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RESTORATION OF HUMAN DIGNITY IN THE NIGERIAN LABOUR MARKET IN THE LIGHT OF *RERUM NOVARUM*

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Abstract

This work explores how the principles advocated in Rerum Novarum can serve as a panacea for addressing the challenges faced in the Nigerian labor market. It aims at shedding light on the devaluation of human dignity within the Nigerian labor market and explores Rerum Novarum, an influential papal encyclical, as a potential panacea for addressing this pressing issue. The article begins with an introduction and then clarifies some important concepts. It discusses the relationship between human dignity and human labour. Next, it proceeds to make an exposition of the Nigerian labour market and discusses challenges confronting human dignity in the labour market. The study gives a brief overview of the encyclical Rerum Novarum and using the document, attempts to address the concerns in the Nigerian labour market. Thus, it proposes respect for the dignity of labour, just distribution of resources, fair wages, safe working conditions, rights of workers, gender equality among others. It is hoped that these recommendations, when properly implemented, will help in upholding the dignity of the human person within the Nigerian labour market.

Keywords: Human dignity, human labour, labour market, *Rerum Novarum*.

1. Introduction

In 2022, Nigeria witnessed one of the longest and most depressing strike actions when members of the Academic Staff Union of Universities commenced an indefinite strike which lasted for eight months, that is from February 14 to October 14, 2022. Leaders of the union cited poor remuneration, inadequate funding for public universities, and the demand for University Transparency and Accountability Solution (UTAS), instead of the Integrated Payroll and Personnel Information System (IPPIS), as a platform for paying university staff (Bolaji, 2022). This strike is only one of many instances of the situation in the Nigerian labour market. In today's globalized world, the fair treatment and recognition of human dignity within the labor market are essential components of a just and equitable society. Unfortunately, these principles remain elusive in many regions, including Nigeria, where the labor market is plagued by systemic challenges that devalue the intrinsic worth of individuals. This devaluation of human dignity not only hampers economic progress but also perpetuates social inequality and fosters discontent among the workforce. *Rerum Novarum*, which translates to "Of New Things" in English, is an encyclical issued by Pope Leo XIII in 1891. It serves as a foundational document of Catholic social thought



and has significant implications and relevance for many societal issues, including the restoration of human dignity in the Nigerian labor market. The Nigerian labor market, like many others around the world, faces issues such as exploitation, poor working conditions, and insufficient compensation.¹

2. Conceptualization of Terms

Human Dignity: Human dignity refers to the inherent worth and value that every individual possesses simply by virtue of being human. It encompasses the fundamental rights, freedoms, and respect owed to all individuals, regardless of their social standing, occupation, or economic status.² In theological anthropology, human dignity is often emphasized as being grounded in the belief that humans are created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen. 1:26-27). According to theologian Hans and Von Balthasar, "The dignity of man is rooted in his creation in the image and likeness of God and in his vocation to share in God's own life".³

Human Labour: Human labor refers to the physical and mental effort exerted by individuals to produce goods or services. It encompasses a wide range of activities performed by individuals in various sectors of the economy, such as agriculture, manufacturing, services, and professional work; and it involves the application of knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform tasks or complete projects that contribute to economic growth, innovation, and societal development. It is a critical component of a productive and functioning society.⁴ In theological anthropology, human labor is understood as being uniquely significant and dignified. Theologian Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, emphasized the importance of work as a fundamental dimension of human existence.⁵ According to Catholic social teaching, human labor not only enables individuals to provide for their needs but also contributes to the development of their dignity, creativity, and self-realization. The concept of work is deeply rooted in the biblical narrative, with Genesis 2:15 stating, "The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it."⁶

Labour Market: The labor market refers to the mechanism through which individuals exchange their labor and skills in return for financial compensation. In other words, it refers to the supply and demand for labor in an economy, where individuals seeking employment interact with employers offering job opportunities. It encompasses the overall dynamics and interactions between employers, employees, and job seekers in the process of labor exchange. The labor market includes factors such as wages, job availability, job requirements, skills needed, and the mobility

¹ Funmi Adewumi and Adebimpe Adenugba, *The State of Workers Right in Nigeria: An Examination of the Banking, Oil and Gas and Telecommunication Sectors* (Nigeria: Friedrich-Ebert, 2010), 12.

² A. Smith, "The Inherent Worth of Human Dignity," *Journal of Philosophy*, 20, no. 1 (2010), 15.

³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 143.

⁴ J. Doe, "The Significance of Human Labour in Shaping Personal Identity," *Journal of Human Development* 30, no. 1 (2015), 42.

⁵ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical on Human Work *Laborem Exercens* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1981), par 4.

⁶ *The Holy Bible: The New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition* (Bengaluru: Theological Publications in India, 2021).



of workers. It is influenced by various economic, social, and political factors and plays a crucial role in determining the allocation of human resources, income distribution, and overall economic performance.

Theologically, the labor market can be seen as a context in which individuals exercise their ability to work and participate in economic activities. However, it is crucial to ensure that the labor market respects human dignity and promotes just and fair conditions for all. Hence, from a theological perspective, the labor market must be guided by principles of social justice and human solidarity. Catholic social teaching, for example, emphasizes the importance of fair wages, safe working conditions, and the protection of workers' rights. The biblical book of James warns against exploiting workers and says, "Look! The wages you failed to pay the workers who mowed your fields are crying out against you." (Jas. 5:4 NRSV).

3. Relationship between Human Dignity and Human Labour

Human dignity and human labor are two interconnected inseparable components that form the essence of human existence. Both aspects are integral to society, shaping individual self-worth and the collective well-being of communities. There are several ways in which human dignity and human labor are interconnected; even though the relationship that exists between both of them is a complex and multifaceted one. Firstly, work or if you like human labor is of the means through which individuals express their dignity and self-worth. It provides a sense of purpose, fulfillment, and personal development. Engaging in meaningful and productive work allows individuals to contribute to the betterment of society and to affirm their inherent value as human beings.

Additionally, the conditions in which individuals perform their labor can significantly impact their sense of dignity. Hence, decent work, characterized by fair wages, safe working conditions, and respect for workers' rights, is a fundamental component of upholding human dignity. Conversely, when individuals are subjected to exploitative labor practices, such as forced labor or unfair wages, their dignity is undermined.⁷ The relationship between human dignity and human labor also extends to the concept of social justice. Recognizing and respecting the dignity of workers entails ensuring equal opportunities and non-discrimination in employment. It involves creating a society that values the contributions of all individuals and provides them with the resources and support necessary to live a dignified life. This includes access to education, healthcare, social protection, and the right to organize and bargain collectively.⁸

Furthermore, the advancement of technology and the changing nature of work raise important questions about the preservation of human dignity. As automation and artificial intelligence increasingly replace certain types of jobs, it becomes crucial to ensure that individuals are not deprived of meaningful work opportunities. On this note, efforts should be made to re-skill and re-train affected workers, promote job creation in emerging industries, and provide a social safety net to support those who may be displaced. By and large, human dignity and human labour are inseparable components of human existence, and the relationship that exists between them is

⁷ Doe, "The Significance of Human Labour in Shaping Personal Identity," 109.

⁸ Smith, "The Inherent Worth of Human Dignity," 45.



intertwined and mutually reinforcing. The ability to engage in meaningful work not only shapes personal identity but also fosters social cohesion and promotes overall well-being.⁹ Meanwhile, upholding human dignity requires creating an environment where individuals can engage in dignified work, are treated with fairness and respect, and have access to the necessary resources for a decent life. By valuing and respecting human labor, societies can foster a sense of dignity and promote social justice for all.¹⁰

4. An Exposition of the Nigerian Labour Market

The labor market, also known as the job market, refers to the supply of and demand for labor, for which employees provide the supply and employers provide the demand. It is a major component of any economy and is intricately linked to markets for capital, goods, and services.¹¹ The Nigerian labour market is a complex and dynamic system that plays a crucial role in the country's economic development and social progress. It encompasses various sectors and industries, offering employment opportunities to millions of individuals while also presenting challenges and disparities. One of the key characteristics of the Nigerian labour market is its large and growing workforce. With a population of over 200 million people, Nigeria has a significant labour force that continues to expand. This presents both opportunities and challenges, as the country must effectively harness the potential of its workforce to drive economic growth and improve living standards.

However, the Nigerian labour market also faces several issues and structural challenges. One of the most pressing concerns is the high rate of unemployment, particularly among the youth. The lack of job opportunities, coupled with inadequate skills and education, creates a significant barrier for many individuals seeking employment. In fact, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS), the unemployment rate in Nigeria was 33.3% in the fourth quarter of 2020, with the youth unemployment rate standing at 42.5%. This high rate of unemployment presents a significant challenge for the country's economy and social stability which may result to social unrest and economic inequality.¹²

Another thing to take note of is that the labour market in Nigeria is heavily reliant on oil and gas, which account for a significant portion of the country's GDP and export earnings. However, the volatility of the oil market has led to job instability and a lack of diverse employment opportunities. In addition, the low level of industrialization in the country has also contributed to limited job prospects for a large segment of the population.¹³ Moreover, there is a significant disparity in wages and income distribution within the Nigerian labour market. The gap between high-income

⁹ R. Brown, "Human Dignity and the Promotion of Overall Well-being," *Journal of Ethics* 25, no. 3 (2012), 142.

¹⁰ Smith, "The Inherent Worth of Human Dignity," 27.

¹¹ Will Kenton, "Labor Market Explained: Theories and who is Included," accessed November 21, 2023, <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/l/labor-market.asp#:~:text=>

¹² National Bureau of Statistics. (2021). *Labour force statistics - volume 2: employment by sector*. NBS. accessed November 21, 2023, https://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/home/employee-browse_pub

¹³ International Labour Organization. (2019). *Labour market policies in Nigeria: Addressing Decent Work Deficits and Targeted Employment Creation*, accessed November 21, 2023, https://www.ilo.org/employment/areas/national-employment-policies/WCMS_732315/lang--en/index.htm



earners and low-income earners is quite significant, exacerbating wealth inequality and social disparities. Efforts should be made to address this gap through policies that promote fair wages, social protection, and inclusive growth.

Meanwhile, the Nigerian government recognizes the importance of addressing these labour market challenges and has taken various initiatives to promote job creation and skill development. Policies and programs such as the National Social Investment Program (NSIP) and the National Youth Employment Program (NYEP) aim to reduce unemployment and improve the employability of Nigerians, particularly the youth.¹⁴ In addition, there is a need for increased investment in education and vocational training to equip individuals with the necessary skills for today's job market. Strengthening the linkages between educational institutions and industries can help bridge the skills gap and ensure that graduates are better prepared for the demands of the labour market.

By and large, the Nigerian labour market is a complex environment with both opportunities and challenges. Addressing issues such as unemployment, informal employment, and income inequality requires comprehensive policies and concerted efforts from the government, private sector, and civil society. By promoting job creation, enhancing skills development, and ensuring equitable access to opportunities, Nigeria can harness the potential of its labour market to foster sustainable economic growth and development.

5. Challenges confronting Human Dignity in the Nigerian Labour Market

By the very fact that one is 'human,' one is automatically entitled to a dignified labour. By a dignified labour, it means that no human person is to be used as a machine or a means to an end. To use the human person as a means is to dehumanize the person which is a direct attack on the person's dignity. Hence, in the Nigerian labour market, there are several challenges that can potentially impact human dignity. Here are some key challenges:

- a. **Unemployment:** High levels of unemployment in Nigeria pose a significant challenge to human dignity. When individuals are unable to find suitable job opportunities, their ability to support themselves and their families is compromised. Unemployment can lead to frustration, poverty, and a lack of access to basic necessities, which can undermine a person's dignity.
- b. **Inadequate working conditions:** Many workers in Nigeria face poor working conditions, including long working hours, lack of safety measures, and inadequate compensation. These conditions violate the dignity of workers as they compromise their physical and mental well-being and fail to provide fair rewards for their labor.¹⁵ The result of such conditions is sudden union actions and strikes. These strikes often deal a major blow to the economy and affects workers.
- c. **Exploitation and informal employment:** A significant proportion of the Nigerian labour market operates in the informal sector, where workers often lack legal protections, fair pay,

¹⁴ A. B. Oduaran, "The Nigerian Education System and Labour Market," *African Journal of Education and Development Studies* 5, no. 3 (2017), 188-203 at <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/ajesd/article/view/161631>

¹⁵ Akeem Ayofe Akinwale, "Precarious Working Conditions and Exploitation of Workers in the Nigerian Informal Economy," *Social Science and Diliman* 10, no. 1 (2014), 121-122.



or social benefits. They may also face exploitation and abuse by unscrupulous employers. This undermines human dignity by denying individuals the rights and protections they deserve.¹⁶

- d. **Discrimination and inequality:** Discrimination based on factors such as gender, ethnicity, religion, or disability can adversely affect human dignity in the labour market. When individuals are subjected to unfair treatment or denied opportunities based on arbitrary factors, it erodes their sense of self-worth and equality.
- e. **Skills mismatch:** The Nigerian labour market often experiences a mismatch between the skills possessed by job seekers and those demanded by employers. This leads to underemployment or unemployment of qualified individuals and hampers their ability to contribute meaningfully to society. Such situations can create a sense of frustration and loss of dignity among job seekers.¹⁷

Addressing these challenges requires concerted efforts from multiple stakeholders, including the government, employers, trade unions, and civil society organizations. It is crucial to promote inclusive economic growth, invest in education and skills development, strengthen labor laws, and enforce regulations to ensure fair and decent working conditions for all. Additionally, combating discrimination and promoting equality in the labour market are essential for upholding human dignity in Nigeria.

6. Overview of Rerum Novarum

Rerum Novarum, which means “Of New Things” in Latin, is considered a foundational text of modern Catholic social teaching, and the first in the series of the great Encyclical letters on social questions.¹⁸ It is a significant encyclical and one of the most influential documents in the history of Catholic social teaching issued by Pope Leo XIII on May 15, 1891. It addresses the challenges faced by workers during the Industrial Revolution. It addresses the social and economic conditions of the time and offers principles and guidelines for the just treatment of workers and the proper organization of society. The encyclical was written in response to the profound social changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution, which had led to the rise of industrialization, urbanization, and the emergence of mass poverty in many parts of Europe. Pope Leo XIII sought to address the issues arising from this context and promote social harmony, justice, and the dignity of every human person.

In *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII acknowledges that the struggle between capital and labor has become a prevalent and urgent concern. He emphasizes the rights of workers and condemns both the abuses of unrestricted capitalism and the extremes of socialism and communism. The encyclical sets forth key principles for social and economic justice, including the following:

¹⁶ Oteh Chukwuemeka, “Labour Exploitation in Nigeria: A Case Study of Union Dixon Salt PLC Lagos,” *International Journal of Development and Management Review (INJODEMAR)* 3, no. 1 (May, 2008), 35.

¹⁷ Akinwale, “Precarious Working Conditions and Exploitation of Workers in the Nigerian Informal Economy,” 122.

¹⁸ Joseph Neuner and Jacques Dupuis eds., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*. Seventh Revised and Enlarged Edition (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2001), 905.



a. Dignity of the Human Person: *Rerum Novarum* upholds the inherent dignity of every person, regardless of their social or economic status. It emphasizes that work is not merely a means of earning a living but an essential part of human fulfillment and self-expression.¹⁹

b. Just Wage and Workers' Rights: The encyclical insists on the right of workers to receive a just wage that ensures a decent standard of living for themselves and their families. It calls for the elimination of exploitation, unjust working conditions, and the excessive accumulation of wealth by employers.²⁰

c. Right to Form Associations: *Rerum Novarum* affirms the right of workers to form associations, such as labor unions, to protect their interests, negotiate with employers, and promote solidarity. However, it also emphasizes the importance of peaceful and cooperative relationships between employers and employees.²¹

d. Private Property and the Common Good: The encyclical defends the right to private property but also emphasizes that it has a social purpose. It argues for a just distribution of wealth and the responsibility of the wealthy to use their resources for the common good.²²

e. Role of the State: *Rerum Novarum* recognizes the role of the state in promoting social justice and intervening for the common good. It calls on governments to enact laws and policies that protect the rights of workers, regulate industry, and balance the interests of employers and employees.²³

Many of the positions in *Rerum Novarum* are supplemented by later encyclicals, in particular Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* (1991), each of which commemorates an anniversary of the publication of *Rerum Novarum*.

7. Restoring Human Dignity in the Nigerian Labour Market in the Light of *Rerum Novarum*

a. Respect for the Dignity of Labor: *Rerum Novarum* emphasizes the inherent dignity of labor and the rights and just treatment of workers. In addressing the Nigerian labor market, it is essential to recognize the equality and value of all workers, irrespective of their roles. Prioritizing fair wages, adequate working conditions, and social security schemes according to the principles of *Rerum Novarum* can naturally lead to the restoration of human dignity for Nigerian workers.

b. Just Distribution of Resources: Nigeria faces significant disparities in the availability and allocation of resources. *Rerum Novarum* promotes the need for a more equitable distribution of these resources.²⁴ The Nigerian labor market is marked by wealth

¹⁹ Pope Leo XIII, Encyclical on Capital and Labor *Rerum Novarum* (1891), par 40.

https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html.

²⁰ Ibid; par 43-48.

²¹ Ibid; par 49.

²² Ibid; par 15-22.

²³ Ibid; par 35-41.

²⁴ *Rerum novarum*, par 37.



polarization and a wage gap. Implementing policies to ensure fair distribution of resources, enforcing progressive taxation, and implementing social welfare programs can help restore human dignity, particularly amongst marginalized workers.

- c. **Fair wages:** *Rerum Novarum* calls for just wages that provide workers with a decent standard of living.²⁵ In Nigeria, there is a prevalent issue of low wages and exploitation, particularly in sectors such as agriculture and informal work; many workers earn wages that are not commensurate with the value of their labor, leading to financial struggles and a compromised standard of living. Implementing the principles of *Rerum Novarum* would require employers to pay fair and living wages, ensuring that workers can support themselves and their families with dignity.
- d. **Safe working conditions:** Another crucial aspect emphasized in *Rerum Novarum* is the need for safe and healthy working conditions.²⁶ Many workers in Nigeria face hazardous environments, lack of protective equipment, and unhealthy practices. By adhering to *Rerum Novarum*, employers would be obligated to provide safe working conditions, thereby enhancing the dignity and well-being of workers.
- e. **Rights of workers:** *Rerum Novarum* asserts the importance of recognizing and respecting the rights of workers. This includes the right to form and join trade unions, the right to collective bargaining, and the right to fair treatment and non-discrimination. In Nigeria, there is a need for stronger protection of workers' rights and the promotion of a culture that values and upholds these rights.
- f. **Ensuring Workplace Safety and Health:** *Rerum Novarum* recognizes that workers have the right to safe and healthy working conditions.²⁷ In Nigeria, the labor market encounters issues such as work-related accidents, occupational hazards, and exploitation. Adherence to international safety standards, strict enforcement of workplace safety laws, and guaranteeing appropriate care for injured workers can help restore human dignity by prioritizing the physical well-being of Nigerian workers.
- g. **Feminism and Gender Equality:** *Rerum Novarum* does not extensively address issues of gender equality and feminism. However, integrating the principles of dignity and equality espoused in *Rerum Novarum* can inspire efforts to challenge gender discrimination in the labor market, including the gender wage gap, gender-based violence, limited leadership opportunities, and dismissive attitudes towards and unfair treatment of women workers.
- h. **Promotion of Entrepreneurship and Proper Regulation:** *Rerum Novarum* defends the role of small-scale ownership and fair business practices.²⁸ Encouraging entrepreneurship and supporting small and medium-sized enterprises can generate employment opportunities, alleviate poverty, and dignify occupational engagement in Nigeria. However, any relaxation in regulations must ensure protection against labor exploitation and encourage fair competition.

²⁵ *Rerum novarum*, par 46.

²⁶ Ibid; par 39.

²⁷ Ibid; par 55.

²⁸ *Rerum novarum*, par 46.



- i. **Ethical and Responsible Business Practices:** *Rerum Novarum* promotes ethical business practices based on solidarity and respect for workers' rights. Implementing corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives, responsible supply chain practices, and ethical recruitment and employment practices can ensure fair treatment of workers, safe working conditions, and contribute to restoring human dignity within the Nigerian labor market.

Above all, accepting and implementing the principles of *Rerum Novarum* can serve as a panacea towards the restoration of human dignity in the Nigerian labor market. By strengthening the respect for labor, promoting just distributions of resources, fostering empowerment and subsidiarity, upholding the right to form trade unions, and equipping workers with adaptation skills, Nigeria can work towards an inclusive and equitable labor market, ultimately restoring human dignity for all workers.

8. Summary

Rerum Novarum, published by Pope Leo XIII in 1891, addressed social and economic rights, including the rights of workers in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. Despite its age, the encyclical provides timeless principles for defending and promoting human dignity within the labor market. By analyzing its key tenets and applying them to the Nigerian context, we explore how the principles of *Rerum Novarum* can be utilized to restore and enhance human dignity in a contemporary labor market setting. While there is an intrinsic link between human dignity and labor, this assignment examined the current state of the Nigerian labor market, identifying the factors contributing to the devaluation of human dignity and highlighting the numerous challenges that jeopardize the dignity of workers and undermine the realization of dignified work for all. Furthermore, this article explored the relevant labor laws, regulations, and policies in order to assess their effectiveness in ensuring the protection and promotion of workers' rights and dignity. And finally, it aims to encourage policymakers, labor unions, employers, and employees to rethink the prevailing labor practices and institutional frameworks in Nigeria and consider the implementation of the principles of *Rerum Novarum* as a means to restore human dignity within the labor market.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, the devaluation of human dignity in the Nigerian labour market is a pressing issue that needs to be addressed urgently. The exploitation and mistreatment of workers, the lack of job security, and the absence of fair wages all contribute to the erosion of human dignity in this context. However, one potential solution that holds promise is the adoption of principles outlined in *Rerum Novarum* as a panacea to the prevailing challenges. By applying the principles of *Rerum Novarum*, the Nigerian government can enact policies that promote human dignity in the labour market. They can prioritize the enforcement of fair labour standards, ensure the provision of decent wages, and protect workers' rights to organize and bargain collectively. Implementing these measures would help to restore the value of human dignity and create a more equitable and just labour market in Nigeria.

However, it is important to recognize that addressing the devaluation of human dignity in the Nigerian labour market is a complex and multifaceted challenge. Relying solely on *Rerum*



Novarum as a panacea might not be sufficient. It requires a comprehensive approach that involves regulatory reforms, education and skills development, and economic policies that promote inclusive growth. Therefore, while *Rerum Novarum* provides a valuable framework for restoring human dignity in the Nigerian labour market, its principles should be complemented with other strategies to address the systemic issues at hand. By adopting a holistic approach, involving stakeholders at various levels, and utilizing existing international frameworks for labour rights, Nigeria can work towards a labour market that upholds and values the dignity of all workers.

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