



Statement by His Excellency Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher,  
Secretary for Relations with States  
at the Special Event on the occasion of the Centenary of the  
International Labour Organization  
“Rethinking Labour and the Future of Work – An Interreligious Perspective”

**HOLY SEE AND ILO: COMMON PATHWAYS ON LABOUR**  
Geneva, 25 February 2019

Mr. Chairman,  
Director General, Mr. Guy Ryder,  
Excellencies,  
Distinguished Delegates,

I am grateful for this very timely invitation to participate in this Special Event, in commemoration of the Centenary of the International Labour Organisation, on “Rethinking Labour and the Future of Work - an Interreligious Perspective”. Let me start by thanking the ILO for hosting us, and the organizers of this event, including the World Council of Churches, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the Permanent Mission of the Holy See for giving us the possibility to reflect on the challenges linked to the future of work.

One month ago, as recalled by the Director-General, the ILO’s Global Commission Report on the Future of Work encouraged governments and all stakeholders to commit to a set of measures in order to deal with the unprecedented challenges coming from the world of work. Particularly at this historic time, which is increasingly characterized by globalization and multilateral economic pressures with profound implications in the area of human work, the social functions of work need to be strongly reaffirmed and encouraged at all levels.

Today’s profound transformations cannot be denied: some of them have a social impact on policies influenced by market forces rather than by laws of the economy, others include the urgent request for protection of rights and a changing definition of social roles and life expectations. All these aspects equally influence labour relationships, which are increasingly assuming a temporary nature, leading, in turn, to even greater social instability. While this phenomenon might be at least “manageable” in developed countries, it takes on dramatic tones where underdevelopment and the absence of preconditions for human dignity and decency of work are contributing factors to poverty.

The unregulated development of financial activity, in fact, is not typically connected with the real base of the economy, leading to what are known as “financial bubbles”: thus, becoming a true vehicle for crisis of employment, institutions and values.

This inversion of the order between means and goals has hit on the world’s population, marginalizing great masses, depriving them of decent labour, and leaving them “without possibilities, without any means of escape [...] It is no longer simply the phenomenon of exploitation and oppression, but something new. Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; [...] The excluded are not the ‘exploited’ but the outcast, the ‘leftovers.’<sup>1</sup>

The economic crisis, along with its correlated environmental and social issues have, over time, prompted the Catholic Church to reaffirm the urgency of restoring a natural social function to the economy and, even more, to the world of public and private finance. Finance, therefore, is no longer understood as an instrument exclusively designed to guarantee the maximization of monetary profits but aimed mainly at a social profit. It is the entire human family who demands that resources be used fairly, in order to create the right conditions for a fairer and more sustainable global economy, one that allows more and more people to come out of poverty and partake the common goods.

When society is affected by economic crises, often accompanied by negative environmental and social consequences, the Church, led by the universal message of the Gospel, continually offers “what it possesses as its own: a global vision of man and society”<sup>2</sup> The Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church emphasizes both the social dimension of work and the social function of the whole economy. It clearly shows the limits of any approach that does not give due consideration to the person. Labour is “the essential key to the whole social question and is the condition not only for economic development but also for the cultural and moral development of persons, the family, society and the entire human race.[...] Work is a person’s ability to transform into reality his/her talents and to realize everyone’s vocation. Under this subjective component, work acquires dignity, because it draws on the ultimate meaning of the human condition.”<sup>3</sup>

While this perspective has been at the heart of Catholic teaching over the centuries, it underwent a faster development in the last decades of the 19th century. When the Industrial Revolution marked a major turning point in the economic and human conditions of the time, social justice issues became a matter of major interest for the Catholic Church. Masses of poorly educated workers left the farms to find steady work in city factories. This new form of work often happened in dangerous, unregulated environments, where wealthy owners exploited workers. They lived with their families in inhumane conditions and men, women and children laboured for fourteen or more hours per day, earning pitiful wages.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 53: AAS 105 (2013), 1042.

<sup>2</sup> Pope Paul VI, Address to the United Nations General Assembly, 4 October 1965.

<sup>3</sup> Compendium of Social Doctrine of the Church, para. 269 – 270.

Within this context, the Catholic Church played a role in raising awareness on the social transformation of economics, and thus, of human lives. Few social laws were in place and so, facing the huge and prompt changes coming from the Industrial Revolution, Catholics gradually started to focus on the need of new institutional actions in order to ensure justice in the political and economic structures of liberalism. To this aim, the Catholic Church began to deal with the new circumstances through a combination of direct assistance – labour union associations, hospitals and schools – and the formulation of ethical principles for the improvement of norms to protect workers and their families. This social activity of the Church, at different levels, led to the development of an original body of teaching with the aim of understanding and facing the emerging social problems. All the teachings on labour expounded by the Catholic Church in those years came from the principle that the human person should always be at the centre of every political, economic, social and even individual decision, and that the Catholic message is always in connection with the spiritual and current situation of humanity. An excellent example of that is found in the Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum*, issued on May 15, 1891 by Pope Leo XIII. This document focused on the condition of the working classes, one of the first papal letters on social justice. Pope Leo pleaded for social reform, for trade unions to ensure that workers receive a proper wage, and for governments to awaken to the threats and promises of the Industrial Revolution.

Within a similar social and economic context, during the First World War, non-Marxist socialist unions took up the idea of creating international labour legislations. Considering the exploitation of workers in the arms industry, the pioneering idea behind an international labour organization was that a universal and lasting peace could be established only if based on social justice. A number of international organizations such as the League of Nations and the Hague Peace Palace were founded to work for peace, to prevent conflicts, and to advance economic justice. With the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, the International Labour Organization was created with the International Labour Office as the permanent secretariat of the Organization.

Given these areas of mutual interest, the roads of the Holy See and ILO began to cross: the Holy See followed with attention the work of the ILO, even if, at the beginning, it was excluded from participation in the new organization. Albert Thomas, a prominent French Socialist appointed in 1919 as first Director General of the International Labour Office, recognized the Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* as the source of “a great movement” that led Christians to focus their efforts and commitments on institutional reforms. In 1924, Thomas decided to meet Pope Pius XI in order to propose a more formal collaboration between the ILO and the Holy See. This mutual and close relationship was recognized by the official visits to the ILO made by Pope Paul VI in 1969 and Pope John Paul II in 1982. It has always been rooted in the priority that the Holy See and the ILO have in common: upholding human dignity, solidarity and social justice.

As previously highlighted, at the heart of the Catholic Social Doctrine there is a principle that concerns all: “No man may with impunity outrage that human dignity which

God himself treats with great reverence, nor stand in the way of that higher life which is the preparation of the eternal life of heaven.”<sup>4</sup> All components of the world of work, without exclusion, are aspiring for the acknowledgment of their dignity: “The great mistake made in regard to the matter now under consideration is to take up with the notion that class is naturally hostile to class, and that the wealthy and the working men are intended by nature to live in mutual conflict. So irrational and so false is this view that the direct contrary is the truth.”<sup>5</sup> This reality is evident in the tripartite structure of the ILO and in the actions foreseen by the development cooperation strategies, requiring the participation of the different components: governments, civil society and the private sector.

The Social Doctrine of the Church teaches, among the various aspects regarding conditions of work, that wages should enable workers and their families to live above the poverty line and provide them with enough resources to fulfil the demands for adequate food, lodging, rest and family responsibilities, including children’s education. Pope John Paul II stressed that work cannot be treated as a commodity, as a kind of merchandise or as an impersonal force<sup>6</sup>. This idea is clear if we understand that according to the Church’s doctrine, social justice does not derive from a mere observance of the law. Social justice, rather, must be the guiding principle to address the challenges raised by different social questions. The structural dimension of social justice and its respective solutions affect the social, political and economic domains (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 201-202). Social justice is one of the pillars of the ILO, as is clearly demonstrated in the Declaration for Social Justice for a Fair Globalization (2008). This document tries to respond to the mounting inequalities in the world with the aspiration that the measures and recommendations contained therein may be implemented by decision-makers on the local, national and international levels to improve the lives and livelihoods of all workers. Catholic Social Doctrine teaches that the best approach for incorporating the principles of justice in work is paying attention to the subjective dimension of work (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 270-271). The objective dimension changes drastically over time, with the development of technology, industrial production, communication and trade. However, as Pope John Paul II observed, the human being is the subject of work and the purpose of all human action is to serve and nurture humanity. Work has the capacity to diminish or build up human dignity, to protect or deface nature, to lend or to omit the service due to our neighbour. The capacity of ennobling work for those who suffer unemployment and experience the anguish of the lack of earnings must be better understood and recognized. As Pope Francis states, helping the poor or the unemployed with money is a “provisional solution in the face of pressing needs”; the greater goal, however, “should always be to allow them a dignified life through work”.

Labour and its legal and political framework results from an experience based on ethical values and principles and therefore charged with political, legal and economic

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<sup>4</sup> Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* (1891), para. 13.

<sup>5</sup> Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical Letter *Rerum Novarum* (1891), para. 19.

<sup>6</sup> Cfr. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens* (1981), para.7.

character. This makes it possible to grasp how essential it is to respect dignity in the lives of working people. Far from being an abstract concept, respect for human dignity in work allows everyone to realize his or her human aspirations in a particular context. Living worthily means that the “human being comes before all”, an apparently rhetorical phrase and perhaps a clear violation of current ideas of “political correctness.” Recognizing the centrality of the human person means restoring dignity to work and production processes. It means putting the working person at the forefront even before the work he does. This responsibility is present even in moments of tension or open conflict between what is set as the finality of economic activity and the well-being of those who are its protagonists. As recalled by the recently published Report of the Global Commission, the ILO has a “unique role” to play in the development and delivery of a “human-centred economic agenda” in the international system by “placing people and the work they do at the center of economic and social policy, and business practice. The ILO, bringing together governments, employers and workers from all parts of the world, is well suited to act as a compass and a guide in order to help open up new vistas for coming generations at work.”

The reflections and challenges for the human family looking at the future of work allow us to clarify that the sustainability of the global economy depends on overcoming employment policy failures and rectifying those structural defects that led to the crisis. The policy complexities arising from these circumstances are undeniable, but one very clear conclusion can be drawn from them: work fulfils three basic human needs in our societies – the wish to develop capabilities, the need to interact with others and the need to earn one’s sustenance. As stated by Pope Francis, “work should be the setting for this rich personal growth, where many aspects of life enter into play: creativity, planning for the future, developing our talents, living out our values [and] relating to others.”<sup>7</sup>

Considering the current challenges, we should recall the message of Pope Francis to the whole Christian family and to all people of goodwill, that we are called to construct bridges instead of walls in our society. Among the various themes, I would like to suggest three situations where building bridges is particularly necessary. The first one is related to the looming crisis of an intergenerational conflict because youth unemployment is becoming a major emergency, especially in advanced economies, where, in some countries, the rate is close to 50%; since the previous generation is lengthening its permanence in employment while the new generation faces increasing difficulties to enter the labour market. Policies and institutions need to address this conflict, and, in this framework, a key role has to be assumed by the family. The family, in fact, is the primary sphere where potential intergenerational conflicts of interest can be solved and recast.

Another dimension where it is necessary to build a bridge, is the one between education and work. Youth unemployment has a twofold implication. On one hand, it highlights the inability of the economy to generate enough job opportunities for the new

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<sup>7</sup> Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter, *Laudato si'* (2015) para.127.

generations. On the other hand, it points out the difficulties of the education system to generate the qualifications and skills needed in the labour market. The education system is the cornerstone of any development strategy. It is, in fact, the primary source of human capital, which is the most effective engine of economic growth. More importantly, educated individuals become fully aware of the worth of all persons and of the value of work, not because of what it produces but because of who undertakes it. Without this subjective dimension, there would be no concern for the dignity of work, and only the economic dimension would be seen as relevant.

A third bridge is needed to span the gap between work and its often negative environmental consequences. When the focus is on profit alone, not only are the poor excluded, but our common home is degraded. Business must be transformed in order to play a constructive role, starting with bearing the true economic and social costs of using up shared environmental resources, which is a precondition for ethical behaviour. The future of work, then, must be understood in the context of sustainable development and of environmental responsibility, because, as evidence shows, “transition to an inclusive green economy can indeed act as a new engine for growth and a strong driver of decent work creation in developing, emerging and advanced economies.”

In six key paragraphs (124-129) dedicated to “The need to protect employment,” the Encyclical Letter *Laudato si’* outlines how decent and sustainable work is fundamental to care for our common home. Work acquires its true character when it is decent and sustainable for workers, employers, governments, communities and the environment. Therefore, work not only becomes the means for developing and expressing every individual’s dignity, but it also participates in the ongoing creative work of God. Whenever the problems posed by tech innovation are discussed, “more education” comes as the standard response. However, if education must be a part of the solution, pushing higher education for everyone is almost certainly not the only answer to the problem. Lifelong learning will be necessary to respond to rapid changes in jobs due to technological advances, and to fill new jobs created by technology. Planning, creativity, management of others, and relational skills that robots do not have will remain in high demand. Creativity and adaptability are not limited to science and hard skills. Education therefore should be broadened to include life-long learning, vocational training, coaching, tutoring, access to self-employment and entrepreneurship. In Pope Francis’ inspiring words: “we ourselves become the instrument used by God to bring out the potential which he himself inscribed in things”.

There is the real danger that, in the near future, our economies will be characterized by significant numbers of unemployed persons and large inequalities that will fuel social unrest. It is our duty to invert this trend. The recognition of the centrality of the human person suggests that we must invest more in people than in technology, because technology is ultimately the product of human intelligence and creativity. By investing in people, we will create a wealthier and more just society, in which persons will find, by their work, their complete identity, the fulfilment of their aspirations and finally the efficacy of their talents.

Working together, as the Catholic Church, the ILO, along with religious women and men and all people of goodwill, we are called to recognize the centrality of the human person and its dignity, including the indispensable dimension of work. This the best way to produce a new society focused on the wellbeing of all instead of the profit of few.

Thank you for your attention.