

## CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT – TOPIC SESSION

Topic: “All You Who Labor...”: Theology, Work, and Economy  
 Convener: Kate Ward, Marquette University  
 Moderator: William George, Dominica University  
 Presenters: Levi Checketts, Holy Names University and St. Mary’s College of California  
 Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, Fordham University  
 Matthew Gaudet, Santa Clara University

The convention theme “*“All You Who Labor...”: Theology, Work and Economy*” offered many paths to fruitful exploration of this critical area from a Catholic social thought perspective. Catholic social thought has ample material on the broad convention themes of the dignity of work, work as a vocation, just economic structures, and just wages. The administrative team sought proposals from members that responded to “the signs of the times” vis-a-vis work and the economy. These included contemporary issues such as labor and the university; mechanization/robotization; “emotional labor” and invisible labor (Arlie Hochschild); work and/in the family; work, leisure, and burnout; cooperative businesses; globalization and outsourcing; economic complicity/cooperation in evil; “Fight for 15” and other campaigns around minimum wage laws; “right to work” and other contemporary issues facing unionization. The team also welcomed proposals that took a more methodological or historical approach to Catholic social thought.

Preempted by the COVID-19 pandemic, the team also initially invited members to propose issues germane to US politics and the election year of 2020. These included papers that discussed democracy, participation, class issues, “resentment” along various demographic lines, individualism, polarization, “fake news,” the culture of life/death (2020 was the twenty-fifth anniversary year of *Evangelium Vitae*). Finally, before downsizing the 2020 convention and pivoting to a virtual convention for 2021, the administrative team hoped that the 2020 location along the once-infamously polluted Cuyahoga River would inspire proposals on Catholic social thought and environment, perhaps with connection to work and economy as well. In the end, the administrative team invited three members to present their research.

Levi Checketts presented a paper entitled “The Harvest is Ready: Christian Work in a Post-Labor Society.” Checketts asked a critical question: “How does our faith articulate the dignity of labor in a world where many forms of labor are no longer materially necessary for survival?” Advances in robotics and AI will potentially end the need for human drudgery in the near future. In such a world, the question of how humanity lives comes clearly to the fore. Labor for survival will be superfluous, but for Christians, the work still remains. In a post-labor society, the Christian call to be kingdom builders laboring is more pressing: Christians will build God’s kingdom through evangelization, art, activism, works of mercy, and other tasks in pursuit of a more just common good.

In Barbara Hilkert Andolsen’s paper, “Unions for All, Justice for All,” she amplified Pope Francis’ teaching on unions. In line with Catholic social thought, the holy father has taught that good labor organizations are necessary for the common

good. Ominously, Hilkert Andolsen observed that union membership continues its long decline in the United States, contributing to anemic wage growth, loss of key benefits, and lesser wages and benefits for nonunionized workers, too. The Service Workers International Union (SEIU), the second-largest US labor union, recently announced a Unions for All campaign—a parallel to its participation in the fight for a \$15/hour wage. This presentation examined whether Catholic scholars and institutions have an obligation to support some or all of the goals of the SEIU’s Unions for All Campaign.

Matthew Gaudet’s PowerPoint turned attendees’ attention towards the labor inequities in the Academy. Gaudet’s presentation, “Catholic Social Thought and Working Conditions in Academic Theology,” reviewed significant research already completed and proposed strategies for the future. In 2019, the Society of Christian Ethics Task Force on Contingency (in partnership with the Catholic Theological Society of America and ten other scholarly societies) surveyed theology and religious studies faculty’s labor status and working conditions. The study gathered over 2000 responses and offered great insight into the present state of academic theology as a profession. Gaudet’s paper reviewed the significant findings of the survey in light of Catholic Social Teaching and the mission of Catholic higher education.

The conversation which followed these presentations noted the intersectionality of the three papers. Attendees shared the urgency of the presenters to examine more closely on a systemic level the critical evolving labor concerns that Checketts, Hilkert Andolsen, and Gaudet raised. Further, the insights and wisdom from Catholic social teaching, all concurred, provided an understanding of a just and inclusive common good that would enhance meaningful conversations regarding contemporary expressions of labor.

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