What Does the Church Teach About Work / Life Balance?

Balancing Work, Life, Faith & Family, 21 October 2007, St Patrick's Cathedral Hall, Marist Place, Parramatta, NSW.

The Catholic Social Teaching has a lot to say about work. A good, brief, summary of these teachings is included in the Australian Catholic Commission for Employment Relations document *The Catholic Church as an Employer in Australia Today* (http://www.acer.asn.au/docs/pdfs/p_thechurch.pdf) and Chapter six of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* spells out these teachings in somewhat more detail. For those who are keen to look directly at the primary sources, the two major Catholic Social Teaching documents focusing especially on work are *Rerum Novarum* (Leo XIII, 1891) and *Laborem Exercens* (John Paul II, 1981).

If we are to keep work in its proper place in our lives, it is important to reflect on the nature and purpose of work, in order to be attentive to movements in our lives that are out of balance. This is why, rather than reciting all the major teachings on the question of work, I will focus on some key ideas from the teachings concerning the nature and purpose of work.

Our society tends to think of work as effort for which we get paid, that is, to reduce work to employment. Looking after children in a child care facility is considered to be work, but what about looking after our own children at home? We don't get paid to look after our own children – it may be a task, but it is not a job. Perhaps we think of it as a vocation, something fulfilling, a thing done out of love, and therefore not work? Do we subconsciously consider work to be something negative, unpleasant, something for which we have to be rewarded, something we need to be 'bribed' into doing?

Some insights from Catholic Social Teaching might help us to approach work from another perspective.

A Mandate from God, Not a Punishment

In the second Genesis account, we see that work is a mandate from God. Adam and Eve were to cultivate and care for the garden, drawing on the gifts of creation to meet their needs. The task of stewardship of creation comes before the fall – it is not a punishment (Compendium, n 255, LE n 4).

Toil and pain enter the picture after Adam and Eve break their relationship of trust and harmony with God by seeking absolute dominion (to become like God by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) rather than cultivating and caring for creation. Work is not a punishment, but because of the effects of sin, it may involve suffering. Through the rigors of work we can participate in a sense in the redemptive activity of Jesus (Compendium, n 263, LE n 9 & 27)

Necessary & Good

Work is a necessary and good thing – it is how we sustain our lives. It provides a foundation for family life (LE n 10). Housework (whether we pay someone else to do it, or do it ourselves) as well as income generating work is necessary for family life, and for the functioning of group and community households.

Work is an honourable thing, not something to be endured if it can't be avoided (LE n 9). Jesus was a working man (LE n 26). John Paul II frequently emphasized the dignity of work and the preeminence of the subjective dimension of work over its objective dimension. The value of work is grounded in the fact that it is the free act of a human person rather than being determined primarily by what is produced or the market value of the work done (LE n 6). Work is for people, not people for work (LE n 6).

Right & Responsibility
Work is both a right and a responsibility (LE n 16). St Paul reminds us in 2 Thes 3:6 – 12 that no one should feel entitled not to work and to live at the expense of others. Whether our work is paid or unpaid is not the point here – are we contributing according to our abilities or do we simply rely on others? The obligation is indeed mutual – a society can insist that individuals fulfill such a responsibility only if it ensures opportunities for everyone to contribute (LE n 18). If we accept a certain level of unemployment (above and beyond frictional unemployment) as structural and inevitable, we are effectively saying to certain members of the community that their efforts are surplus to requirements and that any unpaid work they may do is meaningless, worthless to the community. What place is there for them to make their contribution? What are we missing out on by excluding these contributions?

A Contribution to the Community
Work is not just for ourselves and the support of our own families or households, it is also a way in which we contribute to the well being of the community. Our work should contribute to the support of those in need. It should help to build up the common good (LE n 10). Many people feel that their voluntary work, rather than their paid employment, most directly addresses this dimension of work.

Participation in Creation
Work is a way in which we participate in God's on-going work of creation. We are made in the image and likeness of God, and in our work we reflect the image of God as Creator. St Ambrose saw each worker as the hand of Christ that continues to create and do good (Compendium, n 265, LE n 4 & 25).

Self Expression
Through work can we express ourselves and grow as persons, becoming more human, becoming more the people that we were created to be (LE n 9 - 10).

The Seventh Day
On the seventh day, God rested. We need time to rest, to nurture our family and community relationships, to participate in cultural life, political life, to enjoy recreation, and to nurture our spiritual life individually and communally. It is not sufficient to have time off work to rest; it must be organized in such a way as to enable us to participate in family and community life and to make our religious observance (LE n 19). We need time away from work together at the same time.

Achieving a Balance
Catholic teaching on work reminds us that for a balanced life we need:

- Meaningful activity (paid or unpaid work)
- Adequate rest to ensure our health and well being
- Recreation (participation in social and cultural life)
- Time to develop and maintain our relationships (God, self, family/household, community, society, the cosmos)

If this is how we understand work, what might this mean for our efforts to achieve or maintain an appropriate balance between work, family and faith?

Some questions for reflection:

- What do I need in order to attend to my relationship with my self? Does my work help or hinder me in this? How could this situation be improved?

- What do I need in order to attend to my family/household responsibilities? How could my work be organized in order to better enable me to meet these responsibilities?
- Do I contribute to the life of my local community, and to the common good of Australian society? Could the way my activities are organized help me to do better? What might this look like?
- Am I in touch with creation and actively caring for it? Do my work and other activities help or hinder me in this? How could this situation be improved?
- Do I regularly take time to nurture my relationship with God? What gets in my way? Am I unconsciously giving higher priority to other people and things in practice? How can I change this?

I think this last point is the key. Each of us may be called to a different kind of mix of activities. The right balance for me will be different to that of someone with young children. If we each continually attend to where the Spirit is drawing us, and respond, we will be able to set our priorities well and achieve the right balance.