

FOURTH PLENARY ASSEMBLY: WORKSHOP DISCUSSION GUIDE

**THE LAITY IN THE WORLD OF WORK****INTRODUCTION**

The late twentieth century is a time of traumatic transformation of our civilization. The two modern ideologies, industrial capitalism and scientific socialism, are now clearly threatening our ecological, social and spiritual life. To counter these threats and heal the damage already wrought, a new form of civilization not only is needed but, as many thoughtful people believe and hope, is already in the making. We call this new form of civilization "post-modern."

A key theme in the emergence of this healing post-modern civilization is the meaning of work. Modern civilization has been degrading work, organizing it more and more for the destruction of life. A fundamental task for post-modern civilization is to recover the religious meaning of work as the expression of human creativity.

So a theology of work takes on great importance. It should be a leading guide for Christians in the midst of this crisis of civilization.

**I. THE MODERN DEGRADATION OF WORK****1. The Root Metaphor of Our Present Civilization — the Machine**

The crisis of late modern civilization is that it is effecting the destruction of life's creative holistic communion. The reason for this destruction is found at the root of modern culture. The root metaphor of our present civilization is the machine, or mechanization. This root metaphor tends to

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shape people's ecological, social and spiritual experience according to its image.<sup>1</sup>

The modern understanding of science until very recently saw all reality as something to be measured, weighed and separated into the distinct parts of a machine. This mechanistic vision comes to us from the foundational thinkers of the modern world, especially René Descartes in philosophy, Isaac Newton in physics and Charles Darwin in biology.

Within this modern vision, work becomes the construction of a great machine intended to produce progress and freedom. Our work is organized according to the criteria set by this mechanistic vision. The resulting social machines envelop more and more of our life.

But while mechanistic civilization grows, a paradoxical thing happens. As the social machines become powerful, life is threatened. Our ecological foundations are undermined. Social community erodes. And spiritual meaning is converted into hollow secularism. Ultimately we are threatened with destruction — slowly from the ecological crisis, or rapidly by nuclear holocaust.

## **2. Effects of This Mechanization**

We now live in a world of great social machines — massive multinational corporations, giant government bureaucracies, and ever more centralized churches, trade unions, and so on. But fundamental contradictions call into question the stated purpose of these social institutions.

Corporations often turn workers, including white collar workers and even managers, into cogs for their economic machine. Human needs and dignity do not seem to count for much. They become tools for the maximization of profit. When these tools are viewed as “unprofitable,” they are abandoned. All over the world governments spend more and more money on arms for national security. Some even “govern” by repression and torture, in the name of national security. But humanity and the earth become desperately insecure.

In the midst of all these institutions people feel powerless. They feel like minor parts of a giant machine. In effect, the machine built by their work now controls them.

One way in which the modern social machine destroys life is by making people work too much — not only in their jobs, but even when they

are consuming. We call this the “rat race.” There is no time to enjoy life. We are always on the run. Our work and our possessions consume us. As a result, there is little room in life to help marriages grow, to bring children into the world, to care for the elderly, to build up the local community. Everything becomes work, but a work that extinguishes life.

Thus modern work crushes life by failing to allow rest. Without its basic rhythm work becomes slavery instead of creation. Rest is essential to the purpose of work — ecologically, socially and spiritually. It keeps nature fruitful, prevents humans from being slaves, and taps into divine energy. Without rest there is no room for new life. That is why our “rat-race” civilization crushes the life of the unborn, poisons the earth, and now threatens to blow the world up. Unless balanced and renewed by rest, constant work brings only death.

### **3. The Priority — Not of Persons, but of Capital**

While some work too much, others are not allowed to work at all, i.e., the “unemployed.” The other side of the “rat race” is the pit of unemployment. The curse of unemployment is a fundamental assault on human dignity. It denies to the jobless the image of God the Creator. It refuses to give them a social place to exercise their co-creativity with God. Unemployment should be a great moral concern for Christians.

In his encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II calls this degradation of work by a mechanistic civilization the inversion of the priority of labor. He means that work should be a process consciously and creatively shaped by the workers themselves. But modern materialistic ideologies have reduced workers to instruments of production. Sometimes they are “paid off” by being enabled to participate in excessive consumption. Other times they are abandoned entirely, i.e., they become the unemployed. In both cases, their divinely-rooted creativity is denied.

Our modern ideology of capitalism makes workers only tools of the “free market.” Workers are seen as commodities, whose labor is to be bought like raw materials or energy. When much labor is needed, the free market buys much. When much is no longer needed, the free market lets it go into unemployment. If there are many extra workers, labor can be bought at a cheap price, no matter what the workers’ needs.

The pattern above is considered the scientific law of the free market. It is given the same indisputable, absolute character in modern times which the divine right of kings had in the Middle Ages.

Marxism rebelled against this domination of labor by capital through the free market. But when Marxism tried to restore the priority of labor, that is, the participation and creativity of workers, it largely failed. Because it only built up the priority of the state. Rejecting the free market, it elevated the state as the organizing principle of the economy. The workers were still reduced to tools of production. Capital still dominated labor. The domination of labor only shifted from the private sector to the public sector.

The kind of society we built out of the mechanistic model, under the principles of either capitalism or Marxism, militates against human community. We see the effects every day in the epidemic breakup of family, in mass technological abortion, in the decline of neighborhoods into lonely isolation, and in our deepening alienation from nature.

What kind of work is it that makes human beings into manipulated objects, reduces them to temporary tools for profit or power, isolates them from each other by competition and fear, and uproots us all from the natural world? It is a degraded expression of human work.

All of these worries climax in the great concern over the fate of the earth itself. As Pope John Paul II constantly points out in his speeches and writings, life on earth is now threatened with extinction. We face the risk of ecological suicide through slow contamination of the subsystems of air, earth and water, or through a rapid holocaust by nuclear war. This risk of destruction comes not from nature, but precisely from the modern form of human work.

## II. WORK AS CO-CREATION

### 1. Distorted and Reductionistic Interpretations of Work

Religious versus secular work? This distortion causes us to consider religious work only those works done by priests, sisters or brothers. Religious work is limited to work done in "religious" institutions. Other work places are called "secular."

Often we refer to people who do these "religious" works as having "vocations" from God. As if other forms of work were not also vocations from God. Thus, when we use the language of "praying for vocations," meaning these "religious" vocations, we fall into the trap of this first distortion of work.

A second distortion sees work as a distraction from spirituality. In this view, work is necessary because of our bodily or "earthly" nature. We have to work, but it would be better if we didn't. If we didn't, we could be busy with "heavenly" things. Here prayer and spirituality begin only when work ends. By setting up such a radical separation between work and prayer, we say that religious meaning is found only outside of our work in the world. Work becomes part of our exile, our vale of tears.

In this distortion, work gains status to the degree that it is removed from the material world. Thus jobs that get our hands dirty or require physical labor are seen to be inferior to jobs that keep our hands clean and require only mental labor. Mental labor becomes more "heavenly," while manual labor remains "earthly." Our educational system reinforces this dichotomy. A more intense version of this distortion is to see work simply as a curse for original sin.

In this distortion work is simply the activity by which we earn money in order to buy consumer goods. This can lead to the "rat race" of consumerism, which becomes a false religion.

To heal the destructive effects of both the classical spiritual degradation of work and its modern secularization, we need to recover the religious depth of work itself.

## **2. The Spiritual Meaning of Work**

As creation-centered spiritual writers, like Mathew Fox and Thomas Berry, have reminded us, the starting point for spirituality is the affirmation of creation.<sup>2</sup> Creation is the fundamental doctrine of theology. Without creation there is nothing to theologize about. It is in this context of continuing creation that we need to understand the spiritual meaning of human work. It should be clear that all authentic work is profoundly religious, even if we are not conscious of the fact. Work is meant to be the cultural way in which we reveal God's actively creative love. Work is meant to be the cultural place where we come together with the Creator to continue the process of creation.

How absurd, then, to suggest that only certain works are religious. Or that work is a distraction from knowing God. Or that work is a curse for sin. Or that work is only a means for buying things. Such religious and secular distortions of work ultimately deny the religious significance of creation.

Work is meant to be a fundamental religious act. It is a basic source of dynamic unity with the Creator.

But all work is not so clearly our participation in the divine creativity of the universe. The creativity of work may be blocked by structures that disfigure its meaning. Thus, work may be reduced to oppression by slave labor, or work may be denied entirely to people through unemployment. So it becomes necessary to distinguish between authentic — *holy* work, and degraded — *evil* work.

### 3. Holy Work and Evil Work — The Norms

Holy work opens the work process to the creativity of the human species, of the rest of the universe, and ultimately of the divine Creator. By contrast, evil work blocks all three interrelated sources of creativity. When this threefold creativity of work — human, ecological and divine — is blocked, work becomes destructive. Destructive work is anticreative.

Of course, evil work may not be the fault of the actual workers who perform the work. It may not be their fault if a work situation stifles human creativity, injures the natural ecology, and shuts out the image of the divine Mystery. Such workers may be the victims of evil work, rather than the cause. The work may be imposed on them by a larger institution, much as slavery was imposed on slaves against their will.

Three criteria flow from the three dimensions that constitute work — human, ecological and divine.

a) One way that institutional structures repress participation is by becoming too large and centralized. Participation becomes feasible only to the degree that the institutions of work are reorganized into smaller-scale units.<sup>3</sup>

b) Just as much contemporary work treats workers as objects to be controlled, so too it often treats the earth as an object to be plundered. The end result is an ecological crisis. Work becomes evil when it treats the earth as something to be manipulated and used with no respect for its internal value.<sup>4</sup>

c) The final criterion for holy work is that it be self-consciously religious. To the degree that we consider most work secular, we deny its religious depth and block its creative energy.

How often do we hear in sermons on Sunday that the liturgy is the celebration of the religious depth of our work during the week? Many Church ministers consider it important to visit the homes of their fellow Christians, but how many ever try to visit their work places?

These criteria — conscious participation, ecological wholeness and religious celebration — are three of the norms by which we distinguish structures of holy work from structures of evil work. The healing transformation of the blockages requires a spirituality that understands the religious depth of all work as our participation with the rest of the universe in God's creative love.

### III. TOWARD A HOLY ECONOMY

#### 1. The Exploitation and Fragmentation of Labor

The work process was scarred by fundamental and antagonistic divisions based on sex, class, race and geography. These divisions caused the many oppressions that came to mark human labor — the patriarchal domination of men over women; the class domination of masters over slaves, lords over serfs, and capital over labor; the racial domination of lighter-skinned peoples over darker-skinned peoples; and the geographic domination of colonizing centers over colonized peripheries. Further, the work process was increasingly polarized so that human community began to erode, especially in the modern context.

The other violence was the alienation from nature, i.e., humanity tried to break its organic ties with wider ecology.

#### 2. The Post-Modern Recovery of Holism

Post-modern culture is based on an intensified network of communications and transportation. The creative challenge for the post-modern world of work is to direct control of information toward nonviolence and the healing of the wounds caused by the threefold violence of the post stages of human culture.

The challenge is: a) to reintegrate human work within the ecological rhythm; b) to recover the priority and solidarity of labor; c) to rediscover the profound spiritual meaning of work.<sup>5</sup>

Now we shall elaborate on the second point. Capitalism proved incredibly able in organizing labor for higher productivity and in unleashing

the modern technological imagination. But it degraded labor by viewing it only as an objective factor of production, to be hired and fired like so much merchandise, the value of which rose and fell according to the law of supply and demand. Capitalism failed fully to recognize the subjective meaning of labor, what Pope John Paul II calls its "priority and solidarity." This means that all labor workers are the subjective source of creativity in work. Capitalism only honored this subjective dimension for the entrepreneurial and managerial classes.

By contrast, socialism stressed the subjective dimension of labor, namely, that it is the workers who create the economy. Hence, it mounted a program to challenge capitalism with its doctrine of workers' control, i.e., socialism's version of the priority and solidarity of labor. But socialism mediated workers' control and solidarity exclusively through a centralized scientific state, which simply repeated the anti-communal models of industrialization in capitalism, left the workers with a new form of social domination, i.e., the state, and stifled creative imagination in all realms, including technological innovation.

Thus, both modern capitalism and socialism, despite their contributions, cannot provide the social vision for a post-modern holy or holistic economy. Rather, we need to create some new way of imagining the social structure of the work process. We believe this way is coming to us from two key sources — one being the movement called "economic democracy," and the other, the movement called "appropriate (or alternative) technology."

a) Economic democracy means pioneering new forms of worker participation, from the most extensive form of a renewal of the co-operative movement to lesser forms of worker co-operation in mixed or privately held enterprises.<sup>6</sup>

b) Appropriate technology refers to a technology that is consciously and artistically shaped to promote co-operation among workers and co-operation between all people and nature. Technology can be shaped any number of ways, depending on the values that are brought to it. Much of modern technology is aimed at supporting the concentration of power in large transnational corporations or state bureaucracies, as well as at the mass control of workers and citizens.

We need to learn how to shape technology in the service of the priority and solidarity of labor. This means first of all using technology in service of labor, and not the reverse. It also means developing small-scale

technology that workers can own and control, at least acting as a co-operative.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. The Importance of Unions

In our late modern industrial society a prejudice against trade unions has been increasing. This is true in both capitalist and communist societies, as we now see a world-wide attack on labor, one which crosses ideological boundaries. However, Catholic social teaching has consistently upheld the right and importance of workers' organizing into unions. In his encyclical "On Human Labor," Pope John Paul II calls unions an "indispensable" element of modern industrial life. Why this Catholic stress on the importance of unions?

From the viewpoint of contemporary Catholic social thought, where workers do not themselves own the means of production, unions are necessary in order that workers may have some decision-making power within the work process. Prior to the period of industrial capitalism, when the production process was more simple, many workers were self-employed. But the industrial revolution stripped many workers of the ownership of the means of production. Hence, a new institution was needed for their defence, as well as to enable them in some measure to participate in the decision-making process concerning their work. Thus, the emergence of modern unions.

The Catholic affirmation of unions is rooted in the theological affirmation that workers are not simply instruments of the production process, to be hired and fired according to the laws of the market, nor simply to be managed scientifically without participation based on the power of their own organization. Rather, they are to make their voices heard in shaping the fundamental design of the work process. In an industrial system, where capital is largely controlled from outside the workplace, be it by corporations or by the state, workers need such organizational strength to realize the religious depth of their work.

Pastorally this would mean that the Christian community cannot be neutral on the principle of the right of labor, any more than on the rights of the poor, the handicapped, the unborn, or whomever.

Of course, this does not mean that we need endorse every policy of every union, but that we are called to defend the foundational rights of these organizations. Support of workers' organizations in turn needs to be built into pastoral strategy, liturgical celebration and preaching.

#### IV. SOME ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Does the Church project to Asians a picture of a Church which is primarily of the "elite," a middle-class Church, to the neglect of the masses of workers and laborers? Does the worker feel at home in the Catholic Church of Asia?

2. Is there a catechesis of work in your country and diocese?

Does such a catechesis appear regularly in liturgical celebrations, sermons and religious education classes?

3. Are the thousands of Catholic schools geared to the middle class, to form more who look like middle class, who are the "white collared," to the neglect of the "blue collared" or the "shirtless"?

4. Is there formation in the spirituality of the worker? Are Church personnel engaged full-time in this apostolate?

5. Are there Church-sponsored programs for training workers in their rights, goals, means, etc.

Are there "labor schools"?

Who direct these schools — priests, religious, laity?

6. What support does your diocese give to social action groups? Has the Church taken a position in your country, diocese, parish, regarding the theological basis of the labor union, and their necessity for the development of workers' rights and goals?

Is this position clearly stated and known by all, through Catholic catechesis?

7. Are Catholics, individually or in groups, on the "picket lines"?

Does your diocese have social action groups?

#### Footnotes:

- 1) Cf. Gibson Winter, *Liberating Creation: Foundations of Religious Social Ethics*, New York, Crossroads, 1981. This paper owes much to the co-operation of Joe Holland (Center of Concern, Washington D.C.)

- 2) Cf. Mathew Fox, *Original Blessing: A Primer in Creation Spirituality*, Santa Fe, Bear and Co., 1983.
  - 3) Cf. E.F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered*, New York, Harper & Row, 1973.
  - 4) Cf. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution*, New York, Harper & Row, 1980.
  - 5) (i) In his encyclical, *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II effectively places the liberating and creative interpretation of human work at the core of his social teaching.  
(ii) The two modern ideologies, capitalism and socialism, both liberated and degraded human labor.  
(iii) A meditative introduction to the new cosmology and the excellent sketches of the post-modern fusion of the scientific and spiritual traditions, and a scientific introduction to the new physics are found in following works: Brian Swimme, *The Universe is a Green Dragon: A Cosmic Creation Story*, Santa Fe, Bear & Co., 1984; Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point: Science, Society, and the Rising Culture*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1982.
  - 6) Cf. Martin Carnoy and Derek Shearer, *Economic Democracy: The Challenge of the Eighties*, Armonk, M.E. Sharpe, 1980.
  - 7) Cf. E.F. Schumacher, *Good Work*, New York, Harper & Row, 1980. George McRobie, *Small Is Possible*, New York, Harper & Row, 1981.
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