

# **The Ecological Impact of Economism and Consumerism**

*Francis Ononuju Agba*

## **Abstract**

In the light of the call made to African nations by Pope Benedict XVI, during his visit to Benin Republic, not to yield to market forces in their quest for development, this article examines the notion of human labour, that is, the biblical injunction that human beings should fend for themselves through the work of their hands. The Genesis account of creation presents work as part of human definition and not merely as a means of amassing wealth. However, the contemporary definition of the human person, influenced by the anthropology of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, has led to a materialistic understanding of human work. This has given rise to the twin evils of economism and consumerism as well as a distorted understanding of globalization and urbanization. It is time we reflect on the ecological impact of these evils especially in Africa given the many ecological problems that bedevil the continent. Although the focus of this article is not limited to the Nigerian situation it nonetheless mirrors what the country is going through.

## **Introduction**

In his advice to African nations not to yield to market forces, Pope Benedict XVI echoes the view of his esteemed predecessor, Pope John Paul II, who perceived "a threat to the right order of values in all forms of economists thought that reduce human beings to economic calculations and calculators" (Elshtain, 2002, 33) Arguing further, Elshtain maintains that for John Paul II a proper understanding of work should take into consideration its meaning for anthropological concerns and be situated within its God-given dignity to human beings. This is opposed to certain theories on human work such as that of Karl Marx and Machiavelli that

led to a manipulative and divisive view of labour. In this sense, work is seen and valued within the context of the position and power it confers on the person in the society. On the other hand, John Paul II's theology of work and economy is a continuation of the Catholic social tradition which has long called into question many of these accepted conclusions of economic theories (Wojtyla, 1993, 266). These theories have encouraged the consumerist and economist attitude of our modern society.

For our purposes, consumerism is defined as the attitude that values the acquisition of material goods while economism is the belief that economics is the most important element in society. These concepts have had a negative impact on the true meaning of human work. Furthermore, it is important to note that in this article, the words 'labor' and 'work' are used interchangeably because both connote any activity a person does in order to earn a living.

### **Catholic social teaching on the dignity of work**

John Paul II's notion of praxis contradicts particularly the Marxist view of work which shows that work produces or is the origin of the person. John Paul II argues that work exists because human beings exist. He insists that the Marxist view that the more one has the better the person's life is enhanced encourages a materialistic concept of work. Consequently, in his theology of work, John Paul II contradicts the distorted but long accepted economic theories of human work, such as that the value of work, like the value or price of goods, is determined by the market system. He uses *Laborem Exercens* to provide an alternative understanding of the place of work in the life of individuals and society (LE 7) and, in this way, lays the basis for the proper understanding of work by emphasizing the place of God in human work. For John Paul II, the texts of Genesis on which the Second Vatican Council bases its understanding of human work are intended to instruct us about our own activity; the nature and purpose of our work. In this way, the work of God at creation becomes the *paradigm* of human work and this, for him, in a sense refers to the “*gospel of work*”. (LE 6)

Catholic Social teaching presents human labour as a necessity because it is the appropriate way for human beings to give expression to and enhance their dignity (Compendium, 2004, 165). The Second Vatican

Council makes clear this point when it notes that “human activity proceeds from man: it is also ordered to him. When he works, not only does he transform matter and society, but he fulfils himself. He learns, he develops his faculties, and he emerges from and transcends himself. Rightly understood, this kind of growth is more precious than any kind of wealth that can be amassed. It is what a man is, rather than what he has that counts.” (*Gaudium et Spes* 35) Indeed, the notion of work rightly understood pays more attention to the divine vocation that human beings should work. In other words, a proper understanding of the importance of work for human existence takes into consideration the fact that right from creation God gave human beings the capacity to develop themselves through the work of their hands.

This definition of human work has been replaced by an understanding of labour that places more emphasis on profit making thereby reducing the dignity of the worker. In this sense, it is not important that one works; the emphasis is on the material benefits, power or status that come from working. Hence, more important than the dignity that comes from being a worker is the amount of profit one is able to make for the company and this determines the salary one earns. This understanding of work is the reason why a certain category of Nigerian workers have had to go on strike to demand a mere eighteen thousand naira as a minimum wage while other workers, whose work is deemed more important, take home millions of naira. A practical example is the work of the hospital attendant whose work is as necessary as is that of the doctor or nurse because without them the hospital environment would not be conducive for anybody, doctors, nurses or patients. The same goes for the gateman who works in any blue chip company, the oil or bank sectors. It is the emphasis on the material benefits of work rather than the dignity it confers on the person that explains why many graduates prefer to remain unemployed, searching for elusive white collar jobs instead of engaging in any other dignified labour. This in part explains the high rate of unemployment in our society today.

A proper understanding of work insists not on the *kind* of work one does but on the *value* of work itself and this value is not measured in monetary or material terms but on the dignity which work confers on the person. This is because work is a perennial and fundamental aspect of human existence. John Paul II in the aforementioned Encyclical on human labour sees work as being at the centre of the social question and he calls

for a renewed attention and decisive witness to its understanding. Made in the image of God, the human person is placed in the universe to “subdue the earth” and therefore, to work. Through work, the person transforms nature, develops and humanizes oneself, and progressively builds the civilization and culture of the human community. Indeed, through work, humanity shapes history.

This buiding of civilization and transformation of nature through work brings us to the ecological implications of the wrong understanding of work as seen in the concepts of economism and consumerism. As John Paul II notes in his Encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, “equally worrying is the ecological question which accompanies the problem of consumerism and which is closely connected to it. In the desire to have and enjoy rather than to be and grow, people consume the resources of the earth and their own life in an excessive and disordered way” (CA 37). This ecological implication of the encounter between humanity and nature is engendered by the lack of ethical consideration in the understanding of human dominion through which human beings, by working, transform nature.

### **Today's culture of consumerism and economism**

The lack of an ethical dimension to human dominion has foisted on modern society a culture of consumerism and economism. The emphasis is on celebrating new technological breakthroughs without a thought for the cost to humanity and nature. Thus, humanity sees no meaning in nature other than the usefulness of its resources for their consumption. Consequently, the inordinate desire for riches, pleasures and esteem by human beings has become a common phenomenon. Furthermore, the market is flooded with luxury goods acquired for purposes of amusement or as status symbol while the rich are surfeited by a superabundance of possessions and are enslaved by the the tasks of protecting and managing their wealth. The blatant disrespect for the environment occasioned by this attitude will continue as long as nature and its pontentials are seen merely as objects of immediate use and consumption to be manipulated by an unbridled desire for profit.

Equally contributive to the culture of consumerism and economism is the phenomenon of urbanization. As presently understood, instead of the integral development of the person, this concept places much

emphasis on consumerism and has engendered the rural to urban drift by many people in search of material comfort and entertainment. Noting the evil implication of this phenomenon and the need for an evenspread of development, John Paul II insists that urbanization should also take into consideration the moral implication of protecting the natural environment (CA 38). Hence, emphasis should also be placed on rural development so that those who live in the rural areas are not denied the basic necessities of life. Understood in this way, the concept of urbanization becomes the planning for the complete wellbeing of the person and thus respects the purpose for which God has given the earth and its resources to humanity.

According to the Christian perspective, human values which are understood from a misguided view of globalization and urbanization represent a perversion of what God intends for creation because a society is wrongly motivated when people's lives are shaped by production processes and revolve around income and possession. This negates the intention of God who not only wills a harmonious co-existence for all creation but also wills that His name be glorified through creation.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, we align with the view of John Paul II that this unbridled quest for material progress is idolatrous in that society is motivated more by this than by any relationship with God (SRS, no. 30). This idol of wealth takes the form of individual vanity and the desire for power. The unfortunate aspect of this materialistic tendency is that there is no foreseeable end to it because the more one has, the more one seeks to acquire (Bruce, 2001, 113-139). It is important to note, therefore, that while creating or having wealth is not opposed to having a relationship with God, an obsession with it certainly derails one from having a relationship with God. This is why Jesus taught His followers that "no one can serve two masters" (Mt. 6: 24). In fact, the kind of pressure which this materialistic 'religion' demands is often a challenge to faithful obedience to the will of God for creation and results in exploitation, greed and injustice of both other human beings and of nature.

## REFERENCES

- Bruce, J. M. (2001). *The Social Gospel of Jesus. The Kingdom of God in Mediterranean Perspective*. Minneapolis: Alba House.
- Elshtain, Jean Bethke (2002). "Catholic Social Teaching and the Meaning of Work", in *Work as Key to the Social Question. The Great Social and Economic Transformations and the Subjective Dimension of Work*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- John Paul II (1980). *Sources of Renewal. The Implementation of Vatican II*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_(1981). *Laborem Exercens*. Encyclical Letter on the ninetieth anniversary of Rerum Novarum
- \_\_\_\_\_(1991). *Centisimus Annus*. Encyclical Letter on the hundredth anniversary of Rerum Novarum.
- O'Connor, R. (1995). *The Theology of Work*. Castleisland: Geoffery Chapman.
- Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2004). *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.
- Schumacher F. E. (1980). *Small is Beautiful. A study of economics as if people mattered*, London: Gracewing.
- Spiazzo, R., (1981). "Thoughts on the Encyclical Laborem Exercens. Gospel of Work and the Dignity of Man". In *Osservatore Romano*, 12<sup>th</sup> October, 9-10.
- Wojtyła, K. (1993). *Catholic Thought from Lublin. Person and Community. Selected Essays*. Sandox T. (tr). New York: Peter Lang.