

Dignified work as an aspect of integral ecology

COVID-19 shows us more than ever its value and importance

A rather typical Monday morning, somewhere in April. It's around 9am. I'm making myself comfortable in the place in our house that we use as an office, while I hear the noise of our playing children in the background. Since the lockdown, it has become a habit: I work before noon, my husband in the afternoon, and in the evening we see what still requires our professional attention. In this way, we manage to combine work and 'home schooling' while also entertaining the kids. Surprisingly enough, we actually found a rhythm after a few weeks. We miss our friends, formal meetings and informal meetings among colleagues, the contact with our students... At the same time, however, we realize how privileged we are to be able to continue our lives in this way, including understanding for one another, peace and serenity instead of panic or violence, but with care and concern for each family member, space in our garden if the house feels too crowded and a fridge which is never empty. With a physical and mental space in order to continue our work which is not only an obligation or a must, but something we love to do because we consider it meaningful. At least we have a house which we can call a home, and a job where we can go to, now and also after this crisis is over.

All these things may look self-evident – and maybe they were for too long, but if the corona crisis shows us anything it is that they are all but evident. I'm worried about our international students, far away from their home country and almost imprisoned in a country which is not their own: do they have enough support? Aren't they too lonely or scared? What about their worries? I also wonder how the kids are doing who have less fortunate parents and have to struggle to make ends meet. Or about those who for whatever reason live in precarious situations and for who school is a way to get out of the mess, to leave their concerns behind for a few hours... I feel for people with abusive partners, victims of family violence, most of the time too hidden behind doors which are now even more closed. What about the migrants and homeless people on our streets who don't even have a home to be locked down in? I'm worried about so many people whose jobs are threatened because of this crisis, who wonder whether temporary unemployment will be permanent unemployment.

I'm becoming more conscious of certain economic dynamics, because COVID 19 uncovers some interesting aspects of our economy, in particular with regard to the value and dignity of work, or rather: the value we give work.

Applause, candles and white sheets for our care-givers, people in the food industry and medical sector: almost right from the start of this crisis we spontaneously showed respect and gratitude for 'our heroes'. The Dutch philosopher Liza Herzog describes this as a 'silent revolution' which reflects an important shift in our thinking and appreciation of work and labour. Our economy, and especially its capitalist variant, measures the value of work on the profit it creates and rewards labour based on offer and demand. Market value is key. During this crisis, however, we see how our societies appreciate and value the contributions people make – even literally one could say: we honour the value of it. In times of crises like this, it becomes immediately obvious which jobs we need the most: the jobs which help us to survive and to meet our basic needs, such as food and health care. In this regard, it is interesting to note that not only care-givers and people in supermarkets, but also local farmers increasingly get attention. The importance of these jobs, and thus those people, becomes more visible and we look for ways to show our newly discovered appreciation, even in lockdown. Hence the sheets, the candles, the applause.

If we take this a step further, Herzog argues, our appreciation for people who contribute to other human needs such as our social and cultural life, would be more appreciate as well. Think for instance of bar tenders, restaurant holders, but also theatres. It is exactly these sectors which are facing bankruptcy in the wake of this crisis. Will only the contributions of people focused on market value and profit survive, Herzog wonders? Or will we be able to proceed with the shift of the 'silent revolution'? This crisis offers, in any case, a good opportunity to reflect on and act upon this, at a fundamental level, collectively.

The pandemic showed us how crucial and valuable work is for creating and sustaining a 'healthy society', often even literally. As such, it reflects Pope Francis' ideas on integral ecology in general, and the role labour plays in this in particular. At first glance, integral ecology refers to the fact that both the social (i.e. inequality and poverty) and environmental crisis should not be distinguished, but should be considered as two sides of the same coin. At a more fundamental level, integral ecology reflects a particular theological viewpoint, namely a relational one which considers the interconnectedness between everyone and everything. Within Christianity, the idea of human interconnectedness is very common, grounded in the belief in God as Creator and Father of all. *Laudato si'* expands this vision explicitly, for not only human beings but every creature and all of creation reveals something of the goodness and greatness of God and has value in itself (LS §69). As the Dutch theologian Erik Borgman summarizes: in *Laudato si'* "not only human beings are relational, but they are part of a relational universe." (*Leven van wat komt*, 2017, p. 93) Contemplation requires to look at the world from this perspective, a 'contemplative gaze' (LS §85) which takes this relational perspective as its starting point for reflection and activity. And work is such an activity. "If we talk about the relationship between human beings and things, the question arises as to the meaning and purpose of all human activity" the pope argues (LS §125). This counts for all labour or any activity, since "underlying every form of work is a concept of the relationship which we can and must have with what is other than ourselves." As many Christian spiritualities show, we not only contemplate on creation, but also actively participate in and contribute to it, he further argues. Indeed, in line with the monastic tradition it is about combining *ora et labora*, prayer and work and it was "revolutionary to consider manual work as spiritually meaningful" (cf. §126). Hence "protecting employment" is indeed an indispensable part of integral ecology as Pope Francis claims in *Laudato si'* (cf. §124-129). Indebted to the encyclical *Laborem Exercens* by his predecessor John Paul II, he argues how part of the reflection on our relationship as human beings with the world must include work since developing the created world in a prudent way is the best way of caring for it, as this means that we ourselves become the instrument used by God to bring out the potential which he himself inscribed in things: "The Lord created medicines out of the earth, and a sensible man will not despise them" (*Sir* 38:4)." (LS, §124) In this request to value work on the basis of persons' contributions, and to rethink how it can reflect and shape both our relationship with the ecosystem and our global interrelatedness as human beings, pope Francis encourages us to give a more structural analysis and response of what the aforementioned 'silent revolution' rather spontaneously and intuitively discloses.

In 2021 it has been 130 years since Leo XIII published the first social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. The topic at hand was also labour, labour conditions between employers and employees, and labour and capital. It will be interesting to reread the timely letter in the wake of this crisis. I worry that its focus on dignified work and appreciating and valuing labour will appear very relevant. I'm not very good in making intentions at the beginning of a new year. But during this crisis, I realized how I want to appreciate the cleaning lady or man who takes care of all the small and collected things in our house, giving the space they need to clean everything carefully. Or to keep investing in the local farmer, as well as the local bakery although the supermarket is often not only cheaper but also easier. Not to

forget the bigger questions where we hardly have an impact on. Which lessons have we learned as a society, a global society from this pandemic? Did the balance between labour and capital, between service and profit, become more just? Will 'our heroes' also get appreciation in or more sustainable, long term way, in terms of better working conditions (more colleagues, less pressure) or salary? Shall teleworking become the norm, with a positive impact on the climate? (But what is the social impact on human relations of this?) What about the solidarity with people, organizations and sectors who suffer from this crisis? Will we continue to see the importance of local consumption, while not losing sight of what the pandemic means for the rest of the world? Or will it be 'business as usual' – also in its literal sense?