

HUMAN WORK AND THE NIGERIAN CHURCH: A REVIEW OF *LABOREM EXERCENS* IN THE LIGHT OF CURRENT WORK REALITIES IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examines the reality of human work within the Nigerian context through a critical engagement with *Laborem Exercens*, the 1981 encyclical of John Paul II. Like the complex dynamics observed in plural social systems, the world of work in Nigeria reflects tensions between dignity and exploitation, opportunity and marginalization. Methodologically, this study adopts a **descriptive and analytical approach**. It first describes the key teachings of *Laborem Exercens* as contained in primary Church documents. It then analytically evaluates these teachings in light of contemporary Nigerian socio-economic realities using secondary sources, including recent labour data and scholarly reflections. The findings reveal that despite the Church's long-standing teaching on the dignity of labour, many Nigerian workers continue to experience unemployment, unjust wages, and lack of social protection. These conditions have not only weakened economic stability but have also affected social cohesion and human dignity. The study further shows that while the Church has made efforts to respond, there remains a gap between doctrine and practical implementation, particularly in areas such as job creation, fair remuneration, and vocational formation. The significance of this study lies in its effort to bridge the gap between theological reflection and lived reality. It brings to light the everyday struggles of Nigerian workers and challenges both church leaders and policymakers to move beyond abstract teaching toward concrete action. The study concludes that a shift from passive moral teaching to active institutional engagement is necessary if the Church is to remain credible in her mission. It recommends the promotion of job planning initiatives, equitable wage structures, expanded social benefits, and vocational training centres as practical steps toward restoring the dignity of work. In doing so, the Church can contribute meaningfully to national development and the holistic well-being of her members.

Keywords: work, human work, *Laborem Exercens*, Nigeria, Nigerian Church

INTRODUCTION

The Industrial Revolution (1760–1840) marked a turning point in human history, introducing machine-based production and transforming economic life. While it brought progress, it also led to widespread exploitation of workers, especially in industrial settings. This exploitation prompted strong reactions, most notably from Karl Marx, who criticized capitalism and called for a radical restructuring of society (Marx, 2018). His rejection of religion as the “opium of the masses” appealed to many workers who felt abandoned and oppressed.

Faced with the risk of losing the working class, the Catholic Church responded through Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum*, which defended the dignity of workers, upheld the right to private property, and insisted on just wages and humane working conditions (Leo XIII, 1891). This marked the beginning of Catholic Social Teaching, later developed by subsequent encyclicals such as *Quadragesimo Anno* (Pius XI, 1931).

Within this tradition, John Paul II’s *Laborem Exercens* provides a deeper theological and ethical reflection on human work. The encyclical emphasizes that work is not merely an economic activity but a fundamental aspect of human dignity and participation in God’s creative plan (John Paul II, 1981). In Nigeria today, the realities of unemployment, underemployment, poor wages, and weak labour structures make this teaching particularly relevant. Recent data from the National Bureau of Statistics indicates that unemployment fluctuated between **about 4.3% and 5.3% in 2024**, with youth unemployment remaining significantly higher. However, beyond these figures lies a deeper concern: the dominance of informal employment estimated at over **90% of the workforce** which often lacks job security and social protection. This suggests that the crisis of work in Nigeria is not merely about job availability but about the quality and dignity of work itself.

These challenges raise an important question: how can the Church in Nigeria translate her rich teaching on work into practical solutions for her people? This study addresses that question in three stages. First, it examines the key teachings of *Laborem Exercens*. Second, it evaluates their relevance within the Nigerian socio-economic context. Third, it proposes practical steps the Church can take to promote dignity in work and improve the lives of workers.

KEY POINTS OF *LABOREM EXERCENS*

In *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II offers a comprehensive reflection on the dignity of human work and the rights of workers within the broader framework of human dignity. He grounds his teaching in the belief that the human person is created in the image and likeness of God and that work carries a deeply personal and ethical significance (John Paul II, 1981). The encyclical develops this position through several key themes, which are discussed below.

Work as a Divine Mandate and Necessity for Human Existence

Laborem Exercens defines work broadly as any human activity whether manual or intellectual that corresponds to human nature and contributes to the development of the individual and society (John Paul II, 1981). In this sense, work is not merely an economic necessity but a fundamental dimension of human existence. It is described as “the key to the whole social question,” highlighting its central role in shaping human life and social organization.

The encyclical presents work as both a natural obligation and a divine mandate. Drawing from the biblical account of creation, it affirms that human beings are called to “subdue the earth” and participate in God’s creative activity. This theological perspective underscores that work is intrinsic to human identity and purpose. As such, work is not optional but essential for the full realization of human dignity.

Furthermore, work is described as a “transitive activity,” meaning that it originates in the human subject and is directed toward transforming the external world. Through this process, individuals not only shape their environment but also develop themselves. Thus, work serves a dual function: it contributes to the improvement of the world while simultaneously fostering personal growth and fulfilment.

In summary, *Laborem Exercens* presents work as a universal and enduring reality that transcends historical and cultural contexts. It is both a duty and a means through which human beings participate in the ongoing act of creation, making it indispensable for authentic human existence.

Human Person as Subject and Measure of the Value of Work

A central argument in *Laborem Exercens* is that the human person is both the subject and the primary measure of the value of work. According to Pope John Paul II, while work produces objective outcomes such as goods, services, and technological advancements, its deepest meaning lies in its subjective dimension, that is, in the person who performs it (John Paul II, 1981). This distinction between the objective and subjective dimensions of work is fundamental to understanding the dignity of labour.

The objective dimension refers to the external results of work, including the transformation of natural resources, agricultural production, industrial output, and technological innovation. These aspects are measurable and often form the basis for economic evaluation. However, the encyclical insists that these outcomes must never overshadow the subjective dimension, which concerns the human person as a conscious, free, and rational agent. It is the worker, not the product that gives work its ultimate value.

This perspective represents a significant departure from earlier historical attitudes toward labour. In many ancient societies, manual labour was considered inferior and was often relegated to slaves, while intellectual work was reserved for the elite. Such a view implicitly valued work over the worker. In contrast, the Christian tradition, as articulated in *Laborem Exercens*, reverses this hierarchy by affirming that all forms of legitimate work possess dignity because they are performed by human persons created in the image of God.

This understanding is further reinforced by the life of Christ, who, despite his divine nature, engaged in manual labour as a carpenter. His example elevates the status of all forms of work and demonstrates that dignity does not depend on the type of work performed but, on the person, performing it. Consequently, work is not an end in itself; rather, it exists for the sake of the human person. As John Paul II (1981) emphasizes, “work is for man and not man for work.”

Recognizing the primacy of the human person in work has several important implications. First, work becomes a means of personal fulfilment. Through work, individuals develop their abilities, express their creativity, and achieve a deeper sense of self-realization. In this way, work contributes not only to material well-being but also to personal growth.

Second, work is essential for the establishment and sustenance of family life. It provides the means through which individuals can support themselves and their dependents, thereby making the family both a product of work and a formative environment where the value of work is first

learned. The family thus becomes the “first school of work,” where discipline, responsibility, and cooperation are cultivated.

Third, work has a broader social dimension. It connects individuals to their communities and nations, contributing to the common good. Through their labour, individuals participate in the cultural, economic, and social development of society, thereby enriching the shared heritage of humanity.

This emphasis on the dignity of human person is further reinforced in the broader tradition of Catholic Social Teaching, which consistently affirms that economic and social systems must be ordered toward the good of the human person. As articulated in *Gaudium et Spes*, human activity, including work, is meant to serve the integral development of the person and the common good (Vatican Council 11, 1975). In light of these considerations, the encyclical firmly establishes that the dignity of work is rooted in the dignity of the human person. Any system that prioritizes productivity or profit over the well-being of workers ultimately undermines the moral foundation of work itself.

Rights of Workers: Wages and Social Benefits

In *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II situates the rights of workers within the broader framework of human rights, emphasizing that the obligation to work is inseparable from the rights that safeguard the dignity of the worker (John Paul II, 1981). Work, as both a duty and a necessity, must therefore be accompanied by conditions that respect the human person and promote integral human development.

One of the major challenges identified in the encyclical is unemployment, which is described as a significant obstacle to the realization of the right to work. John Paul II (1981) argues that addressing unemployment requires the collaborative effort of both direct employers (such as companies and institutions) and indirect employers (including the state and broader economic structures). He stresses the importance of proper planning in education and labour markets to ensure that individuals are trained in fields that correspond to societal needs. Without such coordination, societies risk producing a workforce that is either underemployed or unemployable.

Central to the discussion of workers’ rights is the principle of just remuneration. The encyclical presents a just wage as the most concrete and practical means of ensuring justice within the employer–employee relationship. A just wage is not merely a matter of market forces but a

moral requirement. It should be sufficient to enable a worker to support themselves and their family, maintain a decent standard of living, and secure their future. In this sense, just remuneration becomes a key indicator of whether a socio-economic system is functioning equitably (John Paul II, 1981).

Closely linked to just wages are social benefits, which are essential for protecting the well-being of workers and their families. These benefits include access to healthcare, especially in cases of workplace injury, as well as the right to rest, which encompasses weekly rest periods and annual leave. Additional provisions such as pensions, insurance for old age and accidents, and safe working conditions are also emphasized as necessary components of a just labour system. These measures are not acts of charity but expressions of justice that recognize the inherent dignity of the worker.

The encyclical also affirms the right of workers to form associations or unions in order to defend their interests. Such collective organization enables workers to engage in dialogue with employers and, when necessary, to take legitimate action such as strikes, to secure fair treatment. This right is presented as a natural extension of human sociality and a vital mechanism for maintaining balance within labour relations.

Furthermore, *Laborem Exercens* extends the discussion of workers' rights to include vulnerable groups, particularly persons with disabilities. It calls for the creation of structures that enable such individuals to participate meaningfully in the workforce through appropriate training and adapted employment opportunities. This reflects a commitment to inclusivity and the recognition that every person has the right to contribute to society through work.

Finally, the encyclical addresses the rights of migrant workers, acknowledging their freedom to seek better living conditions outside their native countries. However, it strongly warns against their exploitation and calls for legal protections to ensure that they are treated with dignity and fairness in their host societies. This understanding is echoed in the wider social teaching of the church, which stresses that the economy must serve people and not the other way around. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* highlights that just wages and social protections are essential for safeguarding human dignity and promoting social justice (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005).

The rights of workers especially the right to just wages and social benefits are presented as essential conditions for preserving human dignity in the world of work. Any neglect of these rights not only harms individuals but also undermines the moral and social fabric of society.

Spirituality of Work

Beyond economic and social considerations, *Laborem Exercens* presents work as having a spiritual dimension. Work is seen as a way of drawing closer to God, not just a means of survival. First, work is participation in God's creation. Second, it is modelled after the life of Christ, who worked as a carpenter before beginning His public ministry. Third, work is linked to the cross—meaning that the struggles and difficulties associated with work can have redemptive value when united with Christ (John Paul II, 1981).

This perspective is especially meaningful in difficult environments like Nigeria, where many people work under harsh conditions. It reminds workers that their labour has value beyond immediate economic reward as it contributes to their personal growth and spiritual journey.

Relevance of Laborem Exercens for Nigeria Today

Although *Laborem Exercens* was published in 1981, its insights remain highly relevant in addressing contemporary socio-economic challenges, particularly within the Nigerian context. As Pope John Paul II emphasizes, the dignity of work and the rights of workers are universal concerns that transcend time and place (John Paul II, 1981). However, applying these ideals within Nigeria requires attention to the country's unique structural realities.

Recent studies show that Nigeria's labour market is largely informal, with over 90% of workers engaged in vulnerable employment lacking stability and social protection (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2024). Scholars such as Ajakaiye (2018) argue that this structure weakens the link between work and dignity, as many workers remain trapped in low-income, insecure jobs. In this sense, the Nigerian situation not only reflects the concerns raised in *Laborem Exercens* but also exposes gaps in its practical application within developing economies.

Co-ownership of Investments

The idea of co-ownership or worker participation becomes particularly significant in Nigeria, where many employees feel disconnected from the outcomes of their labour. John Paul II

(1981) suggests that workers should not be treated merely as instruments of production but as participants in the enterprise itself.

In the Nigerian context, this remains largely unrealized. According to Anyanwu (2020), many organizations both public and private operate within hierarchical systems that limit worker participation in decision-making and profit-sharing. This often leads to low morale, inefficiency, and even industrial conflict.

Introducing models of shared ownership, even in modest forms such as bonuses or cooperative structures, could help bridge this gap. While *Laborem Exercens* proposes this ideal, its implementation in Nigeria requires adaptation to local economic realities, including weak corporate governance and limited institutional trust.

Unemployment

Unemployment remains one of the most pressing socio-economic challenges in Nigeria today, and its persistence directly undermines the realization of the right to work emphasized in *Laborem Exercens*. According to Pope John Paul II, unemployment is not merely an economic issue but a moral and social concern that affects human dignity and social stability (John Paul II, 1981).

Recent data from the National Bureau of Statistics (2024) suggest relatively moderate unemployment figures. However, this does not fully capture the depth of the problem. As noted by Okonjo-Iweala (2020), the real issue in Nigeria is not only unemployment but widespread **underemployment and working poverty**, where individuals are engaged in economic activity but cannot meet basic living standards.

Furthermore, the structural mismatch between education and employment remains a critical concern. Ajakaiye (2018) observes that Nigeria's education system often produces graduates without the technical and entrepreneurial skills required in the labour market. This aligns closely with the warning in *Laborem Exercens* about poor coordination between education and labour demand (John Paul II, 1981).

This reality calls for more than theoretical reflection. It requires deliberate planning, collaboration, and a shift toward vocational and skills-based education areas where the Church can play a transformative role.

Rights of Workers in Nigeria: Just Remuneration and Social Benefits

The question of workers' rights, particularly just remuneration and social benefits, remains deeply relevant in Nigeria. *Laborem Exercens* presents just wages as the clearest expression of justice in labour relations (John Paul II, 1981).

In practice, however, many Nigerian workers struggle with wages that fall short of basic living standards. According to NBS (2024), rising inflation has significantly eroded purchasing power, making it increasingly difficult for workers to meet essential needs. Supporting this view, Anyanwu (2020) argues that wage structures in Nigeria often reflect economic constraints rather than moral considerations, thereby weakening the ethical foundation of work.

While employers face genuine challenges such as unstable markets and high operational costs, the encyclical's moral insistence remains valid: work must serve the human person. Yet, one may critically observe that *Laborem Exercens* assumes a level of institutional stability that is not always present in Nigeria. Weak enforcement of labour laws and corruption further complicate the realization of just wages. This suggests that beyond moral teaching, there is a need for structural reform and accountability mechanisms to ensure that workers' rights are protected in practice.

Meanwhile, achieving just wages in Nigeria may require a balanced approach. Employers should strive to allocate a fair proportion of their profits toward workers' wages, recognizing the contribution of labour to the success of the enterprise. At the same time, innovative employment structures such as flexible working arrangements or equitable distribution of work may help balance the need to create jobs with the responsibility to offer fair compensation.

Closely related to just remuneration are social benefits, which are essential for safeguarding the welfare of workers. These include access to healthcare, paid leave, pension schemes, insurance, and safe working conditions. However, in many Nigerian workplaces, such benefits are either limited or entirely absent. High levels of unemployment often discourage workers from demanding these rights, as they fear losing their jobs.

From the perspective of Catholic Social Teaching, these benefits are not acts of charity but expressions of justice and human dignity. Institutions, including those operated by the Church, are therefore called to lead by example in implementing fair labour practices. As noted by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (1972/2002), the Church consistently advocates for just wages, social security, and humane working conditions as essential components of a just society.

While it may not be feasible for all organizations to implement a full range of benefits immediately due to financial constraints, gradual steps can be taken. For instance, employers can begin by ensuring basic provisions such as healthcare support, regular rest periods, and safe working environments. Over time, additional benefits such as pensions and insurance schemes can be introduced as resources permit.

In reality, the realization of workers' rights in Nigeria requires both moral commitment and practical effort. By prioritizing just remuneration and social benefits, employers including Church institutions can contribute to building a more just and humane society, in line with the vision articulated in *Laborem Exercens*.

Spirituality of Work and Declining Work Ethic

The spirituality of work, as articulated in *Laborem Exercens*, presents labour as participation in God's creative activity and a path toward personal fulfilment (John Paul II, 1981). However, this vision appears increasingly challenged within the Nigerian context.

Scholars such as Nwankwo (2019) note that changing socio-economic conditions, combined with certain interpretations of prosperity teaching, have contributed to a shift in attitudes toward work. In some cases, success is perceived as achievable without sustained effort, creating tension with the traditional Christian understanding of labour as both responsibility and vocation. At the same time, it would be simplistic to attribute declining work ethic solely to moral failure. As Ajakaiye (2018) points out, persistent unemployment and lack of opportunities can lead to frustration and disengagement, particularly among young people. As noted in *Laborem Exercens*, lack of access to meaningful employment undermines human dignity and weakens social responsibility (Pope John Paul II, 1981). Therefore, a renewed spirituality of work is needed—one that reconnects faith with diligence, responsibility, and perseverance. This aligns with the Church's broader teaching that human activity, including labour, contributes to both personal sanctification and the common good (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005).

This calls for a more balanced response, one that not only re-emphasizes the spiritual value of work but also addresses the structural conditions that make meaningful work difficult to attain.

CONCRETE PROPOSALS TO THE NIGERIAN CHURCH FOR HER WORKERS

As a social teaching document, *Laborem Exercens* is not only meant to be read but to be lived. In the Nigerian context, the Church cannot remain at the level of preaching alone; she is called to take practical steps that touch people's everyday realities. As Pope John Paul II emphasizes, promoting the dignity of work requires concrete action (John Paul II, 1981).

Job Planning and Career Guidance

The need for proper alignment between education and employment remains urgent in Nigeria. *Laborem Exercens* emphasizes the importance of planning in labour organization and education to avoid structural unemployment (Pope John Paul II, 1981).

In response, the Church can establish career guidance centres to assist young people in making informed vocational choices. These centres can help young people make informed choices, understand labour market realities, and develop relevant skills. This approach reflects the vision of *Populorum Progressio*, which calls for addressing the root causes of poverty through thoughtful and practical interventions (Pope Paul VI, 1967). When young people are guided properly, frustration reduces, and productivity increases.

Just Salary

The principle of just wage remains central to Catholic Social Teaching. According to *Laborem Exercens*, just remuneration is the key indicator of justice within any economic system (Pope John Paul II, 1981). Within the Nigerian context, many workers struggle with inadequate wages. The Church must therefore lead by example. As emphasized in *Deus Caritas Est*, justice must precede charity; one must first give what is due before offering acts of generosity (Pope Benedict XVI, 2009). It is not enough to preach justice; it must be practiced within Church institutions. A just salary should enable workers to meet their basic needs—food, shelter, healthcare, and transportation while still offering some sense of security. Even where resources are limited, efforts can be made to improve gradually. Transparent salary structures, clear promotion paths, and fairness in payment can restore dignity and trust among workers.

Workers' Entitlements

Workers' entitlements such as healthcare, pensions, and safe working conditions are essential components of justice. These rights are clearly articulated in *Laborem Exercens* (Pope John Paul II, 1981). In many Nigerian workplaces, these benefits are either weak or absent. The Church can change this narrative by ensuring that its own institutions reflect these values. As noted by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (1972/2002), defending workers' rights is a matter of justice, not charity.

Furthermore, the broader social doctrine of the Church reinforces that such provisions are not optional but necessary for protecting human dignity (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005). Even small steps such as basic health support and regular leave can make a real difference in workers' lives.

Craft Centres and Vocational Training

One of the most practical solutions to unemployment is skill acquisition. Nigeria needs more skilled workers, yet many young people are not encouraged to learn trades. *Laborem Exercens* highlights the importance of organizing labour according to societal needs (Pope John Paul II, 1981). This vision aligns with *Populorum Progressio*, which emphasizes human development through practical and sustainable means (Pope Paul VI, 1967). The Church, being a major provider of education, can establish **vocational training centres (craft centres)** or adapt some existing schools to focus on skills. Training in areas like electrical work, carpentry, tailoring, and technology can empower young people to become self-reliant.

This approach not only reduces unemployment but also restores the dignity of labour, showing that every honest work has value. By investing in skill acquisition, the Church contributes not only to individual empowerment but also to national development.

CONCLUSION

Human work remains central to human dignity and social development. As presented in *Laborem Exercens*, work is not merely a means of survival but a participation in God's creative and redemptive plan (John Paul II, 1981).

In Nigeria, however, the reality of work is often marked by unemployment, underemployment, low wages, and poor working conditions. These challenges do not only affect the economy; they touch the very dignity of the human person and weaken social cohesion.

For the Church, this situation presents both a challenge and a responsibility. Her teaching remains rich and relevant, but its credibility depends on concrete expression. Where injustice persists—even within institutions that proclaim justice—the message risks losing its moral force.

Restoring the dignity of work, therefore, is not optional. It is a moral and pastoral necessity. The Church must move beyond teaching to active engagement, becoming not only a voice for workers but also a model of just and humane labour practices in society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. The Church in Nigeria should establish **career guidance and job planning centres** to help young people make informed vocational choices.
2. Church institutions should implement **fair and transparent salary structures** that reflect the dignity of workers.
3. Employers, especially within Church settings, should gradually introduce **workers' entitlements** such as healthcare, pensions, and paid leave.
4. There should be deliberate investment in **vocational and technical training centres** to promote skill acquisition and reduce unemployment.
5. The Church should intensify teaching on the **spirituality of work**, correcting false notions that separate success from effort and responsibility.
6. Collaboration between the Church, government, and private sector should be encouraged to promote **job creation and labour reforms** in Nigeria.

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