



# Are These Our Neighbours?

## The Dignity of Work

*Do not hate hard work or farm work  
which was created by the Most High  
Sirach 7 15*

### Background

God created men and women in his own image and likeness. This gives the human family a unique dignity that extends to all generations throughout the entire world (Genesis 1: 27-28). That humankind should labour to earn its keep was one of the first commandments of God, given to Adam and Eve on their expulsion from the garden, “by the sweat of your brow, you will earn your food”. (Genesis 3: 17, 19)

### Definitions:

**Work** – the application of mental or physical effort (use of energy) to a purpose  
**Dignity**—the state of being worthy of honour and respect

Following God’s command and participating in His ongoing creation is in itself a matter of dignity. It is recognition of God’s love and concern for everyone. We are indeed special, every one of us, even if this is not immediately and individually obvious to us.

The Church in its social teachings states, “the inherent dignity of work is that, no matter how large or small the task is, all people participate in God’s creation by supporting ourselves and our families and by contributing to the common good.” The Church also states that “work is for the person, not the person for the work.” The church also points out that while capital, the accumulation of God’s gifts, is a vital component of work, the worker as a creation of God and without whom capital could not operate, is entitled to first consideration.

### Problem

Until the Industrial Revolution of the 1800s, ordinary people were engaged mainly in providing food for themselves and for others. It was a life style tied to rhythms of nature. The peasant in the field and the artisan in the workshop were seen as necessary parts of life, and accorded a measure of dignity in human society.

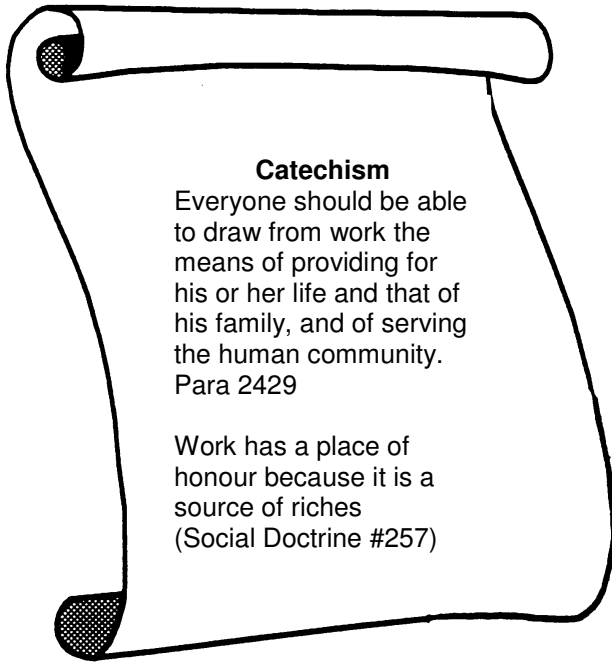


During the land enclosures preceding and accompanying the Industrial Revolution, displaced peasants flooded into urban centres sometimes moving to other lands. They provided a pool of desperate unsophisticated labourers who could be exploited and discarded at will. Under the circumstances respect for the dignity of labour essentially vanished.

Meanwhile, the definition of labour gradually expanded to include mental i.e. paper work, up to and including middle management. Advances occurring in the mechanical, scientific and cultural life were not available equally to all, regardless of income levels.

Any work that is mechanical, repetitive and “soul destroying” is deemed to be of little value both in terms of remuneration and in contributing to society’s well being.

The result is often in the mind whereby people make judgments about others’ worth and dignity based on their performance or non performance in their daily work.



*“By the sweat of your brow you will earn your food.”*

*God to Adam and Eve*

*“Working men are now left isolated and helpless, betrayed to inhumanity of employers and the unbridled greed of competitors.”*

*Pope Leo XIII 1891*

**REFERENCES** (It is no accident that work is the recurring theme of so many papal letters.)

Rerum Novarum 1891—rights of workers and of employers. Leo XIII

Mater magistra 1931—commentary on failures following World War One. Pius X

Populorum Progressio 1967—ideas expanded to the developing world. Paul VI

Centimus Annus 1991—analysis following the collapse of communism. John Paul II

United Nations Charter and associates, example ILO.

### **SPEAKER RESOURCE**

Board of Trades, Chambers of Commerce.

Canadian Labour Congress, local labour organization representatives.

Government agencies such as ministry of labour.

Private lawyers specializing in labour law.



### **Discussion**

What respect do you look for in your daily life a) in the home b) outside the home?

What respect do you offer to people in the work place? Give examples.

What benefits should we be offering to immigrants, First Nations and young people?

As an employee, what standards in honest performance would you set for yourself?

As an employer, what would you establish as a norm for just wages in a safe work place?



### **ACTIONS**

Establish a friendly way of helping co workers and others you meet in your work.

Set a standard for honesty for yourself either as an employer or an employee.

Ensure that no one makes judgments about others based on appearance, especially clothing.

Become involved in supporting new work force members, for example mentoring and instructing.