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EMPLOYERS AND VOLUNTARY WORK

This year is dedicated to Voluntary Work. As the Pastoral Commission for Work, we concentrated more on the work aspect as a decently paid employment. But this year we also discussed the topic on how Voluntary Work correlates with the labour sphere. The Maltese are getting used to allocate some time on one's own agenda to perform some voluntary work, such individuals more than finding time to spare, actually boast a heart that aches to help out their brethren who happen to be in need. There are infrequent instances, where the employer himself takes the initiative to assist his employees to engage in voluntary work. This initiative is commendable and urges more such 'employers' to introduce this idea in their organization.

STOPPING AND REFLECTING WHAT IS WORK FOR US

Every person has a task to perform during his life, both for himself to feel that he is being united with God the Creator in developing a new world, likewise for himself and his family and even for the good of society. But sometimes we get engrossed in work and forget the sublime value of the work of man. Pope John Paul II during his first visit to Malta in 1990, met the Maltese working population at St. Margaret Square in Cospicua. There he delivered an interesting speech which is worthwhile reflecting upon again. He stated that the Church always regarded work with high esteem primarily because amongst other things it helps in building a strong character while contributing towards a mature personality. This occurs as a result of performing the work itself and even more so when voluntary work is incorporated. In this speech the Pope states that work is not excluded from the Gospel of Christ. Consequently Jesus Christ, the carpenter of Nazareth venerated work. We are conscious how much Jesus cherished the work performed by man as is evident from the various applications of skills He used, such as the farmer, the shepherd, the fisherman, the servant, the businessman and the soldier, in his sermons. He used to mention mankind's toil to demonstrate God's hand which happens to be the first voluntary work full of affection in the creation.

The Pope, in this speech addressed to the Maltese workers had mentioned that 'the work imparts a strong impact on human life and cannot be detached from the ethical and moral responsibilities of anyone of the involved parties'. Anyone who is somehow involved in the labour sphere; workers, employers, workers' representatives, the government, the families of the workers, must link work not only with the economy but must also link work with the ethical and moral responsibilities; so that one's work will prove to be beneficial to the entire society, especially to those who are vulnerable.

The Pope quoted from the Council document *Gaudium et Spes* (67) wherein he states that the Church desires to impart to the world what he describes as 'The Gospel of work', that work contains the good news, for in work, God through the worker, is redeeming man and rendering him whole. Quoting the Pope that: 'Anyone who listens to this Gospel and abides by it, can no longer perceive work merely as a means to gain money. In broader and nobler sense work has to be a means to develop oneself personally and a normal approach for man to create conditions enabling him to have a more secure life both culturally, socially and spiritually'. This aids us to reflect upon the need to yearn for more sense of voluntary work, so that apart from earning our keep we will be more generous by seeking terms on how to improve the life of those who are in a poorer state.

The Pope in his speech quotes St Paul who said 'Whatever you do, do it from your heart as if it is for the Lord and not for man; for you know that you shall be compensated with the inheritance that the Lord has prepared for you' (Colossians 3,23-24). Voluntary work stems up and is initiated when one works with affection, recognizes that the Lord gave him the strength to be able to help others and voluntary work helps those who open their hearts both to God and also to his brethren.

The Pope spoke clearly to us workers: 'The highest virtue of the Maltese workers (male and female) should be solidarity'. Out of this solidarity emerges the essence of volunteering, when the individual (workers and employers) recognizes the responsibility and the common interests of society to help those who are weak due to several factors. In this speech the Pope tells us that we should show respect towards each other and that this should be expressed in concrete acts of solidarity between employees and employers, between the workers themselves and this solidarity must be translated in being more sensitive to the poor and vulnerable. At the end of this speech the Pope, appeals to us to say Yes to the full development (both material and spiritual) of each citizen of these islands, especially to the poor and those in need. This Yes that the Pope is leveling at us must be remembered during this year which is dedicated to Volunteering, so that we altogether, especially the employer, will be confirming this Yes in his plans for the development, not solely of his organization, nor merely for his workers but to help the needy from that which the providence of God has provided him.

WHAT IS VOLUNTARY WORK?

Persisting along the statement as pronounced by Pope John Paul II (due to be beatified) on Voluntary Work. On the 5th December 2001 he had imparted a message related to the year dedicated to Voluntary Work which portrays that this Voluntary Work sheds a ray of light, of hope that segregates the bleak aspect of loneliness and aids individuals to emerge of such situation.

To better understand the significance of the voluntary work in a world which currently is more inclined towards self economic development and consumerism, the Pope cites the example of Jesus Christ who degenerated Himself by accepting the degenerating nature of a slave and outwardly transformed Himself in resemblance to man (Philippines 2.7). Voluntary work demands of us that we ought to renounce and deprive ourselves and to start resembling those who need us to feel their experience, so that we will be in a better position to help them.

In this speech on Voluntary Work the Pope mentions examples of two saints, St Maximilian Kolbe, who offered his life to save that of a family father, and Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who consecrated herself to become the poor amongst the poorest. These saints and many others stir up this holy desire inside us so that we in our own way be willing to offer a little bit of our time, and wealth, to reflect on the needs of others.

The Pope states that charity is the best form of evangelization because through it one responds to the human needs and so we will be expressing the love that God the Father has for each person. Through Voluntary Work the Christian will be a witness of this Divine charity which is so useful and which even contributes in our workplace.

It is interesting that the Pope proclaims that there are people who have further strengthened their faith in performing voluntary work. Voluntary work besides serving to relieve to those who are receiving the service, inversely proves beneficial to those who are doing the work. Similar to any other work, voluntary work helps the person who performs it to realize that he himself has achieved fulfillment, socially, and also as a man who is working together with the Creator to help others. In performing Voluntary Work we encounter Christ who said, 'I was hungry and you fed me, I was thirsty and you quenched my thirst'.

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But one perhaps may ask whether these two realities go hand in hand? Does Voluntary work serve to enhance the sphere of work?

In foreign countries Voluntary Work is constantly evolving, through cooperation between employers and employees. One comes across terms like *Corporate Volunteering*, *employer support* or *Workplace Volunteering*. In Malta these terms are still not so familiar. But we believe that during this current year it happens to be high time for every employer to reflect and study these realities with a view to possibly implement same at their work place. The common aim among these groups is that workers perform Voluntary Work in the community under some form of support and encouragement by their employers.

In order that these Voluntary Work programs operate properly one should consider the following three factors: 1. The priorities of the company, 2. The interest of the employees, 3. The needs of the Community. The employer must have this whole picture in the planning program of the company. Firstly, the company's own priority must be safeguarded, and one must not expect that this priority be threatened but must be protected both for the welfare of the worker as well as that of his employer. The Workers' interest is also a priority that should be met by all employers, but these two do not exclude the help to meet the community needs. On the contrary, it transpires that those who are open to Voluntary Work feel that this kind of work greatly contributes both towards the company and the workers and understandably of course proves beneficial to society in general.

Thus employers must take the initiative to instill such volunteering interest in their workers. It is not a bad idea for example for a company to set up a special committee meant to identify the means of how they can draw up a Voluntary Work program within their company. Moreover one can always approach non-profit organizations in the Voluntary Work sector.

Voluntary Work may vary from an employer who simply acknowledges Voluntary Work undertaken by his workers, to help and give donations in time (time paid by the company) to Voluntary organization with which the employee is occupied.

THE POSITIVE ASPECT OF A COMPANY ADAPTING VOLUNTARY WORK

There are many positive aspects that prove to be beneficial to the employer himself when adapting a Voluntary Work program within its workplace.

The first aspect concerns the greater altruistic sense felt by both employers and workers. This altruistic sense implies that one is more motivated by the desire to help those in need and feels more inclined to contribute towards society. Altruism replenishes one with more hope for a better world, a better society, and a better workplace. Altruism induces one to think not only of those that one supports during the course of his voluntary tasks but renders one to be more generous to his work mates and to his employer who inversely will reciprocate such attitude.

Another aspect that one benefits from when doing Voluntary Work is that of an increased social relationship whereby one feels the need mix with others, increase socialization strikes up and make more acquaintances. This relationship helps the employee and the employer to learn more about himself, because when interacting with others one discovers more about himself. Everybody is aware of the importance of establishing a good relationship between employer and the employee since the lack of this relation would lead to many conflicts at the workplace. The social relationship is crucial in understanding each other's behaviour, and the more we understand each other the more we can work together.

Another positive aspect which stems up from Voluntary Work is that in the company there will materialize a motivation to achieve a specific work goal through a common effort. This factor helps to enhance the sense of teamwork between the workers with their employer.

Voluntary Work helps the individual who performs it since one learns more about work and gains other work experiences. This helps one to appreciate other people's work.

During the current year, The Pastoral Commission on the Working Sphere, is reflecting on Voluntary Work, a year in which everyone is invited to seek how to contribute in this field, calls on the employers to study further and deduce how they can help along with their workers in this area, and this for the glory of God, for the good of the company, the workers and those who are expecting aid which is plentiful of love from our end.