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Parallels on Work, Theory, and Practice in Yves R. Simon And John Paul II

This study is an exercise in liberal education understood as an ongoing contemporary conversation between outstanding representatives of two traditions of discourse—the one secular and academic and the other ecclesial and pastoral.¹ It is not intended to explicate or comment upon the lectures of Yves R. Simon or the encyclical letter of Pope John Paul, but rather to set them side by side so as to note the common insights that can help us to understand work better than we do and to enhance our capacity to derive more benefit from the specific forms of work we engage in.²

In pursuit of this objective, we shall also note that the study provides evidence of an essential compatibility between reason and revelation. Simon's application of Aristotelian philosophy (metaphysics, psychology, ethics, and politics) and John Paul's application of Sacred Scripture (especially the anthropology he finds within it) complement and reinforce each other in arriving at similar conclusions from diverse analyses concerning the meaning of human work in a common context of challenges brought against its authenticity by forces at work in the modern world.

Simon conducts a philosophical analysis that falls into equal parts:

¹This study focuses on parallel passages in Yves R. Simon's *Work, Society, and Culture* and Pope John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Work) (Boston: Saint Paul editions, 1981).

²An earlier version of this study was presented at the annual meeting of the *American Maritain Association* at the University of Notre Dame on October 29, 1988. The author is grateful for observations offered by those present when the paper was presented, some of which have been incorporated into this version.

theoretical (lectures 1–3) and practical (lectures 4–6). In the former, he examines work from several related points of view (which he calls psychological-metaphysical and socio-ethical); in the latter, he shows how these standpoints throw light on several aspects of the history of the labor movement, wealth, and culture. Throughout, he proceeds by simple examples, inviting his students to view each question from various angles until an answer emerges. Logically, the practical part comes first, because it suggests why Simon finds it desirable or necessary to take up a definition of work.

In the encyclical, John Paul summarizes and updates the Church's social teaching as it concerns human work. Meditating and commenting mainly upon the Bible, the Pope speaks for the Church's theological analysis of the way social reality impacts upon work in the context of what has been called over the past hundred years "the labor question."³ He calls upon historical experience and scholarship in the social sciences to show how recent developments in technology, economics, and politics require fresh attention to the meaning of work.

The year 1988 marks the fiftieth anniversary of Simon's monograph, *Trois leçons sur le travail*,⁴ and the thirtieth anniversary of his course "On Work and the Workman" at the University of Chicago (Committee on Social Thought). Midway between those two dates, Simon contributed "The Concept of Work" to a Chicago symposium on *The Works of the Mind* (1947). His reflections on the place of work in human and social life belong to a comprehensive set of interests in theoretical and practical philosophy that developed over time in his examinations of knowledge and experience, freedom and community. For Vukan Kuic, who edited the lectures for posthumous publication, they contain "a complete prescription, difficult to fill but realistic, on how it may be possible to save the modern man from himself" (WSC xv).

If Karol Wojtyła had heard Simon's lectures, his attention might especially have been caught by a reference to Saint John of the Cross, the subject of his own doctoral dissertation.⁵ He would surely agree with Simon's

³John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, 9. [Due to the frequent use of this work in the article, it is referred to by *LE* and placed within the text according to the method adopted for books by Adler, Simon, and Maritain—Ed.]

⁴The three lessons are on "the definition of work," "work and wealth," and "the worker's culture."

⁵Simon also cited Saint John of the Cross in *Critique de la connaissance morale* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer et C^{ie}, 1934).

praise of the Spanish mystic's insight into the way love links work with contemplation, an even more exalted form of human activity. Simon's course reaches a climax at the end of the theoretical part, where he shows how a worker is motivated by the love of friendship, a form of love where the center of attention lies outside the self. "The great adventure of work," he writes, "is that it promotes precisely such feelings and not only among a chosen few but practically among the whole of mankind" (WSC 71). It brings out a "communion in appreciation . . . living within each and all" and "at all times"—an expression suggesting the theme of "solidarity" that is to be found in *Laborem Exercens* and in all of Pope John Paul's social writings and speeches.⁶

Wojtyla would also have understood and respected the difference between Simon's purpose and method, and his own orientation to work. It is not surprising, given that difference, that the two texts under study here contain no footnoted references in common. The encyclical cites only the Old and New Testaments, the Papal and Conciliar Magisterium, and the Common Doctor of the Church, Saint Thomas Aquinas. Simon's lectures never once cite those authorities; his references run from Aristotle to a range of contemporary authorities in the humanities and social sciences, but, in the main, his own and others' experiences underlie the argument.⁷

Linking those diverse approaches is a common awareness of the dangers and difficulties confronting work and workers as a result of modern ideological forces arrayed against the classical and Christian traditions. Simon's thought seems fundamentally inspired by the need to provide a philosophical critique of *laissez-faire* economic theories which treat human labor as just another commodity that can be bought and sold in the market (WSC 137). The Pope is sensitive to the same error, which he

⁶Cf. LE 19–22 and *Sollicitudo Rei* (On Social Concern, 1987).

⁷So far as I can determine, Simon rarely cited Scripture in his published work or paid explicit attention to the social documents of the Church. I have found a few references to the encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII. In Simon's Aquinas lecture at Marquette University—*Nature and Functions of Authority*—he quoted from Leo's *Immortale Dei* (On the Christian Constitution of States, 1885), in a note. The same quotation, which summarizes Leo's general theory of government, is noted in *Philosophy of Democratic Government*, Simon's Walgreen lectures at the University of Chicago. Elsewhere in that work, he notes *Rerum Novarum* (On the Condition of the Working Class, 1891), with reference to freedom, and *Diuturnum* (On the Origin of Civil Power, 1881), with reference to civil government and to sovereignty. As may be expected, Simon often makes use of the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas and other scholastic commentators on Aristotle.

identifies as “materialistic economism” (LE 17ff).

In the fifth lecture, “Work and Wealth,” Simon cites the Charter of the International Labor Organization as evidence that by 1919 “the principle that human labor was *not* an item of merchandise . . . had been accepted all over the world by most diverse sections of opinion” (WSC 132). If further evidence was needed of the failure of *laissez-faire*, it was the practical experience of the Great Depression, when “abundance itself was a cause of poverty. . . . This tragic experience,” he goes on, “should have opened our eyes to the immense fact that wealth can never be distributed adequately by means of exchange alone” (WSC 139ff). Compensation according to services rendered and distribution according to need—both admirable principles, in his view—become impossible if human labor is treated as a commodity. Moreover, the unmasking of this error will lead to a moral review of all commodities: “From now on,” Simon writes, “they too must be evaluated by humane and social standards; . . . the market place will increasingly be judged by rules pertaining to human labor” (WSC 138).

John Paul also mentions the I.L.O. in his discussion of the human rights of workers that are threatened by the modern denial of the principle of the priority of labor over capital (LE 26). *Laborem Exercens* contains a spirited critique of “economism,” which in the early nineteenth century asserted that work is “a sort of merchandise that the worker sells to the employer.” Like Simon, the Pope argues that recent developments make this earlier view untenable in theory as well as in practice; it has given way to “more human ways of thinking about work.” Nevertheless, John Paul cautions that as long as philosophical materialism maintains an influence in the world, there is danger that this erroneous view of work as “an impersonal force needed for production” will reassert itself (LE 17ff).

If the restoration of Aristotelian realism in our thinking about human, and especially social work is Simon’s leading purpose in these lectures, John Paul’s corresponding objective is a reassertion of the primacy of the person over things—a principle he finds in the “Gospel of work” (LE 16, 57, 61). For him, the great need at present is to prevent “the objective dimension of work” (roughly equivalent to Simon’s psychological-metaphysical dimension) from gaining the upper hand over “the subjective dimension” (which Simon calls socio-ethical), thereby depriving the worker of his dignity and reducing his inalienable rights (LE 25; cf. 14, 15, 17). To prevent the placing of man and his work in such a position of dependence, the Pope appeals for changes in theory and practice in line with a conviction that labor has primacy over the means of production and over capital (LE 32, 34).

Those familiar with the personalist character of Karol Wojtyła’s life work will recognize here that the Pope’s interest in work is instrumental to

his prior concern for man, the subject of work, for man as worker is first man as man. Work must be attended to because it lies at the heart of the human question, especially in its social dimension. The entire first decade of John Paul's pontificate has seen a sustained and multidimensional pursuit of the truth about man in light of the Church's knowledge of the Man-God, Jesus Christ. When the Pope looks at work "from the point of view of man's good," he sees that it is "probably *the essential key* to the whole social question" (LE 7, 10).

This link between man as a whole and man as worker is what gives the ethical and social character of work a special urgency—for both pope and philosopher—in the present circumstances of technological and economic development. The "very important conclusion" John Paul draws from theological-anthropological analysis of work is that work must be "for man," and not man "for work" (LE 17); the worker must know at all times that he is working in the first place "for himself," and not for "the economy" (LE 38). The Pope adds that this is why private ownership is preferable to public; Simon concurs: "Personally, I prefer free distribution through independent institutions rather than directly through state institutions" (WSC 141).

After treating this central theme of the personal, or subjective, character of work and the worker, John Paul moves on to the way work supports family life—a matter Simon also insists upon. For the Pope, "the family constitutes one of the most important terms of reference for shaping the social and ethical order of human work." It does this, in large part, by serving as the primary educational agency in human development: "The family is simultaneously a community made possible by work and the first school of work . . . for every person" (LE 24ff).⁸ Later, he derives practical conclusions from this thesis (for example, the family wage) (LE 46).

Simon takes up the family in lecture 3, "Man at Work." He observes that in modern times there has been "an enormous separation between work and family life," in contrast to Aristotle's observation that "what is daily an essential in the life of work is performed within the family unit." Here "the extremely precarious bonds of love and affection which are supposed to hold families together are constantly strengthened by the members' association in the daily actuality of work. . . . Working together, they all share also in the sociability of the worker. Their unity, in other words, is brought about by their common tasks, which most naturally in-

⁸This is further developed in *Familiaris Consortio* (The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World, 1981), part iii.

volve a division of labor" (WSC 89, 77ff). The natural sociability of work done in common (the Pope would say "solidarity") lays a basis in the elementary human association for stability in community life, by strengthening the bonds of love and friendship in the most natural way. What John Paul ascribes to person, Simon ascribes to nature. The philosopher hopes, incidentally, that the shortening of the workday will allow more time for working at home in the presence of the family (WSC 83).

After treating the family, *Laborem Exercens* moves on to the broader sphere of social relationships. This third "sphere of values" connected to work is "a great historical and social incarnation of the work of all generations." As in the family, this heritage passes from generation to generation by means of education (LE 24ff). Past work keeps adding to the patrimony of the human family and contributes to the building up of culture.

Simon dwells at greater length on this matter of "the right conduct for the individual in his relations with members of social groups to which he belongs." He applies socio-ethical analysis to historical materials in an effort to discover "the right order to be established in the uses of human freedom" (WSC 56), and in the final lecture enlarges on many implications for culture. For Simon, "the principle of the social utility of work" is "an essential part" of his theoretical definition (WSC 109). "I insist," he had said at the outset of the lectures, "that work cannot be defined without reference to society. . . . The man who does nothing but speculate" may be engaged in something intrinsically more valuable than working, but he does no work "because he does not render a service to society. To qualify as work, an activity must not only be honest but also socially productive" (WSC 31, 38ff; cf. 55, 110).

While Simon asserts with John Paul that "the end [of work] is not in wealth but always in man," and that "the real wealth produced by work is above all destined to serve," he develops more fully what the Pope calls the "objective dimension" of work (WSC 118, 121). This is understandable in view of the Pope's greater attention to the human person than to implications for work, which Simon finds so interesting in the Aristotelian focus on human nature. John Paul is surely not indifferent to those implications; at one point, he asserts that "the moral obligation of work" flows from man's nature, which is thereby maintained and developed, as well as his responsibilities to family and society—to what he refers to as "the indirect employer" (LE 39ff). But what John Paul notes in passing, Simon brings out in its psychological-metaphysical fullness.

Perhaps the most eloquent passages deal with philosophical distinctions between work and contemplation, and between work and art. In the former case, we are shown how "the terminal character of contemplation

[is] in sharp opposition to the mere usefulness of work," that is, to the transformation of physical nature for human purposes. This utility of work is what Simon refers to as "a metaphysical characteristic of work: Work is never a terminal activity"; or, as John Paul puts it, work is always something transitive—for it "always leads to something else" (WSC 109ff). This is a metaphysical characteristic in that work involves a "compromise with the law of what is," with "pre-existent data" (WSC 74, 76). While art "is always an activity of free development," work occurs under the constraints of being, of the existing state of things, and is thus "an activity of legal fulfillment"; it is "always something serious" (WSC 31, 74, 76).

In contrast to both work and art, contemplation "is always an end in itself and can thus never be useful. In fact, it is better than useful" (WSC 13). Simon hopes that this distinction might lead to a new "ethic of the worker" which replaces "resentment of the contemplatives" with a recognition of "the goodness of things that have nothing to do with social utility." Aristotle justifies contemplative life "because he has an idea of the good that is . . . desirable for itself because it is an end in itself" and hence "better than useful" (WSC 55).

Still, Simon does not want us to agree with Josef Pieper that leisure for art and contemplation is the "basis" of culture. A good it surely is, but the activity leisure permits, in Simon's more socially or politically sensitive view, transcends culture and benefits mainly the individual. Conditions that facilitate work are what provide the real foundation for developing social life. In a passage I find somewhat prophetic, Simon says at the conclusion of his lectures: "The real basis of culture . . . is to be found rather in activities in the performance of which a workmanlike disposition is indispensable. . . . Holding out an ideal of culture based on freedom from work inevitably leads to a disorderly exaltation of the flowery element of culture, and this makes for subjectivism, arbitrariness, and an attitude of frivolous aversion to nature and its laws." Therefore, "the immediate task before us appears to be the development of a theory of culture centered not on leisure but on work in the broadest sense, including moral, social, and intellectual, as well as technical and manual work" (WSC 185ff).

That John Paul would agree with this is evident in the very first sentence of the encyclical: "Through work man must . . . contribute to the continual advance of science and technology and, above all, to elevating unceasingly the cultural and moral level of society within which he lives in community with those who belong to the same [human] family" (LE preface, 5). He indicates, too, that more and more of the weight of this responsibility will fall upon persons who work with their minds, as machines come to replace what for centuries has been the principal form of work.

The Pope carries forward this observation in a quasi-poetic meditation on the spirituality of work that draws upon his theological sources. Having explained how work enters into the salvation process, he finds a particularly apt passage in Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* (On the Church in the Modern World):

When a man works he not only alters things and society, he develops himself as well. He learns much, he cultivates his resources, he goes outside of himself and beyond himself. Rightly understood, this kind of growth is of greater value than any external riches which can be garnered. . . . Hence, the norm of human activity is . . . that it should harmonize with the genuine good of the human race and allow people as individuals and as members of society to pursue their total vocation and fulfill it (*LE 61*).⁹

Simon treated this subject in the context of the worker "as a psychological type" whose exclusive concern is with the thing to be produced and hence is a kind of lover. Ultimately, workers whose interest is absorbed in things strictly external to themselves, as they observe the metaphysical laws cited earlier, coincide with lovers as a psychological type (*WSC 66ff, 70*). Simon goes even farther to assert that "the good worker and the lover of truth . . . have much in common, and the promotion of their understanding could do a great deal for the reformation of our concept of culture" (*WSC 187*). When I am "struggling toward what is good for my fellow men," I am "simultaneously struggling . . . toward an order of wisdom." Hence, "it is even clearer that social action in the community at large must be combined with the psychology of the lover if it is to be genuine. We all expect social workers to be animated by love because when they are not so animated social work is necessarily perverted. How could it be social work if it is not coupled with love for one's fellow men?" (*WSC 70*). So "there is such a thing as love . . . in struggle," as Simon had said when he introduced the notion of love in his first lecture. "And there is such a thing as love in presence and joy. . . . The higher, the more perfect, the more genuine form of love exists . . . in presence and by way of rest" (*WSC 7*). Through love, work and rest enter a unity that is at once metaphysical (in origin) and cultural (in end).

A final problem, however, remains to be met, and that is what Simon calls the "irksomeness" of work (*WSC 31ff*). The Pope, too, observes the "heavy toil" that sometimes accompanies human work, both physical and intellectual (*LE 22*).

Simon deals with this problem by simply excluding irksomeness from

⁹This passage is quoted from sec. 35 of *Gaudium et Spes*.

his theoretical definition of work. While it must be admitted that there is “a permanent foundation for irksomeness” in work because it is “legal” and not “free” activity, still, the frequently onerous and sometimes oppressive character of work is not “essential” to it (WSC 31ff).

John Paul, I think, is able to do better than this: “In spite of all this toil—perhaps, in a sense, because of it—work is a good thing for man.” It is good *because* it is irksome, a *bonum arduum* in the terminology of Aquinas. On this last point, the Pope is able to go farther, because he associates work with virtue, a virtue he calls industriousness, a part of the cardinal virtue of fortitude. This virtue brings out the goodness in toil and enables work to perfect man in spite of its irksomeness and even its oppressiveness. Hence John Paul adds that there is a “moral obligation to link industriousness as a virtue with the social order of work” (LE 22–24).¹⁰ Simon’s understanding of moral virtue as “habitus” makes him want to exclude virtuous activity from any association with work. Yet, almost in the same breath, he admits that “these things are profoundly mysterious” (WSC 19, 24).¹¹ John Paul’s resources give him an advantage over the Aristotelian philosopher when it comes to things mysterious. And so, at the end of the encyclical, where he meditates on work in the context of the Cross of Christ, we can see why, for him, toil “goes with” work (LE 63).¹² Perhaps, if Simon were to look at the matter in that light, he might be able to admit that industriousness is a facilitating “habitus” for human work after all. For, as a Christian and Thomist, he knew that, for all the greatness of philosophy, there is a brighter light than reason, a stronger force than nature.

¹⁰The reference is to Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, 40, 1 and 43, 2 ad 1.

¹¹Cf. *The Definition of Moral Virtue*, especially chap. 3. It may be significant that one of Simon’s rare citations of Scripture is Saint Paul’s “We see now through a mirror in an obscure manner . . .” (1 Cor. 13:12) in *A General Theory of Authority*.

¹²Cf. *Salvifici Doloris* (On the Christian Meaning of Suffering, 1984), where he does for pain what he does for work in *Laborem Exercens*.