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Work Is Divine Activity

During the debate about immigration, the argument is frequently made that immigrants do work no one else wants. Picking tomatoes, processing chickens, cleaning motel rooms and tarring roofs typify the jobs that many immigrants do. Classified as low skill, these jobs usually pay low wages and are considered relatively unattractive work.

Ordinary Americans do the same kinds of work, but on a different scale. Most families clean their own toilets, mow their lawns, prepare food, repair their homes and occasionally do a variety of unpleasant work around the house. Work, per se, is not dignified or undignified, but rather work derives its nobility from how it is structured and compensated.

From a scriptural perspective, work is divine activity. God worked: "Since on the seventh day God was finished with the work he had been doing, he rested..." (Genesis 2:2). Jesus refers to redemption as work: "The works that the Father gave me to accomplish...testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me" (John 5:36). Yet, if work becomes structured oppressively, it dehumanizes and calls for relief: "I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry of complaint against their slave drivers...therefore I have come down to rescue them" (Exodus 3:7 & 8).

God's work is creating and redeeming, and we are invited to participate in that work. To the extent we use our creativity and talents, we help create society and contribute to the common good. To the extent we promote teamwork and community, we redeem co-workers from selfishness and isolation. For people of faith, the challenge remains to structure work so it helps workers become more human and reflects more closely divine activity.

For many low income workers, however, the work environment reflects more the oppression of ancient Egypt

than the milk and honey of the Promised Land. Low wage workers-immigrants, single mothers and members of minorities-face daily challenges to self-esteem, and with meager pay. Jobs are "dummed down" to minimize training costs, and hours are pared from full time to save benefit costs.

Barbara Ehrenreich reflected in her book, *Nickel and Dimed*, on her experience doing six low wage jobs. One of her conclusions deals with maintaining self-respect when management has the right to search your purse for pilfered goods, to demand drug testing for job interviews and to restrict free speech on the job. She cites the AFL-CIO estimate that ten thousand workers each year are fired for participating in union organizing drives.

Yet, most Americans are fair-minded. Ehrenreich cites a poll conducted in 2000 by Jobs for the Future, an employment research firm that found 94 percent of Americans agree: "people who work full-time should be able to earn enough to keep their families out of poverty."

While economists have several strategies to address the plight of the working poor, raising the minimum wage offers a logical first step. Because the federal minimum wage was last raised in 1997, 17 states plus Washington, D.C., Santa Fe and San Francisco have raised their own minimum wages above the federal \$5.15 an hour. Studies about the two raises of the federal minimum wage during the 1990s show: 1) wages of the lowest wage workers rose; 2) systematic job loss did not occur; 3) a slight reduction in poverty took place; and 4) through a "spillover effect" the workers earning slightly above minimum also benefited.

People of faith affirm the dignity of workers and oppose reducing them to a mere commodity. After all, as writer Wendell Berry asks, "What are people for?"

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The Catholic Conference of KY (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops, established in 1983. It speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 388,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK's Board of Directors.