

1981

Encyclical Letter

**Laborem Exercens**

*John Paul II*  
(*Excerpts*)

14 September 1981

**Work and the emigration question**

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23. Finally, we must say at least a few words on the subject of emigration in search of work. This is an age-old phenomenon which nevertheless continues to be repeated and is still today very widespread as a result of the complexities of modern life.

Man has the right to leave his native land for various motives— and also the right to return – in order to seek better conditions of life in another country. The fact is certainly not without difficulties of various kinds. Above all it generally constitutes a loss for the country which is left behind. It is the departure of a person who is also a member of a great community united by history, tradition, and culture; and that person must begin life in the midst of another society united by a different culture and very often by a different language. In this, case, it is the loss of a subject of work, whose efforts of mind and body could contribute to the common good of his own country, but these efforts, this contribution, are instead offered to another society which in a sense has less right to them than the person's country of origin.

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Nevertheless, even if emigration is in some aspects an evil, in certain circumstances it is, as the phrase goes, a necessary evil. Everything should be done – and certainly much is being done to this end – to prevent this material evil from causing greater moral harm; indeed every possible effort should be made to ensure that it may bring benefit to the emigrant's personal, family, and social life, both for the country to which he goes and the country which he leaves. In this area much depends on just legislation, in particular with regard to the rights of workers. It is obvious that the question of just legislation enters into the context of the present considerations, especially from the point of view of these rights.

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The most important thing is that the person working away from his native land, whether as permanent emigrants or as seasonal workers, would not be placed at a disadvantage in comparison with the other workers in that society in the matter of working rights. Emigration in search of work must in no way become an opportunity for financial or social exploitation. As regards the work relationship, the same criteria should be applied to immigrant workers as to all other workers in the society concerned. The value of work should be measured by the same standard and not according to the difference in nationality, religion, or race. For even greater reason the situation of constraint in which the emigrant may find himself should not be exploited. All these circumstances should categorically give way, after special qualifications have of course been taken into consideration, to the fundamental value

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of work, which is bound up with the dignity of the human person. Once more the fundamental principle must be repeated; the hierarchy of values and the profound meaning of work itself require that capital should be at the service of labor and not labor at the service of capital.

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Source: Excerpts from Encyclical “Laborem Exercens” (John Paul II). Available from Vatican’s website:[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091981\\_laborem-exercens\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens_en.html).

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