

ACTON INSTITUTE POWERBLOG

COVID-19 reminds us of the humanizing aspect of work

by ANTHONY BRADLEY • April 21, 2020



With “shelter-in-place” orders across the country during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, most employees are not allowed to enter their work places unless their work is considered “essential” by their state and local governments. Opportunities for normal employment have been disrupted for millions of people around the world. Sadly, many workers have been furloughed, others laid off entirely, and the fortunate ones, thanks to advances in technology, are able to work from home.

Beyond the obvious financial implications for individuals, and the economy at large, the decline of work also has implications for how we experience ourselves as persons. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a sobering opportunity to revisit Pope John Paul II's 1981 encyclical *Laborem exercens* on the dignity of work. We need to be reminded why work matters for persons and their communities beyond its capacity to help people meet their personal financial obligations and businesses to remain open.

The encyclical opens with this prescient observation: "through work man must earn his daily bread and contribute to the continual advance of science and technology and, above all, to elevating unceasingly the cultural and moral level of the society within which he lives in community with those who belong to the same family." In other words, work is more than simply a means of meeting material needs. Work is a means of facilitating the cultural and moral dimensions of human flourishing. Work as a human activity contributes to the common good.

In the encyclical we learn about the "objective" sense of work in which the human person subdues and cultivates the earth, through the use of technology, to unlock the resources of the earth. This is more or less what we mean by "going to work" day to day. There is also, however, the "subjective" sense of work which points us to the affects work has on the human person as subject of work. That is, we also must be concerned about the impact work has on the dignity of workers. After all, work is for the human person. Work humanizes us in transcendent ways and its telos points back to God and human flourishing.

It is the anthropological implications of the loss of work during the pandemic that should alarm us the most. *Laborem exercens* reminds us it is through work that persons not only transform nature, adapting it to human own needs, but the human person "also achieves fulfilment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes 'more a human being.'" With **16.8 million** unemployment

claims filed by mid-April alone, it sobering to think about so many people losing opportunities to experience a crucial aspect of their God derived humanity. If it is true that work makes us more human, the absence of work, then, is often the birthplace of the self-destructive pathologies that cripple human dignity, tear apart families, and undermine communities.

Laborem exercens also teaches work is the foundation for the formation and sustainability of family life. Work makes family life and its sustainability possible. A stable family life is correlated with academic success, thriving for children, and flourishing communities. The encyclical adds that “the family is simultaneously a community made possible by work and the first school of work, within the home, for every person.” Gainful employment is one of the most social stabilizing sources of human dignity and social virtue found in society as the collaborations of human work meet the virtuous demands of human society that form the common good. When families thrive, communities become places that nurture and invites the next generation to discover their role in making a contribution to the common good. The need work because it allows families to fulfill their role in civil society.

In sum, it is because of the humanizing aspects of work that we pray that our economy can get back online as soon as prudently possible. We want people to able to meet their financial obligations but we also want people to reconnect with this important aspect of their humanity and make their families, and communities, better places in the process. Our political leaders would do well be reading *Laborem exercens* to help provide the “why” behind needed decision-making to move our economy forward and get Americans back to work.



Anthony Bradley, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics in the Public Service Program at [The King's College](#) in New York City and serves as a Research Fellow at the [Acton Institute](#). Dr. Bradley lectures at colleges, universities, business organizations, conferences, and churches throughout the U.S. and abroad. His books include: *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America* (2010), *Black and Tired: Essays on Race, Politics, Culture, and International Development* (2011), *The Political Economy of Liberation: Thomas Sowell and James Cone of the Black Experience* (2012), *Keep Your Head Up: America's New Black Christian Leaders, Social Consciousness, and the Cosby Conversation* (2012), *Aliens in the Promised Land: Why Minority Leadership Is Overlooked in White Christian Churches and Institutions* (forthcoming, 2013). Dr. Bradley's writings on religious and cultural issues have been published in a variety of journals, including: the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, the *Detroit News*, and *World Magazine*. Dr. Bradley is called upon by members of the broadcast media for comment on current issues and has appeared C-SPAN, NPR, CNN/Headline News, and Fox News, among others. He studies and writes on issues of race in America, hip hop, youth culture, issues among African Americans, the American family, welfare, education, and modern slavery. From 2005-2009, Dr. Bradley was Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology and Ethics at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, MO where he also directed the Francis A. Schaeffer Institute. Dr. Bradley holds Bachelor of Science in biological sciences from [Clemson University](#), a Master of Divinity from [Covenant Theological Seminary](#), and a Doctor of Philosophy degree from [Westminster Theological Seminary](#). Dr. Bradley also holds an M.A. in Ethics and Society at [Fordham University](#).

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