COMPRENDIUM OF THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH
Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace
March 2005

CHAPTER VI: HUMAN WORK

(EXCERPTS OF POINTS EMPHASIZED BY ST. JOSEMARÍA)

INTRODUCTION: AN INTEGRAL AND SOLIDARY HUMANISM

1. Salvation and Secularity: “Salvation, which the Lord Jesus obtained at a price, is achieved in the new life that awaits the righteous after death, but it also permeates this world in the realities of economy and labor, of technology and communications, of society and politics, of the international community and the relations among cultures and peoples: ‘Jesus came to bring integral salvation, one which embraces the whole person and all mankind, and opens up the wondrous prospect of divine filiation’ (Redemptoris Missio, 11).

SOCIAL DOCTRINE AND THE COMMITMENT OF THE LAY FAITHFUL

543. Responsibility of the Laity: “It is the proper duty of the lay faithful to proclaim the Gospel with an exemplary witness of life rooted in Christ and lived in temporal realities: the family; professional commitment in the world of work, culture, science and research; the exercise of social, economic and political responsibilities. All secular human realities...are the context in which the lay Christian lives and works” (cf. Christifideles Laici, 15).

551. A Life of Service: “The presence of the laity in social life is characterized by service, the sign and expression of love, which is seen in the areas of the family, culture, work, economics and politics...” (cf. Centesimus Annus, 57).

HISTORICAL NOTE

101. Pope John Paul II: “Ninety years after Rerum Novarum, Pope John Paul II devoted the Encyclical Laborem Exercens (1981) to work, the fundamental good of the human person, the primary element of economic activity, and the key to the entire social question.”
CHAPTER SIX: HUMAN WORK
I. BIBLICAL ASPECTS

255. Man's First Calling: The Old Testament presents God as the omnipotent Creator who fashions man in his image and invites him to work the soil, to cultivate and care for the garden of Eden in which he has placed him" (Gen 2:2,15).

257. Reason for Work; Its Limits: “Work has a place of honor because it is a source of riches, or at least of the conditions for a decent life, and is, in principle, an effective instrument against poverty. But one must not succumb to the temptation of making an idol of work, for the ultimate and definitive meaning of life is not to be found in work. Work is essential, but it is God—and not work—who is the origin of life and the final goal of man” (Prov. 10:4; 15:16).

259. The Example of Jesus: “In his preaching, Jesus teaches that we should appreciate work. He himself...devoted most of the years of his life on earth to manual work at the carpenter’s bench in the workshop of Joseph...” (L.E., 6).

260. Work in Right Proportion: “In his preaching, Jesus teaches man not to be enslaved by work. Before all else, he must be concerned about his soul; gaining the whole world is not the purpose of his life.... Work, then, should not be a source of anxiety. When people are worried and upset about many things, they run the risk of neglecting the Kingdom of God and his righteousness.... Everything else, work included, will find its proper place, meaning and value only if it is oriented to this one thing that is necessary and that will never be taken away” (cf. Mk 8:36; Mt. 6:25,33; Lk 10:40-42).

262. Work as Service: “In this way...human work becomes a service raised to the grandeur of God.”

263. As Co-creative and Co-redemptive: “Work represents a fundamental dimension of human existence as participation not only in the act of creation but also in that of redemption.... In this perspective, work can be considered a means of sanctification and an enlivening of earthly realities with the Spirit of Christ” (L.E., 27).

264. As Witness: “Believers are to undertake their work in the style of Christ and make it an occasion for Christian witness...” (cf. 1 Thes. 4:12).

265. As “Opus Humanum”: “The Fathers of the Church do not consider work at ‘opus servile’...but always as an ‘opus humanum,’ and they tend to hold all its various expressions in honor. By means of work, man governs the world with God.... Idleness is harmful to man’s being, whereas activity is good for his
body and soul [St. John Chrysostom]... Every worker is the hand of Christ that continues to create and do good [St. Ambrose].”

266. **As Contemplative:** “By his work and industriousness, man...makes the cosmos...more beautiful [St. Irenaeus].... Human work, directed to charity as its final goal, becomes an occasion for contemplation; it becomes devout prayer.... ‘Such a connection between work and religion reflects the mysterious but real alliance between human work and the providential action of God’ [Pastoral Visit to Pomerzia, Italy (1979)].”

III. THE DIGNITY OF WORK

270. **Objective and Subjective Work:** “Human work has a twofold significance: objective and subjective. In the objective sense, it is the sum of activities, resources, instruments and technologies used by men and women to produce things.... In the subjective sense, work is the activity of the human person...that corresponds to his personal vocation” (cf. L.E., 6).

271. **Work as an “Actus Personae”:** “This subjectivity gives to work its particular dignity, which does not allow that it be considered a simple commodity or an impersonal element of the apparatus for productivity.... It is an ‘actus personae.’... The human person is the measure of the dignity of work” (L.E., 6).

272. **Ordered to Personal Perfection:** “Human work not only proceeds from the person, but it is also essentially ordered to and has its final goal in the human person. Independently of its objective content, work must be oriented to the subject who performs it” (L.E., 6).

274. **Work as a Moral Duty:** “Work is also an obligation.... Man must work, both because the Creator has commanded it and in order to respond to the need to maintain and develop his own humanity. Work is a moral obligation with respect to one’s neighbor, in the first place one’s own family, but also the society to which one belongs.... We are heirs of the work of generations and at the same time shapers of the future of all who will live after us” (L.E., 16).

284. **Work and Rest:** “As God ‘rested on the seventh day from all the work which he had done,’ so too men and women, created in his image, ae to enjoy sufficient rest and free time that will allow them to tend to their family, cultural, social and religious life. The institution of the Lord’s Day contributes to this” (L.E., 19; Centesimus Annus, 9; Gaudium et Spes, 67).

IV. THE RIGHT TO WORK

294. **Work and Family Life:** “Work is a foundation for the formation of family life, which is a natural right and something man is called to do. It ensures a
means of sustenance and serves as a guarantee for raising children. Family life and work mutually affect one another in different ways. Travelling great distances to the workplace, working two jobs, physical and psychological fatigue all reduce the time devoted to the family. Situations of unemployment have material and spiritual repercussions on families, just as tensions and family crises have negative influences on attitudes and productivity in the area of work” (*L.E.*, 10; *Familiaris Consortio*, 23).

249. **The Family’s Contributions to Work:** “Family and work are united by a very special relationship. The family constitutes one of the most important terms of reference for shaping the social and ethical order of human work.... The contribution that the family can make to the reality of work is valuable and, in many instances, irreplaceable.... Above all it is a contribution that is made by educating to the meaning of work and by offering direction and support for professional choices” (*L.E.*, 10).

251. **Domestic Work:** “Particular attention must be given...to the work of housekeeping, which also involves the responsibility of men as husbands and fathers. The work of housekeeping...must be socially recognized and valued, also by means of economic compensation in keeping with that of other types of work. Care must be taken to eliminate all the obstacles that prevent a husband and wife from making free decisions concerning their procreative responsibilities and, in particular, those that do not allow women to carry out their maternal role fully” (*L.E.*, 19; *Familiaris Consortio*, 23).

295. **Work and Women:** “The feminine genius is needed in all expressions in the life of society; therefore, the presence of women in the workplace must also be guaranteed.... The organization of work must take into account the dignity and vocation of women...., structured in such a way that women do not have to pay for their advancement by abandoning what is specific to them” (*L.E.*, 19).

V. **THE RIGHTS OF WORKERS**

301. “The rights of workers, like all other rights, are based on the nature of the human person and on his transcendent dignity.... These rights are often infringed.... It often happens that work conditions for men, women, and children...are an offense to their dignity and compromise their health” (*L.E.*, 19,20; *Centesimus Annus*, 7,15).

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**Aspects of Work and the Worker Treated by St. Josemaría:**

“**The Core Element of His Teaching**”

302. The nature of work; its personal and social worth; its dignity: sharing in creation and redemption; its necessity—in the home, outside the home;
example of **Jesus Christ** (at the summit of all human activities); Mary and Joseph in Nazareth; divine filiation and **secularity**; love for work; freedom and rectitude of intention; work well done (human perfection); laying the last stone; practicing **virtues** in work; order and good use of time; spirit of poverty and detachment; social responsibility, justice and charity; means of **sanctification** (of oneself, of others, of the work itself; of the world); instrument of **apostolate**; good example; **professional vocation** as part of Christian vocation; professional competence and service; professional interest and prestige; work and **prayer** (unity of life; contemplative spirit).

**PRIMARY SOURCES**

**Vatican Council II**

*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* 1965

“Economic and Social Life” (part II, chap. III)

**Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace**

*The Social Agenda: A Collection of Magisterial Texts* 2000

“The Nature of Work” (art. seven, I)

**Pope John Paul II**

*On Human Work (Laborem Exercens)* 1981

*The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World (Familiaris Consortio)* 1981

*Persons before Economics*, discourse in Monterey, Calif. 1987

“Work Is a Vocation;” “Transformation of Work in the Eucharist”

*The Lay Members of Christ’s Faithful (Christifideles Laici)* 1988

*Guardian of the Redeemer (Redemptoris Custos)* 1989:

“Work as an Expression of Love” (chap. IV)

*On the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum (Centesimus Annus)* 1991

**St. Josemaría Escrivá**

*Conversations with Josemaría Escrivá*, 1968 (*passim*, consult index for “Work”)

*Christ Is Passing By*, 1973 (“In Joseph’s Workshop”)

*Friends of God*, 1977 (“Working for God”)

*The Furrow*, 1986 (“Work”)


**SELECTED SECONDARY SOURCES**

**José-Luis Illanes**


“Sanctification of Work” (chap. III, espec. “Work, Justice, Charity”)

**UNIV 84: The Professions and Society**

*Cooperation in Education*, 45/46 (Autumn 1984)
WORK AND SOCIETY

Prepared for an anthology of the works of
Yves R. Simon
Edited by Anthony O. Simon

In his lectures gathered under the title, Work, Society, and Culture, Yves Simon conducted a philosophical analysis that divides into equal theoretical and practical parts. In the former (lectures 1-3), he examines work from two related points of view—“psychological-metaphysical” and “socio-ethical.” In the latter (lectures 4-6), he shows how these standpoints throw light on several aspects of the labor movement, wealth, and culture. Throughout he relies on simple examples to help his students view each question from various angles until a persuasive answer emerges. Logically, the practical part is prior because it suggests why Simon finds it desirable or necessary to offer a theoretical definition of work.

Twenty years passed between Simon’s monograph Trois Leçons sur le Travail and “Work and the Workman,” the University of Chicago course from which the present lectures are taken. Midway between the two, Simon

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contributed “The Concept of Work” to a Chicago symposium on *The Works of the Mind*. His reflections on the significance of work and working in the larger contexts of human and social life belong to a comprehensive set of interests in theoretical and practical philosophy which developed over time in the course of examining knowledge and experience, freedom and community. For his student, Vukan Kuic, editor of the lectures for posthumous publication, they contain a “complete prescription, difficult to fill but realistic, on how it may be possible to save the modern man from himself.”

The authorities Simon cites in the lectures run from Aristotle to several modern figures in the humanities and social sciences, but in the main what underpins the argument is his own and others’ experiences. Linking the two sources is a common awareness of dangers and difficulties confronting work and workers as a result of modern ideological forces arrayed against the classical tradition. Simon’s work seems fundamentally inspired by the need to provide a philosophical critique of *laissez-faire* economic theories which treat human labor as just another commodity to be bought and sold in the market.

In the fifth lecture, “Work and Wealth,” Simon cites the Charter of the International Labor Organization as evidence that already by 1919 “the principle that human labor was not an item of merchandise...had been accepted all over the world by most diverse sectors of opinion.” Moreover, the Great Depression (1928-1939) definitively showed the failure of *laissez-faire*: “...abundance itself was a cause of poverty” because “wealth can never be distributed adequately by means of exchange alone.” Compensation according to services rendered and distribution according to need—both admirable ideals, in his view—become impossible if human labor is treated as a commodity. And the unmasking of this error will lead to a moral review of all commodities:

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3 *Work, Society and Culture*, p. xv.
“From now on, they too must be evaluated by humane and social standards;...the market place will increasingly be judged by rules pertaining to human labor.”

Among social units, Simon singles out the family for special attention in lecture 3, “Man at Work.” He observes that in modern times there has been “an enormous separation between work and family life,” which contradicts Aristotle’s insistence that “what is daily an essential in the life of work be performed within the family unit.” The natural sociability of work done in common lays a basis in the elementary human association for stability in community life by strengthening the bonds of love and friendship in the most natural way. Simon hopes and even predicts that the shortening of the work day will allow more time for working at home in the presence of the family. When he wrote, more than a generation ago, one could still assume that almost all workers would find a wife and children awaiting them at home.

Which brings us to Simon’s third major consideration: the broader sphere of culture. In the final lecture, “Work and Culture,” he enlarges upon the implications for culture of a worker’s “right conduct...in his relations with members of social groups to which he belongs,” especially “the right...uses of human freedom.” Applying socio-ethical analysis, he emphasizes “the social utility of work” as an “essential” component of his theoretical definition. “To qualify as work, an activity must not only be honest [i.e., valuable in itself] but also socially productive.” Even speculative activities must “render a service to society” if they are to be true works of the mind because “the end [of work] is not in wealth but always in man.”

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4 Ibid., pp. 132, 138-40. Pope John Paul II made that element of Christian social teaching emphatic in his 1981 encyclical, Laborem Exercens (On Human Work; Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1981): “From the point of view of man’s good...work is probably the essential key to the whole social question” (pp. 7, 10). For the Pope, the greatest economic challenge of our day is to prevent “the objective dimension of work” (roughly equivalent to Simon’s psychological-metaphysical standpoint) from overwhelming “the subjective dimension” (which Simon calls socio-ethical), thereby depriving workers of their personal dignity and corresponding inalienable rights (p. 25).

5 Simon, op. cit., pp. 70 f., 80, 83.

6 Ibid., pp. 31, 38 f., 56, 109, 118, 121.
Unlike artistic and contemplative activity, which has “a terminal character” and is therefore “better than useful,” work occurs under the constraints of being, of the existing state of things, and is “always something serious.” In contrast to Josef Pieper’s famous dictum that leisure is the basis of culture, Simon insists that according to the psychological-metaphysical analysis of work, “the real basis of culture...is to be found rather in activities in the performance of which a workmanlike disposition is indispensable.” A good it surely is, but the activities leisure permits transcend culture because they benefit mainly the individual artist and contemplative. Conditions that facilitate work are what provide the real foundation for social development; “holding out an ideal of culture based on freedom from work inevitably leads to a disorderly exaltation of the flowery element of culture, and this makes for subjectivism, arbitrariness, and an attitude of frivolous aversion to nature and its laws.”

Therefore, in undertaking “the reformation of our concept of culture,...the immediate task before us appears to be the development of a theory of culture centered not on leisure but on work” broadly understood to include “moral, social, and intellectual, as well as technical and manual work.” As a kind of “lover” concerned exclusively with the thing to be produced, something external to himself, “the good worker” has “much in common” with “the lover of truth.” “Struggling” toward the good of one’s fellows is “simultaneously struggling...toward an order of wisdom.” Hence “social action in the community at large must be combined with the psychology of the lover if it is to be genuine.... How could work be social if it is not coupled with love for one’s fellow man?” So “there is such a thing as love...in struggle,” Simon had said when dealing with the worker “as a psychological type” in the first lecture. It is through love that work and rest enter a unity that is at once metaphysical (in origin) and cultural (in end).

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7 Ibid., pp. 13, 31, 74, 76, 109 f., 185 f.
8 Ibid., pp. 7, 66 f., 70, 187.
The following selections from Simon’s text present his general theoretical
analysis of work and society (his second lecture) from which the above
implications and applications are drawn.  

[Insert text from Work, Society, and Culture, chapter 2: pp. 33-45, 55-59]

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9 This introduction abstracts from the author’s graduate seminars on Simon at Illinois State
University (1993, 1996), a paper presented to the American Maritain Association’s 1988
conference, and the corresponding contribution to Freedom in the Modern World, ed. Michael D.
Torre (Notre Dame, Ind., University of Notre Dame Press, 1989). The author wishes to thank
Anthony O. Simon and others who encouraged his studies of Simon, with whom he worked
briefly while pursuing graduate study at the University of Chicago in 1961.