



**EMPLOYMENT:
TOWARDS AN ECONOMY THAT
NEEDS EVERYONE**



A young woman with a serious expression, looking off to the side. She is wearing a patterned shawl and a beaded necklace. The image has a monochromatic green tint. The quote is overlaid in white text on the lower right side of the image.

**“WHEN A SOCIETY IS ORGANISED IN A WAY THAT NOT EVERYONE
IS GIVEN THE CHANCE TO WORK, THAT SOCIETY IS NOT JUST.”**

POPE FRANCIS, 1 MAY 2013

INTRODUCTION

WORK IS STILL THE KEY

“The unsatisfied hunger for jobs, with the unemployment and enforced emigration to which it gives rise, is the greatest single social issue confronting Ireland today. The current levels of unemployment, North and South – with their extraordinarily high incidence among some social groups and in some geographic areas – are causing suffering to an extent which is wholly unacceptable. More can be done to bring these levels down, and more must be done.”

These words could have been written this morning, but were actually written over twenty years ago. They are taken from the introduction to *Work is the Key: Towards an Economy that Needs Everyone* (1) – a Pastoral Letter published by the Irish Catholic Bishops in 1992. The most striking similarity is the persistence of unemployment in Ireland today, North and South. This is in spite of the prosperity of the Celtic Tiger era in the Republic and the investment that accompanied the peace process in Northern Ireland. In some areas, in fact, it was as if the time of prosperity never happened, as long-term, structural unemployment blighted generations of some communities, and the infrastructure and interventions required to address inequalities failed to materialise.

Now, as it seems we have come full circle, it is clear that the growing disconnect between the generation of capital and the real economy meant that several key sectors of our economy were operating with excessive levels of risk. As the various “bubbles” began to burst,

thousands of people lost their jobs; many lost a lot more besides – homes, relationships, self-esteem. Now, even more than in the 1990s, we are living in a truly globalised society. This brings new challenges in the form of increased competition and the relocation of some types of employment to other countries. At the same time, it brings new opportunities such as access to global markets and new possibilities for sharing skills and resources. If, however, we are to avoid the heartache of another cycle of “boom and bust”, we need to reflect on the lessons that can be learned from the experience of the past twenty years.

Catholic Social Teaching can make an important contribution to shaping our responses to social justice issues related to work and employment as it places the human person at the centre of how work is structured and organised. The values outlined in Catholic Social Teaching protect the rights of the most vulnerable, while reminding us all of our responsibilities in this area.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

THE VALUE OF WORK AND THE DIGNITY OF THE WORKER

Work is of central importance in the Christian view of the human person – as an individual, in relationship with others and in relationship with God, who, in turn, is understood as a ‘working God’.¹ Concern about the place of work in society and the dignity of workers has been at the heart of Catholic Social Teaching since the publication of the first social encyclical, *Rerum novarum*, in 1891, which addressed the condition of workers. Although written as a response to the exploitation of workers after the Industrial Revolution and reflecting a different worldview, nonetheless many of the core principles of this text remain valid even in today’s modern globalised society. This teaching was updated and expanded on its 40th anniversary (Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo anno*), on the 90th (Saint John Paul II, *Laborem exercens*) and on the centenary, (Saint John Paul II, *Centesimus annus*).

The common message of these encyclicals is that work is inextricably linked to the dignity and social nature of the human person. It is

therefore vital for the well-being of the individual and common good of the whole of society. Work derives its value from the fact that the work is carried out by a human being, made in the image and likeness of God. When conducted in right relations with each other and in a way that respects our natural environment, work is a powerful expression of solidarity and a significant contribution to the common good: ‘human work, by its nature, is meant to unite peoples’ (*Centesimus annus*, 27). As we find ourselves in the midst of a deepening employment crisis, North and South – with hundreds of thousands of people unable to find work and many thousands more suffering as a result of deteriorating working conditions, or living with the threat of redundancy hanging over them every day – there is a need to remind ourselves of the core principles and values from Catholic Social Teaching in the area of employment.

¹ Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, *Work is the Key: Towards an Economy that Needs Everyone* (1992), 47-48.

SEE
What exactly is happening? Why is this happening? (the causes)
Who is being affected? (the consequences)

JUDGE
What do you think about all of this? (why?)
What do your values, your beliefs and your faith say about this?
What do you think should be happening?

ACT
What exactly would you like to change? (long term)
What action are you going to take now? (short term)
Who can you involve to help you in your action?

UNEMPLOYMENT 'A REAL SOCIAL DISASTER'

Saint John Paul II was unequivocal in his denunciation of unemployment as “in all cases an evil” and, when it reaches a certain level, “a real social disaster” (*Laborem exercens*, 18). Few would question the assertion that what we are facing today is, indeed, “a real social disaster”, key characteristics of which include:

- Increasing numbers of people finding themselves unemployed and dependent on social welfare at a time when social welfare levels are being cut as part of government austerity measures;
- Increasingly difficult conditions and lowering of income for those who are employed;
- Greater obstacles for those who are long-term unemployed;
- Individuals and families at risk of losing their homes;
- Cutbacks in funding to essential public services.

Today, unemployment and the threat of unemployment affect people at all levels of society, although it needs to be recognised that certain groups and communities remain disproportionately impacted by long-term, structural unemployment. This long-term unemployment, which disconnects people from the labour market, risks scarring society long beyond the end of the recession.

For someone who is unemployed or under-employed, daily life can become dominated by the loss of financial security, anxiety for

the future, loss of self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy. The knowledge that so many others are in the same situation is no consolation as we see only our own inability to contribute. These feelings are exacerbated by a discourse in the wider society which presents those affected as a burden. This view needs to be challenged. It is a contradiction of the principles of solidarity and the common good; from this understanding of our interdependence on one another stems the duty to care for those who find themselves in a position of vulnerability. Furthermore, such a view fails to take account of the fact that income tax is not the only way in which people contribute to the tax system – there are many other forms of indirect taxation to which people who are unemployed contribute through their participation in the economy.²

Media attention has, understandably, been focused on the rising numbers of people claiming social welfare and on large-scale job losses in particular companies and sectors. This is only part of the problem. Many more are suffering as a result of under-employment: forced to accept reduced hours that do not allow them to maintain a decent standard of living; unable to find employment at the level of their qualifications; or forced to remain in jobs which offer no opportunities for progression.

² This point was emphasised by the Irish Catholic Bishops in *Work is the Key* (122).

SEE CASE STUDY: “I’M AT A LOSS AS TO WHAT’S HAPPENING”

From the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, *The human face of austerity as witnessed by the Society of St. Vincent de Paul*, 2012

The SVP is helping a family of two adults and three children, 17, 12 and 11 years of age. The husband had a low paying job and they were just about managing. But last year the husband lost his job. He had to wait almost 4 weeks for the first social welfare payment. The family has a mortgage but has negotiated a break with the bank, reducing their repayments from €1,500 per month to €600.

The couple’s youngest son has special needs and requires full-time care. As the family live in the country they have two cars, however they cannot afford to tax either car, and insure only one. There is a loan on the second car which they hold onto in the event that the husband gets a few days’ work. The family travels back roads to get the children to school, take them to activities and to visit an elderly and ill mother in order to avoid meeting the Gardaí. All the cloak and dagger driving has made the mother a nervous wreck. At home she is moving tinned food from the cupboard to the fridge to make it look full in front of the children. She buys food

just going out of date as it’s cheaper. Her daily worry is what the family will eat today.

The mother feels she has aged ten years from the financial stress. Their lives have changed so much that she is afraid the worry will push her husband over the edge, and, in her own words, that he will “end up in the river” – meaning the river which runs by the family home. She is at a loss as to what’s happening to her and her family. To top it all she has just received notice that when the eldest turns 18 she will lose the children’s allowance for him even though he is still in secondary school.

The mother says “I used to think nobody cared – long days turning into longer nights – dreading the postman who only brings bad news – cupboards and drawers full of unopened letters full of demands for this bill and that bill. The SVP members listened and gave us hope. With their assistance in giving us a hand we might just make it.”

Take a moment to reflect on the issues raised by the family’s experience in the light of the principles of Catholic Social Teaching...

JUDGE WORK IS NOT DEFINED BY WAGES

“We can no longer trust in the unseen forces and the invisible hand of the market. Growth in justice requires more than economic growth, while presupposing such growth: it requires decisions, programmes, mechanisms and processes specifically geared to a better distribution of income, the creation of sources of employment and an integral promotion of the poor which goes beyond a simple welfare mentality. I am far from proposing an irresponsible populism, but the economy can no longer turn to remedies that are a new poison, such as attempting to increase profits by reducing the work force and thereby adding to the ranks of the excluded.”

EVANGELII GAUDIUM

In *Caritas in veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI emphasised the importance of ‘gift’ and giving in economic life (34). A holistic understanding of work needs to extend beyond paid employment, recognising and valuing the particular contribution that people make through all forms of voluntary service. In highlighting the significance of giving, the Pope is making a powerful appeal for an ‘economy of solidarity’ which is not limited to private gain, but seeks to serve the common good.

The unique value of voluntary work can be clearly seen in the efforts to address poverty and social exclusion. Speaking at the launch of the NICCOSA position paper, *Challenging Poverty in Northern Ireland*, Dr Noël Treanor, Bishop of Down and Connor, asked: “Is there anyone so poor that they cannot give something of their time, talent or resources to help others? Important as they are, state-based

systems of support will always find it difficult to replicate the dignity, friendship and personal support given by someone who is there to help for no other reason than that they care and that they are willing to give freely of their time to listen.”³

As a society, we need to acknowledge and appreciate the contribution people make by giving of their time and talents through volunteering. The work of volunteers is a visible expression of the value of solidarity within our society. It is evidence that our sense of community has withstood the individualistic excesses of our time of prosperity, and provides hope and solid foundations for a better future.

³ “*Challenging Poverty in Northern Ireland*”,

1 December 2010, www.catholicbishops.ie.

ACT A VISION FOR THE FUTURE FOUNDED ON THE COMMON GOOD

“The evident excesses of the consumer society can lead to a sense of antipathy towards such things as economic growth, new technology, enterprise and market forces. It is true that when such things are not regulated and guided by a wider vision of human life and by institutionalised commitments to the common good they spawn environmental degradation, increased unemployment and widening social inequality.”

WORK IS THE KEY, 114

Unemployment is not inevitable. It is a result of policy decisions which can be changed and must be changed if the common good of society is to be protected and promoted. The crisis we currently face demands a response on two levels:

- I. immediate intervention to address the situation of those currently suffering as a result of unemployment, insecurity, low income or poor working conditions;
- II. long-term reform aimed at laying the foundations for a more just and sustainable economic future.

An employment policy that contributes to the common good needs to take account, not only of the number of available jobs, but also of the quality of the work opportunities and the conditions in which people are expected to work. In the long-term, the problem of unemployment can only be meaningfully addressed in the context of a wider approach that views economic activity as being at the service of society and the dignity of the human person.

The task of promoting such an approach is shared by all sectors of society, but falls, in a particular way, to government: “The responsibility for attaining the common good, besides falling to individual persons, belongs also to the State, since the common good is the reason that the political authority exists.”⁴ A reflection on the significance of work in our society cannot fail to acknowledge the vital service provided by those who choose the path of political leadership, many of whom have been working tirelessly to ensure that the most vulnerable are protected at a time of economic crisis.

Work is the Key called for a re-thinking of our understanding of growth as the bishops warned that the failure to take account of the common good and the demands of solidarity would serve only to lay the foundations for future crises: “Economic growth which reduces total employment or which leaves greater new needs in its wake (a damaged environment, burned-out people) is a run-away engine. Society, acting through its legislators,

⁴ “Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (Dublin: Veritas, 2004), No. 168.

government, business community, labour movement, and at every level, has to seek to influence what it is that grows and the way in which it grows so that economic growth genuinely benefits the human family, each member of it and its habitat” (*Work is the Key*, 116). In light of what has happened since 2008 there is greater awareness of the flaws in our existing economic model and the need for change. For this reason Pope Benedict XVI in *Caritas in veritate* has argued that the current crisis may be seen as an opportunity to ‘re-plan our journey’ (21).

Such wide-ranging reform on an international level may appear a distant dream, but a common thread running through all these analyses is the need for a new appreciation of the centrality of ethical principles, particularly social ethics, in economic life. This is an area where every member of society can make a contribution on a personal level. In the business and financial sectors there is growing awareness that greater regard for ethics and

social justice could have helped avoid many of the worst aspects of the present crisis. Conscious of this growing awareness, and mindful too of the negative reputation that has befallen these sectors in the wake of the crisis, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace has published a reflection entitled *Vocation of the Business Leader*, which underlines that “when businesses and market economies function properly and serve the common good, they contribute greatly to the material and even the spiritual well-being of society.”⁵

Work will necessarily be at the heart of any vision for our economic future, and we all have a role to play in ensuring that the economic model we choose protects the right to work, the dignity of the worker and our natural environment at local, national and international level.

⁵ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Vocation of the Business Leader: A Reflection* (2012).

“The changes brought about by work cannot be fully accounted for by its objective dimension. The worker, the subject of work, is also greatly affected by his or her own work. Whether we think about the executive, the farmer, the nurse, the janitor, the engineer, or the tradesman, work changes both the world (objective dimension) and the worker (subjective dimension). Because work changes the person, it can enhance or suppress that person’s dignity; it can allow a person to develop or to be damaged. Thus ‘the sources of the dignity of work are to be sought primarily in the subjective, not in the objective one’” (*Laborem Exercens*, 6). When we regard work from that perspective, we should find a joint commitment from both the employer and the employee to elevate work to that splendid vision. It is the unity of sound business practice and ethics.”

PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, *Vocation of the Business Leader: A Reflection* (2012)

FOR REFLECTION

By recognising the true significance of work, and the way in which it connects us to one another, we can achieve a more just and sustainable future for everyone in our society. Although we are experiencing a crisis, there are clear signs of hope. People and communities are demonstrating that same solidarity and resilience that has allowed us to overcome previous crises.

What would it mean if Catholic Social Teaching on work and employment were more widely known and understood?

What are the consequences of unemployment (i) for individual members of our community and (ii) for our community as a whole?

Are there vulnerable groups in our society who need particular support?

SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

Examine ways in which Catholic Social Teaching on work and employment might be communicated in the local Church community.

Research the problem of unemployment through engagement with organisations providing outreach and support, such as the society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Research the different forms of support available in the community for those who are unemployed. Could these be better publicised? Could the Church help in this? Could relevant information be publicised in bulletins or on Church noticeboards?

Organise an event to recognise the value of volunteering in the local community; highlight volunteering opportunities and encourage people to get involved.

