

Presentation by CCSJ Chair Leela Ramdeen at the opening session of Justice, Peace and Community Week Saturday, October 19, 2019 – Live on Trinity TV

Work is a key to building a just, inclusive society. In TT today many have lost their jobs or are underemployed, many graduates and young people are unable to find gainful employment. This year's theme for JPCW aims to facilitate a conversation about the challenges we face. Is our society only concerned with profit/the bottom line? In Genesis God mandated that man and woman should work//cultivate and care for the earth. Climate change clearly shows that we are failing to do so. We can't talk about "work" without considering how climate change is already adversely impacting billions of people e.g. health, homes, food, work.

As [Maria Nilsson](#) and [Tord Kjellstrom](#) say: “Climate change has several direct adverse effects on working people such as heat exhaustion and heat stroke , as well as indirect effects including increased risks for infectious diseases, changing distribution and transmission patterns of vector-borne diseases, malnutrition, water and sanitation problems, and injuries due to extreme weather events.”

Our Church has been always promoted the dignity of work and the rights of workers. Remember that there are obligations on the part of both employers and employees.

Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 Encyclical, Rerum Novarum was a major encyclical that addressed the miserable working conditions of the working class. The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church reminds us that: “The person is the yardstick of the dignity of work...Work is for man and not man for work...Any form of materialism or economic tenet that tries to reduce the worker to being a mere instrument of production, a simple labour force with an exclusively material value, would end up hopelessly distorting the essence of work and stripping it of its most noble and basic human finality.”

The US Bishops echoed this sentiment when they said: "The economy must serve people, not the other way around. Work is more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God’s creation. If the dignity of work is to be protected, then the basic rights of workers must be respected--the right to productive work, to decent and fair wages, to humane working conditions, to form and join trade unions, to reasonable limitation of working hours, to private property, and to economic initiative.”

There are many documents in our Church that focus on the issue of work. In 1981, Pope John Paul II wrote an encyclical entitled, *Laborem Exercens*, on human work, to celebrate 90 years since the publication of *Rerum Novarum*.

As a young man during the years of WW2, Karol Wojtyła (Woytila) (the future Pope John Paul II, who is now a saint) did manual labour, first in a quarry for four years and then in a chemical company. This was when Poland was under Nazi occupation. He is the only pope in modern history to have experience of such work. What he saw in the lives of fellow workers had a lasting impact. Later he wrote that he came to know intimately “their living situations, their families, their interests and their human worth”. One commentator says, “He was struck by the innate dignity of these workers expressed in their friendliness, self-sacrifice, and generosity”.

In his encyclical, *Laborem Exercens*, Pope JPII noted how Jesus spent most of his earthly life working at the carpenter’s bench. A central message of this encyclical is:

.. that work is a key, probably the essential key, to the whole social question, if we try to see that question really from the point of view of humanity’s good.

(And if the solution ... must be sought in the direction of ‘making life more human’, then the key, namely human work, acquires fundamental and decisive importance.” (# 3)

He said: “Work is a good thing for man – a good thing for his humanity – because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes 'more a human being.'”

He also spoke of the importance of just wages and adequate conditions: ... “wages, that is to say remuneration for work, are still a practical means whereby the vast majority of people can have access to those goods which are intended for common use ... Hence, in every case, a **just wage** is the concrete means of verifying the justice of the whole socioeconomic system and, in any case, of checking that it is functioning justly”. (# 19)

As well as his concern for the common good, the Pope expressed a special concern, a ‘preferential option’, for unemployed people, young people, impoverished agricultural workers, people with disabilities and migrant workers – and highlighted the special assistance that should be provided (# 18, 19, 21–23).

He identified those who suffer, particularly the poor, because of what he referred to as 'materialistic economism': And the 'poor' appear under various forms; they appear in various places and at various times; in many cases they appear as a result of the violation of the dignity of human work: either because the opportunities for work are limited as a result of the scourge of unemployment, or because a low value is put on work and the rights that flow from it, especially the right to a just wage and to the personal security of the worker and his or her family. (# 8)

He called for solidarity with workers wherever they are degraded or exploited, and a concern as well for their families and communities subject to poverty and even hunger. He focused also on the spirituality of work. He said: work is participation in God's activity and ought to permeate even "the most ordinary everyday activities. For, while providing the substance of life for themselves and their families, men and women are performing their activities in a way which appropriately benefits society. They can justly consider that by their labour they are unfolding the Creator's work, consulting the advantages of their brothers and sisters, and contributing their personal industry to the realisation of history of the divine plan." (25)

Good work promotes the dignity of the human person. Not all work is good - e.g. human/sex trafficking, exploitation of adults and minors working e.g. in mines in dangerous conditions for lengthy hours, forced labour, modern-day slavery. It is estimated that there are 40.3 million people, including 10 m. children in modern day slavery around the world - e.g. debt bondage where entire families work for free for years to pay off a debt with exorbitant interest rates, domestic servitude, forced sexual exploitation, sexual harassment in the workplace - all of which violate human dignity.

Consider whether we have adequate Employment laws that codify employers' obligations to their employees – regulating the relationship between employers and employees. The key employment laws include discrimination, minimum wage, and workplace safety and health laws, as well as workers' compensation and child labour laws. Our Constitution entrenches the rights of workers to form Unions – and our Church supports the existence of Unions.

In his Apostolic Letter, *Octogesima Adveniens* – marking the 80th anniversary of Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, ("A Call to Action"), Pope Paul VI, 1971 said: "The important role of union organizations must be admitted: their object is the representation of the various categories of workers, their lawful collaboration in the economic advance of society, and the development of the sense of their responsibility for the realisation of the common good." #14

I am a Lay Assessor at the Equal Opportunity Tribunal. It is important for viewers to know that The Equal Opportunity Act 2000 prohibits an employer or prospective employer in TT from discriminating against an employee or a prospective employee because of their status and also from discrimination by victimisation whereby the person victimised is less favourably treated than other persons. Status refers to: race, disability, ethnicity, marital status, religion, sex, origin/geographical origin

(4 categories of discrimination: education, employment, provision of accommodation, provision of goods and services).

With the number of Migrants and Refugees that have come to our shores from over 20 countries, there is a real fear that some of them are being exploited in the workplace. This is an issue that AMMR and PMMR address as we seek to welcome, protect, promote and integrate our brothers and sisters who come here seeking peace.

At the Vatican, our Church has a Department for the Service of Integral Human Development. Integral Human development means the development of the whole person and of every person. The Prefect of this Department is Cardinal Peter Turkson. He has rightly said: "Where there is no work, there cannot be progress, there cannot be wellbeing and, assuredly, there cannot be a better future. Work, which is not only the commitment but the way by which man fulfills himself in society and in the world, is an essential part in determining integral development, be it of the person or of the community in which he lives."

We must remember that we are part of a community, a nation and a world. We can't be selfish and think only of working for ourselves. We are called to serve in the Lord's vineyard. So, when we work, we are not supposed to amass a fortune for ourselves and forget those who have little or nothing. As St Ambrose said: "If you have two shirts in your closet, one belongs to you and the other to the person with no shirt."

And remember to develop a work/life balance so that you find time to spend with your family, and for leisure. Pope Francis has reminded us that: "Work is part of the normal rhythm of life for individuals and for families. It must alternate with times of rest or celebration and, especially, time for prayer. Balance is important for protecting individuals, their families, society and the environment."

In his 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis said: "We were created with a vocation to work. The goal should not be that technological progress

increasingly replaces human work, for this would be detrimental to humanity. Work is a necessity, part of the meaning of life on this earth, a path to growth, human development and personal fulfillment...As St Basil the Great said: 'Work honours the gifts and talents that God has given to each one of us.'

In 2017 Pope Francis told us: "...work is fundamental to the dignity of a person created in the image of God...work is sacred...it gives one the ability to maintain oneself, one's family, and to contribute to the growth of one's own nation...There is no worse material poverty ... than the poverty which prevents people from earning their bread and deprives them of the dignity of work." How is work in IT contributing to the common good?

During this week, also consider your own experience of work. How has it enhanced your dignity as an individual, a worker and member of society? Are there circumstances where your dignity has been undermined? If so, how have you dealt with this?

And don't forget that there are many, including homemakers – those mums, dads and guardians who care for their families at home. Although they don't get paid by an employer, what they do is work and they work 24/7 and 7 days a week! Let's acknowledge their work.

Our vocation is to be holy. We can achieve holiness in our work by being productive in our workplace, whatever our job is; by recognizing the talents God gave us and constantly striving to employ them in ways that build our family, community and nation. As the writer, David Cusimano says: "Without this perspective, work becomes simply a quest for material excess."

All these are issues to be addressed as we consider "The Dignity of Work" this week and beyond.