

Work for God's sake!

Might economic crisis help us re-discover the true purpose of work? (FIBQ – June 2012)

It seems impossible to turn on the TV evening news these days without being confronted yet again with the faltering economies of Europe, teetering on the brink of collapse under the weight of debt accrued by some of its less affluent nations. Billions upon billions of Euros are being poured into the ever deepening financial hole, in desperate attempts to shore up the system. Politicians are putting a brave face on it, some are even becoming somewhat aggressive in their attempts to justify their actions, but questions are being asked of our economic order that have never been asked before. Most of us probably never even realised that our nation has a triple A credit rating; suddenly our future seems to depend on it.

These various interventions, we are told, are necessary in order to maintain a functional economic order, without which we would not be able to manufacture and trade and earn. Work is portrayed as an economic activity that depends upon economics for its existence. This is language that we have become used to in recent years; even the distinction between those who have employment and those who do not, has increasingly been expressed as whether or not an individual is “economically active”.

Few people in our contemporary society would argue with the basic premise that we work in order to earn. Economic well-being seems to be its principle end; when we speak of someone “getting a good job”, what we normally mean is not that they have become engaged in virtuous activity, but that they are doing something that pays them well. But for the people of Greece, Spain and an increasing number of other European nations, their economic activity is becoming increasingly concerned with generating sufficient revenue to repay their escalating national debt, rather than realising any personal benefit.

In a world that tells us “we work in order to earn”, this must raise serious questions as to what is the point of continuing to do it. Working to stave off the collapse of our public services and national infrastructure might be

something of an incentive, but it hardly seems a brilliant one.

For most people in our own nation, the world economic crisis has largely impacted our working lives by requiring us to work a few years more before we can retire and draw our pensions. The rhetoric that has surrounded the various protests against this has been interesting. Few have welcomed it as the opportunity to remain in a meaningful and fulfilling vocation for some further years, rather work has become depicted as a kind of penal sentence from which release has unfairly been delayed.

But perhaps this is not all bad news, particularly for people of faith. The argument that work is primarily and almost exclusively an economic pursuit is a relatively new one. We only have to look at the language that describes some of the older and more traditional business institutions to recognise that they were formed as “companies”. This is an expression of community, sometimes embracing a familial dimension through terms like “Joe Smith and sons”. Work is an expression of our humanity, it is something that generates and expresses a common bond between us as we engage together in common purpose with fellow citizens.

It is also a reflection of our identity as beings made in the image of God. The early accounts of Genesis, depict humanity as the crown of God's creation, given charge of the natural order and tasked with its care and oversight. These are the earliest roots of this human enterprise that we call work, and even though affected by what classical theology describes as “the fall” – its impact was to diminish our capacity for work, and increase its physical cost on us, not to suddenly make it a necessary evil.

Perhaps as other explanations and accounts of the purpose of work show themselves to be increasingly questionable and unpopular, the world of business might find itself irresistibly drawn back to a faith based perspective on human endeavour. Whether or not it yields an eye-watering Christmas bonus, or manages to keep our nation's economy afloat, might the workforces of future decades find themselves instead, boarding commuter trains or signing on for the early shift, because they believe that what they are doing is part and parcel of what it means to be human?