

Labor Day Statement

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This Labor Day, we find ourselves at a time of *kairos*, a moment of crisis as well as opportunity. Over the past year, Pope Francis has drawn our attention to problems in the world of work that seek to undermine our understanding of the dignity of the person and threaten the stability of society. The Pope has also called us to action based on the truth about the nature of work which is intended to support the flourishing of the family. As the Holy Father recently remarked, work “comes from the first command that God gave to Adam There has always been friendship between the Church and work, starting with a working Jesus. Where there is a worker, there is the interest and the gaze of love of the Lord and of the Church.”¹

What does our Lord’s “gaze of love” see today? Surely he honors the parents and grandparents who offer their work as “prayers said with the hands”² for their family and future. In turn, we thank God for the vocation of work, which, when healthy, “anoints” with dignity, helps children grow into adults, and strengthens cooperation across all people in our society.³ “Brother work,” in Pope Francis’ words, is formational and sustaining for every human life and community, and is essential to our faith.⁴

God’s “gaze of love” also receives all those who are struggling with work. A lack of work can be devastating to the human person, and it can undermine solidarity and destabilize society. “[T]he entire social pact is built around work,” Pope Francis told a gathering of factory workers in Genoa. “This is the core of the problem. Because when you do not work, or you work badly, you work little or you work too much, it is democracy that enters into crisis, and the entire social pact.”⁵

Our Lord’s “gaze of love” embraces men and women who work long hours without rest to provide for their loved ones; families who move across towns, states, and nations, facing the highest risks and often suffering great tragedy in order to find better opportunities; workers who endure unsafe working conditions, low pay, and health crises; women who suffer wage disparities and exploitation; and those who suffer the effects of racism in any setting, including the workplace. Our Lord knows that too often, hidden from the world’s view, our brothers and sisters’ dreams for a better life are shattered in unthinkable ways as they become victims of labor trafficking, viciously exploited as mere objects instead of being treated as persons created with God-given dignity.

Pope Francis rejects economic approaches that are driven by the “throw away” culture, systems which prize only commercial value and recognize no other values or truths.⁶ The Holy Father connects the idolatry of consumerism to the undervaluing of labor and the erosion of the social pact.⁷ Here, Francis echoes the warnings of his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, on the dangers to society of excessive inequalities in the economic sphere:

The dignity of the individual and the demands of justice require, particularly today, that economic choices do not cause disparities in wealth to increase in an excessive and morally unacceptable manner, and that we continue to *prioritize the goal of access to steady employment* for everyone. . . . Through the systemic increase of social inequality, both within a single country and between the populations of different countries (i.e. the massive increase in relative poverty), not only does social cohesion suffer, thereby placing democracy at risk, but so too does the economy, through the progressive erosion of “social capital”: the network of relationships of trust, dependability, and respect for rules, all of which are indispensable for any form of civil coexistence.⁸

Study after study shows that the economy is growing and unemployment is declining—but wages remain stagnant or are decreasing for the vast majority of people, while a smaller percentage collect the new wealth being generated.⁹ Economic stresses contribute to a decline in marriage rates, increases in births outside of two-parent households, and child poverty. Economic instability also hurts the faith community, as Americans who have recently experienced unemployment are less likely to go to Church, even though such communities can be a source of great support in difficult times. Bound up in economic and social trauma are the increased use of contraception, higher abortion rates, greater abuse of alcohol and drugs, and increases in crime. When unethical labor conditions weaken the social pact, society can become vulnerable to attempts to use fear, and our care and concern for one another can disintegrate into blame and suspicion.¹⁰

A Kairos Opportunity

What, then, is to be done? Pope Francis calls us to action. In his message for the First World Day of the Poor, which will be celebrated later this year, the Pope recalls the words of St. John: “Little children, let us not love in word or speech, but in deed and in truth.” (1 Jn 3:18). We must be moved to conversion and action.

Following Jesus in Solidarity with Our Neighbor

The Christian recognizes that the path of reform is not a political or economic program.¹¹ The Way is Jesus Christ. The human person can encounter him in the Church. The solution to repairing the damage done to economic and social solidarity begins with us following Jesus more closely: for all to become more like the Good Samaritan, and for the Church to become more like the good innkeeper, to whom the afflicted are entrusted.¹² Francis notes that this requires us to “become neighbor” to each person we meet in need, filled with “the capacity to suffer with someone else.”¹³ We see a powerful example of this now along the Gulf Coast, where emergency responders and relief workers alike are acting as Good Samaritans to all who are in distress from the impacts of Hurricane Harvey. This is the Christian way to displace fear and blame in society: love that suffers in support of another.

Worker-owned businesses can be a force for strengthening solidarity, as the Second Vatican Council encouraged businesses to consider “the active sharing of all in the administration and profits of these enterprises in ways to be properly determined.” When decisions are made that greatly affect workers and their families, “the workers themselves should have a share also in determining these conditions—in person or through freely elected delegates.”¹⁴ The Catholic Campaign for Human Development (CCHD) has helped in the formation of many employee-owned companies which provide jobs in communities where work opportunities may be scarce.¹⁵

Work that Encourages Cooperation and Social Bonds

When workers and labor are properly honored, the social bonds of society are strengthened. Work is not just about individual growth and development. When work finds its proper role in the life of society, Pope Francis explains, it is the great teacher of cooperation and solidarity.¹⁶ Daily work is a form of “civil love” that “makes the world live and carry on.”¹⁷

As Pope Francis and his predecessors point out, however, excessive inequality threatens this cooperation and the social pact it supports.¹⁸ This is occurring even though many economic indicators show continuing growth, in some sectors at a record-setting pace. Leaders in business and government must revisit, therefore, the Church’s moral framework on balancing the legitimate role of profit in a business and the moral obligations to pay a just wage. This teaching grew out of the historical experience of the industrial revolution. In St. John Paul II’s words, the industrial revolution’s “unheard-of accompanying exploitation in the field of wages, working conditions and social security” led to a reaction against the whole system, and “it must be frankly recognized that the reaction against the system of injustice and harm that cried to heaven for vengeance and that weighed heavily upon workers in that period of rapid industrialization was justified *from the point of view of social morality*.”¹⁹

Today, we are in the midst of a technological revolution, which has coincided with severe economic disparity and threatens to continue or accelerate due to many factors such as the growing presence of automation technology in the workplace. Once again, we see in many places the consequences of widespread failures to pay a just wage and to honor the dignity of work for each person. The root of the problem, which remains prominent, comes from an errant understanding that “human work is solely an instrument of production” such that business leaders “following the principle of maximum profit, tr[y] to establish the lowest possible wages for the work done by the employees.”²⁰ A just wage, however, is not the principle of maximum profit; rather, it is “the concrete means of *verifying the justice* of the whole socioeconomic system and, in any case, of checking that it is functioning justly. . . . This means of checking concerns above all the family. Just remuneration for the work of an adult who is responsible for a family means remuneration which will suffice for establishing and properly maintaining a family and for providing security for its future.”²¹ The Church draws the heart of a business owner to the foundational truth of what business should be about:

the purpose of a business firm is not simply to make a profit but is to be found in its very existence as a *community of persons* who in various ways are endeavouring to satisfy their basic needs, and who form a particular group at the service of the whole of society. Profit is a regulator of the life of a business, but it is not the only one; *other human and moral factors* must also be considered which, in the long term, are at least equally important for the life of a business.²²

When a parent—working full time, or even working multiple jobs beyond standard working hours—cannot bring his or her family out of poverty, something is terribly wrong with how we value the work of a person. All those involved in the determination of wages, in the public and private sectors, must grapple with this serious moral responsibility, for “the justice of the whole socioeconomic system” depends upon it.

Greater Legal Protections for Vulnerable Workers and “Good Entrepreneurs”

One powerful way to protect the dignity of the person is through the law. Legal protections cannot solve all problems when the culture itself must also change.²³ Nevertheless, legal protections and important gains that humanize the workplace are vital and should be supported and strengthened.

First, workers’ legal rights to a just wage in exchange for work, to protection against wage theft, to workplace safety and just compensation for workplace injuries, to health care and other benefits, and to organize and engage in negotiations, should be promoted. Migrants and refugees should receive careful consideration, including the conditions that allow for dignified work and protections against trafficking. The law should also seek to avoid wage disparities for women, and exploitation of any kind.²⁴ It should also encourage work environments that recognize and seek to end racism and its effects. The USCCB’s newly established Ad Hoc Committee Against Racism will be dedicated to addressing the sin of racism throughout our society, which includes the workplace.

Second, the law should encourage entrepreneurs to choose the best interests of workers and a healthy culture over exploitation and expediency. Pope Francis has said that the good entrepreneur “knows his workers, because he works alongside them” and “shares the joys of work, of solving problems together, of creating something together.”²⁵ These leaders find that laying someone off is “always a painful decision and he would not do it if possible. . . . He always suffers, and sometimes from this suffering new ideas emerge to avoid dismissal.” By contrast, the “speculator” is without a moral grounding, and “uses, exploits, ‘eats’ people [in order] to reach profit targets.” Business can be “friendly to people and even to the poor” when it is run by good entrepreneurs, but under a “speculator,” the economy becomes “faceless” and “abstract.” Laws should reward those who remember the faces of persons engaged in and impacted by the economy and discourage the abstraction that leads to exploitation.

Third, workers must be aided to come to know and exercise their legal rights. As an example, CCHD has supported the Don Bosco Workers in Westchester, NY, which has launched a successful campaign to combat wage theft.²⁶ Persons returning from prison also need support to understand their legal rights as they seek new

employment. CCHD has helped the Society of St. Vincent de Paul in Cincinnati and elsewhere as they work with returning citizens to find stable and meaningful jobs.²⁷

Twisted Understanding of Labor and Laborers

Pope Francis challenges us to confront a twisted understanding of the purposes of labor which does not recognize talents as gifts from God. With such a mindset, it becomes possible to improperly justify economic and societal injustices. The Pope acknowledges that “merit” is “a beautiful word,” but the modern world can often use it “ideologically,” which makes it “distorted and perverted” when it is used for “ethically legitimizing inequality.”²⁸ This view is especially pernicious when it blames the poor as “undeserving.”²⁹ But this is not the message of the Gospel:

A second consequence of the so-called “meritocracy” is the change of the culture of poverty. The poor person is considered undeserving and therefore to blame. And if poverty is the fault of the poor, the rich are exonerated from doing anything. This is the old logic of Job’s friends, who wanted to convince him that he was guilty of his misfortune. But this is not the logic of the Gospel, it is not the logic of life: meritocracy in the Gospel is instead found in the figure of the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son. He despises his younger brother and thinks he must remain a failure because he deserves it; instead the father thinks no son deserves the acorns that are for the pigs.³⁰

How different this false view is from the “gaze of love” that the Lord has for the worker! In following the Lord in deed and in truth, we must advocate for those in a state of misfortune, as the prodigal’s father did when he made clear that his younger son could never be stripped of his inherent dignity.

The Crucial Role of Unions: Prophets and Innovators

Pope Francis recently reiterated the still essential role of labor unions in society:

There is no good society without a good union, and there is no good union that is not reborn every day in the peripheries, that does not transform the *discarded stones* of the economy into its cornerstones.³¹

The Pope laid out two “epochal challenges” that unions must face in the world today. First, he explained that unions must retain and recover their prophetic voice, which “regards the very nature itself of the union, its truest vocation. The union is an expression of the *prophetic profile* of society.”³² The union is “born and reborn” whenever it “gives a voice to those who have none, denounces those who would ‘sell the needy for a pair of sandals’ (cf. Amos 2:6), unmasks the powerful who trample the rights of the most vulnerable workers, defends the cause of the foreigner, the least, the discarded. . . . the unions movement has its great seasons when it is prophecy.”³³ Thus, the union should resist the temptation of “becoming too similar to the institutions and powers that it should instead criticize. The union, with the passing of time, has ended up resembling politics, or rather, political parties, their language, their style,” the Pope said.³⁴ Without the prophetic voice, a union’s “actions within businesses will lose strength and effectiveness.”³⁵

The second challenge is “innovation”: although the union must watch over those within its care, it must also work for those outside its walls in order to innovate and protect those “who *do not yet have rights*.”³⁶ Unions are especially valuable when they speak on behalf of the poor, the immigrant, and the person returning from prison.

Recovering Rest for Faith and Family

When workers do not have adequate time to rest, families suffer. Also lost is the necessary time for spiritual growth and building a relationship with God. Pope Francis has said it is “inhuman” that parents must spend so much time working that they cannot play with their children.³⁷ Surely many wish for more time, but their working conditions do not allow it. As St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, “Even as God rests in Himself alone and

is happy in the enjoyment of Himself, so our own sole happiness lies in the enjoyment of God. Thus, also, He makes us find rest in Himself, both from His works and our own. It is not, then, unreasonable to say that God rested in giving rest to us.”³⁸ A culture that obsesses less over endless activity and consumption may, over time, become a culture that values rest for the sake of God and family. Employers ought to consider the total well-being of their employees and prioritize conditions that help them to thrive as human persons. Wages and working hours should support the fundamental needs of people to form and nurture families. The spiritual needs of workers must also be taken into account, so that God may more easily draw them into deeper relationship toward their ultimate purpose.

Recovering the Sacredness of Work

Work, properly understood, can be a place of great sanctity, giving expression to the deep yearnings of the human person; where people are permitted to—and, indeed, do—embrace work as a cooperation with God’s creative power, the mundane can become transcendent. As Pope Francis points out, many Biblical encounters between persons and God occurred at work: “Moses hears the voice of God calling him, and revealing his name while grazing his father-in-law’s flock; Jesus’ first disciples were fishermen and were called by him while working by the lake.”³⁹

This notion that work is sacred is essential, not only to understanding our work, but also to coming to know God himself; nowhere do we see this more powerfully than in the Eucharist. The Holy Father calls us to drink more deeply of this idea: “Work is a friend of prayer; work is present every day in the Eucharist, whose gifts are the fruit of man’s land and work. A world that no longer knows the values, and the value, of work does not understand the Eucharist either, the true and human prayer of workers . . .”⁴⁰

Going Forth Toward Restoration

On this Labor Day, then, let us give thanks to God present to us in the Eucharist as we toil for our heavenly reward. Let us give thanks for the human vocation to work, and strive to make our businesses, our communities, our nation, and our world places where the human person can fully thrive. And let us give thanks, finally, for the opportunity to encounter Christ present in those in need, along with the great gifts that come in demonstrating care and concern for our most vulnerable brothers and sisters, including those experiencing great poverty in the area of work. May we all earnestly seek to adopt God’s “gaze of love” as our own, to envision and make real a world of work restored “in deed and in truth.”

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Pope Francis, Meeting with the World of Work at the Ilva Factory, Genoa, Italy, May 27, 2017, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/05/27/170527a.html> (hereinafter “Ilva Factory”)
- ² *Id.*
- ³ *Id.*
- ⁴ *Id.*
- ⁵ *Id.*
- ⁶ *See, e.g.*, Message of His Holiness Pope Francis on the Occasion of the World Meeting of Population Movements in Modesto, February 10, 2017, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2017/documents/papa-francesco_20170210_movimenti-popolari-modesto.html (hereinafter “Modesto”); *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 53; *Laudato si’*, nos. 122-123
- ⁷ *See, e.g.*, Modesto; Ilva Factory
- ⁸ *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 32 (referencing *Populorum Progressio*, no. 33) (emphasis in original)
- ⁹ *See also, Caritas in Veritate*, no. 22 (“The world’s wealth is growing in absolute terms, but inequalities are on the increase. In rich countries, new sectors of society are succumbing to poverty and new forms of poverty are emerging”) (emphasis in original).
- ¹⁰ *See, Modesto*
- ¹¹ *See, e.g.*, First Homily of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, March 14, 2013 (“. . . we can build many things, but if we do not profess Jesus Christ, things go wrong. We may become a charitable NGO, but not the Church . . . what happens? The same thing that happens to children on the beach when they build sandcastles: everything is swept away”).
http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130314_omelia-cardinali.html
- ¹² *See, Modesto*
- ¹³ *Id.*
- ¹⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 68.
- ¹⁵ For example, CCHD helped support Opportunity Threads. *See*, Duda, John. “How a worker cooperative factory is helping bring textile manufacturing back to North Carolina.” *Community-wealth.org*, October 16, 2014. <http://community-wealth.org/content/how-worker-cooperative-factory-helping-bring-textile-manufacturing-back-north-carolina> (accessed August 16, 2017).
- ¹⁶ Pope Francis, Audience with Delegates from the Confederation of Trade Unions in Italy, June 28, 2017. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/06/28/170628a.html> (hereinafter “Trade Unions”)
- ¹⁷ *Id.*
- ¹⁸ *See, e.g.*, Modesto, Ilva Factory; *Caritas in Veritate*, no. 32 (referencing *Populorum Progressio*, no. 33).
- ¹⁹ St. John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, nos. 8, 11 (citing *Dt* 24:15; *Jas* 5:4; and also *Gen* 4:10) (emphasis in original).
- ²⁰ *Id.*
- ²¹ *Laborem Exercens*, no. 19 (emphasis in original).
- ²² *Centesimus Annus*, no. 35 (emphasis in original).
- ²³ *See, e.g.*, *Laudato si’*, no. 123 (“We should not think that political efforts or the force of law will be sufficient to prevent actions which affect the environment because, when the culture itself is corrupt and objective truth and universally valid principles are no longer upheld, then laws can only be seen as arbitrary impositions or obstacles to be avoided”).
- ²⁴ *See, e.g.*, Ilva Factory
- ²⁵ *Id.*
- ²⁶ USCCB Department of Justice Peace & Human Development, “Wage Theft: A Threat to the Worker and to Economic Development.” *To Go Forth*. <https://togoforth.org/2016/03/31/wage-theft/> (accessed August 16, 2017). Don Bosco Workers also built the chair used by Pope Francis in his 2015 mass in Madison Square Garden. *See also, id.*, “From Prison to Rome: The Impact of the Year of Mercy on Reentry.” <https://togoforth.org/2016/11/17/from-prison-to-rome/> (accessed August 16, 2017).
- ²⁷ *See*, Curnutte, Mark. “Former inmate helps others re-enter society.” *USA Today*. February 20, 2015. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2015/02/20/former-prisoner-leads-new-reentry-program/23774963/> (accessed August 16, 2017).
- ²⁸ Ilva Factory
- ²⁹ *Id.*
- ³⁰ *Id.*
- ³¹ *See* Trade Unions (emphasis in original).
- ³² *Id.* (emphasis in original)
- ³³ *Id.*
- ³⁴ *Id.*
- ³⁵ *Id.*
- ³⁶ *Id.* (emphasis in original)
- ³⁷ *Id.*
- ³⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, Q. 73, A. 2.
- ³⁹ Ilva Factory
- ⁴⁰ *See, Ilva Factory*