the late Middle Ages, the ennobling value of work was gradually passing from the monastic orders to merchants, artisans, and traders who, through work, were trying to gain wealth and power.

Work also occupied the minds of medieval philosophers and theologians. The "Angelic Doctor," Saint Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274), an Italian Dominican priest, scholastic philosopher and major theologian of the Roman Catholic Church, known as *Doctor Angelicus*, proclaimed as one of the thirty-three Doctors of the Church, maintained that work was the essence of human life as it diverted man's attention from emotionally harmful

3. *The Holy Rule of St. Benedict*. Chapter XLVIII: "Of the Daily Work." The 1949 Edition. Trans. by Rev. Boniface Verheyen, OSB, of St. Benedict's Abbey, Atchison, Kansas. Electronic text.

anxieties, thus defending man against evil. Thomas's ethics were based on the concept of four cardinal virtues of prudence, temperance, justice, and fortitude; they are natural, revealed in nature and binding on every human being. The goal of human existence is union and eternal fellowship with God, achieved through morality, and revealed in everyday human choices. Saint Thomas was convinced that work most perfectly designed man's unity with God, and was the best means through which man could fulfill his moral obligations. Although the conviction that work was both of an ennobling and of salutary value had its roots in the religious teachings; it was also congenial to the citizens of the growing towns and cities who had no reason to consider it disgraceful. What had formerly begun as a Benedictine rule for monks, and had, remarkably, been expressed in the phrase *Ora et Labora*, was successfully transformed into the true value and purpose of life.

The decrease of the medieval period and the onset of the Renaissance may serve as the prominent example of the adjustment of religion to the economic and social conditions of its adherents. The religious wars of those times were but the clear manifestations of the attempts of all the social classes —aristocracy, city dwellers, and peasants—to adapt the old, pre-Reformation theology to the changing economic situation. The European Renaissance, with the revival of art, literature, and learning, marked the transition from the medieval to the modern world, and brought the view that creative work could be a joy in itself. Work was then separated from religion. In the urban setting of Renaissance Italy, for instance, the demand for literate public servants prompted the rise of a new elite group whose distinction derived from their education. The work demanded facility in reading and writing classical Latin, skills more accessible to those with some substance to pay for the schooling. The productive core of urban society were artisans and their families, who worked with considerable independence. Similarly to the cities of Renaissance Italy, all Christian Europe started to depend on the efforts of workers. Modern basic assumptions that labor would exchange for income are not applicable to the Renaissance notion of work for contemporary societies conceived of work in the broadest sense as the whole pragmatic effort, whether for money or not, crucial to society's survival and prosperity. It has to be noted that although the economy and hard cash counted, they were much less dominant than today. Instead, other forms of payment were more common. As the distinction between payments, gifts and services was not clear or evident, the difference between economy and society was also blurred. Admittedly, Church, State, and community required efforts, thought, and emotional contribution; Renaissance Italians had to labor hard

to sustain themselves, they also worked to non-economic purposes, related to the domain of social service and ritual work—charity, worship, and celebration, which frequently occurred. Accordingly, the Renaissance worker can only be looked at beyond jobs and wages, in the context of the cultural meanings of his work, also approached through the status and self-worth he could achieve by performing it.[4] The early utopian ideas also placed work in a non-religious context, clearly distinguishing leisure as a value in itself in human life. Within the framework of the then newly acquired positive meanings of work the new distinctions began to arise between mental and manual work as well as between skilled and unskilled labor. Those distinctions gave rise to a hierarchy of work evaluations which reflected a status hierarchy in society. Since then, it has been customary to assign social values to people according to the importance of the kind of work they perform, disregarding their religious beliefs. A modern conviction that work is a necessary and highly desirable aspect of the human condition was unknown in antiquity or the Middle Ages when Christianity was a religious equivalent of feudalism. The unity and stability of medieval western Europe rested on both the feudal landownership and the feudal hierarchical organization of the Church. Significantly, not only did the Catholic Church derive its power from feudalism but it also consecrated the secular feudal system of the state.

Commonly, the meanings attached to work are a matter of particular cultural norms. Logically, the evaluation placed on work, and the hierarchy of values assigned to various kinds of work appear to be determined by social, political, and religious conditions of man's existence. Viewed from this perspective work seems to be a cultural compact; a degree to which it is gratifying, frustrating, or merely endurable depends upon the communal/social norms and values, that is upon a particular pattern of culturally derived attitudes toward different kinds of work which the pattern has existed for thousands of years. However joyful and creative work can be, its spiritual and moral aspects have never been disregarded. The social as well as the eschatological dimensions of work have been valued in the teachings of the Catholic Church for centuries. Work has been referred to as the perennial and fundamental issue in human existence, always relevant and constantly requiring a renewed attention because the changing situation of man in the world calls for a rediscovery and re-evaluation of the meanings and dimen-

4. For a broad survey of the Renaissance Italian society, see Elizabeth S. Cohen and Thomas V. Cohen, *Daily Life in Renaissance Italy* (Westport, CT.: Greenwood Press, 2001), especially chapter 15: "Work," 253–275, where numerous settings and socio-economic backgrounds are presented from urban to country life, and from upper- to peasant-class.

sions of the notion of work. John Paul II in his Encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work) develops the concept of human labor and man's dignity "in the vast reality of work."[5] *Laborem Exercens*, published on 14 September, 1981, in the third year of his Pontificate, on the occasion of the 90th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, was structured in four main issues: the subordination of work to man; the primacy of the worker over the instruments and conditions of the world of labor; the right of the human person as the determining factor of all socio-economic, technological, and productive processes that must be recognized; and some ways and means that can help all men to identify with Christ through their own work. Pope John Paul II argued that "Toil is something that is universally known, for it is universally experienced. […] *It is familiar to all workers* and, since work is a universal calling, it is familiar to everyone."[6] Human work, claims the Pope, is a fundamental dimension of man's existence on earth, the essence of man's life which "is built up every day from work, from work it derives its specific dignity, but, at the same time, work contains the unceasing measure of human toil and suffering."[7]

The social and eschatological dimensions of work have not ceased to engage the attention of the Catholic Church since the publication of the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of Workers; Latin for "Of New Things") by Pope Leo XIII. It was an open letter passed on May 15, 1891, in the fourteenth year of his Pontificate, to all Catholic bishops, and it addressed the appalling condition of the working classes toward the end of the nineteenth century. Arranged as the "Rights and Duties of Capital and Labor," the Encyclical was the Pope's response to the social conflict that had risen in the wake of industrialization. The message was clear: the social teaching of the Catholic Church declared private property a fundamental principle of natural law but it also recognized that market forces must be tempered by moral considerations. "Every one should put his hand to the work which falls to his share," argued Leo XIII. "It may truly be said," he continued elsewhere in his encyclical, "that all human subsistence is derived either from labor on one's own land, or from some toil, some calling, which is paid for either in the produce of the land itself, or in that which is exchanged for what the land brings forth." However, the question arises how one's pos-

5. John Paul II [Joannes Paulus PP.II], *Laborem Exercens*, 14 September, 1981, I: "Introduction." Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2003. Digitalized by Intra Text.

6. *Laborem Exercens*, Chapter II [Work and Man], 9: "Work and Personal Dignity." Emphasis original.

7. *Laborem Exercens*, "Blessing."

sessions should be used. Remarkably, the Pope quotes from the well-known arguments of the famous *Summa Theologiae* of Saint Thomas Aquinas. "It is lawful for a man to hold private property," claimed St. Thomas, but "Man should not consider his material possessions as his own, but as common to all, so as to share them without hesitation when others are in need."[8]

However, as noted earlier, the source of the Catholic work ethic was in the Holy Scripture, from the Book of Genesis and then through the Gospels and writings of the Apostles. And although the truth revealed in the Book of Genesis "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it" [Genesis (1:28)] may not directly refer to work, unquestionably, it indirectly points at work as a task and activity assigned to man on his path to salvation, and bears resemblance to God's act of creation. John Paul II understood work as a transitive activity, that is the effort beginning in the human subject and directed toward an external object, which the effort (i.e. transitive activity) confirms and develops the dominion of man over the earth. Thus man works in order to expand his dominion in the visible world and to satisfy his needs. Yet the expression "subdue the earth "may refer as much to the resources of the earth as to the conscious activity of man, which embraces both the past and the future. Not only does man through work become the master of the earth but he also executes the will of God and His original ordering. The process of subduing the earth assumed various forms in various civilizations and cultures. In this context there emerges the meaning of work in a direct, objective sense connected with cultivating the soil and transforming it to products satisfying man's needs.[9]

A deeper analysis of the notion of work, however, requires a consideration of its indirect, subjective sense. According to John Paul II's social theology, man as a person who works is the subject of work:

> 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-realization.[10]

If man's work serves to confirm his humanity and to fulfill his calling, then work understood as a process through which man subdues the earth cor-

8. Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of Labor), encyclical, 15 May, 1891: 62, 8, 22. Liberia Editrice Vaticana, date not specified.
9. John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, Chapter II, 4: "In the Book of Genesis."
10. *Laborem Exercens*, Chapter II, 6: "Work in the Subjective Sense: Man as the Subject of Work."