



New Perspectives

TOGETHER FOR THE
COMMON GOOD

Meetup 16 April 2020

The New Perspectives Network, the youth branch of Together for the Common Good, held their first Zoom discussion group on Thursday 16th April. We focussed on the theme of the Dignity of Work and the Common Good. The session was led by Joanne Rolling whose briefing notes are shared here.

Dignity of Work and the Common Good

While the ethical and sociological questions around employment have been particularly dynamic since the new millennium, the acute and ongoing disruption to the labour market induced by the COVID-19 lockdown has made it an urgent issue.

Our discussion revolved around four areas:

- 1 the Christian anthropology of work
- 2 the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on employment
- 3 the use of artificial intelligence systems as a substitute for human labour
- 4 the emergence of the so-called 'gig economy'

1) WORK AND CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

There are two errors concerning the anthropology of labour. The first error is that work is nothing but a burden to be evaded and useless in itself; this was the view of the ancient Greeks. The second error is that work is the main source of one's personal value or meaning in life; this view is seen to some extent in our own society.

In contrast, the Christian understanding elevates work to a 'good' but subordinates it as a 'created good' which can only find its ultimate end in reference to God. The Christian understanding is one of integration: its approach avoids both the compartmentalisation of the Greeks and the idolatry of modernity in relating the proper attitude towards human labour.

There are two key points worth reflecting on.

The first is that the modern industrial understanding of work differs from that of the Scriptural understanding of work. Whereas the former restricts the meaning of work to "paid employment", Scripture distinguishes work to encompass all forms of human labour, such as activities in the family or the voluntary sector.

The second point is that our work can share in the creative and redemptive life of God. The whole life (integrity) of a person can participate in God's life through grace. This means that work can be sanctified – 'made holy'. When our work is a source of joy, it can share in the life-giving creativity of God. When our work is a source of pain, it can share in the redemptive suffering of Christ.

Common Good Principles:

- The *dignity of the human being*, as made in the image of God
 - The *dignity of labour*, as an act of stewardship and cooperation with God
- Catholic Social Thought supports measures such as the existence of trade unions, a living wage, holiday leave and periods of rest (traditionally Sundays) during the working week.

Questions:

- 1) Do you consider the act of God 'creating' (Genesis 1) to be an example of work?
- 2) Meaningful work is an idea rooted in a specifically Christian anthropology. How do you think work relates to your sense of personal meaning?
- 3) How does your work interconnect with your faith - do you experience them as compartmentalised spheres of your life or as an integrated lifestyle?

2) WORK AND THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

The COVID-19 lockdown has had, and will continue to have, significant ramifications on the labour market. There are three key trends:

The first is the largescale temporary transition to a *remote workforce*. This has compressed the typical boundary between the workplace and the home which has been characteristic of industrial society.

The second point is that the burdens of the lockdown have largely fallen on traditional **social class** fault lines, with those already vulnerable to financial stress from income instability, low wages and few legal protections being the ones to endure the brunt of the economic shock. While there has been a wave of social sentiment (see the weekly "Clap for NHS Carers" tributes) which has washed over our key workers, there has been little or nothing delivered in tangible economic benefits such as higher wages, better working traditions or job security. Workers in occupations such as healthcare and supermarket retailers have actually seen a decrease in their working conditions, with longer working hours and postponed annual leave for shop workers and a lack of personal protective equipment for healthcare workers.

The third occurrence is the *largescale state intervention* in the labour market through the Government's Job Retention Scheme for temporarily furloughed workers.

Common Good Principles:

- *Respect for life* - prioritising the care of the sick and elderly
 - *Solidarity* - a shared experience, as every person has been affected in some capacity by the lockdown measures
 - *Human equality* – fair opportunities to access basic necessities such as healthcare and food.
- Catholic Social Thought supports *justice and distributive justice* - ensuring that our key workers have sufficient protection and remuneration for their contribution.

Questions:

- 1) How do you think the lockdown's effects have highlighted pre-existing vulnerabilities in UK society? For example, the lack of monetary savings among businesses and households, or the lack of social support networks.
- 2) How do you think the COVID-19 virus will affect the welfare state? Will we see a renewed effort and enthusiasm to sustain welfare, or a new wave of public austerity as the Government faces higher unemployment, lower tax receipts and increased debt?
- 3) Is the increased demand on state financial support changing the narratives and stereotypes of welfare claimants?
- 4) Walter Scheidel's book *The Great Leveller* argues that inequality declines with the onset of major disasters as the fortunes of the rich are decimated and the wealth gap is flattened. To what extent do you think our current crisis will lessen or widen gaps in economic inequality?
- 5) Do you think the financial damage to business caused by the lockdown will accelerate the move towards substituting human labour with automated systems?
- 6) How has the move to remote working challenged boundaries between work and home life?
- 7) Has remote working changed our need for physical office spaces?
- 8) Do you think workplace practices / the work culture will change after the end of lockdown? In what ways?

3) ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Artificial intelligence (in the context of employment) refers to the use of computer systems to perform tasks previously done by humans. There are three key points.

The first is that AI is driven by technological sophistication and expansion and that as machines increase their ability to perform activities, this will cause some level of human displacement. While *technological displacement* is not a new phenomenon, the concerns around the next wave of automation focus on the rate of displacement and the breadth of displacement – large sectors of employment are now under threat, some in the near future.

The second point is that the probability of technological displacement is directly correlated to the level of *education* each worker has obtained. The higher one's level of education, the lower one's chances of losing a job through automation.

The third point is that where displacement has already occurred it has led to *job polarisation*, which means an increase in the shares of job roles requiring low and high levels of formal education, at the expense of those in the middle. In parallel with job polarisation, highly educated workers have increasingly clustered geographically in the United States and in other advanced economies. This has led to a *concentration of talent and opportunities* in specific, generally socially privileged, locations.

Common Good Principles:

- *Participation* - ensuring the inclusivity of the whole human family in the labour market
 - *Stewardship* - using new technologies responsibly, in a way that upholds the dignity of person's and of creation
- Catholic Social Thought supports
- *Innovation* - utilising technologies to help combat our most pressing social problems
 - *Efficiency* - minimising high risk or inefficient processes thereby helping, freeing and protecting people
 - *Humility* - respecting the limits of morality and human knowledge

Questions:

- 1) Is the genetic jackpot of high IQ now more important than ever, as the need for constant up-skilling, re-education and training and technical expertise become increasingly necessary for the workforce?
- 2) In Japan, the Government have already implemented a small number of robots to work as carers in nursing homes. Do you think the interpersonal skills of humans can be matched by automation? Could interpersonal skills become a highly marketable attribute as they are not replaceable by machines?
- 3) The Office for National Statistics predicts that women are much more likely to be in jobs vulnerable to automation (as women are typically found in a higher proportion of jobs in hospitality, retail and administration). How do you think this could impact the role of women in society?
- 4) Do you think a society with where large numbers of people engaged in less work is either likely or desirable with increased automation?

4) GIG ECONOMY

The gig economy is defined by individuals negotiating temporary contracts either on behalf of themselves (self-employment) or by selling their skills to a third party. Workers may rely on gig work as their main source of income or may supplement their salary from a traditional job with 'moonlighting', or a 'side hustle'. The is an expanding sector of employment.

There are three keys points.

The first point is that the gig economy relies to a large extent on *technology* but is not synonymous with it. While online platforms such as Uber and Deliveroo have been enormously successful, gig work is found in a wide range of employment sectors.

It is also a product of the increased *elasticity of the job market* which see employers' value the freedom and innovation of capital over stability and security for the labour force. Gig work balances the push factors of job insecurity and stagnant wages from businesses with the pull factors of a desire for meaning and autonomy from employees.

The other fundamental point is that it *changes the nature of the employee-employer relationship*. The gig economy changes the employee into a private contractor rather than a corporate asset. The nature of this relationship can relieve corporations from responsibility for workers, with the usual employment benefits such as a pension, holiday, sick or maternity pay and opportunities for training and progression subject to individual negotiation.

Common Good Principles:

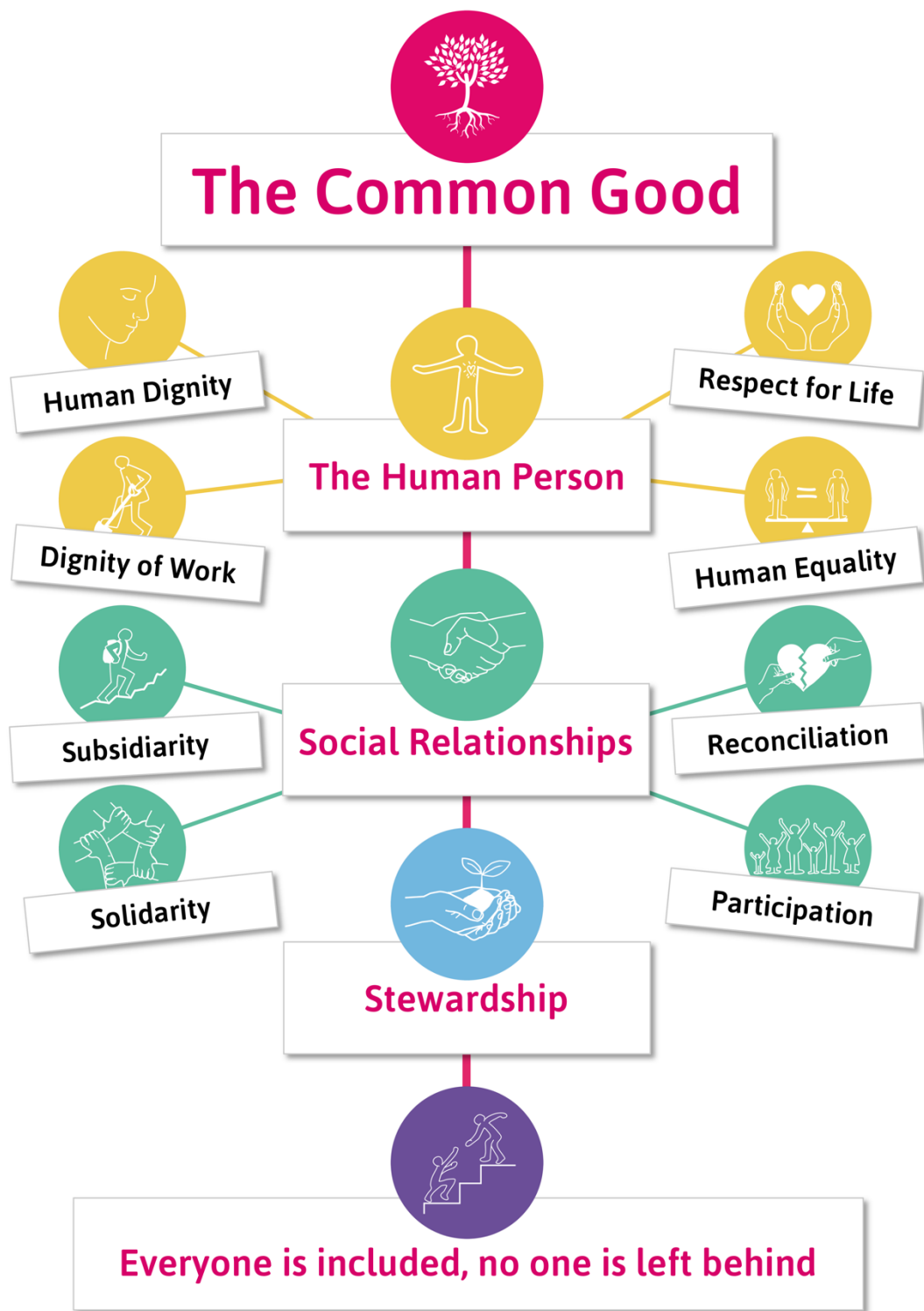
- *Subsidiarity* – gig work can minimise centralised bureaucracy and 'middlemen' and instead return power to individuals
- *Participation* - is participation only accessible to those with technological advantage? (e.g. an internet connection and a globally marketable skill).
- *Solidarity* - in Pope Leo XIII's encyclical "Of New Things", the Church recognised the inequality of the lone worker with just his or her labour to sell versus the overwhelming power of the employer or owner of the means of production. What measures need to be in place to ensure gig workers receive adequate protection?

→ Catholic Social Thought supports

- *Freedom* - gig work can allow people opportunities for creativity, ownership and self-expression in their work
- *Distributive justice* – with such wide disparities of experience and opportunities for gig workers, who are the winners and losers?

Questions:

- 1) Does the gig economy provide a case for Universal Basic Income?
- 2) Thinking about the differences across generations, how does employment stability (or the lack of it) effect traditional social milestones such as marriage, childbearing and property ownership among younger people?
- 3) The 2019 Labour general election manifesto vowed to outlaw zero-hour contracts. What are your thoughts on this pledge?
- 4) How is the gig economy challenging traditional ideas about career and success?



For more on Common Good Thinking and principles, go to:

<https://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/about/common-good-thinking>