



LABOR DAY STATEMENT

Labor Day 2005: Work, Pope John Paul II, and Catholic Teaching

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Labor Day marks an end and a beginning. It represents the real end of summer and the beginning of a new year of school and work. Vacations are over. Classes are starting. The football season is underway. Soon the leaves and seasons will begin to change. For many, Labor Day may be a time for a final picnic, a back-to-school shopping trip, yard work or relaxation.

But Labor Day should be more than just a date on a calendar and a long holiday weekend. This holiday was established to honor American workers. It is a time to pause and reflect on the meaning of work, the contributions of workers, and the important role of the labor movement in our economy and nation.

Pope John Paul II and Catholic Teaching

In our Catholic tradition, work is more than a way to make a living. It is not a burden, but a blessing. Work is an expression of our dignity and a contribution to the common good. In spiritual terms, work is a way to participate in God's continuing work of creation. This particular Labor Day is the first since the death of John Paul II; it seems a good time to recall the constant teaching and courageous leadership of our beloved Pope on work and the rights of workers. For three decades, he insisted work is not a burden, but "expresses the human vocation to service and solidarity."¹ He declared that "[H]uman work is a key, probably the essential key to the whole social question."² He taught that workers have "the right to establish professional associations," and that trade unions have "the Church's defense and approval."³

According to Pope John Paul II, unions have a role, "not only in negotiating contracts, but also as 'places' where workers can express themselves. They serve the development of an authentic culture of work and help workers to share in a fully human way in the life of their place of employment."⁴ He said unions are an "indispensable element of social life, especially in modern industrial societies."⁵

Our new Holy Father, Benedict XVI, also has affirmed this teaching, insisting it is "necessary to witness in contemporary society to the 'Gospel of work,'⁶ of which John Paul II spoke in his Encyclical *Laborem Exercens*. I hope that work will be available, especially for young people, and that working conditions may be ever more respectful of the dignity of the human person."⁷

The U.S. Economy: Blessed and Challenged

This "Gospel of work" needs to be proclaimed and practiced in our own lives and in the broader economy. In the United States, we are blessed to have the resources and knowledge, technology and tools, as well as businesses and unions, markets and laws which together contribute to the world's most powerful and productive economy. At its best, the U.S. economy is shaped by a tradition of economic freedom and initiative, a commitment to "liberty and justice for all," an ethic of hard work, and a spirit of generosity and sacrifice.

However, on Labor Day 2005, there are some daunting challenges to how we live "the Gospel of work," and how we respect the dignity of work and the rights of workers today. In this economy many are moving forward, reaping the rewards of their

education, skills, and hard work. Others can be left behind, hungry, homeless, or poor, often struggling with rent or paying for decent health insurance. Families in the middle can be one lost job, one major illness, one unanticipated setback away from serious economic trouble. As their children grow, parents are faced with balancing the costs of education and saving for their own retirement. Too many families find it difficult to reconcile the demands of work, the duties of family life, and the obligations of community and spiritual life.

“Signs of the Times”

These pressures are reflected in some of the troubling “signs of the times” within economic and public life:

- Sadly the American labor movement seems bitterly divided over priorities, personalities, and how to move forward.
- The Central American Free Trade Agreement very narrowly passed Congress after an angry debate about its impact on workers and farmers in the U.S. and Central America.
- There is a growing conflict in some local communities, and on Wall Street, about the obligations of large retailers and major employers to their workers in the U.S. and around the world, and the communities they serve.
- Workers in the automobile, airline, and other industries confront ongoing struggles over wages, work rules, health care, and pensions in the face of new competition and new economic realities.
- Our nation debates how budgets, benefits, and sacrifices are to be shared—who gains and who loses—in the midst of the war and deficits.
- The minimum wage, last raised in 1997, leaves a full-time worker with two children below the poverty level, while the gap between executive and worker compensation continues to widen dramatically.
- In a time of more retirees and longer life spans, discussion about retirement—what it means and who will pay for it—begins with a polarized debate about Social Security, but also extends to pensions, savings, and taxes.

- The reality that many U.S. workers are immigrants too often leads to a search for scapegoats rather than practical responses that recognize both the humanity and contributions of these newcomers to our economy.

A Catholic Framework for Economic Life

Unfortunately, these challenges often are addressed in simplistic, ideological, and polarized ways. For example, “the market is always right” **or** “government should fix it.” “Globalization is the solution” **or** “globalization is the problem.” The Catholic tradition offers a different way of thinking about economic life. Through the centuries, the Church has looked to the scriptures and to its own moral teaching to develop a number of key principles to guide economic choices. These principles are found in *A Catholic Framework for Economic Life*.⁸

1. The economy exists for the person, not the person for the economy.
2. All economic life should be shaped by moral principles. Economic choices and institutions must be judged by how they protect or undermine the life and dignity of the human person, support the family, and serve the common good.
3. A fundamental moral measure of any economy is how the poor and vulnerable are faring.
4. All people have a right to life and to secure the basic necessities of life (e.g., food, clothing, shelter, education, health care, safe environment, economic security).
5. All people have the right to economic initiative, to productive work, to just wages and benefits, to decent working conditions, as well as to organize and join unions or other associations.
6. All people, to the extent they are able, have a corresponding duty to work, a responsibility to provide for the needs of their families, and an obligation to contribute to the broader society.
7. In economic life, free markets have both clear advantages and limits; government has essential responsibilities and limitations; voluntary groups have irreplaceable roles, but cannot substitute for the proper working of the market and the just policies of the state.

8. Society has a moral obligation, including governmental action where necessary, to assure opportunity, meet basic human needs, and pursue justice in economic life.
9. Workers, owners, managers, stockholders, and consumers are moral agents in economic life. By our choices, initiative, creativity, and investment, we enhance or diminish economic opportunity, community life, and social justice.
10. The global economy has moral dimensions and human consequences. Decisions on investment, trade, aid and development should protect human life and promote human rights, especially for those most in need wherever they might live on this globe.

According to Pope John Paul II, the Catholic tradition calls for a “society of work, enterprise and participation” which “is not directed against the market, but demands that the market be appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the state to assure that the basic needs of the whole society are satisfied.”⁹

A “Leaven” in Economic Life

In our tradition, believers are called to be the “salt of the earth,” the “light of the world,” a “leaven” in economic and social life.¹⁰ Catholics are everywhere in our economy: we are corporate executives and migrant farm workers, lawmakers and welfare recipients, university presidents and child care workers, computer programmers and farmers, office and factory workers, union leaders and small business owners. In all these arenas, we are called to live out “the Gospel of work” and the principles of Catholic teaching.

To move forward, our nation needs a strong and growing economy, strong and productive businesses and industries, and a strong and united labor movement. In Catholic teaching, it is up to workers to choose how they wish to be represented in the workplace and they should be able to make these decisions freely without intimidation or reprisal. When management and union representatives negotiate a contract or settle disputes, they should pursue justice and fairness, not just economic advantage. When our leaders pass laws, adopt regulations, or negotiate and debate trade agreements, they should seek the common good and focus on the needs of the weak.

On this Labor Day, all of us are called to look at the economy from the “bottom up:” how our economic choices (i.e., work, investments, spending) affect “the least of these”—poor families, vulnerable workers, and those left behind.

Labor Day 2005

This year we should take a break from the picnics, shopping, or relaxation to remember why we celebrate this holiday. Let us recall the constant plea of Pope John Paul II to live in “solidarity” and his consistent defense of the right to decent work, fair wages, and full worker participation in economic life. Let us thank God for our many blessings and ask His help in living out “the Gospel of work” and making His “kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven.” This is the legacy of Pope John Paul II and our task this Labor Day.

¹ General Audience, Feast of St. Joseph the Workers, March 19, 1997

² *Laborem Exercens*, #3.

³ *Centesimus Annus*, #7.

⁴ *Ibid.* 15.

⁵ *Laborem Exercens*, #20.

⁶ In *Laborem Exercens* (#6), Pope John Paul II says the “Gospel of work” shows that “the basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done but the fact that the one who is doing it is a person.”

⁷ Angelus, May 2005.

⁸ *A Catholic Framework for Economic Life, A Statement of the U.S. Bishops*, 1996.

⁹ *Centesimus Annus*, #35.

¹⁰ Mt 5:13; Gaudium et Spes #40.