

Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called

St Paul's Letter to the Ephesians 4:1 (NRSV).

The dignity of work in the context of a labour shortage

Since 1974, the Québec Assembly of Catholic Bishops has published its “Message for May 1st” for International Workers Day and the Feast of St. Joseph the Worker, their patron saint. Many of the messages address the impoverishment and vulnerability of workers, especially women; increasingly inhuman working conditions; the plight of those who migrate to find work; and the imperative of solidarity with the unemployed.

In these early years of the 2020s, it is not jobs that are lacking in Quebec, but people who are available to fill vacancies, even as the economy continues to grow. We are experiencing a labour shortage that may last for several years.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ and the social teachings of the Church, which are our trustworthy reference-points in addressing poverty and injustice, contribute to our understanding of this new shortage of labour. This new scarcity does not immediately bring about an end to poverty, injustice, and inequality, but creates in turn a new set of sufferings. By calling us to place *love of God and love of neighbour*¹ at the centre of our lives, these two sources, the Gospel and the Church's social teaching, help us to identify attitudes to adopt and actions to take in this situation.

Causes for the shortage

The causes of the shrinking labour market are complex. The Institut du Québec, for example, identifies two long-term structural factors (the aging of the population, and the digital revolution) and three situational factors related to the Covid-19 pandemic (income support programs; border closures; and doubts, uncertainties, and changes of plans due to the health crisis). Other analysts add that difficult working conditions and low wages in several sectors are important contributing factors².

In the fall of 2021, the Quebec government announced several measures to offset the current labour shortage in the medium- and long-term³. As Christians, we welcome this effort, while putting forward certain concerns that must be kept in mind when crafting socio-economic policies.

1. *Gospel according to St Mark*, 12:29-31.

2. Catherine Couturier, “[La pénurie de main-d'œuvre, plus qu'une question de salaire](#)” [“The labour shortage is not just about wages”], *Le Devoir*, 16 October 2021. (Resource in French).

3. Government of Québec, [Opération main-d'œuvre. Mesures ciblées pour des secteurs prioritaires](#) [“Operation Labour. Targeted strategies for priority sectors”], 30 November 2021. (Resource in French).

The Christian vision of work

These concerns arise from the very *dignity* of human work⁴. We see work not as a mere commodity, or an impersonal element in the organization of production, but as a right and duty, with a social dimension. The goal of human work is the growth of the human person; it is an essential expression of every person created in the image and likeness of God, author of the created world. Any response to the labour shortage must propose to humanize work, and for this it is essential to reflect on what really matters, in order to promote the good of the human person.

This phenomenon calls into question the destiny that we reserve, as a society, for the different generations who coexist upstream, downstream, and on the margins of the labour market, as well as in the labour force itself. The deaths that occurred in CHSLDs in the spring of 2020, far too many of them, exemplify the challenge of maintaining an adequate number of staff to ensure the quality of care required, as do the legitimate demands of daycare staff during the strikes in the fall of 2021. These examples show clearly that the humanization of working conditions is a major issue. A society like ours must ensure, through its public and private institutions, that the dignity of each person, and more particularly the most vulnerable, is respected.

Ongoing inequalities

It is notable that those occupations that provide essential services to the general public, and that are most affected by labour shortages and the pandemic, employ mainly women⁵. Persons working in the health sector, in early childhood education, primary and secondary education, social work, and community action, are often portrayed as women with a ‘calling’ to work in professions that are driven by an ethic of care. This term captures a call to serve the vulnerable, a call to which many respond with conviction and dedication, continuing in their own way the commitment of the consecrated laity and religious sisters who laid the foundations of these professions in Quebec.

While it seems vital to us to find meaning and ultimate significance in our work, we need to be mindful of the blind spots of such a celebration of self-giving, which often translates into lower salaries and less favourable working conditions than those offered in other sectors, thus endangering the right to work and the sense of justice.

Global and local implications

In many sectors, the combination of a falling birth rate and an aging population makes it more necessary than ever to resort to an immigrant workforce. Whether they are economic migrants, refugees, or asylum seekers, or temporary migrant workers, it is clear that they are not always welcomed with respect and treated with dignity. With Pope Francis, we must therefore recall four duties towards them: “welcome, protect, promote, and integrate⁶.” We must develop true empathy, a deep compassion, for those who have made the difficult decision to leave their country, especially in times of war.

In order to welcome, protect, promote and integrate properly, we must be careful not to politicize, in the partisan sense of the word, issues such as immigration thresholds and integration assistance measures. We must guard against the polarization of society at the expense of the vulnerable. Policy debates are legitimate, unavoidable, and beneficial in a democracy. They can be used to move towards a better understanding of the common good. However, when individuals and groups encourage and harden divisions over highly charged issues like immigration, the fabric of society can be damaged, and respect for people’s dignity can be threatened.

Paths forward for analysis and for action in solidarity

This socially polarized situation makes it more difficult for community groups to do the essential work of ensuring that the working conditions of migrants, in particular, are truly dignified. It also makes it more

4. Pontifical Council “Justice and Peace”, [Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church](#), 26 May 2006, chapter 6, section III (paras. 270-286).

5. Association pour la santé publique du Québec [Québec Public Health Association] and Observatoire québécois des inégalités [Quebec Centre for the Monitoring of Inequalities], [Inégalités de genre. Impact de la pandémie de Covid-19 sur la santé et la qualité de vie des femmes au Québec](#), [“Inequalities in gender. Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the health and quality of life of women in Québec”], November 2020, pp. 15-16. [Resource in French].

6. Francis, [Fratelli Tutti](#), Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship, 3 October 2020, para. 129.

difficult for organizations, including trade unions, to fight for greater social justice for all. In alliance with these groups, we must counter the individualistic view that impoverishment, precarity and the use of social assistance are the result of a lack of will or of personal courage. Rather, they should be seen as the effects of structural causes linked to the national and international socio-economic system. Such a change of perspective begins in our own daily lives, especially in our friendly discussions about current events.

We must develop a global vision of the common good and solidarity. From a social perspective, it is not enough to focus on our own groups or professions. The shortage shows that the situations of workers in all sectors are interdependent.

This social outlook on work does not suggest that persons have no individual responsibility or autonomy. Consider the fact that many people may refuse to take up available jobs because of the low wages offered and the unacceptable working conditions. This should not be seen primarily as a sign of idleness or of excessive pride, but rather as a sign of a just appreciation by these individuals of their own dignity and of the dignity of work.

These avenues of analysis and action are of direct concern to our parish and diocese communities. Forty years ago, Pope John Paul II published an encyclical letter on human work, on the ninetieth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, a historic milestone in the Church's social teaching. In his reflection on the need for solidarity movements among and with workers, John Paul II writes: "The Church is firmly committed to this cause, for she considers it her mission, her service, a proof of her fidelity to Christ, so that she can truly be the 'Church of the poor'. And the 'poor' appear under various forms; they appear in various places and at various times; in many cases they appear as a *result of the violation of the dignity of human work*⁷."

As Christians animated by a spirituality of work that responds to the imperative to love God and neighbour, we are always called to ensure that the dignity of work and the dignity of each person are respected, and to name and confront the new forms of poverty that are present in our context.

The first of May is an opportunity to renew this commitment.

The Québec Assembly of Catholic Bishops's Council on Church and Society consists of:
Mr. Frédéric Barriault, Ms. Sabrina Di Matteo, Ms. Émilie Frémont-Cloutier, Bishop René Guay, Bishop Claude Hamelin, Mr. Simon Labrecque (secretary), Bishop Marc Pelchat (president) and Ms. Sasha Valdes.

7. John Paul II, [*Laborem Exercens*](#), Encyclical Letter on Human Work, 14 September 1981, para. 8.