

**A RESPONSE TO GEMMA TULUD CRUZ'S
"THEOLOGY AND (DE)HUMANIZING WORK
IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY"**

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We need to work to support our families and ourselves. Companies, businesses, organizations and other hiring bodies need employees not only to exist and advance their mission, but also to achieve their goals and thrive. In a perfect world, these two aims should not be mutually exclusive or antagonistic. They should be part of a continuum, an economy of grace and life, a social contract whose ultimate goal ought to be the flourishing of humanity and the care of the world in which we live.¹

Yet, we do not live in a perfect world. Whether we approach them from an economic, political, theological and even evolutionary perspective, it does not take long to realize that labor relationships are often fraught with inequity, power imbalances, dehumanizing instincts, and, yes, idolatry. Such realities come before our attention as theologians and as disciples of Jesus Christ. We are compelled to ask ourselves, as scholars and as people of faith, most of us drawing from the wells of the Catholic intellectual tradition, what is at stake when labor turns out to be dehumanizing and the worker as *imago dei* is constantly disfigured by the work she does or the conditions in which that work is done?

Dr. Gemma Cruz powerfully delineated for us some eye-opening and at the same time heart-wrenching realities associated with labor relationships in our contemporary world. In her analysis, she introduced us insightfully to the reality of the precariat, a large sector of humanity, who live day-by-day performing "unstable and insecure labor in jobs," barely making enough to survive in substandard conditions, and exist disenfranchised within social and political structures to which they belong yet manage, almost cruelly, to ignore their rights, sometimes their own existence.

In reflecting about the precariat and the circumstances in which they work, theologians, pastoral leaders and faith communities have an obligation to interrogate the social, economic, political, global and even religious systems that feed off each other to create inhumane conditions for millions throughout the world. Unbridled capitalism, oppressive socialist regimes, and dictatorships, among other sociopolitical political systems that gain momentum in our day, have historically demonstrated how

¹ See Francis, *Laudato Si'* (May 24, 2015), 124-219, http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

easy it is to push the most vulnerable in a society into further conditions of disadvantage, force them to migrate and even to engage in activities that are akin to contemporary forms of slavery or degrading behavior. Believing communities, and particularly theologians, must remain attentive to any effort, explicit or veiled, to coopt the Gospel and key elements of the Christian tradition to justify participation in systems that dehumanize human beings and their labor.

The precariat, with their presence and their voices, remind us constantly that sin is real and that it dehumanizes. More particularly, in understanding the reality in which the precariat work *en lo cotidiano*, the everyday, we are invited to reflect about emerging expressions of social sin. We must remain aware about efforts and practices that seek to normalize dehumanizing labor realities. Our theological community has an obligation to question, for instance, immigration policies based only on utilitarian principles that seek to attract inexpensive labor yet without regard for family reunification or the wellbeing of the immigrant; substandard hiring policies; practices that perpetuate gender inequality in terms of compensation and promotion; racism and discrimination in the workplace, etc.

The precariat, their tired and regularly exploited bodies, their relationships, their labor, the products they deliver, the circumstances and spaces where they work, all together constitute an inescapable *locus theologicus* that demands serious theological analysis in our day. We cannot escape their *realidad*. They are our neighbors. Some are our relatives. Some among us, contingent faculty, part-time instructors, unsalaried ministers, retired teachers living in poverty and surviving in the gig economy, etc., may well see themselves as such.

As a theological community, we find ourselves before the challenge of meeting the precariat face to face, confronted by their eyes, their tears, their sweat, their callous hands, their thirsty mouths, their tired feet, their sleepless eyes, and their concerned looks. Theirs are the faces, eyes, mouths, hands and feet of Christ in our midst.

We know who the precariat among us are. A quick look at our own faith communities confronts us with thousands of lay pastoral leaders, most of them women, working in Catholic parishes, organizations and schools, without pay or being severely underpaid.² About 20 percent of pastoral leaders in Catholic parishes with Hispanic ministry are not paid, yet work the equivalent to full time jobs or close to it.³ A quiet practice of inviting vowed religious women from Latin America, Asia and other parts of the world, sometimes priests, to serve in the United States temporarily, in cases for years, and not compensating them appropriately or not providing them with basic

² The Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) estimated that in 2010 about 34 percent of Lay Ecclesial Ministers earned \$22,000 or less annually per year for their ministry. A survey of Lay Ecclesial Ministers in 2012 reveal that 27 percent of respondents “reported ministry and income wages at or below the poverty level for a family of four in that year.” See Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, *Research Review: Lay Ecclesial Ministers in the United States*. Washington, DC: CARA, 2015, 20; available online at <https://cara.georgetown.edu/lemsummit.pdf>.

³ See Hosffman Ospino, *Hispanic Ministry in Catholic Parishes: A Summary Report of Findings from the National Study of Catholic Parishes with Hispanic Ministry*, Boston College (2015), 22. Available online at <https://www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/schools/stm/pdf/2014/BC-NatStudyParishesHM-Rep1-201405.pdf>.

worker's benefits, including health care, borders the scandalous. If we are going to talk about labor and justice, we must start at home.

We cannot claim innocence or naively assume that what Dr. Cruz describes is someone else's concern. Nearly forty million people in our society live in poverty. Millions more live close to the poverty level and, when looking at the conditions in which they work, they are clearly among the precariat. What we should not miss from such a general statistic is that the majority of those who live in poverty and must labor under precarious conditions in our country are women and men from minoritized communities.

It is no accident that about 25.4 percent of Native American people, 20.8 percent of Black people, and 17.8 percent of Hispanic/Latino people live in poverty. There is a history of oppression and disenfranchisement of minoritized communities for which we must account. We need to accept also with humility and repentance any complicity of church leaders, faithful, organizations and communities, Catholic and non-Catholic, in that history.⁴ Considerations about the sin of racism must be part of our theological reflection about labor. It will be irresponsible to think theologically about labor in the United States of America and ignore the centuries of slavery that African Americans experienced and the consequences of that evil. We cannot turn a blind eye to the fact that even in our day white supremacy and white privilege continues to define many of our relationships in our society and in our church. It will be irresponsible to think theologically about labor in the United States of America and ignore the expropriation of land, denial of rights, and the systemic marginalization that Native Americans have endured until our day. It will be irresponsible to think theologically about labor in the United States of America and ignore how Mexican-Americans have been treated in this country since 1848, or the effects of the annexation of Puerto Rico as a U.S. colony since 1898, or the experience of nearly 11 million alternatively documented immigrants, the vast majority of them from Mexico and Latin America.

The presence of alternatively documented immigrants offers an important opportunity for us as Catholic theologians in the United States to reflect not only about labor, but also about what it means to be church. The majority of these women and men are Roman Catholic and they are among the faithful injecting new air and new hope with their faith and their young families to thousands of Catholic parishes nationwide.

Most farmworkers in this country are Hispanic/Latino and most are alternatively documented immigrants. Even though they are the backbone of entire faith communities and of industries such as agriculture and construction, we still manage as a society, and many times as a church, to render them invisible. We eat the fruit of their work, experience their care, benefit from their daily sacrifices, and yet fail to treat them as fully human. In a profoundly sacramental way, in the liturgy of their daily experience and their bodies diminished, sometimes broken by their toils, they invite us to experience a form of ecclesial communion with profound Eucharist dimensions.

Here I return to Dr. Cruz's address. She makes an invitation to affirm Christianity's "incarnational attunement," and she rightly suggests that we do this by

⁴ See Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2019).

contemplating how the precariat refuse to separate the materiality and embodiment of life from our moral and spiritual concerns. Echoing Christine Firer Hinze, she argues, “Incarnational attunement further dictates that economic processes, however complex and expansive (e.g. global chains of production, exchange, and consumption), remain attentive and accountable to the situations and needs of embodied persons, local communities, and particular cultures from whence they spring, on whom they depend, and whose welfare they influence.”⁵ Such incarnational attunement, I would argue building upon her insights, is an excellent antidote to a culture that practices a form of pragmatic Docetism when looking at questions of labor. By this I mean, a culture that overly focuses on the good of products and outcomes, financial gain, personal and corporate growth, yet pretends to do this while treating human workers as cogs in a machine, without regard for their dignity as persons and their being images of the divine in our midst. Ours would certainly be a more solidary society, and our faith communities more authentic spaces of communion, if we were more “incarnationally attuned” to the daily and embodied experience of alternatively documented immigrants.

Dr. Cruz has given us much food for thought about a theology of labor in a world in which the presence of the precariat, whoever they are in our midst, compels us to revisit how we look not only at the question of labor, but also about what it means to be church in a globalized world. For that, I am grateful. Dr. Cruz rightly notes that, “Traditional Christian theologies of work are anchored on the two interrelated themes of vocation and co-creation.”⁶ Yet, she observes that when applied to the experience of the precariat, such categories are largely inadequate. My take on the observation is that they still have some potential. I would not want to advance a full-fledged Christian, Catholic theology of labor without exploring more intentionally these classic concepts of vocation and co-creation. My sense is that contemporary theological reflections on vocation and eco-theology may be good entry points to update, perhaps redeem such categories in light of contemporary realities. We have a clear agenda that calls for, as Dr. Cruz says, “uncommon courage,” and I look forward to the conversations this interchange and the responses the topic of this convention will generate into the future.

⁵ Gemma Tulud Cruz, “(De)Humanizing Work in the Twenty-First Century,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 75 (2021): 12; see Christine Firer Hinze, *Glass Ceilings and Dirt Floors: Women, Work, and the Global Economy* (Mahwah: Paulist, 2015), 39.

⁶ Cruz, “(De)Humanizing Work in the Twenty-First Century,” 8.