

Westminster Social Justice and Peace Forum
THE CATHOLIC VISION OF WORK
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The toad and the altar

So; take a moment to reflect on what work has meant in your life: it probably takes up more time than anything else except family life; certainly more time than Church activities. Has it made you feel valuable, or given you a sense of meaning? Has it been a crucial part of your identity? Or the opposite? Philip Larkin's famous poem begins 'Why should I let this toad work sit on my life?'

Well, the Catholic vision of work isn't about toads. Rather, it proposes that work is part of what gives our lives meaning and purpose; part of what it means to be a human person. In CST, work shapes us as moral persons.

To put this in practical terms, think about nurses and other medical staff in the pandemic. Rachel Clarke wrote recently about their determination to sit with people who were dying alone, to hold ladders and read letters from loved ones. Did they do that because they were already compassionate before they became nurses? Or did the work to which they were committed draw that out from them?

Let's also put two other examples on the table, before we move to CST principles, two stories recently in the media.

The first is the British Gas workers who fought back against the company's decision to fire and rehire a large proportion of its workforce of engineers, compelling them to accept new contracts with longer hours for the same pay, removing extra pay for working week-ends or bank holidays. Around 3-400 would not accept and lost their jobs, many of them lifetime British Gas workers.

The second is Deliveroo, a prime example of the gig economy, precarious work, paid by the number of deliveries, with no guaranteed hours or rights to holiday pay or sick pay. How many of our young adults have been pushed into such work in the last year? This was in a way a good news story; the stock market flotation of Deliveroo flopped, because investors thought that its policy on workers' employment status and wages was likely to run into trouble.

The crucial point in both these examples is that **the worker matters**; indeed, the worker is more important than the product, or the profit, even than the company. What was at stake in for the British Gas workers was not just an extra 3 hours a week, but the whole structure of family life, care tasks and community belonging that each worker builds around their job. Deliveroo also seems indifferent to that, viewing its couriers only as replaceable economic units.

So what does CST offer us? There are 2 basic ideas.

And just to be clear; work in the CST vision is not just paid employment; it's also all the other ways we labour; work done in the home, work that is part of the unpaid care economy; work that is care for creation or voluntary community or public life.

The first principle is that work expresses our dignity as human persons; it is part of the goodness of our human condition; it is good for us to work. It gives us purpose and enables us to explore our potential and reach for our fulfilment. Pope Francis expressed this beautifully in a letter for the feast of St Joseph:

'Work is fundamental to the dignity of a person. Work anoints us with dignity, fills us with dignity, makes us similar to God, who has worked and still works, who always acts.'

This means that work should be worthy of human persons; and that those with the economic power to structure work have a moral duty to ensure this, that jobs provide what we might call **decent work**; in which workers have a say in how it is organised and structured; where there is fairness in what they are paid; and security when they are ill or in need.

That is the ideal, the mark of a good society, But when we look around at how work is organised in our society, it's not always the case that jobs are worthy of human persons. Some work is degrading; some is exploitative, failing to

recognise people's dignity or rights, or treating them as commodities. Yet research shows that most people would rather work than not, even in what are called 'bullshit' jobs.

The second is that work in the CST vision has two dimensions, **the subjective and the objective**.

The **subjective** dimension is where I began: that work makes us more fully human. It shapes who we are; it has a formative moral effect. It is not just a practical necessity, nor is it a burden, a punishment or a toad; back to the nurses, care workers, paramedics, the restaurateurs who turned to feeding homeless people and many others. And that formative effect works too when work is exploitative; moral senses are blurred or lost.

The **objective** dimension is that through work, we play a part in the creative and redemptive activity of God; we collaborate with the divine purpose which is still unfolding in our history. Our work is part of ordering created reality in the interests of the vision of the Kingdom which we receive from the Gospel.

I've recently been doing some research into the YCW, Young Christian Workers, a movement which started in Belgium in the 1920s and spread worldwide, but is now much smaller. The founder, Joseph Cardijn, made a cardinal in his 80s, had a prophetic vision of the task of young workers. Each young worker, he said, is more precious than all the gold in the world. He spoke often of how 'your workbench is your altar'. In the workplace, he said, you are made lay priests, you are Christ in the workplace. He saw a parallel between the ordained priest who places the host on the paten, and the worker who places 'the host of work' on the workbench. He was talking of factories and workshops, offices and shops, rather than laptops and courier bikes, but the principle and the theology stand. He wanted to give dignity to young people and equip them to be activists.

Years ago when I worked in adult formation, I was trying to explain in a parish group the idea that in baptism we become part of a priesthood, and our task is to consecrate the world around us to God. A man sitting at the back looked up and said to me, 'what I do is, I shovel up shit on Blackpool beach. That's my job. Are you telling me that's consecrating the world to God?'. And the answer is yes. The world of dirty work, like care work, needs re-valuing.

So those are the core principles; the rest is implications; which is where our social mission starts.

CST has covered many of them: papal texts are strongly in favour of worker solidarity, worker movements and trade unions, and on worker rights; they are also keen on worker involvement in shared ownership of companies (and I note in passing that there's a movement of 67 worker owned co-operatives courier food delivery companies spreading across Europe; that Deliveroo gave up in Germany because they were required to give workers proper contracts and benefits). CST texts have spoken out about just wages, what we now recognise as a living wage. Our own Bishops in their 1996 statement, *The Common Good*, cautiously endorsed the policy of a minimum wage (before we had one), one of the few practical conclusions they drew. CST has also set out a critique of economic structures and of various political ideologies, but that's another topic.

But we have to receive and test and enact the principles; first, do they ring true? Do they resonate with our instincts? And then, if they do, we have to examine what's happening around us that contradicts this vision, and what we can do to change it.

The pandemic has sharpened our sight. We can see that care work is under-valued and under-paid; that gig work means people live in radical insecurity so they can't stop work when they need to self-isolate, and so infection rates go up; that people in many other jobs, in supermarkets and transport, are key workers.

On Thursday I listened to Jon Cruddas speaking in a CSAN seminar outlining his vision of how a renewed sense of the dignity of work and its intrinsic value in people's lives could and should become the organizing principle for a new kind of politics. He could hardly have been closer to Pope John Paul's conviction that work is 'the essential key' to the social question, how we organise society, and integral also to social peace and development. Cruddas' new book, *The Dignity of Work*, outlines the practical ways we can do this, paying particular attention to what we have learned in the pandemic.

And here's the rub. For much of the 20th century, this was a crucial area of Catholic social mission; Catholics were involved in labour movements. Bishops spoke out; on Merseyside, Catholic and Anglican bishops, Derek Worlock and David Sheppard led protest marches when factories were threatened, and fought to save jobs and to face the new realities of technological change. Today, I worry that we seem to have withdrawn from this field; yet for us, the

baptised, our workplace is the frontline of our mission. One of my dreams for the post-pandemic church would be that in every parish we begin to talk about our workbench, whatever it is; that we re-engage in shaping the future of work; that we agitate so that our young people have work worthy of their dignity.