

PARTICIPATING IN THE NEW CREATION

A Theological Appreciation of Work

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IT IS COMMONLY acknowledged that Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), which was promulgated against the backdrop of the rise of modern industrial society, inaugurated a new beginning for Catholic social thought and that it represents a kind of *magna carta* for modern Catholic social teaching. This is evidenced by the fact that Popes subsequent to Leo XIII, namely Pius XI (1931), Paul VI (1971), and John Paul II (1991), all promulgated encyclicals that revised and updated the analyses of *Rerum Novarum* in light of changing economic, social, and political conditions. The manner in which each newly promulgated encyclical revisits and re-evaluates the earlier ones alerts us to the evolving character of Catholic social teaching as open to the dynamics of history and seeking to discover new tasks in the process of humanizing our world. In other words, Catholic social teaching is truly focused upon reading the signs of the times and is therefore an arena of the development of doctrine (Coleman & Baum, 1991, ix).

The purpose of this essay is to offer an appraisal of John Paul II's encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (*LE*) by bringing his understanding of the meaning of labour into dialogue with Miroslav Volf's proposed theology of work which is set forth in his book *Work in the Spirit: Toward a Theology of Work*. The essay will show that there is a significant degree of overlap between these two thinkers on the subject of human work, but it will also seek to highlight some weaknesses in the encyclical that are overcome by Volf's explicitly eschatological and pneumatological perspective of

human work.

In order to do this, the first part of the essay will present the core of *LE*, which is the portrayal of the person as the subject of work, and the implications of this view for employer-employee relations, while the second part will discuss Volf's portrayal of work as work in the Spirit, and how this perspective sheds light on potential weaknesses in *LE*. The essay will conclude by proposing that the eschatological concept of the 'new creation,' which features in Volf's theology of work, is preferable to the protological notion of 'dominion over the earth' (Gen 1:28) that forms the basis of John Paul II's reflections on the meaning and purpose of human work.

The Human Person as the Subject of Work

John Paul II begins his encyclical by pointing out that while his reflections on work are in 'organic connection' with the whole tradition of Catholic social teaching, at the same time our situation today calls for 'the discovery of the *new meanings of human work*...the *new tasks* that in this sector face each individual, the family, each country, the whole human race, and, finally, the Church herself' (*LE* 2). Talk of the need for 'discovery' implies that we do not yet possess all the elements necessary either for an adequate analysis of the current situation or for identifying definite tasks for the future (Schasching, 1982, 137).

The encyclical is therefore an attempt to offer some deeper insight into the nature of work that is both continuous with scripture and tradition, yet offers something new to the

question of the purpose of work. In particular, as will become clearer in what follows, John Paul II, as well as Volf, are keen to ascribe *inherent* and not merely instrumental value to the activity of work, so that theological reflection on work becomes fundamental (not marginal) to the task of theology (Volf, 2001, 70).

The first encyclical on human labour, *Rerum Novarum*, addressed the problem of a 'slave-like situation' introduced by the industrial revolution where labour had become a form of merchandise. Notwithstanding the many positive changes that have taken place in the organization of labour in some parts of the world, in the global context *LE* laments that the 'objective' aspect of labour prevails over the 'subjective' dimension, so that the merchandise-quality of labour is still very much a negative reality that prevents work from 'making life more human' (*LE* 3).

The subjective dimension of work is the core of John Paul II's understanding of work. While the encyclical includes many aspects of an ethical and philosophical understanding of human work, the Pontiff explicitly states that his starting-point for reflection on this important issue is 'the mystery of creation' (*LE* 4, 12). As made in the image of God (Gen 1:26), the human has received the mandate to be 'fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it' (Gen 1:28). The person is placed at the very centre of work which is designed to bring about human self-actualization.

What is presented in the biblical creation story is human work as a sharing in the activity of the Creator, so that in a sense we have here the first '*gospel of work*' (*LE* 25). In the past the concern of the Church was to bring the word of the Gospel into the world of labour (*i.e.* the Gospel *for* the world of labour), but in addition to this concern John Paul II wants to introduce the notion of the Gospel *of* human work. The latter expresses the insight that work should not merely be seen as a human activity requiring a certain moral behaviour; rather, work contains in itself an evangelical message inasmuch as it is the means whereby the person becomes more fully human. 'In this

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sense, *Laborem Exercens* intends not only to give to work its rightful place in human society but to open a new vision, and to call forth new efforts to arrive at a deeper understanding of the theological meaning of human work' (Schasching, 1982, 145). This argument is fully supported by Volf's major contention that there is an urgent need to replace an ethic of work by a comprehensive theology of work that portrays the meaning of work in terms of active cooperation with God in bringing about the 'new creation' (Volf, 2001, 69-87).

From the standpoint of the person as the subject of its work (*LE* 6), John Paul II pleads for a system of labour that places the personal-spiritual above the material and encourages workers' 'effective participation in the whole production process' (*LE* 13). If the production process does not respect the person as the subject of work, the result is not only economic damage but first and foremost damage to humankind and society (*LE* 15). True humanisation of work, as Volf also acknowledges, requires that workers have the right to participate actively in the management of their work (Volf, 2001, 70). Furthermore, the personal character of work requires the 'socializing' (*LE* 14) or joint ownership of the means of production (capital). This does not mean that the means of production should become the property of the State, as in Marxist collectivism; rather, John Paul II affirms private ownership, although this is conceived as giving each worker full entitlement to being 'part-owner of the great work-bench at which he is working with every one else,' in which

case the position of 'rigid' capitalism, which defends the exclusive right to private ownership of the means of production, is in need of 'constructive revision' (LE 14).

Given that at the beginning of work there stands the mystery of creation and the right to common use of the goods of the earth and the goods produced by labour, the right to private property must always be subordinated to the common good. Work, then, is seen by John Paul II as '*the essential key* to the whole social question, if we try to see that question really from the point of view of man's good' (LE 3).

This new vision is critical of both 'liberal capitalism' and 'Marxist collectivism' for not upholding the primacy of the spiritual in work, and, moreover, we must not think that what is being envisioned is some sort of 'middle ground' between these two economic world-views (Baum, 1991, 60); rather, both are criticized as deficient inasmuch as they are based, in their respective ways, on a purely economical model of human being that fails to uphold the dignity of humanity created in God's image and called to participate in the activity of the Creator.

In addition to the creation story, the Pontiff relates work to the paschal mystery of Christ (LE 27), although this is more stated than developed, perhaps because an earlier encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (RH), published in 1979, had highlighted the idea that by virtue of the Incarnation the Son has 'in a certain way united himself with each human being' (8, 13, 18). It is this marvellous event that ultimately establishes the inalienable dignity and worth of every human being.

In light of the mystery of redemption, the Pontiff sets up an important relation between Christ and the Church by using the metaphor of the 'way'—*Jesus Christ is the chief way for the Church* (RH 13). This means that the Church cannot be bound to any political system since she is entrusted with upholding the transcendence of the human person, which goes beyond every system and every ideology. In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, John Paul II expressly

states that the aim of the Church's social teaching is to 'guide' Christian behaviour and that it 'belongs to the field, not of *ideology*, but of *theology*' (41).

This understanding is consistent with the Gospels, of course, where the kingdom of God proclaimed by Christ does not mount to any practical agenda designed to set up a new social-political regime in Palestine: 'He was not a political leader in the sense of someone enunciating a detailed political and social programme that was to be implemented by particular measures. Rather, the transformation of Israel in the end time was to be the work of God coming as king' (Meier, 2001, 624). Yet given that the Church witnesses to the power of the love that is radiated by the truth of the redemption in Christ, she is not only concerned for the eternal welfare of humans but also for their temporal welfare, hence she cannot remain insensitive to whatever serves the common good or what threatens it. The common good is here not restricted to the mere distribution of goods and wealth, but is understood in historical terms as the sum total of the socio-economic-political conditions whereby humans are enabled more fully to attain self-realization as persons (Gallagher, 1991, 43). Humans ought to imitate the Creator in working so as to 'contribute' by their personal industry 'to the realization in history of the divine plan' (LE 25).

Work in the Spirit of the New Creation

The discussion in this section will feature the thought of Volf, although the intention will be to compare and contrast his work with that of John Paul II. Volf is dissatisfied with the vocational understanding of work, still dominant in Protestant circles, and proposes 'a shift from a vocational to a charismatic understanding of work' (Volf, 2001, viii).

There are inherent problems with the vocational view of work developed by Luther. Because God's spiritual call through the preaching of the Gospel reaches a person in his or her particular station in life (husband,

wife, servant, factory worker, etc.), the duties of the station become God's commandment to that person (Volf, 2001, 105-109). This notion of vocation is indifferent toward alienation in work, it can be misused ideologically to enable dehumanizing work (instead of improving the quality of work through structural change), and it is not applicable to modern industrial societies that are increasingly characterised by mobility (not permanence of one's station in life).

By following Moltmann's assertion that the Christian faith is eschatological since Christian life is life in the Spirit of the new creation, Volf proposes the development of a distinctly pneumatological view of work. He writes, significantly, that *Gaudium et spes* (38) is the most notable example of a recent charismatic interpretation of Christian service to the world, although to date no theology of work has been developed on the basis of the suggestions contained in that Vatican II document (Volf, 2001, 104-105). At the end of his encyclical on human work (*LE* 27) John Paul II also appeals to *Gaudium et spes* 38, although he only quotes that part of the document that links human work to the cross of Christ, and not the section that talks of the manifold 'gifts of the Spirit' which is Volf's focus. The whole encyclical is characterised by a lack of recognition of the pneumatological dimension of human work.

The main thesis proposed by Volf, by contrast, is that 'the Spirit of God calls and gifts people to work in active anticipation of the eschatological transformation of the world' (Volf, 2001, 123). In the past theologians tended to subordinate the *vita activa* to the *vita contemplative* in the process of sanctification (i.e. work was seen as having only instrumental value for the advancement of the 'inner' person), but Volf argues that this is inadequate and appeals to Genesis 1-2 (as does John Paul II) to make the point that work comes not only under the rubric of sanctification, but God's purposes for the creation, hence it has intrinsic value (Volf, 2001, 74-75). The Spirit of the new creation, moreover, cannot be tied to the

ecclesiastical and religious sphere, because the whole of creation is the Spirit's sphere of operation. A theology of work must therefore be comprehensive in that it acknowledges the anthropological, social, and cosmological dimensions of work as cooperation with the history of God's engagement with the world.

John Paul II likewise stresses the intrinsic value of work as set in the context of the mystery of creation, yet it would be fair to say that the Pontiff is more concerned with personal self-actualization and social integration, and less with the cosmological dimension of work that recognises responsible and just human dealings with the natural world. On the basis of Genesis 1:28, the Pontiff adopts a somewhat sanguine approach to scientific and technological development as an instrument for subduing nature (*LE* 4). Are we not, though, asks Volf, in an ecological crisis? (Volf, 1984, 74-5). While it is legitimate to see one of the purposes of work as the transforming of nature (i.e. adapting nature to human needs), the divine mandate in Genesis 1:28 does not give us licence for unrestricted violence against nature. When the latter text is set in relation to Genesis 2:15 where the human is depicted as placed by God in the garden of Eden 'to till and keep it,' it becomes clear that the human's kingship over nature must not become a despotic relationship to nature.

Volf is also keen to point out that whether we view work as having instrumental or intrinsic value is dependent upon our understanding of the relationship between the present and future orders. If we hold to an apocalyptic scenario in which the present world will be *annihilated* (cf. 2 Pet 3:10) and a new creation will take its place, then all human work is rendered insignificant, at least directly; only indirectly can it serve certain goals such as sanctification and preparation for the bliss of heaven (Volf, 2001, 90). The alternative model is that of eschatological *transformation* where a continuity between the present and the future orders is highlighted. In this model where the fundamental goodness of creation is stressed, sin and evil notwithstanding, we find a strong

incentive to cultural involvement inasmuch as human work is invested with ultimate significance as contributing, in a 'modest and broken way,' to God's new creation (Volf, 2001, 92; cf. *LE* 25). The Christian hope for the resurrection of the body, which involves the abolition of corruptibility and thus glorious transfiguration, together with Paul's writings about how Christian hope cannot be thought apart from the liberation of creation itself from its bondage to decay (Rom 8: 19-23), provides more than ample support for the model of the eschatological *transformatio mundi*.

There can be no doubt that John Paul II concurs with Volf's endorsement of the inherent value and ultimate significance of human work as contributing or sharing in the activity of God the Creator. In the very first paragraph of his encyclical the Pontiff lists one of the main purposes of work as the elevating of 'the cultural and moral level of the society.' Through work the human not only transforms nature, adapting it to its own needs, but also 'achieves fulfilment as a human being' (*LE* 9).

A problem arises, however, in connection with work as self-actualisation and the view that work not only 'expresses' the dignity of the human but also 'increases' it (*LE* 9). If the moral meaning of work lies in that it establishes the value and dignity of the person, what becomes of the lives of those (e.g. children, the elderly, the disabled, the chronically sick) who are not able to effectively work? (Volf, 1984, 73). Are their lives less valuable and less dignified than those of productive and able workers? On theological grounds, moreover, must we not assert that personal worth and value are derived not from our capacity to work but from God alone who graciously confers upon humanity a dignity beyond compare by elevating it to the glory of beholding God? On John Paul II's own reckoning, does not the fact that each and every human is ontologically joined to the Incarnate One underscore the understanding that human worth and dignity is *received* from God? It seems that it would be better to speak of 'self-expression' in work instead of 'self-actualisation' through work, for

the latter suggests the human is 'constituted' through work while the former views the human as 'developing' through work (Volf, 2001, 132-33).

The basic point that we do not give birth to ourselves through work, but rather find ourselves by cooperating with God and enjoying communion with God, is reinforced by Volf's portrayal of work in the Spirit. In Pauline theology, the gifts of the Spirit (*charismata*) are imparted to all Christians (not just an elite group) who form the Body of Christ, and these gifts are related to the specific tasks or functions to which God calls each Christian, which go beyond the needs of the Church to include constructive engagement with the world (Volf, 2001, 110-12). As work in the Spirit, Christian mundane work must be understood as cooperation with God (cf. Gal 2:20), and since the indwelling Spirit is a 'guarantee' (2 Cor 1:22) of the coming new creation, such cooperation is to be seen as active anticipation of God's eschatological *transformatio mundi* (Volf, 2001, 115).

The notion of work in the Spirit of the new creation is able to overcome the deficiencies of Luther's vocational model of work, for the emphasis falls not upon the origin of work (call of God) and purpose of work (service to others), but the inherent quality of work as cooperation with God in the anticipated *transformatio mundi*. Indifference to alienation in work and dehumanizing work is therefore not an acceptable Christian position or attitude. In light of the Easter and Pentecost events, God's eschatological action must be situated not only *at the end* of history (kingdom-expectation) but also *in* history (kingdom-participation), so that work in the Spirit contributes, however limited and imperfect the contribution, to the final consummation of God's plan for creation (Volf, 2001, 100).

Finally, given that the Spirit is present in creation and the Spirit of the Risen One is poured out on all flesh, Volf holds that the work of non-Christians can be viewed pneumatologically as well. In a manner that recalls the declarations of Vatican II (cf. LG 16; GS 22),

he contends that non-Christians can be open to the promptings of the Spirit without being aware of it, in which case their work (all noble achievements) may also be seen as cooperation with God (Volf, 2001, 119).

The difference between Christians and non-Christians lies in the nature of their receptivity to the Spirit: the former are consciously aware and thus more receptive to the activity of the Spirit as the 'first fruits' of the new creation (cf. 1 Cor 15:20), as redeeming and sanctifying the people of God and bringing them the gift of communion with the living God as their true end; whereas in the latter the Spirit is active sustaining and developing humanity and leading people to work towards the common good. The goal of the Spirit is the same in both the Church and the world, namely, the final glorification of created reality in the new creation.

Concluding Remarks

A properly developed theology of work is integral to the task of theology, as John Paul II and Volf have both acknowledged. Both reinforce the human person as the subject of work and conduct their reflections within the framework of the mystery of creation, so that human work is seen as contributing to God's purpose for the world. Volf, however, is focused on the gifts received from the Spirit of the new creation, thus he views work as active 'anticipation' of the eschatological transformation of the world and makes it clear that work must not be seen as increasing personal worth and dignity. John Paul II, on the other hand, paints a picture of work as human 'self-actualisation' by means of the faculties of rationality and freedom, so that he regards personal worth and dignity as increasing through the activity of work and coins the phrase 'the gospel of work' to highlight that human toil and labour is ultimately

meaningful because it is linked to the work of Christ.

The advantage of Volf's theology is that he keeps very much in focus the fact that the person is fundamentally a receiver, in the Spirit, and only then a doer, and he includes the whole of creation as the sphere of the Spirit's operation so that there is an inherently cosmological dimension to human work as cooperation with God, something that is not to be found in *Laborem Exercens*. Furthermore, Volf's writings do not amount to a general theory of all human work, for he draws attention to God's judgment of work, something that is also lacking in the papal encyclical, so that only work that is not rebellion against God but corresponds to the anticipated new creation is ultimately meaningful and valuable.

John Paul II and Volf have both attempted to discover new meanings of human work, yet neither of them see the Church's mission as political, economic, or social, but religious. The Christian vision for the world is theological (created in God's image, as John Paul II and Volf both underscore), christological (the Incarnate Son has joined himself to each and every human person, as John Paul II highlights), and pneumatological (this is the strength of Volf's theology), hence the Church's sense of mission cannot be drawn from ideological systems and practical agendas, all of which end up becoming ends in themselves. The Church reflects on the signs of the times and offers guiding principles and values that are consistent with the kingdom of God which is beyond every political and social system. The fact that the object of Christian faith is the Risen One who is the new creation in person, present in the power of the Spirit, serves as a reminder that Christians are required to give *witness* to the kingdom of God in the world, which can never be identified with worldly progress or achievement.

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