



# The Holy See

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**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM  
RUN BY THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL  
FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE ON THE THEME  
"WORK AS THE KEY TO THE SOCIAL QUESTION"**

*Dear Cardinals,  
Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,*

1. I am delighted to greet you on the occasion of the international Conference on the theme *Work as the Key to the Social Question* that the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace has organized in collaboration with several prestigious scientific and cultural institutions. It is a meeting open to experts in the social sciences from universities and research centres, and it intends to highlight the 20th anniversary of the Encyclical *Laborem exercens*.

I cordially greet all the participants, especially Cardinal François Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace. I hope that for each of you these days of reflection and constructive sharing of experience will be a good occasion to consider the *subjective dimension of work*, in the face of the profound economic and social transformations now taking place.

2. In this important sector of social life, we are undergoing a *profound evolution* that at times has the shape of a radical change. The form of work has changed and its hours and sites have been altered. In the more industrialized countries the phenomenon has taken on such dimensions that the model of dependent work that was carried out in big factories with set hours, already belongs to the past.

Like every major transformation, this too presents elements of tension and, at the same time, of complementarity between the local and global dimensions of the economy; between what is

defined as the "old" and the "new" economy; between technological innovation and the need to safeguard the workplace; between economic growth and environmental compatibility.

It would be a serious error, however, to think that the changes taking place happen in a deterministic manner. *The decisive factor*, the "arbiter" of this complex phase of change, *is once again the human person*, who must remain the true protagonist of his work. He can and must take responsibility in a creative way for the changes that are happening, to ensure that they promote the growth of the person, of the family, of the society in which he lives and of the entire human family (cf. *Laborem exercens*, n. 10).

In this regard, the emphasis on the *subjective dimension of work*, constantly referred to by the social doctrine of the Church, is enlightening: "Human work proceeds directly from persons created in the image of God and called to prolong the work of creation by subduing the earth, both with and for one another" (CCC, n. 2427).

3. As long as man exists, there will be the free gesture of authentic participation in creation which is work. Work is one of the essential components in realizing the vocation of man who, in fulfilling himself, always discovers that he is called by God to "dominate the earth". Despite himself, he can never cease to be "a subject that decides about himself" (*Laborem exercens*, n. 6). To him God has entrusted this supreme and demanding freedom. From this viewpoint, today more than in the past, we can repeat that "human work is *a key*, probably *the essential key*, to the whole social question" (*ibid.*, n. 3).

In these days of study you have been able to confirm that certain mechanistic and economic evaluations of productive activity have been superseded by the scientific analysis of the problems connected with work. Today, compared with the past, these concepts appear to be increasingly inadequate to interpret the facts, because they fail to recognize the absolutely original nature of work, which is man's free and creative activity.

The rapid and accelerated period of change in the world calls for the overcoming of the current view of the economic and social system in which human needs, especially, are accorded only a limited and inadequate consideration. In contrast with every other living being, *man has infinite needs*, because his being and his vocation are defined by reference to the transcendent. Starting from these needs, he tackles the adventure of transforming reality with his work according to a dynamic impulse that always goes beyond the results achieved by it.

4. If the historical forms of work are changing, its permanent foundation certainly does not, that is, *respect for inalienable rights*. Unfortunately, we risk seeing these rights denied. This is particularly the case with unemployment, which, in the earliest industrialized countries, in an unprecedented way, involves masses of men and women; I am thinking of those who worked in outdated production processes; I am thinking of the young people and of those who live in disadvantaged

areas, where unemployment rates are still high.

Then work has a precarious aspect that on the one hand may offer greater job opportunities, but on the other, presents risks and burdens which need to be taken into account, such as the cost of mobility, of professional requalification, and of social security benefits.

In the less industrialized countries there are even more urgent problems: the continuing exploitation of child labour; the lack of recognition of the value of work, especially that of women, in the family and outside it; the shortage of work due to instability in the context of the workforce, especially in situations of conflict, and the fragility of the system of local economic relations faced with the changes due to globalized production.

To deal with these problems, *new forms of solidarity* must be created, taking into account the interdependence that forges bonds among workers. If the changes in progress are profound, there must be a correspondingly intelligent effort and the will to protect the dignity of work, strengthening, at various levels, the interested institutions.

Governments have a great deal of responsibility, but no less important is that of the organizations who defend the collective interests of workers and of those who provide work. All are called not only to foster these interests in an honest form and through dialogue, but also to rethink their own functions, their structure, their nature and their kinds of action. As I wrote in the Encyclical *Centesimus annus*, these organizations can and must become places "where workers can express his/her own personality" (cf. n. 15).

5. You, too, *scientists and men of culture*, are called to make a specific and decisive contribution to the solution of such vast and complex problems, that in some areas assume dramatic dimensions. Studying the various aspects of work within a variety of disciplines, you share the responsibility for understanding the change that is taking place. This means pointing out the advantages and risks that are implied; in particular it means suggesting lines of action to direct the change in the best way for the development of the whole human family.

You have the task of reading and interpreting social phenomena intelligently, with respect for the truth, without having to take into account group or personal interests. We can say that your contribution, because it is "abstract", is essential for the concrete action of economic policies. So do not tire of applying yourselves with patience and scientific rigour to this research. May the Lord help you and enlighten you with wisdom, the gift of his Spirit.

The Church's social teaching will provide you with a reliable guide and reference. I also hope that this social teaching will continue to benefit from your contribution, from the categories and the reflections of the social sciences, according to that *fruitful dialogue* that is always mutually advantageous.

With these sentiments, while I wholeheartedly invoke upon all the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of her Spouse, St Joseph, a humble and generous worker, I send my Blessing to each of you.

*From Castel Gandolfo, 14 September 2001*

**JOHN PAUL II**

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