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What is work good for?

Anthropological and Theological Dimensions of Human Work from the Perspective of Christian Social Teaching

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I. Anthropological dimensions of work

1. Although we in Europe spend on average little more than 10 per cent of our lifetime in gainful employment, the term "work" is familiar to us. Work is what fills people's working day, is an active effort to do what we need to live. Work is the trouble to get bread, whereby "bread" is a synonym for everything we need to live, including chemistry and theology, art and politics. Work is the prerequisite for human survival. Work is the destiny of man - so much so that working is one of the constitutive features of human existence. "Grinding stone axes, building pyramids, planting rice, launching rockets: work is as old as human beings. Work has many forms: the work of the nurse, the work of the garbage removal and the work at the control desk in the signal box; research work, office work, housework, assembly line work, school work - also the work of the sculptor who carves a sculpture out of a stone and of the priest who visits a sick person" (Zeichen der Hoffnung, Sek. I, Düsseldorf 1981, p. 129). Work is the main form of human activity. It fills the working day. It dominates so much that it is difficult for many people to keep an eye on the other specifically human forms of activity: play, leisure, prayer, the togetherness of lovers. Only when man succeeds in keeping all forms of activity in view, in finding a balanced, harmonious relationship between work, play, leisure and prayer, can he come one step closer to the success of his life. The fact that work is a constituent part of human life can also be seen in the attitudes to work. According to an older Allensbach survey of December 1996, about 60 percent (East Germans 63 percent) would work even if they did not need it financially. Around 20 percent would not do so and just as around 20 percent could not make up their minds.

2. What is work? Work is a rational, planned activity of man, through which he transforms nature and adapts it to his needs or wants to recognize, protect and promote himself and his social and natural environment. This concept of work includes physical and mental, independent and dependent, paid and unpaid work. By transforming nature and shaping the social and natural environment, man creates goods and services that satisfy his and society's needs. This is the objective dimension of any work.

3. But at the same time work has a subjective dimension: man unfolds his talents by working. Work is the medium of its self-realization. "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 fulfilment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes ‘more a human being’" (LE 9). It is in this subjective dimension that the dignity of human work is founded. Thus it is not the nature of the work done, its social standing or the income earned that determine the moral value of the work, but the fact that the person who does it is a person. The purpose of the work "in the final analysis it is always man" (LE 6). Because of this anthropocentric

perspective, the subjective dimension of work for Christian social teaching always takes precedence over objective dimension, and work always takes precedence over capital.

4. In premature interpretations these statements were called a prophetic plea for a laborist corporate constitution, a corporate constitution in which economic decisions are made not by the owners but by the employees. The encyclical *Laborem Exercens* was supposed to stand up not only for co-determination, but also for workers' self-administration and against capitalism. This interpretation was premature because it went beyond the fact that John Paul II in *Laborem Exercens* emphasized that labour and capital must not be placed in opposition to each other under any circumstances. An order of work can therefore only be morally justified, "if it already in its foundations overcomes the opposition between work and capital" and orients itself in its construction on the "principle of man as the subject of work and his effective participation in the whole process of production". Work is of constitutive importance for the success of human life - independent of the form of work: whether wage labour or independent work, whether paid or unpaid work, whether visible or invisible work.

5. When this anthropological dimension of human work is accepted, it quickly becomes clear what a serious problem unemployment is. It is not primarily the loss of income, but the significantly reduced chances of "becoming more human being". Even a one hundred per cent compensation for the lack of income from gainful employment through unemployment benefits or social benefits cannot prevent the unemployed from being deprived of two essential dimensions of personal existence: the possibility of social contacts and that of self-actualisation through work. Since the 1930s, sociologists have known that long-term unemployment results in enormous social and psychological burdens which cannot be covered by unemployment insurance. Long-term unemployed are those who have been unemployed for more than 12 months. The social consequences include the burden on the budget - and the loss of knowledge and contacts; the psychological consequences, which could often already be observed after six months, include the loss of self-confidence. "Unemployment affects those affected like a disease", Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann stated in connection with the Allensbach-Institut after a test for unemployed people.

6. The question of whether the fate of the unemployed could be improved if the constitution contained a right to work must be answered in the negative. Rights include claims which, if necessary, can be brought before a court. But a right to work is not enforceable. It would clash with various freedoms which are part of the foundations of a free constitutional order: the right to free development of one's personality (Article 2), the right to free choice of job (Article 12) and the right to private property (Article 14). No court, no government and no legislator could grant the unemployed a right to work without violating all these freedoms and ruining the market economy. If, however, the demand for a "right to work" is intended to express that work belongs to the existential conditions of human development and that this results in an obligation for the political powers to combat unemployment and to provide favourable framework conditions for economic action, a central prerequisite of the common good is brought into focus. But even then we cannot speak of a "right" to work.

7. Work is a "good". The unemployed in particular know this. But it is a "bonum arduum", a laborious, an arduous, a sweaty good. (...) Christian social ethics does not lose sight of this aspect of work. It emphasizes it in relation to all positions which are limited to the "desire to work" or the "happiness at work" or even - like Marx - dream of man's self-salvation through work. It does not ignore the coercive nature of work, the effort and burden associated with it.

The fact that labor is connected with effort does not contradict neither the statement that it is meaningful nor the other statement that it serves self-realization. The effort of work is a well-known reality experienced by all workers - wage earners such as managers, farmers and craftsmen, civil servants, housewives and politicians, chemists and theologians, students and professors. The Christian attributes them to the Fall of Man, to the human hubris of wanting to be like God. It can be reduced by many inventions, by science and technology, but cannot be abolished. This applies not only to physical, but also to spiritual work.

8. For Teilhard de Chardin, who especially founded on the pain of spiritual work, work requires "effort and a victory over inertia. As interesting and spiritual as work may be, one could even say that the more spiritual it is, the more it means a painful birth. Material power to produce or order truth or beauty means an inner agony that robs anyone who dares to do so of the peaceful and secluded life... To be a good worker ... man must sacrifice peace and tranquillity. But he must also again and again give up his earlier forms of diligence, his art, his thinking in order to find better ones. Again and again man must overtake himself and wrest himself from himself." Christian social ethics sees in this aspect of the effort of work not only something negative, but something valuable for man, his maturation and perfection. It belongs to the dignity of man, an unruly environment, an inhospitable nature, a rotten state or a corrupt society, to wrest one's own existence and to use one's strength to create the economic prerequisites of human culture or a successful life. This does not mean that the unruly environment itself is a good to be cared for. It belongs to the evils with which humans always have to live and cope - and yet never cope.

9. But work has no meaning in itself. Rather, it always serves to something. For the economist, work is a production factor and the product is more important than work. The product or the service is the goal of work. They can achieve an enormous price, even if the effort is minimal, a price that is not reasonable in relation to work, but rather determined by talent and demand. Work "serves" the production of utility values, goods and services. It serves the common good. It is the prerequisite of livelihood and beyond that of leisure. We do not live to work, but we work to live. But even then, when work is regarded as a factor of production, the fundamental insight of Christ's social teaching applies: it must serve man, it must not enslave him.

10. An essential instrument for preventing this false hierarchy is co-determination within the company. It is a consequence of the anthropocentric orientation of Catholic social teaching. If man is the origin, centre and goal of the economy and if work serves not only the production of goods and services but also the development of the person, then every working person must have the opportunity to participate in shaping his activity. "Justice is to be observed not only in the distribution of wealth, but also in regard to the conditions in which men are engaged in producing this wealth. Every man has, of his very nature, a need to express himself in his work and thereby to perfect his own being. As a rule, the trade unions are the instrument of the workers through which they exercise this right to participation" (MM 82).

11. Whoever fills his existence with work alone is a slave of work. Such an existence is often marked with the term "proletarian". In this sense also the entrepreneur can become the proletarian, also the politician and the professor. So we should not "merge" into the work. We enslave ourselves when we make work the sole meaning of our lives, when we let it become the drug with which we flee from ourselves, when we become workaholics. We must preserve and cultivate the ability to distance ourselves from work, not by distracting ourselves, but by giving ourselves up to leisure. The Sabbath commandment belongs to the divine standardization

of human life, as does the mandate to rule that includes work. In the sanctification of Sunday, man thanks God for his gift of existence, and for his liberation from the yoke of immanence through Jesus' death on the cross and resurrection in Jerusalem.

II. Theological dimensions of work

12. Work presupposes a specific rule of man over the earth. At the same time it confirms and develops this dominion. The Creator's mandate in Genesis "Subdue the earth to you" means that man should rule over the earth - through "servanthood" and "guardianship". Here two misunderstandings are to be ruled out: The term "earth" does not only mean the soil, but the whole civilization, and "master" does not mean, as is occasionally suggested today in ecological debates, "exploitation", but cultivation and protection. According to a joint memorandum of the German Bishops' Conference and the Council of the EKD on ecological questions "Taking Responsibility for Creation" (1985), the sheep should not only be seen from the butcher's point of view. It must also be seen with the eyes of the shepherd. Man's dominion over the earth therefore means cultivating the soil, taking raw materials and food from the earth and the sea, taming and breeding animals, but also researching man himself and nature, developing technology and industrial production, dealing with space travel and stem cell research. The rule of man means: to work physically and mentally.

13. Work, which is to be experienced as meaningful, presupposes the affirmation, the recognition of the world and history as meaningful. "At the beginning of man's work is the mystery of creation" John Paul II writes in *Laborem Exercens* (12). For a long time I overlooked this sentence. Its meaning only became clear to me when I read a graffito of the drop-out scene on a house wall in West Berlin in April 1984: "The world is bad, why should work be good?" Whoever wants to experience work as good, as meaningful, as creation, as contribution to healing and salvation, must acknowledge creation as God's gift, must be able to say: the world is good. Whoever lacks this recognition of the world, this reverence for creation, who even assumes that the world is bad and that existence is meaningless, has the choice between two positions: that of Sisyphus and that of Prometheus. He will either see work as meaningless, as an eternally equal, fruitless burden, and, like Sisyphus, will agree to roll his boulder up the mountain without reaching his goal. Or he will want work as an instrument of self-salvation and want to rob the gods of fire from heaven. He will begin megalomaniacally to build a Babylonian tower and run after the illusion of self-salvation.

14. The ambivalence of human nature to build up and destroy, its ability to be constructively or destructively active has an effect on work - not only when it misunderstands work as an instrument of self-salvation and starts building the Tower of Babel - a temptation not only of the Old Testament, but of timelessness - but also when it tries to evade the effort of work by being lazy, not working at all or working badly. But the ambivalence of human nature means that man can also do otherwise, that he not only has the choice between Prometheus and Sisyphus, but that he also has good sides that he can promote and stabilize. He can participate in God's creation. He is called by God to do it. Through his work he contributes not only to the good but also to the salvation of the world.

15. Holy Mass integrates the fruit of human work in the gifts of bread and wine into the sacrifice of Christ. "You give us the bread, the fruit of the earth and human work" prays the priest during the preparation of the gifts in Holy Mass, and also "You give us the wine, the fruit of the vine

and human work". In this way, divine perspectives open up to human work. When the Gospels tell of the miracles of Jesus, they sometimes show that Jesus, when he does miracles, gives active human participation a not inconsiderable place. Before he turned water into wine at the wedding in Cana, the servants had to fill the jars with water. Before he healed the paralytic whom his friends brought to Jesus, they first had to climb on the roof, cover the tiles and let him down, and before he fed the 5000 men, their wives and children in a remote place in Galilee, his disciples had to bring the five loaves of bread and the two fish. Not that these small human actions were the cause of the miracles. This remains God's grace and God's power. But they make it clear: Jesus does not act like a magician. He does not act without us. He integrates human work into his miracles.

16. The orientation of Christian life towards death and resurrection, its hereafter-orientation, can therefore neither mean that it no longer cares for the world, that it no longer works, nor that it limits the field of vocations suitable for Christian witness to certain social or pastoral vocations. As far as the specter of vocations is concerned, among Christians there is occasionally the idea that one must become a nurse, kindergarten teacher, pastor or social worker if one wants to bear witness to Christian faith in one's everyday life. This is wrong! In every profession the Christian can, indeed must, bear his witness. He can and must sanctify himself and the world. When God, in his incarnation in Christ, has entered into the needs of the world, the Christian also has the duty to enter into and humanize the economy and society, culture and science, state and international relations. The incarnation does not command him to enter a monastery. It challenges him to be light and leaven in family and work, in factories and barracks, in banks and schools, in laboratories and theatres, in town halls and parliaments. She commands him to "become active where the future of society is shaped. The active presence of the laity in all vocations and on the fronts of development can only have a positive effect on the strengthening of that harmony of faith and culture which is one of the most urgent needs of our time" (John Paul II. am 11.Oktober 2002).

17. To sanctify oneself and the world means, first of all, to take one's profession seriously, not to do mediocre work - neither as a worker nor as an entrepreneur, nor as a student or professor. It is said that to carry out in a holy way the most varied works, even those which seem to be quite meaningless, means to transform into prayer also the small, the ordinary, the repetitive works, means to combine the struggle of everyday life with daily contemplation. "If one wants to serve God, there is no such thing as a trivial or secondary work: all are of great importance". The work is the original destiny of man and a blessing of God. To regard it as a punishment is a deplorable error. Work is also a way of sanctification. To sanctify oneself and the world thus also means to acquire professional competence, to respect the relative autonomy of the field in which the profession is exercised and to respect its own laws and structures. It is not enough "to be illumined by the heavenly light of and to be fired with enthusiasm for a cause; they must involve themselves in the work of these institutions, and strive to influence them effectively from within. But in a culture and civilization like our own, ... no one can insinuate himself into public life unless he be scientifically competent, technically capable, and skilled in the practice of his own profession" (John XXIII, PP147ff.)