

**A RESPONSE TO DAVID CLOUTIER'S "THE  
WORKERS' PARADISE: ETERNAL LIFE,  
ECONOMIC ESCHATOLOGY, AND GOOD WORK  
AS THE KEYS TO SOCIAL ETHICS"**

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**SHIFTING THE BALANCE:  
THE WORK BEFORE US**

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Thank you very much to David Cloutier for this illuminating paper, and I'm grateful to our president-elect Christine Firer Hinze for inviting me to respond. David, your paper has rightly identified and begun to redress the need for an adequate teleology of work in Catholic thought. I very much agree that indolence and the consumption of goods is a vision of human flourishing that Catholic thought can't abide. Your own work on luxury demonstrates the economically and morally destructive impact of using goods for status competition or meaningless entertainment. You make the provocative assertion that redistributive anti-scarcity policies are actually promoting a "consumerist eschatology, that the universal destination of goods means *as little work as possible*." My response will challenge this assertion. It seems to me that such proposals do include work in their vision of the well lived human life, and rather advocate a shift in balance: *less* time for waged work, *more* time for the other creative, purposeful, self-transformative activities that Catholic social thought also defines as work.

I very much appreciate your point that simply focusing on "good-enough work" is an unsatisfyingly minimalist task for Catholic ethics. To help us proactively envision work as it should and can be, you propose that good work offers autonomy and collaboration, a sense of positive impact in the world and even sometimes fun. Sacramental work involves self-gift and points beyond itself to higher order goods such as God and our loving human relationships. As you envision how work can be good and even sacramental, by "work" you mostly seem to mean work done for wages. Because it's important to my response, I want to highlight that of course the understanding of work found in the Catholic tradition is broader than that. The tradition envisions work as creative, purposeful, and at its best, self-transformative human activity. Work occurs when we humans act on God's creation, and this includes

activities which only alter ourselves—like studying, as I tell my students—since we are part of creation, too.<sup>1</sup> Work existed long before wages were a common way to meet basic needs, and continues to be done without wages in diverse settings all over the globe. The most obvious example of this is, of course, the childcare, food provision and all other types of unpaid work in the home, which the Catholic Social Teaching (CST) tradition has always recognized as work even as it long assigned these tasks exclusively to women.<sup>2</sup> The tradition also properly recognizes as “work” the activities of artists, entrepreneurs, volunteers and community activists, whether or not these activities are how they meet their basic needs.<sup>3</sup>

David, you argue that the Catholic social tradition envisions the universal destination of goods as coming about through labor. Here, too, I read the tradition differently. I’ve argued elsewhere, and can only sketch here, that the papal social encyclicals uphold both a duty to work and a right to meet basic needs, but do not insist that one depend on the other.<sup>4</sup> In fact, there are places where the documents explicitly reject the idea that earning a living should depend on waged work.<sup>5</sup> When the tradition calls for redistribution to support basic needs, this does not contradict, but presupposes its expansive definition of work as a duty. Redistributing goods to support the livelihoods of families and communities *is* placing goods at the service of labor,

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<sup>1</sup> Francis, *Laudato Si’* (May 24, 2015), 25, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html) (hereafter cited as *LS*); John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (September 14, 1981), 9, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091981\\_laborem-exercens\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens_en.html) (hereafter cited as *LE*).

<sup>2</sup> See the indispensable Christine Firer Hinze, *Glass Ceilings and Dirt Floors: Women, Work, and the Global Economy*, 2014 Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Francis Hannafey, SJ, “Entrepreneurship in Papal Thought: Creation of Wealth and the DIstribution of Justice,” in *Rediscovering Abundance: Interdisciplinary Essays on Wealth, Income, and Their Distribution in the Catholic Social Tradition*, ed. Helen Alford et al. (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 102–28; Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965), 57, 59, 62, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html) (hereafter cited as *GS*); *LS* 232; though obviously not an encyclical, Pope Francis, “Letter to Members of Social Movements” (April 12, 2020), <https://movimientospopulares.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2020.04.06-Social-Mov.-Easter-ENG.pdf>, explicitly discusses community organizing as work and highlights the fact that such valuable work does not always supply the worker’s basic needs.

<sup>4</sup> Kate Ward, “Universal Basic Income and Work in Catholic Social Thought,” *American Journal of Economics & Sociology* 79, no. 4 (September 2020): 1271–1306.

<sup>5</sup> Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno* (May 15, 1931), 57, [https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xi\\_enc\\_19310515\\_quadragesimo-anno.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19310515_quadragesimo-anno.html) (hereafter cited as *QA*), *LE* 19 (“a *practical* means”...) as well as in the longstanding expectation that women will receive their basic needs from a wage-earning man. As I’ve written elsewhere (Ward, “Universal Basic Income and Work in Catholic Social Thought,” 1291), “it strains credulity to say that a mother who cares for her children at home does so *in order to* fulfill her basic needs,” and quite properly, the papal tradition does not say this.

because tending kids, supporting elders, and running community meetings *is* work, and those who do this work deserve support.

Do redistributive policies promise a world with as little work as possible? I would say some almost go to the other extreme. For example, President Biden’s jobs and families plans frame redistribution as something that increases labor force participation and economic productivity.<sup>6</sup> This is an eschatological vision with both more consumption *and* more work. But let’s look at eschatologies that openly challenge that all too common vision. I still find that even those who openly call for less work, or flat-out embrace the label “anti-work,” are not truly envisioning the passive, consumption-focused “Wall-E world” you depict. What they envision is a shift in balance, where paid work coexists with, and doesn’t obliterate, the equally important creative, purposeful, self-transformative activity that is rarely, if ever, paid.

For example, Christine Firer Hinze shows that while economists tend to observe and measure only work that is waged, unpaid care work in the home contributes immense value to the formal economy. The failure to recognize care work as work devalues human embodiment and consigns women, especially, to a punishing double shift. For Hinze, societies must “value and adequately provide for care” and recognize that many adults today work both in waged jobs and at home.<sup>7</sup> In her book *Radical Sufficiency*, Hinze examines different redistributive policies, like minimum wage and universal basic income.<sup>8</sup> None promise as little work as possible, when work is taken in the expansive Catholic sense. Rather, they offer incremental improvements: from work without dignity to good-enough work, from good-enough work to good work, or they allow workers to shift the balance of their time away from paid work toward the crucial and undervalued work that needs doing at home.

Other perspectives explicitly call for decoupling waged work from basic needs, but do so in order to highlight the immense value of unwaged work to society and to the worker. As early as the 1960s, women of color-led movements like Welfare Warriors, here in Milwaukee, and the international organization Wages for Housework demanded pay for caregivers caring for dependents.<sup>9</sup> (And of course, John Paul II joined them in 1986 with his call in *Laborem Exercens* for family grants [LE 19].) Wages for Housework founder Selma James recently wrote, “Women did not form a movement to eliminate caring but the dependence, isolation, servitude, invisibility and almost universal discrimination that society imposes on the unwaged carer.”<sup>10</sup> In other

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<sup>6</sup> “FACT SHEET: The American Jobs Plan,” The White House, March 31, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/31/fact-sheet-the-american-jobs-plan/>; “Fact Sheet: The American Families Plan,” The White House, April 28, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/04/28/fact-sheet-the-american-families-plan/>. Republican Mitt Romney’s rationale for his Family Security Act avoids pro-work language, discussing the importance of allowing parents to stay home with children—in other words, recognizing that not all “work” is done outside the home for wages.

<sup>7</sup> Hinze, *Glass Ceilings and Dirt Floors*, 106, 113–14.

<sup>8</sup> Christine Firer Hinze, *Radical Sufficiency: Work, Livelihood, and a US Catholic Economic Ethic* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2021).

<sup>9</sup> “Mission,” Welfare Warriors, accessed June 8, 2021, <http://www.welfarewarriors.org/mission.htm>.

<sup>10</sup> Selma James, “The Wages for Housework Campaign Began in 1972, yet We Are Still Working for Free,” *Independent (UK)*, March 9, 2020, <http://0->

words, activists in the Wages for Housework tradition do not want a world without work, in the expansive, Catholic sense. They simply want their own care work recognized as work and compensated accordingly.

Theologian Jeremy Posadas makes a kindred move when he embraces the lens of “anti-work theory.” Anti-work theory “rejects the moral norm . . . that the proper way to have access to the necessities of life is through constant waged work and, therefore, one’s moral worthiness depends on actively participating in the work-system.”<sup>11</sup> Yet, despite Posadas’s deep and trenchant criticism of an economy where waged work is compulsory for survival, his concrete solutions differ little from Catholic social thought proposals to support workers and families. They include universal basic income, unions for workers, and even assistance with childcare for those parents who work outside the home. That’s right: even in Posadas’s explicitly anti-work eschatology, not only does care work continue, but even waged jobs still exist—albeit with improved conditions and protections.<sup>12</sup>

Even if these systematic thinkers don’t envision a world without work, should we worry that decoupling basic needs from waged labor wouldn’t, as a knock-on effect, also eliminate *unpaid* creative, purposeful activity? Well, maybe. But here I draw an anthropological clue from the natural experiment of the past year. Amid COVID lockdowns, people with the vast privilege of staying home could easily have retreated into Wall-E World, stuck to the couch and hooked on streaming media. Instead, as was widely observed, those privileged enough to be hermits turned their excess free time to activities Catholic social thought understands as work: cooking and baking, learning new skills, forming mutual aid groups and marching for Black Lives. There was an echo of what we see in pilot tests of universal basic income, where the extra cushion allows recipients to spend more time in school, improving their health, and caring for children.<sup>13</sup> Don’t get me wrong: of course quarantine is not the eschaton. It never could be when so much of the human family is still in danger, in precarity, or mourning those lost. All I’m saying is that the Catholic worldview should not be surprised to find that when basic needs are met, sinful yet graced human beings spend extra time in creative, purposeful, self-transformative activity—that is, “good work.”

You are right, of course, that we need to be mindful of our structures as we think about the kind of society we choose to build. In my view, redistributive proposals, far from offering an eschatology with as little work as possible, can hold the key to shifting the balance in favor of the kind of “good work” that is often unpaid and must compete for time with the paid work we do to meet basic needs. If people can get by with fewer hours engaged in paid work, they will have more time and mental bandwidth to spend

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<sup>11</sup> Jeremy D. Posadas, “Reproductive Justice Re-Constructs Christian Ethics of Work,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 40, no. 1 (2020): 113–14, <https://doi.org/10.5840/jsce202052028>; See also Jeremy Posadas, “The Refusal of Work in Christian Ethics and Theology,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 45, no. 2 (June 2017): 330–61.

<sup>12</sup> Posadas, “Reproductive Justice Re-Constructs Christian Ethics of Work,” 122.

<sup>13</sup> Livia Gershon, “What Happens to Kids When You Give Families a Universal Basic Income?,” *JSTOR Daily*, March 27, 2015, <https://daily.jstor.org/what-happens-to-kids-when-you-give-families-a-universal-basic-income/>; Rebecca Hasdell, “What We Know About Universal Basic Income: A Cross-Synthesis Of Reviews,” *Stanford Basic Income Lab*, n.d., 27.

on the types of work that care for the vulnerable and build up communities, creating the “norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness” that sociologists call “social capital.”<sup>14</sup> When Robert Putnam chronicled the decline in social capital among US people in the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he wrote that “for many people, part-time work is the best of both worlds”—allowing workers to connect with others at the workplace and elsewhere in their communities.<sup>15</sup> Redistributive policies that decouple basic needs from the performance of paid work could support family care of kids and vulnerable adults, while allowing artists, students and community organizers to focus on their important work instead of the hustle for basic needs.

A world where people can meet basic needs without filling their waking hours with waged work is deeply resonant with the vision of Catholic social thought, in fact, arguably more so than the US *status quo* where even maternity leave is a minority privilege.<sup>16</sup> So, far from making waged work compulsory, the Catholic tradition has historically envisioned that at least half of the adults in a family would not work for pay, but instead do the important work of family care and community building.<sup>17</sup> While we rightly reject the earlier assumption that home-workers would all be women, let’s not lose the central point that waged work was never imagined as universally normative.<sup>18</sup> When the Catholic tradition speaks of work as a human good and a duty, it has never meant only work for pay, nor envisioned waged work as the price of the right to basic needs.<sup>19</sup>

David, you have urged us to create more “good work,” which is autonomous, collaborative and makes a positive impact. Certainly much remains to be done to create the conditions for waged labor that can be good or even sacramental. But for me, a Catholic lens on work reveals that the good work we have to do is already before us. Many parents would like to spend more time with their kids, but can’t afford to. Many communities have problems that patient organizing by local leaders could solve. Artists of every type have world-changing visions to share, if only they had the time and the resources. The need for local journalists, experienced teachers, and rural health care workers is no less acute because communities can’t manage to pay them enough to live on. Our so-called post-scarcity society has made progress on feeding the hungry, but not much on visiting those in prison or providing listening ears to the lonely. Pretty

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<sup>14</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 19.

<sup>15</sup> Putnam, 406–7.

<sup>16</sup> Ashley Welch, “Number of U.S. Women Taking Maternity Leave Unchanged for Two Decades,” CBS News, January 19, 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/number-of-u-s-women-taking-maternity-leave-unchanged-for-two-decades/>.

<sup>17</sup> Kate Ward, “Catholic Teaching Changes: Women in the Workplace,” *Women In Theology* (blog), August 23, 2019, <https://womenintheology.org/2019/08/23/catholic-teaching-changes-women-in-the-workplace/>.

<sup>18</sup> Hinze and Pope Francis are right that both men and women can have important roles in home-work or paid work and should be supported by society in either role or both. Hinze, *Glass Ceilings and Dirt Floors*, 108–10; Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (March 19, 2016), 286, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20160319\\_amoris-laetitia\\_en.pdf](http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Christine Firer Hinze, “Women, Families, and the Legacy of ‘Laborem Exercens’: An Unfinished Agenda,” *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 6, no. 1 (2009): 63–92.

much everybody would like to better care for their own bodies, be lifelong learners, and give back in their communities. If these are privileges, and often they are, it's because of inequitable financial resources, but also because many working people simply don't have the time. Yes, we should do what we can to turn good-enough work into good work. But we can also use redistribution to free people from good-enough work so they can do the good work that's already before us.

The work before us can't be automated. Being done for and with others we know and love, it defies being instrumentalized. I would argue that the work before us, the work of family care, community building and artistic creation, may even be the most likely work to be experienced as sacramental. This is precisely because it takes place within those relationships where we most often encounter God, when we work as Jesus did with our friends, our family and the needy at our own gates. The best way we can offer people opportunities to do deeply needed, meaningful and potentially sacramental work is to reduce their survival dependence on waged labor that is least likely to be any of those things. Redistributive policies are a realistic, authentically Catholic way to enable more workers to shift the balance: less waged work for survival, more time to be about the work before us.