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Anthropology of the encyclical "Laborem exercens"

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ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE ENCYCLICAL «LABOREM EXERCENS»

On the memorable day of the inauguration of his pontificate John Paul II spoke in a firm voice, „Brothers and Sisters, do not be afraid to receive Christ and accept His power, do help the Pope and all those who want to serve Christ, serve man and all the mankind”¹. Thus it was an announcement of serving Christ in man.

Indeed, the Pope took up this service, already in the very first days of his pontificate — in dimensions unheard of before. Already out of his first doings at the Peter's Office it became apparent that it was the proclamation of the full truth about man which he admitted to be the primary element of this service. Obviously, it was God's Revelation which for the Pope became the chief source revealing that truth. John Paul II, as a co-originator of the work of the Vatican Council II, wanted to remain faithful to the injunctions of that Council which teaches in the Constitution *Gaudium et spes*: „In actual fact, only in the mystery of the Word Incarnate the mystery of man is truly explained... Christ, new Adam, by revealing the mystery of the Father and His love shows fully a man to the man himself and reveals his highest vocation”².

With his mind set upon the revealed thought, the Pope did not give up, however, the philosophical truth about man. He can skillfully and undiscernibly weave this truth into the theological vision of man.

Serving the man through showing him the truth about himself was assumed by John Paul II first of all within the framework of teaching during public audiences, apostolic journeys, in different papal pronouncements, and particularly in all three encyclicals. Already in his first, programme encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, the Holy Father set off the high dignity of man as of a being created to the image and likeness of God. He inserted here a sentence which has become the "callingcard" of the whole encyclical and perhaps of his whole pontificate: „man is the first and basic way of the Church" (RH, No 14). On that way of man has John Paul II returned in the encyclical *Dives in misericordia*, showing a sinful man in relation to the Merciful God. Along that way of man the Holy Father progresses in his new encyclical *Laborem exercens*. Already

¹ Quotation after „Tygodnik Powszechny”, No 44 of 29 Oct. 1978.

² *Konstytucja duszpasterska o Kościele w świecie współczesnym*, nr 222, in: Sobór Watykański Drugi, *Konstytucje, dekryty, deklaracje*, Paris 1967, p. 557.

in the "introduction" to that encyclical he writes the following words: "thus I want to dedicate the present document just to the human work, and still more I desire to dedicate it to man against the broad context of the reality which the work constitutes" (LE, No 1). Therefore man has become a central problem also in the third encyclical. This time he has been seen and presented in relation to work.

1. Work as the manifestation of the transcendence of self in relation to nature

What has most absorbed the attention of Card. Karol Wojtyła and later the Pope John Paul II in his looking at man can be expressed in the words: "man acts", "I act", "I perform"³. Basing himself on the fundamental selfexperience of man, the Cardinal distinguished that acting from „happening" — from what can be expressed in the words: "something is happening in man"⁴. The latter resolves itself to somatic processes where man is the subject and observer but not the doer⁵ while the human acting consists of the acts of man in which he is not only the subject and observer, but also the doer⁶. The first field of human activism, expressed in the words: "I experience", "something is happening in me" — is situated on the plane of nature, another field — expressed in the words: "I act", "I am doing" is achieved on the level of the person. And it is this "I act" which reveals the person most and is characteristic only of man⁷. This "I act" is a "peeping window" through which we have the insight into person⁸.

It is work which is such an "acting" peculiar only to man. In this connection John Paul II writes in the encyclical: „and the work denotes any activity performed by man irrespective of its character and circumstances, i.e. any activity of man which can be recognized as work and should be acknowledged from among the whole variety of activities of which he is capable and disposed to through his nature, through manhood itself" (LE, introd.) In the present text the thought is included implicitly that not each type of man's activism can be encompassed under the heading of work. Only "acting", i.e. conscious and free activities, acts, the subject, observer and doer of which is man — deserve this name whereas the above mentioned sphere of "happening" cannot be called work.

³ Cf. e.g. Karol Wojtyła, *Osoba i czyn*, Kraków 1969, p. 12.

⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 36, 62.

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 68—69, 83.

⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 68, 74.

⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 81—82, 91.

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, e.g. p. 31—32. Cf. also in this connection: T. Styczeń, *Karol kardynał Wojtyła: filozof spraw ludzkich*, Summarium 7(27) — 1978, p. 17—23.

Because "I act", "I work" is situated on the level of person, then it should be said that this "I act", "I work" is the "discriminant" of man from among the whole world of nature, for only man among the visible creatures is person. The Holy Father clearly indicates to that when he writes: „(...) in this way man has been called since the beginning to work. Work distinguishes him from the rest of creatures whose activity connected with keeping alive cannot be called work — only man is capable of it, and only man performs it, at the same time filling out through work his existence on earth. This way work bears a specific stamp of man and manhood, a stigma of a person acting in the community of persons — that stigma makes its inner qualification, it constitutes in a way its very nature" (LE, introd.)

Work is therefore an element of the human world alone. Through work man transcends all the world of nature, for only he has received from the Creator a gift of freedom and, consequent upon that, the possibility of creative acting, and particularly of cognizance and loving.

2. The person as the source of the worth and dignity of work

In the sixth point of the encyclical under consideration, entitled "Work in the subjective meaning. Man — the subject of work" we read the following words: "Man is to make the earth submitted to his control, is to rule over it just because as an «image of God» he is a person, that is to say a subjective being capacitated to be decisive of himself."

In this sentence the Holy Father summarizes his conception of the person, which has been earlier displayed, especially in the work *Osoba i czyn* (Kraków 1969). The author calls the person a subjective being, i.e. what in Aristotelian and Thomistic tradition was called "suppositum". That subject is a "place" (field) where human "acting" and "happening", thus human dynamism, is realized⁹. The basic attribute of that subject — person is — according to the text quoted above — the ability to determine on himself. Selfdetermination is the indication of the person's freedom. It assumes a structurally different property of the person, namely: selfpossession and selfcontrol. The person possesses himself and at the same time he has control over himself, is a ruler unto himself; the person is non-transferable to another person. Another person cannot control him in the inner dimension. Possessing oneself and governing oneself is

⁹ Cf. K. Wojtyła, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

the condition of selfdetermination, or of the free choice made by oneself¹⁰.

The Pope mentions it in his further reasoning when he writes: "(...) in that whole process man shows himself as that who «governs» and he confirms himself as that who «governs»" (LE, No 6). To avoid misunderstanding regarding this "governing", the author adds that "The governing concerns the subjective dimension somehow more than the objective one" (*Ibid.*).

And so man governs himself, possesses himself and selfdetermines, i.e. decides himself, determines himself to a given and not the other activity. That situation, that property of the person causes man's activity, thus also, and perhaps primarily, human work to gain an ethical qualification. John Paul II speaks clearly about that a little further in the following words: "Undoubtedly the human work has its ethical value which is directly connected with the fact that he who performs it is a person, is a conscious and free, i.e. self-determining, subject" (LE, No 6).

From the text it clearly follows that — according to the Pope — the person is the deepest source of the ethical value and dignity of work. Work as a human activity arises from the subject which is a person; thus it is an act, the performance of man as a person and from this all its value and dignity arises. Presenting such a formulation the Holy Father opposes more or less explicitly all those trends in the social ethics which have been noticing all the ethical value of work solely in the objective element and not in the subjective one. The valuation and qualifying the work only in consideration of its kind (its objective dimension) has led in the history — which has also been mentioned by the Pope — to class differentiation of people. "The basis for determining the value of human work — announces John Paul II — is not in the first place the kind of activity performed, but the fact that he who performs it is a person. The sources of the dignity of work are to be looked for not above all in its objective dimension, but in the subjective dimension" (LE, No 6).

The Holy Father is therefore conscious that the work obtains its moral qualification also from its object, but he sees the primary and fundamental source of its ethical qualification (of the value and dignity) in the subjective element. That is why he formulates a significant conclusion of ethical nature, announcing that "work is for man, and not the other way round (...) For finally the purpose of work, any work performed by man — however ancillary, monotonous, within the range of common valuation simply discriminating — always remains man himself" (LE, No 6).

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 109—125. Cf. also in this connection: J. Gałkowski, *Samostanowienie osoby w ujęciu kardynała Karola Wojtyły*, *Zeszyty Naukowe KUL* 22(1979) No 1—3, p. 73—79.

In this formulation — as it seems — the Holy Father includes the truth of the transcendence of the person towards the act, and so also in relation to work. The personal "myself" appears to us in experiencing ourselves as the reality superior to all the acts that it performs. That "myself" is experienced not only as a subject of human activities, but also as their cause and creator. The entire causativeness appears as dependent on its subjective "self". The moment of causativeness, experiencing the causativeness brings out just the transcendence of man in relation to his acting¹¹. And so the human work as activity is "subordinate" in relation to its source, doer and creator which is the person. Therefore the eventual purpose of activity — work cannot be the work itself. The work itself certainly happens to be the aim of human activity. That aim alone, however, cannot be of a final meaning for itself. It is always man himself who is the ultimate goal of work.

Reminding of those first principles indicating the person as the source of the values and dignity of human work has become sort of a basis for the Holy Father to reject those social trends which used to treat work as some kind of merchandise sold by the worker to the employer. Those trends of materialistic and economic thinking sometimes reduce man to a production tool, treating him as ranking with the whole complex of material production goods. Such an attitude — according to the Pope — brings discredit on the dignity of man who should be treated in any situation not only as a right doer and creator, but also as a right goal for the whole process of production (LE, No 7).

On the groundwork of these ethical ascertainments the Pope has also rejected the standpoints which propagated a proposition of the priority of the capital over work and of the thing over the person (LE, P. III). In the Holy Father's opinion, promoting these views contributed to the intensification of social injustice and as a consequence to this to the objectification and humiliation of man. In order to sanify the social and economic system one should emphasize, heighten and apply the principle of the primacy of work to capital and of the person to the thing.

3. Work as a factor of person's selfcreation

Undeniably, an achievement of the modern philosophical thought in the field of anthropology is emphasizing in the interpretation of the human fact its dynamic elements connected with the fact of human freedom and potentiality. The present-day philosophical interpretations of man compared with the past, traditional

¹¹ Cf. K. Wojtyła, *op. cit.*, p. 107—196, and also his: *Osoba: podmiot i wspólnota*, *Roczniki Filozoficzne* 24(1976) No 2, p. 17—20.

conceptions of human being, show themselves as more dynamic and more emphasizing subjective moments.

While reading the anthropological works by Card. Karol Wojtyła we are almost unceasingly experiencing that their author, not giving up the former expressions, emphasizes and analyses the dynamic moments of human being. In this way his anthropological thought stands firm in the present time.

We have already mentioned that what the Cardinal became most of all fascinated in man by was that experienced: "man acts" (acting, doing) and "something is happening in man", thus, in brief, man's dynamism. One of these dynamisms: "acting" — man experiences as its doer. He feels to be not only the subject of this dynamism, but also its cause, he experiences his causativeness. So he is the cause, or he starts the existence of this action, movement, and also he causes that the outcome of it arises. The acting man "brings" something into existence, gives in himself some *esse* which has not been before. Therefore man stands above his activity, he rules over it. He is not only the cause, but also a creator in the full sense of the word, for he creates in himself new existences, shaping them. While acting, man becomes certain, he actually transforms his being¹². And so man through his acting not only creates or modifies in its existence and acting the transcendent reality, external in relation to himself — as we know experiencing that — but as the subject and originator of his conscious and free acting, he is shaping himself, in some measure creates himself. The Most Rev. Cardinal states it clearly when he writes in his work *Osoba i czyn*: "Human causativeness seems to be some creation. It is that creation for which the first material is man himself. Man through acting is shaping in the first place himself"¹³.

A distinct echo of these statements is found in the encyclical when we read: "(...) man not only transforms the nature through work, adapting it to his needs, but also fulfils himself as man, and also so to say becomes more human" (LE, No 9).

The Holy Father teaches us then that man himself can be shaped by his free action. If work performing coincides with the process of self-realization, then the work shows itself as a benefit which shapes man. That is not only a useful (or usable) benefit, but also a fair good, or that corresponding to man's dignity, expressing that dignity and increasing it (LE, No 9). That is why labour as good is man's duty as much as man's duty is his existential growth. All this makes it possible to talk about the virtue of laboriousness. Thanks to this virtue, as actually to any virtue, man becomes good as man. This fact, however, does not stand in the way — as the Pope goes

¹² Cf. K. Wojtyła, *op. cit.*, p. 69, 101 and ff.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

on — of labour being made the means of oppression and exploitation of man, of the work being turned against man. That takes place when man is reduced to the order of things, matter (LE, No 9).

Reflecting upon the value of work in the self-realization of the person, the Holy Father also indicates the social value of work. He ascertains explicitly that work also constitutes the basis for shaping the family and national life (LE, No 10).

Work is in a way a condition of establishing a family, for it simply gives it means of subsistence. Work also conditions to a certain degree the process of bringing up the man in the family. For if becoming a man constitutes an essential goal of the educational process, then it is just through the work — as it has been said above — that this goal is accomplished to a high degree. For man becomes through work — more human, i.e. is brought up, acquires moral proficiency, becomes certain, or becomes good or bad, of course in terms of morality norms.

And last of all work is also a weighty factor of shaping the life of a nation. Through work man increases the common welfare of his nation and contributes indirectly to the increase of the welfare of the whole mankind. Therefore work is not only creating and shaping an individual personal existence, but also man's social existence.

Final remarks

The foregoing thoughts entitle us to formulate some conclusions. John Paul II's encyclical *Laborem exercens* is undoubtedly both a theological and a social document. In the light of Christian Revelation and of the tradition of the Catholic social teaching of the Church it takes up the social problems of the present-day man focused around human work. In the course of the considerations we find in it an enormous number of references to the texts of the Scriptures, and also to the social documents of the last popes as well as to the documents of the Vatican Council II. Still there are — as we tried to show — also philosophical conceptions woven into this theological and social work. Through the theological texts of the encyclical in many places it is the Holy Father clearly visible as a "philosopher of human affairs."¹⁴

The philosophical elements of the encyclical which we have tried to roughly "fish" out of its text confirm the fact that the Pope still appreciates very much a philosophical reflection based on sound principles, first of all on the faithfulness to man's experience. The texts quoted above and partially analysed confirm also the fact that the Holy Father is that Thinker who both in the field of theology

¹⁴ In this way was Card. Karol Wojtyła described by his close disciple and coworker professor Rev. Tadeusz Styczeń, Ph. D. Cf. his art.: *Karol kardynał Wojtyła: filozof spraw ludzkich*, Tygodnik Powszechny, No 38 of 23 Sept. 1979.

and philosophy combines the old, the traditional with the new, the present. In the philosophical field which is of interest to us, the Holy Father, and former Card. Karol Wojtyła appears as the one who joined the Aristotelian and Thomistic philosophy of being with the philosophy of consciousness. In the field of philosophical anthropology it is expressed in uniting the objective and subjective approach to the problem of man, thus the metaphysical and phenomenological approach.

Finally, it is perhaps proper to bring out a particular that the Holy Father quotes several times in his encyclical *Laborem exercens*, apart from the references to biblical, conciliar texts, and those of the social encyclicals of the popes, St Thomas Aquinas as the only theologian and philosopher. This fact seems to confirm a widely admitted thesis that the Pope, as he is permeated by the present-day philosophical and theological thought, still greatly appreciates Thomas Aquinas' thought. He still considers him to be master of philosophical thinking who has much to say also to the man of today.