



## **Rights and Dignity of Workers**

### *Principle V*

We continue our series on Catholic Social Teaching by looking at the fifth principle: The rights and dignity of workers.

The dignity of work is rooted in the theology of creation. In the opening Book of Genesis, after God creates the first man, we read, *"The Lord God then took the man and settled him in the Garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it."* (Gn. 2:15)

God could have created the world in a perfect state. In the Lord's wisdom, however, He chose to create the world in a "state of becoming," i.e., in a way that needs to be perfected. Out of love, the Lord gives us the opportunity to cooperate with Him in perfecting His work of creation. In short, work is a gift!

To put this in perspective, think of a child who asks his or her parent to help with a project. "Mom, dad, can I help?" "Sure, you can help." God does not need us. However, He delights in giving us the opportunity to share in His creative work.

Additionally, work perfects us human beings. Think of a job where you had to learn or develop the skills necessary to accomplish it. Teachers work in perfecting ways to communicate content so that students can receive and understand it. Lawyers develop their analytical and research skills to argue cases. Doctors and nurses acquire knowledge about the human body and how respective medicines and care heal it when sick. Regardless of the job, through work, you grow in virtue by developing the necessary skills to accomplish the task at hand.

Unfortunately, because we are fallen, we can become enslaved to work. Work exists for people and not the other way around. There was an insidious phrase that appeared on the gate entering Auschwitz: *Arbeit macht frei* or "Work sets you free." This is simply not true. Our freedom is rooted in God, who alone is truly free. We use our God-given gifts, our freedom, in our work to glorify God and to contribute to the good of our world.

Furthermore, this principle reminds us that workers have rights, rights that are rooted in their inherent dignity as human beings. For example, workers have rights to a just wage (a wage commensurate for the work they provide and to raise a family). They have a right to safe working conditions. Workers have a right to participate in the fruit of their work. In other words, employers should not see their employees merely as instruments for profits. They are people who have dignity. Finally, this principle says that workers have a right to leisure and rest, benefits, maternity/paternity leave, healthcare, and adequate support for their retirement.

Along with rights, this principle reminds us that workers have responsibilities. They must provide labor for a fair day's wage. They must be honest, open to working as part of a team, and respect that employers have a right to create a balanced budget and receive a reasonable profit for their investment.

Traditionally, this principle has focused on what was once referred to as "blue collar" laborers or manual laborers. As modern society has undergone significant change in the last hundred years, this principle is beginning to address "white collar" laborers, i.e., those in professional, managerial, or administrative work.

Recently, the Church has been challenged to address new situations such as creating a Christian culture in the workplace, insisting on ethical business transactions, workers maintaining balance between work and family, and using wealth properly (e.g., giving back to the community, to the poor, and to the Church). In 2012, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace published *The Vocation of the Business Leader* to address Christian leaders in business.

Finally, this principle reminds you to prayerfully reflect on our purchasing decisions. You are challenged to pay attention to how products/services are produced. The goal is to purchase ethically produced products, i.e., from organizations that pay their workers a just wage, treat their employees with respect, and conduct business ethically. In short, this principle reminds us that test of the greatness of a business is the way it treats its workers.

~St. Thérèse, pray for us!



Goldy doing good work