



Self-sacrificing love in the workplace

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Have you thought about the weekly ‘clap for our carers’ in the UK as a tacit celebration of Catholic Social Teaching? Patrick Riordan SJ thinks that the coronavirus pandemic is bringing to the fore the Church’s long-held assertion of the priority of labour over capital. ‘The S in NHS stands for service’, and we should not let our focus be shifted away from the selfless commitment of keyworkers at all levels who provide that service.

Certain terms have become commonplace in the commentary on the coronavirus pandemic and how it might be dealt with. Administrative structures, systems of delivery, supply chains, crisis management and organisational accountability belong among our concerns as we monitor the NHS’s ability to cope with the scale of the problem in the UK. The emergency provision of large-scale units with thousands of beds in London’s Docklands, Birmingham’s National Exhibition Centre, Manchester, Cardiff and other major cities, with all that is involved in equipping them, astonishes and impresses the viewer. What logistical acumen is displayed in the organisation of these ‘pop-up hospitals’!

This language of logistics and systems and structures is admittedly very abstract, but the pandemic is making us aware of quite how abstract these terms are. We are constantly reminded that the slogan ‘Protect the NHS’ refers to the staff who work in the NHS and deliver its service at all levels. The staff are individual persons, with names, families and stories, and many of them have featured in news bulletins because they have caught the virus, or have died from the infection, or are risking their lives daily because of the lack of sufficient protective equipment. We see the pressure under which they have to work; we



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see the dedication that motivates them, even in the face of considerable personal risk; we see their exhaustion and frustration. Our healthcare system is not an abstract structure, an object of organisational management; it is a society of persons – interesting how those involved spontaneously speak of it as family – who relate to one another in various roles and

cooperate, guided by a common understanding of what they expect from one another and what they hope to provide to those who need them.

The NHS is a system, a system of systems in fact, but it is primarily a society of persons. And when in the past it has featured in political controversy around issues of funding, privatisation and marketisation, and when political party manifestoes have spoken of it, the focus has been on the abstractions of organisation – costs and benefits, targets and waiting times. The heightened attention occasioned by this pandemic has changed our perspective, helping us to see that people, persons, are at its heart, and that the personal resources of dedication, courage, competence and character are what deliver its service. The S in NHS stands, not for ‘system’, but for ‘service’, and the service is provided by competent, caring people who give of themselves to meet the needs of others and of the wider community.

This shift in attention and perspective illustrates very well a central theme in Catholic Social Teaching that usually gains a nod of assent, but rarely focused attention: the priority of labour over capital.

This has been central to the social question since Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical, *Rerum novarum*. Throughout the century following its publication the Church navigated a path between the doctrinaire positions of communism and unconstrained capitalism. Opposed to the former, the Church has insisted on the identity and dignity of the individual worker, and countered the stress on class interest and its political realisation through conflict. Opposed too to the unbridled forms of capitalism, the Church has objected to such employment contracts that left workers with less than a living wage, inadequate for sustaining family life. Values such as freedom could not be invoked to justify exploitative relationships. And when, almost a century after Leo's letter, the system of real existent socialism collapsed, Pope John Paul II had to warn against any naïve triumphalism on the part of promoters of capitalism. He refused to allow the Church to be interpreted as taking sides in an ideological controversy. The Church would not give an unconditional signal of approval to liberal capitalism.

In his 1991 encyclical, *Centesimus annus*, in which he commemorated *Rerum novarum*'s centenary, Pope John Paul II expressly raised the question of whether capitalism is the model to be endorsed and proposed to developing economies.

The answer is obviously complex. If by 'capitalism' is meant an economic system which recognizes the fundamental and positive role of business, the market, private property and the resulting responsibility for the means of production, as well as free human creativity in the economic sector, then the answer is certainly in the affirmative ... But if by 'capitalism' is meant a system in which freedom in the economic sector is not circumscribed within a strong juridic-

al framework which places it at the service of human freedom in its totality, and which sees it as a particular aspect of that freedom, the core of which is ethical and religious, then the reply is certainly negative.¹

We might find the pope's answer very abstract, but it repays examination. The economic system requires a 'strong juridical framework' to ensure that it achieves its purpose. The purpose is not the facilitation of market freedoms, but of 'human freedom in its totality', a totality that includes ethical and religious aspects of freedom. Elsewhere in the literature of Catholic Social Teaching this is formulated as integral human fulfilment.

Ten years earlier, also marking an anniversary of *Rerum novarum*, Pope John Paul II had issued his encyclical on human work, *Laborem exercens*. The undeniable context then had been the protests by Polish workers in Gdansk and elsewhere and the publicity achieved by their organisation, *Solidarność*, demanding respect for the rights of workers. What an irony that the pope seemed to admonish a communist state and its backers in the then Soviet Union, to uphold this commitment to the cause of workers. After all, was not the summons at the close of the *Communist Manifesto*: 'Workers of all countries: Unite!' While the text of the encyclical often appears to be outdoing Marx in advocating the perspective of working people, the pope does not write about the proletariat, or the working class, but of the persons involved in work. Yet, at many times seeming to echo Marx's rhetoric, he acknowledges the need for worker solidarity arising from the real experience of alienation and exploitation.

The call to solidarity ... was the reaction against the degradation of man as the subject of work, and against the unheard-of accompanying exploitation in the field of wages, working conditions and social security for the worker. This reaction united the working world in a community marked by great solidarity.²

The emphasis is on the person who works, one capable of acting rationally and freely, and oriented to self-realisation (*Laborem exercens* [LE] §6). With this awareness of the personal and subjective reality of the worker the pope resists all forms of analysis that treat workers merely as an instrument of production, or labour as a productive force, as might be reflected in the term 'workforce' (LE §7). Such abstractions deny the essential reality of the person at work who freely brings intelligence, competence and responsibility to their participation in the production process. He writes: 'the basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done but the fact that the one who is doing it is a person. The sources of the dignity of work are to be sought primarily in the subjective dimension, not in the objective one.' (LE §6)

Later in the same letter, John Paul II formulates the principle of 'the priority of labour over capital' that he claims to be a constant theme in Catholic Social Teaching: 'This principle directly concerns the process of production: in this process labour is always a primary *efficient cause*, while capital, the whole collection of means of production, remains a mere *instrument* or instrumental cause.' (LE §12)

The pope elaborates this principle and uses it to ground an extensive discussion of the rights of workers. The core insight is the personhood of the worker who seeks much more than remuneration as *quid pro quo* for the work: working conditions and the quality of relationships at work should reflect acknowledgement of the entitlement to pursue one's own fulfilment in work. Such recognition would ground an awareness of one's own dignity.

This awareness is extinguished within him in a system of excessive bureaucratic centralization, which makes the worker feel that he is just a cog in a huge machine moved from above, that he is for more reasons than one a mere production

instrument rather than a true subject of work with an initiative of his own. The Church's teaching has always expressed the strong and deep conviction that human work concerns not only the economy but also, and especially, personal values. The economic system itself and the production process benefit precisely when these personal values are fully respected. (LE §15)

Is this a lesson we are re-learning as our societies face the challenge of the coronavirus? Our healthcare staff should not experience themselves as mere cogs in a huge, centralised, bureaucratic machine; instead they should have a sense that they are recognised, and that their own wellbeing and fulfilment is essential to their activities.

Pope John Paul II followed the Second Vatican Council's pastoral constitution, *Gaudium et spes* (1965), in underlining the centrality of the personhood of the worker in the discussion of economic matters. In both instances, the concern was with the full spectrum of work. However, his successor Pope Benedict XVI focused on the work of care in his first encyclical letter, *Deus caritas est*.³ Many were delighted to see that Cardinal Ratzinger's first letter as pope was on the topic of love: that God is love, and that the mission and challenge to Christians is to love. The two are not separable, since it is the love given by the creator that animates all human love, and the love shown by the redeemer that models self-sacrificial love and confirms its ultimate validation.

Benedict focuses on the Christian ministries of care, including healthcare, and reflects on the distinctive witness that is given by those who put themselves at the service of others. He underlines the difference made to the quality of service given when it is animated by love. He encourages Christians in their various ministries to draw strength and inspiration from their faith. And he admits the responsibility of the Church to support its own workers with resources to sustain these dimensions of their work.

Individuals who care for those in need must first be professionally competent: they should be properly trained in what to do and how to do it, and committed to continuing care. Yet, while professional competence is a primary, fundamental requirement, it is not of itself sufficient. We are dealing with human beings, and human beings always need something more than technically proper care. They need humanity. They need heartfelt concern. (*Deus caritas est* [DCE] §31)

The traditional word for service, *diakonia*, is the title given to those seven deacons selected in the early Church to provide very concrete, material care to the community. And yet, Benedict stresses as he takes them as exemplars of service, their work was a spiritual office of organised love of neighbour (DCE §21).

Any organisation dedicated to providing care that neglected these personal dimensions of service would be in danger of becoming a bureaucracy and would ultimately frustrate its own purpose. From the point of view of both society and the state, these personal dimensions of loving care and dedication must appear as gifts that cannot be bought or manipulated, and be gratefully recognised and accepted as such. Our national communities should take care to support and encourage all those sources of inspiration and motivation on which people draw in sustaining their commitment, such as faith communities and churches (DCE §28).

The medical professionals who have died in the service of others, the many who voluntarily return to work out of retirement, the thousands who put their health and lives at risk while working in dangerous circumstances – all of them witness to the self-sacrificing love that characterises the caring professions. We should not be surprised to find the action of God's grace and the replication of Christ's self-giving beyond the boundaries of faith communities.

There is no upside to the coronavirus, but our current situation brings home to us in a forceful manner the truth of some principles in Catholic Social Teaching that may have been taken for granted. The principle of the priority of labour over capital can be reformulated now as the priority of the caregiver, or nurse, or physician over the system. That principle is rooted in the fact that the worker is a person who freely gives of herself and whose own development is at stake in their work. And the reality that care is always a human action beyond the objective description of the task, involving dimensions of motivation and commitment as well as competence, appears now in the heroism of NHS staff. This recovered principle of the priority of persons over systems should remain as fundamental to all our work when this present crisis is past.

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¹ Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus annus* (1991), §42: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html, accessed 02.04.2020.

² Pope John Paul II, *Laborem exercens* (1981), §8: http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html, accessed 02.04.2020.

³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est* (2005): http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html, accessed 02.04.2020.