



Address to the Plenary Session on the Subject ‘The Future of Labour and Labour in the Future’

The Supreme Pontiff observes increasing social inequalities between the North and the South of the world and declares with regard to employment that ‘in economic life it is essential to respect human dignity’. He goes on to say that social prosperity and growth cannot ‘be achieved to the detriment of individuals and peoples’. In the more specific area of work, ‘every economic system must have respect for man and his dignity as a first principle’ and for progress truly to serve man ‘all men must be integrated into the productive system or the service of the social body’.

Mr. President,

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Academy,

1. The second plenary session of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, in which you are inaugurating your institution’s regular work after a preliminary period of organisation, gives me the opportunity to express my deep gratitude. My thanks are first addressed to you, Mr. President, for your courteous words. I would like to express all my esteem to you, for you are ensuring that rigorous working procedures and intense collaboration between the members of the Academy are established in order to encourage fruitful research. I address my cordial greetings to all the members of your new institution; I thank them for being willing to examine modern social issues, with competence and great intellectual availability, in order to help the Church fulfil her mission to our contemporaries.

2. Observing the rapid increase of social inequalities between North and South, between the industrialised and the developing countries, but also within the nations normally considered rich, you have chosen *employment as your first subject for reflection*. This is particularly appropriate in contemporary society where political, economic and social upheavals call for *a new division of labour*. I appreciate this decision which corresponds to one of the Church’s constant concerns; as I recalled in the Encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, ‘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’.¹ This concern was central to the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, in which Leo XIII forcefully affirmed that in economic life *it is essential to respect human dignity*.²

The Church offers principles of reflection and judgement

In your work you are careful to link the Church’s social teaching with scientific and technical

aspects. In this way you show the true position of the social doctrine, which does not offer concrete proposals and must not be confused 'with tactical attitudes or with the service of a political system'.³ The Church does not intend to replace political authorities or those who make economic decisions, in order to engage in concrete activities which belong to their area of competence or responsibility in the management of public affairs. The Magisterium desires to recall the *conditions of possibility, at the anthropological and ethical level, for a social process* that must be centred on the individual and the collective whole, so that each person may be fulfilled. It offers 'principles for reflection, criteria of judgement and directives for action', showing that the Word of God applies 'to people's lives and the life of society, as well as to the earthly realities connected with them'.⁴

3. Thus it is first an *anthropology belonging to the long Christian tradition* which scientists and leaders of society must be able to accept; for 'all social action involves a doctrine'.⁵ This does not exclude the legitimate plurality of concrete solutions insofar as the fundamental values and dignity of man are respected. The scientist or the one who holds responsibility in public life cannot base his activity on principles drawn from the positive sciences alone, which leave aside the human person, while considering social structures and mechanisms. They cannot take into account man's spiritual nature, his deep desire for happiness and his supernatural destiny which transcend the biological and social aspects of life. To cling to this attitude, legitimate as an epistemological procedure, would be to treat man 'as a means of production'.⁶ All that has to do with the good, with values and with conscience transcends the scientific process and pertains to the spiritual life, to freedom and to the responsibility of people, who are inclined by nature to seek the good.

Work is a service to one's brothers and sisters

Hence social prosperity and growth cannot be achieved to the detriment of individuals and peoples. If liberalism or any other economic system favours only those who possess capital and makes work only a means of production, it becomes the source of serious injustices. Legitimate competition, which stimulates economic development, must not go against the *primordial right of every man to have work through which he can earn a living for himself and his family*. For, how can a society consider itself rich, if in its midst there are numerous people who lack the basic necessities? As long as a human being is injured and disfigured by poverty, in a certain way the entire society will be blighted.

4. With regard to work, *every economic system must have respect for man and his dignity as its first principle*. 'It is always man who is the purpose of ... work'.⁷ It is right to remind those who in one way or another are employers of the three great moral values of work. First and foremost, *work is the principal means of exercising a specifically human activity*. It is the 'fundamental dimension of man's existence on earth: man's life is built up every day from work, from work it derives its specific dignity'.⁸ For every person it is also *the normal means of meeting his material needs and those of his brothers and sisters for whom he is responsible*. But in addition, work has *a social function*. It is a testimony to solidarity between all men; each is called

to make his contribution to communal life and no member of society should be excluded from the field of work or marginalised. For exclusion from the systems of production almost inevitably brings a wider social exclusion, with the phenomena of violence and family breakdown in particular. In contemporary society, where individualism is more and more pronounced, it is important for men to realise that their most humble and unassuming personal activity, particularly in the world of work, is a service to their brothers and sisters in humanity, and a contribution to the well-being of the community as a whole. This responsibility derives from the obligation of justice. Indeed, each individual receives much from society and must in turn be able to give according to his own talents.

5. Lack of work, unemployment and underemployment lead many of our contemporaries, in both the industrialised societies and those with a traditional economy, to *question the meaning of their life* and to despair about the future. It is appropriate to recognise that for progress truly to serve man, it is necessary that *all men be integrated into the productive system or the service of the social body*, so that they may be its agents and share its fruits. *This is particularly important for young people* who rightly expect to earn their living, to be integrated into the fabric of society and to start a family. How can they have confidence in themselves and be recognised by others if they cannot find their place in professional networks? In periods when full employment is no longer possible, it is the duty of the State and of businesses to create a *better distribution of tasks among all workers*. Professional institutions and workers themselves ought, for the good of all, to accept this division and perhaps a relative loss of acquired benefits. This is as much a principle of *human justice and social morality* as of Christian charity. No one can reason in a purely individualistic way or in too strongly a corporatist spirit. Everyone is invited to take all his brothers and sisters into account. Therefore we should educate our contemporaries, so that they can be aware of the limited nature of economic growth, in order not to be misled by the erroneous and illusory view apparently offered by the myth of permanent progress.

The Church relies on your insights

6. You have wished to broaden your research to include its political and demographic implications. Your assessment of the international situation will be a valuable contribution to showing the numerous factors connected with economic development. In relation to *the globalisation of problems*, I appreciate your concern to suggest an approach that pays greater attention to the demographic division of work and to the *situation in developing countries*, which cannot be ignored when choosing international strategies. There must be no lack of solidarity in the face of the difficulties they encounter in their slow political and economic transition.

7. Ladies and gentlemen of the Academy, on the occasion of your second plenary session I would like to assure you once again of my confidence and esteem. The Church relies on you for enlightenment in the areas where there is an ever broader awareness of the urgent need for decisions that will lead to a future of greater solidarity and brotherhood within nations and among all peoples of the earth. As I express my fervent best wishes for your work, I invoke the Spirit of

truth and the Lord's blessings upon you.

1 N. 9.

2 Cf. n. 32.

3 Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 38.

4 *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n. 8.

5 Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, n. 39.

6 Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*.

7 *Laborem Exercens*, n. 6.

8 *Ibid.*, I, n. 1.