

On the Dignity of Human Work

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This year, Sunday 1 May, Feast of St. Joseph the Worker, will be designated “Workers’ Day”. However, as it happens to be the Fifth Sunday of Easter, which is a privileged Sunday, there can be no Mass of the feast on that day. Nevertheless, there will be Prayers of the Faithful for the special needs of workers and the Homily too may deal with the dignity of human work.

I would like to take this opportunity to share with you some of my thoughts and reflections on how to make the Holy Year “An ordinary year celebrated in an extraordinary way”, as the Holy Father has urged us.

Human work occupies so much of our ordinary year, and it is largely through our work that we can make this an extraordinary year. Human work derives its value and dignity from the mandate given by God to man at the beginning to rule and to subdue the earth.

In carrying out this God-given task man takes part in and continues, as it were, the creative activity of God in the universe. Therefore, each and every one of us needs

meaningful work in order to have a sense of fulfilment and value as a human person. Through our work we contribute to the building up of society, provide for our needs and those of others, and simultaneously develop hidden potential that gives a deeper sense of inner growth and satisfaction not explicable in terms of money or status.

The importance of work in the total arena of human life cannot be overemphasized. Pope John Paul II stresses this point in his recent encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, stating: “Human work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question”. Our Holy Father looks at men and women from the viewpoint of their participation in creating society through their work. This is a dynamic appreciation of the role human persons can play in society. He infers that each of us, by virtue of our participation in work through which we build the world, has also a mission to create a more just society and in the process to become more human. We must not have a narrow idea of work: it includes every activity that helps to build a human world.

Of the 2,405,000 employed persons in Hong Kong, the largest single category (36.45%) works in manufacturing. This 36.45% of the total work force

represents 876,800 persons (cf. Hong Kong Year Book, 1983, P.52). Significant advances have been made in improving the quality of their lives. There are fewer deaths through work-related accidents; maternity leave benefits have been increased; and the rates for employee compensation have been raised. Child labour is no longer an embarrassing social stigma in our city. In the context of the Asian continent, Hong Kong workers may be judged to have a rather enviable life style - color TV, cassette recorders, cameras, access to various recreational opportunities. The availability of the latest consumer items gives an impression of development, but this impression may be an illusion. True development pre-supposes standards of work, standards of finished products, standards of life whether at home or in our work-place, which transform the material world into a place and an environment fit for sons of God to live and work in, a place and an environment worthy of our human dignity.

For the Christian vision of the true human development considers the total person. Without sufficient opportunities for complete and high quality spiritual, moral, social and intellectual education there is no real human development. Hong Kong is deeply indebted to the workers of many trades and professions

who have built the flyovers, tunnels and mass transit systems, the mutli-storey low-cost and private residences, highrise office buildings, our factories. It is equally indebted to the workers who keep these gigantic structures throbbing with productive life.

This debt can be repaid, if not wholly, at least in part, by giving workers a voice in making decisions which touch their lives, by providing better working conditions, fairer industrial compensation, decent housing, quality education and employment opportunities which respect the basic human dignity and rights of each and every person.

Hence we invite all in places of responsibility to listen to the voice of our workers calling for attention to the plight of the exploited, to the needs of the retired, the sick and unemployed. Their voice deserves our attention and calls for action.

I would like to end this reflection by quoting Laborem Exercens: “Let the Christian who listens to the word of the living God, uniting work with prayer, know the place that his work has not only in earthly progress but also in the development of the Kingdom of God, to which we are all called through the power of the Holy

Spirit and through the word of the Gospel” (No. 27)

+ John Baptist Wu

The Bishop of Hong Kong

Feast of St. Mark

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