

The Fragile Relevance of *Laborem Exercens*

Thomas Kohler

Introduction

Times change. We all know this, of course, but a trip home to visit family that I made just as I began work on this paper reminded me of that little truth in a pointed and poignant way. Housebound on a rainy, late-summer afternoon, I ran across a stack of magazines from the early 1980s. Thumbing my way through them, glancing at the images and stories that depicted the once very familiar world in which I spent my student days and early adulthood—and the world in which John Paul II released his first social encyclical, *Laborem Exercens*—an odd sense of disorientation crept over me. Naturally, the hair styles and clothing appeared dated (which is a nice way of saying outlandish), stories about the cultural scene recalled now long- (and well-) forgotten pop-celebrities, while photographs of the then exotic personal computer depicted clunky objects that today look as dated as a Dodge Dart. Somehow, everything had come to look a bit strange. Were things then really so different? Have times changed so much?

The news stories brought old fears and concerns back to mind, along with a strong sense of gratitude for events avoided that so easily could have turned out otherwise. For example, one of the most talked-about books of the era was chillingly-entitled, *THE THIRD WORLD WAR: AUGUST 1985*.¹ Convincingly written by a group of NATO generals, it postulated a scenario in which a series of strikes in Poland, demanding broad social, political and economic reforms, quickly spread across Eastern Europe. As part of the attempt to quell the revolts and to stave off any Western intervention, the authors describe an invasion of West Germany made by Soviet troops through the Fulda gap, an attack that culminates in a shattering but limited nuclear exchange and ultimately, in the collapse of the Soviet Union. Eerily enough, a year later, in the late summer of 1980—the traditional season for the start of

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¹ General Sir John Hackett and Other Top-ranking NATO Generals and Advisors, *THE THIRD WORLD WAR: AUGUST 1985* (1979).

modern European wars—strikes *did* begin to spread across Poland, and in September, the Solidarity trade union and social movement was founded in the shipyards at Gdańsk.

Along with all this, the magazines also were full of stories about John Paul II, the man who would come to play a central role in the miraculously peaceful, if forestalled, “velvet revolution” that would transform Europe and bring down the Soviet regime. The photographs of him show a vibrant and charismatic man of erect bearing at the height of his powers, not the stooped, shuffling and suffering Pontiff of recent memory. The magazines also were crowded with stories of events in Poland, of the remarkable rise of Solidarity and of its extraordinary group of leaders, among whom, improbably enough, was an electrician given to wearing a small icon of Our Lady of Czestochowa on his lapel. By the end of the afternoon, having burrowed through the pile of magazines and the layers of time they congealed, I felt the same felt the same experience of distance and remove that I not infrequently do in reading *Laborem*, or for that matter, any of the social encyclicals.

It could not and should not be otherwise, I suppose. As John Paul reminds us in his 1987 encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, the Church, as “an expert in humanity,” has the duty “to scrutinize the signs of the times, and to interpret them in light of the Gospel,”² a task she does in numerous ways, but perhaps most solemnly and most publicly in the form of a papal encyclical. Every social encyclical responds to and critically reflects upon concrete conditions and trends. The social teachings do not represent a body of pious sentiments, detached from the sweat and blood concerns of real life. No wonder that each of them has something of a “period piece” quality about them. They are not grinning greeting cards, cheerfully urging us to keep our chins up or moist-eyed invitations to think beautiful thoughts. They speak to the most critical and complicated issues facing people. Historically, they tend to be released at crucial moments, when decisions really matter and when the thick and noxious fog of human evil, short-sightedness, misguided good intentions and all our other weaknesses hang most heavily around us.

Perhaps more than any, *Laborem Exercens* demonstrates just this characteristic. The first of John Paul’s three social encyclicals, and probably his most personal, he had planned to announce it on May 15, 1981, the ninetieth anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*. The nearly successful attempt on the Pope’s life, made in St. Peter’s square on May 13th, frustrated

² *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern), ¶ 7 quoting *Gaudium et Spes* (The Pastoral Constitution of the Church) ¶ 1.

this plan. Instead, working on the draft during his convalescence, John Paul released it with exquisite timing on September 14. This date fell just days after the first anniversary of Solidarity's founding, in the midst of the Movement's first and closely-watched Congress, and at a high-point of the tensions that steadily had been gathering throughout that very eventful summer. Soviet officials hardly would have overlooked the fact that the Polish Pope closed his encyclical by noting that he had given it on "the feast of the triumph of the cross." Could he have found a more trenchant way of stating the challenge his encyclical posed, or to have expressed his confidence in the outcome?

Laborem Exercens stands as a powerful mirror of its time. While not limited in any way to the situation in Poland, it does speak, and in a robust fashion, to the most pressing of the then contemporary issues. Its treatment of human work emphasizes the themes and reflects the character of the discussion within influential quarters of the Solidarity movement. While it addresses the entire world, it does so in a voice that carries a distinct Polish accent.

A quarter of a century has passed since John Paul II scrutinized the signs of the times in *Laborem Exercens*. We live in a world since transformed. During the intervening years, and in part because of the contributions his encyclical made, the Soviet Union has vanished and Marxism lies buried in history's ash-heap. The power of the sovereign, juridical nation-state, one of modernity's proudest inventions, steadily ebbs. Meanwhile, globalization, a development of which the encyclical made mention, has gone forward with breathtaking rapidity. Economies, patterns of employment bonding and the ways in which people work have undergone fundamental structural changes. Unions and related forms of workers' associations, institutions that the Pope described in the encyclical as "an indispensable element of social life, especially in modern industrialized societies,"³ constitute an endangered species everywhere.⁴ They, along with the other institutions of civil society that he champions in the encyclical, including the family, stand in a depleted and precarious condition.

The significance of human work, the topic that lies at the very heart of the encyclical, has suffered a no different fate.⁵ Once a matter of

³ *Laborem Exercens* ¶20.

⁴ Even some of John Paul II's most ardent admirers regard unions as at best superfluous and at worst, dangerous institutions, despite the Pope's repeated and emphatic support for them throughout all of his encyclicals.

⁵ In *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul II stated that "there must be continued study of the subject of work and of the subject's living conditions.

considerable social and political significance and the subject of intense scholarly reflection and research, it has all but vanished from the agenda. Topics like job-creation and unemployment rates still manage to capture our attention, but matters like the impact of work on those who perform it, the consequences of job-loss to those who suffer it, and, as John Paul II later would put it, attempts “to avoid making market mechanisms the only point of reference for social life,”⁶ largely have disappeared from the conversation. Even speaking about the last-mentioned theme seems a bit naive, since increasingly we appear to be convinced that economic forces, like the elemental forces of nature, lie beyond our influencing. In these instrumentalist times, we may think nothing of harvesting human embryos in our efforts to manipulate (and patent) stem-cell lines. Nevertheless, we approach the institutions of the market with a touching and sincere holy awe.

So, does *Laborem Exercens* have any relevance today? Does it represent a document with a still-vital message or, like my stack of old magazines, is it something full only of yesterday’s news? In what follows, I will attempt to address this issue. In the first section, I briefly will review the roots of the social encyclical tradition. In the second section, I will follow John Paul’s methodology and “‘look back’ at the text itself” to discover the “fundamental principles” that it explicates.⁷ I will suggest that these principles can be captured by two terms, solidarity and proletarianization, which I will summarize and analyze. In the final portion, I will speak to what I mean by the “fragile relevance” of the encyclical. I conclude that *Laborem Exercens* remains of urgent importance, but that its message comes in a language that we increasingly find difficult to comprehend.

Work, the “Social Question” and the Roots of the Social Thought Tradition

Near the outset of *Laborem Exercens*, the Pope states “that work as a human issue is at the very center of the ‘social question,’” an issue to which the Church’s teachings, he points out, “have been especially directed” for a century and more.⁸ To American ears, however, the term “social question” probably has a slightly odd ring about it. What is the “social question”? Where did it come from and what does it mean? And what does it have to do with work?

⁶ *Centesimus Annus*, ¶19.

⁷ *Id.* ¶3.

⁸ *Laborem Exercens*, ¶2.

The term, “social question” may lie at the heart of the social magisterium, but the person generally credited with its coining was no Churchman. Early in the Nineteenth Century, Napoleon Bonaparte first used the words to describe the challenge left in the wake of the thoroughgoing changes wrought by the French Revolution. Illuminated by a rigorously insistent individualism, the Revolution and the Enlightenment thought that informed it viewed institutions, associations and mediating groups of every description as posing a threat to personal freedom and self-sovereignty. Consequently, freeing the individual from every possible form of institutional constraint constituted one of the key goals of the Enlightenment project.⁹

The opening sentence of Article 1 of the famous “August Decrees,” passed on the night of August 4, 1789, bluntly states the heart of the Revolution’s social and legislative program: “The National Assembly entirely destroys the feudal regime.”¹⁰ François Furet notes that with the passage of the Decrees, “a juridical and social order, forged over centuries, composed of a hierarchy of separate orders, corps, and communities, and defined by privileges, somehow *evaporated*, leaving in its place a social world conceived in a new way”¹¹ as a coincidental aggregate of sovereign, independent, rights-bearing, individual selves, freed to shape the relational character of their lives not through custom but through individually negotiated contractual agreements. Passed two years later, the highly influential and remarkably long-lived Chapelier’s Law carried the Revolution’s project forward by suppressing the guilds and outlawing all other forms of worker’s associations.

Whether as a result of the force of the ideas themselves or of the forces of Napoleon who imposed them across broad swaths of the Continent, the changes wrought by the disciples of the Enlightenment quickly spread across Europe, leaving no region untouched. In the name of the dignity and freedom of the new Adam, now newly conceived along rigorously geometric lines, age-old feudal arrangements were razed and the structures, practices and institutions that once had given society its terms and relations ruthlessly were suppressed. The creation “without concessions” and within an astonishingly brief period “of a wholly

⁹ For a further discussion of these points, see Thomas C. Kohler, *The Notion of Solidarity and the Secret History of American Labor Law*, 53 Buffalo L. Rev. 883 (2005).

¹⁰ Décret Relatif à L [sic] Abolition des Privilegès, August 11, 1789, 8 ARCHIVES PARLEMENTAIRES Article 11, at 398.

¹¹ François Furet, *The Night of August 4. in A CRITICAL DICTIONARY OF THE FRENCH REVOLUTION* at 107 (François Furet & Mona Ozouf, eds., Arthur Goldhammer, trans., The Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 1989).

modern, individualistic society,” Furet points out, raised a truly unprecedented and far-reaching problem. “What had to be worked out now,” he explains, for this wholly new “society of free and equal individuals,”¹² would be the character of the social glue that might bind each of these sovereign, rights-bearing individuals with one another. This problem represents the essence of the social question, a question that dominated the nineteenth century and one that in this increasingly globalizing world, presses in on us with ever-greater intensity.

The so-called “worker question,” often spoken of in the encyclicals, quickly became a core aspect of the social question, but never has constituted the whole of it. Without doubt, the two questions have developed intertwined with one another. As early as the mid-1790s, Goethe darkly observed that the “rampant” interest in the study and application of machinery (or what we would call technology) “torments and frightens me: it rolls in like a thunderstorm, slowly, slowly, but it has set its direction and it will come and affect,” every aspect of life.¹³ The eventual collapse of obsolete customary relational structures and the suppression of venerable institutions, the subsequent extensions (formally, at least) of economic and political rights, the revolution in self-understanding, along with innovations in agricultural practices and in industrial production, broke across the world with the thunderous effects that Goethe had predicted.

Emancipated from the ancient bonds that determined one’s place in life, individuals also found themselves placed outside the web of duties that once sheltered the vulnerable through the obligations that they imposed on the strong. Freed from the land and other customary strictures and obligations, but possessing little if any resources of their own, a new class of people who had only their labor to sell found themselves loosed into a world now ruled by the principles of supply and demand, and ordered largely through the terms set forth in private agreements. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the largest mass migration of human beings the world has seen until our era was underway, spurred by desperately pressing need, by longings for a better life, by political repression and religious persecution and by like forces that pushed people into unfamiliar places and increasingly, to new continents as well. By the time Leo XIII issued *Rerum Novarum* in 1891,

¹² Id. at 113.

¹³ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, in 8 *GOETHE’S WERKE* at 429 (Erich Trunz, ed., Hamburg, 1950), *quoted in*, Franz Josef Stegmann, *DER SOZIALE KATHOLIZISMUS UND DIE MITBESTIMMUNG IN DEUTSCHLAND: VOM BEGINN DER INDUSTRIALISIERUNG BIS ZUM JAHRE 1933* at 16 (2d ed. 1978).

the processes of the first wave of globalization had established themselves and would progress at ever-increasing speed until just before the onset of the First World War.

Trying to find means by which to integrate this rising body of propertyless and rootless workers who lived on the periphery of what was still a class-based society, to afford them the sorts of rights enjoyed by the middle-class, to secure them against financial insecurity and to establish conditions for “making life more human”¹⁴ constituted one of the most pressing tasks of the era. The contests around these issues represent some of the most moving and at times bloody struggles of the nineteenth century, and the debates over them have involved thinkers and activists as diverse as Alexis de Tocqueville, John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, Ferdinand Lassalle, Herbert Spencer, Max Weber, and the holders of the Chair of Peter, to name but a very few.

The social question also highlights a problem for the Church, one that it faced after the Revolution, and one that it continues to confront, although in different guises, presently. Writing in 1861, the Bishop of Mainz, Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler, the man whom Leo XIII would call “my great predecessor,” and whom Pope Benedict XVI recently described as one of the “pioneers” of the social tradition,¹⁵ framed the issue in this way: “We are standing at the end of a time,” he observed, “in which all the old dwellings that our Catholic forbearers had furnished have been torn down, and where we as Catholics have not yet quite sorted out how we should take-up residence in the new order of things.”¹⁶

As Ketteler pointed-out, the Revolution had worked tremendous havoc on the settled institutional patterns of the Church. The process of “secularization” that followed in the wake of the Revolution resulted in the Church’s loss of monastic houses, universities and other faculties, bans against the reception of novices by religious communities and like steps. Along with this would come the massive shifts of population, which included those now foreclosed from agricultural work but for

¹⁴ *Laborem Exercens*, ¶ 3, citing *Gaudium et Spes* ¶38. (The term was a favorite of John Paul II’s; he used it twice in *Laborem Exercens* and employed it in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* and *Incararnationis Mysterium* as well. It could serve as the motto of his social encyclicals summarizing the goal of the social magisterium.)

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love) ¶27.

¹⁶ Wilhelm Emmanuel Freiherr von Ketteler, *Vorwart to Freiheit, Autorität und Kirche in WILHELM EMMANUEL FREIHERR VON KETTELER, AB.I, Bd.1, SÄMTLICHE WERKE UND BRIEFE: SCHRIFTEN, AUFSÄTZE UND REDEN 1848-1866*, at 227 (Erwin Iserloh, Christoph Stoll, Emil Valasek, Norbert Jäger, eds., 1977).

whom industry offered no opportunities for employment—Marx’s “reserve army of the unemployed.” Developing new institutional schemes by which to provide for the spiritual and physical needs of this part of the population posed unprecedented and substantial challenges for the Church and her leaders.

Immigration, both within Europe and from the Continent to the New World, added additional complications to these tasks as ways had to be found to integrate and orient the newcomers into often entirely unfamiliar cultures and ways of living. In Europe as in the United States, much of the answer to this complex of problems would take the form of self-help, through the creation of remarkable systems of hospitals, homes for children, the aged and dying, of schools, training institutes, universities, and a dizzying array of other institutions, many of which existed through the heroic, self-sacrificing efforts of women religious.

The contours of the social question may have changed, but its importance, if anything, only has increased over time. In its fullest significance, the social question raises the most fundamental issues about human nature and the frameworks and possibilities for pursuing life in common. It sweeps matters concerning political, economic and legal arrangements, the character of the family, work, and other social relationships, the role of the state, the place of civil society, etc. within its scope. The Church’s approach to the question highlights the points of departure between her anthropology of the human person, and the philosophical and political nominalistic and voluntaristic prejudgments that inform modernity.

In the Church’s understanding, humans are naturally social beings, not sovereign, self-defining, monadic entities. This understanding does not limit itself to the political or social realm, but characterizes and situates us in our entirety as human beings. Consequently, *Lumen Gentium* teaches that God “does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another.”¹⁷ We realize our communal character most fully through communion in Christ, where the faithful, both the living and the dead, not only “are made members of his body . . . but, severally members of one another.”¹⁸ Work prefigures this deepest relationship; it helps orient us to and prepare us for it. “Work is reciprocity, it is agreement, it is a

¹⁷ *Lumen Gentium* (The Pastoral Constitution of the Church) ¶9.

¹⁸ *Id.* ¶7.

multifaceted dependence,” writes Józef Tischner, one of the theorists of the Solidarity movement. “Work creates a communion.”¹⁹

This anthropology, along with a deep appreciation of the communal character of work, helps to explain the Church’s approach to the social question. Work, John Paul II emphatically reminds us, remains “the essential key to the whole social question.”²⁰ Why? “Only man is capable of work,” John Paul II answers. “Work is one of the characteristics that distinguishes man from the rest of creatures, whose activity for sustaining their lives cannot” be dignified with the term. Work bears the “mark of man and of humanity, the mark of a man operating within a community of persons.” That mark determines the “inner characteristics” of work and “constitutes its very nature.”²¹

Work reflects the character of humans as the *imago Dei*.²² Through work—true work²³—humans, as the Rabbis framed it, are given the unique privilege of participating in the completion of creation. “[B]y means of work,” John Paul II instructs, “man participates in the activity of God himself. . . .”²⁴ Thus, the curse that through “the sweat of your face you shall eat bread”²⁵ mysteriously also takes on the quality of a gift, one reserved to humans alone, one that distinctly ennobles us by allowing us to reflect, through our activities, “the very action of the

¹⁹ Józef Tischner, *THE SPIRIT OF SOLIDARITY*, 98 (Marek B. Zaleski & Benjamin Fiore, S.J., trans., 1984). Fr. Tischner, who died in 2000, was the chaplain and philosopher of the Solidarity movement and he directed the Institute of Philosophy at the Papal Theology faculty in Cracow. He was a colleague and close friend of John Paul II’s. A series of conversations among Tischner, John Paul II, and Krzysztof Michalski, which occurred in 1993, were memorialized in John Paul II’s last book, *MEMORY AND IDENTITY: CONVERSATIONS AT THE DAWN OF THE MILLENNIUM* (2005).

²⁰ *Laborem Exercens* ¶3.

²¹ Id. Forward.

²² Id. ¶25 (“The word of God’s revelation is profoundly marked by the fundamental truth that man, created in the image of God, shares by his work in the activity of the Creator and that, within the limits of his own human capabilities, man in a sense continues to develop that activity, and perfects it as he advances further and further in the discovery of the resources and values contained in the whole of creation.”) and cf. ¶¶4, 6.

²³ Not every human exertion, not all human activity, deserves to be dignified by the term, work. “True work is work that truly serves life,” states Tischner. (Tischner, *supra* note 19 at 16.) Such work gives meaning both to the materials from which objects are formed, but to the community within which and for whom it is performed. Labors that exploit and degrade, that do not grow from authentic values and thus that do not serve human well-being, cannot properly be termed work, and the products of these labors should not be termed goods.

²⁴ *Laborem Exercens* ¶26.

²⁵ Genesis 3:19.

creator of the universe.”²⁶ Even our punishment has mercy at its core and as its purpose. Through work, “God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.”²⁷

Work, both as an activity and in the sense of having steady and regularized access to it, represents our gateway into society. In the contemporary world, our claim on resources, wealth and status comes through employment. Seen as an essential means to enable and to enhance individual freedom, getting people into the market and removing barriers to job entry constitutes a key part of the modern project, and it remains one of the essential policy goals of any modern state. Having work sets the conditions for participation in nearly every sphere of modern life. Those without it exist on the margins of society, while the underemployed find themselves relegated to lives of quiet desperation. Around the world, more people now participate in paid employment—what economists call market work—than at any time in history. If the Church is to care for the whole person, it must start where they are, which as John Paul II emphasizes, is at work.

***Laborem Exercens* and Two Organizing Principles**

Now that we have provided at least some context for the term, the social question, we should turn to the text of the encyclical itself. *Laborem Exercens* is a rich document and one could find numerous ways to organize its contents. For my part, I find that two concepts, solidarity and proletarianization, serve as good means to organize the key ideas set forth there.

Solidarity

At the time John Paul wrote *Laborem Exercens*, solidarity represented a frequently heard term, but for most Americans, then and now, the word has both a foreign and somewhat vague ring about it. Many of us probably continue to associate the term primarily with the movement that adopted it as its name, and the version of fraternity or commonality that Solidarity represented seems to have been one that stood in sharp contrast to the form spoken of in the Marxist catechisms. Nevertheless, the Pope, the Solidarity union movement, Communists and plenty of others have employed the term in a vast array of contexts. Where did it come from, and what does it mean?

²⁶ *Laborem Exercens* ¶4.

²⁷ Hebrews 12:10.

The word solidarity came into use at about the same time that the term, the “social question,” appeared. It was borrowed from the Roman law, where a solidary obligation refers to a situation in which two or more people are liable for or entitled to the whole of a debt. The many associations the term suggests reflect its complicated and fascinating history. While an unfamiliar term to most Americans, solidarity represents an important European legal and social concept, one that the proposed European Union Constitution recognized as one of “indivisible, universal values” on which the European Union rests, and one that embodies a series of substantive rights that the Constitution proposed to protect.

The coeval appearance of the terms solidarity and the social question was no coincidence. The notion of solidarity offered itself as the glue that would bind individuals in the wholly new conditions that obtained in the wake of the political, social and economic “triple revolutions” that remade the world during the nineteenth century. The term strives toward all the elements that its proponents saw as absent from the new order: a sense of unity and shared fate; mutual obligation for the care of the vulnerable and recognition of the fact of individual interdependence; support for the development of networks of small groups and associations through which individuals, and particularly the less strong, could gain concrete opportunities for self-determination and self-responsibility.

In its most profound expression, solidarity exists through shared judgments about meanings, values, the identity of the good, about ways of being that truly suit humans, and in the activities that bring those judgments into act. As Józef Tischner put it, “Authentic solidarity . . . is solidarity of consciences.”²⁸ If it is to be stable, solidarity represents friendship around the authentically valuable. As such, it is something that transcends and reorients us. “Solidarity for us is something to pattern after,” Tischner states, “something that defines itself as it is realized, and something that must be constantly redefined.”²⁹ Solidarity pulls us past the narrow confines of our own personalities and imaginations, and places us into a dialogue about the character of our obligations, our relations to others, and ultimately, the character of our relation to ourselves.³⁰ In its fullest sense, solidarity is a virtue, a

²⁸ Józef Tischner, *supra* note 19 at 7.

²⁹ *Id.* at 5.

³⁰ See, Thomas C. Kohler, *A Rock on Which One Can Build: Friendship, Solidarity and the Notion of Authority* in, *CIVILIZING AUTHORITY: SOCIETY, STATE AND CHURCH* (Patrick McKinley Brennan, ed., Lexington Books, 2007).

modern replacement for the specifically political form of friendship that the ancients and that the Tradition viewed as the necessary ground for any form of political life.

Over the decades, theorists and activists of many stripes have adopted and employed the notion of solidarity. The term has served as the motto for many movements, and it embodies the experiences, understandings and ideologies of a diverse array of contributors. Nevertheless, from the outset, those playing a leading role in the development, propagation and application of the notion have been a group of thinker-activists who founded what is now known as the Catholic Social Thought tradition. One looking for a symbol that most strongly distinguishes Roman Catholicism from modernity and the pervasive individualism that informs need look no further than the notion of solidarity and the anthropology that grounds it.

Moving the principle from the world of theory to practice involved experimentation with structures in which the notion of solidarity could concretely be realized. While those experiments in the structures of solidarity took numerous forms, they eventually came to share three essential characteristics. They attempt to ground individuals in a group, association or sodality of some sort. These bodies provide a defense in depth, mediating the relationship between the individual and the large institutions of the market and state. They thereby function a means of escape from Weber's "iron cage." These mediating bodies also aim at enhancing individual status by increasing opportunities for authentic self-determination. In doing so, they attempt concretely to realize another aspect of the Church's anthropology of the person: that in reasonably deliberating, judging, choosing and valuing, we act in a fashion most consistent with our human personality. Finally, these mediating institutions tend to overlap and support one another, thereby encouraging a new ecology of interwoven and interdependent social institutions—John Paul II likens them to "connected vessels"³¹—that stand free of the state, and that put an emphasis on self-sufficiency and self-determination.³² The social teachings realize that humans

³¹ *Laborem Exercens* ¶20.

³² *Laborem Exercens* exemplifies these characteristics: in it, John Paul II urges "producing a wide range of intermediate bodies with economic, social, and cultural purposes; they would be bodies enjoying real autonomy with regard to the public powers, pursuing their specific aims in honest collaboration with each other and in subordination to the demands of the common good, and they would be living communities both in form and in substance in the sense that the members of each body would be looked upon and treated as persons and encouraged to take an active part in the life of the body." *Id.* ¶14.

become self-determining only by regularly engaging in acts of judging and choosing. The activity sustains the condition, but it requires a setting in which it can be realized. The emphasis on the unions, the family, and the importance of the autonomy of these and the other structures of civil society found in *Laborem Exercens* resoundingly reaffirms these classic characteristics of the social tradition.

While John Paul II insists on the crucial importance of what I might call the “structures of solidarity”, the concept also organizes and illuminates much of the discussion in the encyclical. “Work is an axis of solidarity,” observes Tischner.³³ It sets the conditions for solidarity in at least three dimensions. These dimensions capture much of the teachings and reflections of the encyclical on the character and significance of work.

Through work, one potentially can appropriate one’s authentic self.³⁴ In questioning, understanding, judging and responsibly acting, elements constituent of all conscious human enterprise, one engages in the most distinctly human of activities.³⁵ As a result, our work not only “bears the mark of man.” Because, as I will discuss a bit further below, humans are beings who constitute themselves through the actions they perform, man ultimately is “the effective subject of work” as well as “its true maker and creator.”³⁶ For this reason, John Paul II observes, “However true it may be that man is destined for work and called to it, in the first place, work is ‘for man’ and not man ‘for work’.”³⁷ We not only make things, provide services, seek to understand the workings of our world and to give it meaning through the variety of work we perform. In the process of doing these things, we also make our world and ourselves as human beings. Properly ordered work can assist in bringing us into solidarity with our authentic selves, with those qualities and activities that most fully constitute us as human.³⁸

³³ Tischner, *supra* note 19 at 13.

³⁴ John Paul II thus states that “as the’ image of God’ [man] 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.” *Laborem Exercens* ¶6.

³⁵ As John Paul II puts the point in *Laborem Exercens*, as a person works, “he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfill the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity.” *Laborem Exercens* ¶6.

³⁶ *Id.* ¶7.

³⁷ *Id.* ¶6.

³⁸ Hence, as John Paul II states, “Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed in a sense becomes “more a human being.” *Laborem Exercens* ¶9.

Work has a “transitive”³⁹ or “conversational”⁴⁰ quality. Just as engaging in it can pull us past the narrow limits of our own interior world, so it draws us into the creation of the social world. “Work constitutes the foundation for the formation of family life,” observes the Holy Father, “which is a natural right and something that man is called to.”⁴¹ Through the reciprocal character of work, one also “enters into the labor of others,”⁴² both within the family and in the society in which that family is embedded and operates. Work represents an expression of the naturally intersubjective character of the human. A rightly-ordered “culture of work”⁴³ is prior (both temporally and in terms of significance) to key social institutions like the family as well as to the individual, since that culture sets the conditions for the proper functioning of the family and thereby of the individuals who live and are formed within it. The family, its members and the greater society act in the culture, which gives them their orientation and identity. For this reason, John Paul II insisted upon the priority and normativity of the culture, and the authenticity of the values that it embodies, transmits and that ultimately determine its development or decline.

“Culture signifies cultivation,” John Paul II has observed.⁴⁴ That cultivation is the fruit of the work of the generations that have gone before us, and to which we also make our contribution through our work. That concrete link incarnates a portion of the authentic common good “that serves to add to the heritage of the whole human family, of all the people living in the world.”⁴⁵ Work has both horizontal and vertical aspects. It truly transcends us and the motives for it always point past the instrumental ends our tasks may serve—but only if we are attentive enough to realize who the true subject of our work is and properly discerning about the values that direct it. The Nineteenth Century Polish poet, Cyprian Norwid, helps to put the matter into proper perspective: “Beauty is to enthuse us for work,” he observed,

³⁹ Id. ¶4.

⁴⁰ See, Tischner, *supra* note 19 at 13-17.

⁴¹ *Laborem Exercens* ¶10. Consequently, the Encyclical later takes-up subjects such as wages and other social benefits necessary to support the family (¶19), the duty to act against unemployment, to provide assistance and training for the unemployed and appropriate education to allow entrée into meaningful work (¶18), rights of workers, work opportunities for the disabled, issues related to emigration (¶¶20, 22, 23) etc.

⁴² Id. ¶13.

⁴³ Cf. *Centesimus Annus*, ¶15.

⁴⁴ Pope John Paul II, *MEMORY AND IDENTITY: CONVERSATIONS AT THE DAWN OF A MILLENNIUM* at 63 (2005).

⁴⁵ *Laborem Exercens* ¶10.

“and work is to raise us up.”⁴⁶ To the degree that we make mistakes about the beautiful, the identity of the truly valuable, however, we degrade ourselves in our efforts to realize it.

Proletarianization

Proletarianization: the word itself is a show-stopper. Could anything sound more like a throwback to another and now blessedly by-gone era? Understandably enough, given the time of its writing, John Paul II employs the term in *Laborem Exercens*. Nevertheless, he also makes crystal clear that its application extends well beyond his critique of the Communist system that he and his fellow Poles had confronted. What does proletarianization mean? What does this seemingly creaky old term have to do with us?

To answer these questions, let's start with a bit of history. Most of us probably link the word proletariat with Karl Marx, and not for bad reason, given the centrality of the term to his analysis of capitalism and the chiliastic role he saw this class playing in world history. In fact, however, the first person to use the term, at least in modern history, was the early Catholic social theorist, Franz von Baader, who employed it at least fifteen years earlier than did Marx.⁴⁷ The word itself referred to the lowest class in the Roman state [the *proletariae*], a class whose sons constituted their only wealth and whose status was the equivalent of the helots in Sparta.

Baader used the term to describe the newly-forming cohort who had become the focus of the social question—the “working class.” People without place, property, legal status or protections, Baader ironically described them as enjoying the “freedom of birds” [*Vogelfreiheit*].⁴⁸ From early on, the term proletariat signified far more than simply material poverty, but the degradation and abasement of workers, their instrumentalization and their reduction to a state of dependence that made them into little more than what the ancients had referred to as “talking tools.”⁴⁹ Like solidarity, the term proletariat has been borrowed by many, but has been a key concept in the Catholic social

⁴⁶ Cyprian Norwid, *Promethidion. Rzecz w dwóch dialogach z epilogiem*, in PISMA WSZYSTKIE, III: POEMATY 440 (Warsaw, 1971), quoted in, Pope John Paul II, MEMORY AND IDENTITY: CONVERSATIONS AT THE DAWN OF THE MILLENNIUM at 61 (2005).

⁴⁷ See, Thomas Nipperdey, DEUTSCHE GESCHICHTE, 1800-1866: BÜRGERWELT UND STÄRKER STAAT at 242 (1994).

⁴⁸ Id. An old term dating back to the 16th century to describe persons without legal protections or rights.

⁴⁹ As slaves were described in antiquity.

tradition since its beginnings. Social orders that result in the distortion and mutilation of human personality have remained its steady focus.

Writing in an essay that he published a few years after World War II, the German Catholic theologian and social thinker, Josef Pieper, describes three different forms of proletarianization.⁵⁰ In one fashion or another, John Paul II speaks to each of these variations in *Laborem Exercens*.

In the first place, Pieper points out, one should not equate poverty with the state of proletarianization. One can be poor, he states, without being a member of the proletariat. Likewise, one can be proletarian without being poor. Instead, proletarianization has to do with the condition of being “shackled to the work process,”⁵¹ a condition that abstracts from and transcends one’s economic position.

This definition of proletarianization needs a word or two of explanation. By “work process,” Pieper means activities that satisfy a need or demand. Working is not the same as being active, or a description of all human undertakings other than mere physical rest. Work is “useful activity,” intended to serve desires and needs. Work does not include activities engaged in as ends in themselves,⁵² but acts through which and in which “common advantage” [*gemeine Nutzen*] of the community are realized.⁵³ The notion of common advantage, he notes, is not the same as that of the common good [*bonum commune* or *Gemeinwohl*]. The former is an essential part of the latter, but “a much narrower concept” than that of the common good.⁵⁴

Proletarianization describes a condition of being “bound to the social demand-satisfaction process (to the ‘manufacture of goods’, to ‘production’, to ‘fulfilling the plan’—or however one wishes to describe this process)” to such a degree that “the life-space of the working person is

⁵⁰ Josef Pieper, *Philosophische Gedanken zum sozialen Problem* in JOSEF PIEPER, *FRÜHE SOZIOLOGISCHE SCHRIFTEN* 416 (Berthold Wald, ed., Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag 2004).

⁵¹ Id. at 419.

⁵² In Aristotelian terms, such activities constitute a *praxis*, acts done for their own sake, and not as means toward ends beyond them. These represent activities engaged in by free men.

⁵³ In Aristotle’s schema, these are described as *poiesis*—poietical or productive activities, done for instrumental reasons, typically engaged in by someone not free, and who does not choose the end; e.g., the carpenter does not choose the end, the house, but is given its design and builds toward it.

⁵⁴ Pieper, *supra* note 50 at 419-20.

thereby filled-up and exhausted,” leaving room for little else. In this state, all activities ultimately are ordered toward and become understandable only in light of the contribution they make to exchange, to the processes of production and acquisition.

Noting that proletarianization has several roots and causes, Pieper proceeds to discuss three: the condition of utter destitution; life under the dictate of “total work state,” where one is treated as a mere functionary, an instrument for the achievement of a plan; and lastly, the condition of inner-impoverishment. The last two states, Pieper observes, often go hand-in-hand. Nevertheless, he continues, the condition of “inner-proletarianization” extends well beyond the social class that one typically would characterize as the proletariat. Rather, the inner-impoverishment that accompanies the state of being psychologically shackled to work, “is a completely generalized and to modern humans the truly characteristic symptom of the illness” that showed itself most starkly first among those whom we traditionally call the proletariat. In light of modern conditions and attitudes, Pieper asks, should we not all see ourselves as part of the proletariat?⁵⁵

As both John Paul II and Pieper use the term, proletarianization refers to political and economic orders that instrumentalize human work and that teach individuals to understand their own worth, purpose, and activities in instrumental terms. The resulting impoverishment of human life becomes a pernicious force. Because of its ubiquity, it appears as if it were part of the natural order of things. At the same time, that ubiquity causes instrumentalist thinking to ooze into every sphere of life and decision-making, eventually putting all issues in terms of market demands and analyzing them according to a calculus of gain and risk.

Certainly, many forms of work have an instrumental purpose; we perform such work not as an end in itself, but to achieve some other end that by definition we have judged as being a higher, more desirable good, and worth the work that it will cost to obtain it. In performing that work, however, we literally are performing ourselves. Each act in which we engage is, in a real sense, irretrievable. We all have experienced the helpless feeling that comes after blurting out something that we wish we had not said, or committing the stupidly impulsive act that we instantly wish we had not done. We can apologize, we can regret,

⁵⁵ Id. 422-23.

but we cannot undo. Everything we do constitutes us, makes us to be in a certain way, and when done repeatedly, acts become the habits that cut and shape our characters. No one may have seen what we did, but nevertheless, we never get away with anything. We bear the mark of all of our acts both the bad and the good. We are what we do. *Pas de sortie*.

For these reasons, as we have seen, John Paul II is at pains to emphasize that “man is the subject of work,” and to insist on the priority of labor over capital and of the priority of persons over things. Work, as a basic and nearly universal activity, constitutes us all. How we understand it, organize its performance, compensate it and order the economy in which we regularize its performance touch all of us at the core of our being. Consequently, *Laborem Exercens* condemns every form of “what we can call the error of economism, that of considering human labor solely according to its economic purpose.”⁵⁶

That condemnation carries well beyond the borders of Marx’s dialectic materialism. Stalin sounds oddly like a member in good standing of the Union Club when he remarked that, “One must pay workers according to the work they have performed and not according to their needs.” To this rule, Pieper contrasts the teaching of *Quadragesimo Anno* that instructs, “In the first place, the worker must be paid a wage sufficient to support him and his family.”⁵⁷ Stalin’s statement, Pieper observes, represents an attitude of proletarianization, while the second exemplifies the effort to bring about its opposite.

Pieper illustrates this point with an example. “The difference between *artes liberales* and *artes serviles*,” he notes, “accords with the difference between an honorarium and pay: the free arts⁵⁸ were ‘honored’ (or not), the servile arts were compensated.” The honorarium implies that the service represents something that one really cannot adequately remunerate: “the service and the recompense are incomparable, Incommensurable,” Pieper explains. In contrast, the idea of pay implies that human work represents a commodity, a

⁵⁶ *Laborem Exercens*, ¶ 13.

⁵⁷ Pieper, *supra* note 50 at 428, citing *Quadragesimo Anno*, ¶ 71. In *Laborem Exercens*, John Paul II reiterates this teaching in several places; one example is in ¶19, when in the course of speaking about wages and benefits, he observes that, “Just remuneration for the work of an adult who is responsible for a family means remuneration which will suffice for establishing and properly maintaining a family and for providing security for its future.”

⁵⁸ Law and medicine serve as the classic instances.

product that “is paid for, purchased; no incommensurability exists between the performance and the payment.”

There is another difference as well. An honorarium, Pieper states, signifies a contribution to one’s living expenses, to one’s needs. Pay, on the other hand, “means the payment for an isolated performance of work [*isolierte Arbeitsleistung*], without consideration of the living requirements of the performer.” The notion of a family wage as discussed in *Quadragesimo Anno*, he observes, represents an effort at de-proletarianization. It puts the person and not the work—abstracted from the one who performs it—at the center. The social tradition, notes Piper, retains the sensible distinction between an honorarium and pay. At the same time, however, it recognizes that there is no pay that does not also share the character of an honorarium. “Even in ‘servile service’ there is something—because it is a human act—that cannot be compensated adequately with money,” he points out; “even in ‘servile work’ there remains a certain incommensurability between the work and the pay—just as there is in the area of the *artes liberales*.”⁵⁹

John Paul’s insistence that “work is for man and not man for work” profoundly summarizes the whole of the social thought tradition. That deceptively simple sounding phrase stands as a rebuke to every trend in any economic thought or arrangement that would degrade man through instrumentalizing him. “The Church,” John Paul II resoundingly affirms, “believes in man.”⁶⁰ This statement undoubtedly startles us, since the temptation not to take our humanity seriously ever hangs about us. Surrendering to it permits us to degrade ourselves and others. An aid to rationalization, it is the gateway into sins of every sort, both great and small. Most of us—and I certainly include myself here—prefer working with our eyes down. Perhaps we find it too overpowering to consider what we truly are. Proletarianization involves far more than economic arrangements alone, but their importance to organizing the way we live and the way we constitute ourselves through our work “constantly demands renewed attention.”⁶¹

“[T]he free market,” John Paul II has noted, “is the most efficient instrument for utilizing resources and effectively responding

⁵⁹ Piper, *supra* note 50 at 428.

⁶⁰ *Laborem Exercens* ¶4.

⁶¹ *Id.* ¶1.

to needs.”⁶² Moreover, “[a] truly competitive market is an effective instrument for attaining important objectives of justice...”⁶³ Nevertheless, as he also would warn, “Market mechanisms,” should not constitute “the only point of reference for social life.”⁶⁴ As he teaches in *Laborem Exercens*, “the only chance” for overcoming the error of economism “is through adequate changes both in theory and in practice, changes in line with the definite conviction of the primacy of the person over things, and of human labor over capital as a whole collection of means of production.”⁶⁵ In other words, if we are “to make life more human,” we must reconsider our identity and the purposes of our economic orders. Can we be surprised that the Vicar of Christ calls us to an examination of how we live, to a rethinking of how we might order things, and possibly, to a conversion?

The Fragile Relevance of the *Laborem Exercens*

It certainly has been some time since Étienne Gilson wrote that

[T]he teachings of the Popes, as found in their encyclical letters, can by no means be considered as expressing mere opinions which anyone is free to hold or to reject at will. Even though they may not be binding as to faith in all their parts, the teachings of an encyclical are all directly related to faith in the supreme teaching authority of the Church with the special assistance of the Holy Spirit. There always is grave temerity in not accepting the teaching of an encyclical on any of the points it touches.⁶⁶

Reading that quote might bring a quiet smile. Submission of the intellect and will is not a widely-practiced virtue these days, even among Catholics. John Paul II may have described the social

⁶² *Centesimus Annus* ¶34. For a summary, see Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *COMPENDIUM OF THE SOCIAL DOCTRINE OF THE CHURCH*, Chap. 7, and see especially Pt. IV, ¶¶346-360 (2004).

⁶³ *Id.* ¶347 at p.197.

⁶⁴ *Centesimus Annus*, ¶ 19, and see text at note 3, *supra*.

⁶⁵ *Laborem Exercens*, ¶ 13. John Paul II sounds a similar warning in *Centesimus annus*: “Economic freedom is only one element of human freedom. When it becomes autonomous, when man is seen more as a producer or consumer of goods than as a subject who produces and consumes in order to live, then economic freedom loses its necessary relationship to the human person and ends up by alienating and oppressing him.” ¶40.

⁶⁶ Étienne Gilson, *THE CHURCH SPEAKS TO THE MODERN WORLD: THE SOCIAL TEACHINGS OF LEO XIII* (1954).

encyclicals as “documents of the supreme Magisterium of the Church,”⁶⁷ but we probably tend to take them no more seriously than we do other of the Church’s teachings that we find inconvenient, unpleasant, or at odds with our settled convictions, which typically we have informed, consciously or otherwise, by reference to the cultural magisterium and the thought that informs it. We live in a consumerist world, and like our clothing, automobiles or even our cell phones, we favor what suits or serves as a symbol of our chosen lifestyles, even when it comes to the teachings of the Church. In my experience, for example, many unionists will eagerly and correctly quote the social magisterium’s support for unions and the right of workers to form and join them. Not a few, however, show noticeably less zeal for the teachings on life, sexual morality, the constantly re-asserted ties in the encyclicals between unions and the traditional family, or the reminder that unions must put the common good first, and avoid the problem of group bias—that ever present temptation to put the needs and desires of my group, association, profession, community, etc. before the just claims of everyone else.

At the same time, many others seem to think that the social teachings—except perhaps those in *Centesimus Annus* that support the authentic virtues of the free market—represent the outdated or sentimental expressions of a possibly ill-informed and certainly unworldly Pontiff that now safely can be ignored. I even am aware of cases in which religious orders operating various types of institutions have engaged in tooth and nail resistance to the legitimate organizational efforts made by the lay employees of those institutions. In these instances, not only have the social teachings been disregarded, but the admonitions of the local ordinaries as well. So much for the social magisterium, it seems. Authority really isn’t our thing. Our tastes might differ (would it be poor form to call them “catholic”?) but at least we all can unite around the idea of cafeteria Catholicism. *Non serviam*, as someone once reputedly said.

In *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict’s first encyclical, he reminds us that, “The Church’s deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), celebrating the sacraments (*leitourgia*), and exercising the ministry of charity (*diakonia*). These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable.”⁶⁸ He also reminds us that for the Church, “charity is not a kind

⁶⁷ *Laborem Exercens* ¶2.

⁶⁸ *Deus Caritas Est* (God is Love) ¶25.

of welfare activity” but instead constitutes “part of her nature, an indispensable part of her very being.”⁶⁹ The Church’s social magisterium, its efforts to reflect upon and to address the social question, constitutes an expression of her charitable undertakings. “In today’s complex situation,” Benedict instructs, “not least because of the growth of a globalized economy, the Church’s social doctrine has become a set of fundamental guidelines offering approaches that are valid even beyond the confines of the Church: in the face of ongoing development these guidelines need to be addressed in the context of dialogue with all those seriously concerned for humanity and for the world in which we live.”⁷⁰

Benedict reminds us that the “just ordering of society and the State is a central responsibility of politics,”⁷¹ and not of the Church. The state and the Church have properly autonomous spheres that “are distinct, yet always interrelated.”⁷² While the state must resolve the question of how to realize justice in the here and now, the question of the nature of justice provides the place where “politics and faith meet.”⁷³ This nexus also provides the locus “where Catholic social doctrine has its place.” The social magisterium makes no claims of Church power over the state. Nor does it seek “to impose on those who do not share the faith ways of thinking and modes of conduct proper to faith.” Instead, it simply seeks “to purify reason and to contribute, here and now, to the acknowledgment and attainment of what is just.”

Consequently, observes Benedict,

The Church’s social teaching argues on the basis of reason and natural law, namely, on the basis of what is in accord with the nature of every human being. It recognizes that it is not the Church’s responsibility to make this teaching prevail in political life. Rather, the Church wishes to help form consciences in political life and to stimulate greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest.

It may not be the Church’s job, but “the direct duty to work for the just ordering of society” is the responsibility of the lay faithful.

⁶⁹ Id. ¶25(a).

⁷⁰ Id. ¶27.

⁷¹ Id. ¶28(a).

⁷² Id.

⁷³ Id.

So, are we up to it? Do we care? We might want to duck it all, but insists Benedict, the laity “cannot relinquish their participation ‘in the many different economic, social, legislative, administrative and cultural areas, which are intended to promote organically and institutionally the *common good*.’”⁷⁴ Like it or not, the lay faithful have the duty “to configure social life correctly.”⁷⁵

In light of modern conditions, *Laborem Exercens* remains a critical source for fulfilling this special task of the laity. It isn’t just another story from the slightly musty stack of old magazines. Like John Paul II and the Second Vatican Council before him, Benedict puts special emphasis on the formation and enhancement of solidarity and the need to promote the institutions of civil society. As John Paul II observes in *Laborem Exercens*, for just orders to be achieved, “there is a need for ever new movements of solidarity of the workers and with the workers. This solidarity must be present whenever it is called for by the social degrading of the subject of work. . . .”⁷⁶

The language of solidarity and warnings against proletarianization—against instrumentalizing ourselves and others—run deeply contrary to the prevailing ethos of our era. In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville famously predicted that democracy was an unstoppable social force. I think he was wrong. Atomistic individualism, another force about which he had much to say, represents the real engine of modernity. Calls to live in a different way become increasingly difficult to comprehend. This difficulty increases as parish life and the other institutional schemes that once characterized Catholic life in the United States and elsewhere weaken.

The calls for authentic solidarity that lie at the core of the entire social tradition mark the spot where modernity and the Church part from one another. Happily, whether we can heed the call true solidarity and all that comes with it is not entirely left up to us. “Nevertheless, when the Son of Man returns, will he find faith on earth?”⁷⁷

I hope (so).

⁷⁴ Id ¶ citing, John Paul II, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Christifideles Laici* (30 December 1988), 42: AAS 81 (1989), 472. (Italization in original).

⁷⁵ Id. ¶29.

⁷⁶ *Laborem Exercens* ¶8.

⁷⁷ Luke 18:8.

