

CAPITAL COMMENTARY

Labor Day, 2005

Labor Value

Labor Day is a national holiday set aside to acknowledge and celebrate those whose hard work builds and sustains the nation. How can we best thank and celebrate laborers today—the mothers and fathers who work day and night to raise their children; the nurses and counselors, cooks and groundskeepers who care for the elderly in retirement villages; those who build our highways, cars, and office buildings, collect our refuse, track and warn of hurricanes, and serve as firefighters, police officers, and judges? How can we celebrate the work you do?

This weekend, in particular, how can we thank the tens of thousands of workers giving themselves to relief and recovery efforts along the Gulf Coast in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina?

Significant changes have taken place in the world of labor over the past few decades. Work in the United States has been redefined by the service and information economies. A declining percentage of laborers are farmers and steel workers, and that decline has gone hand in hand with the globalization of much of economic life. More of the steel we use is produced in Japan, clothes in China, and food in Mexico. Do we intend to thank and celebrate the workers of the world on our national holiday?

Technological changes and globalization have also encouraged the further marketization of labor. The work of road builders and construction workers may not be able to be sent abroad, but many communications and information-processing jobs are being outsourced. Both at home and abroad, then, labor is becoming more of a commodity valued and distributed as a cost to businesses in their scramble to survive. This is why companies work so hard to replace or supplement human workers with robots and computers that will reduce labor costs.

But what about the *laborer* in all of this? How far can work be abstracted from the worker without degrading its meaning? In America and perhaps throughout much of the world, it seems to me, there

is a declining sense of how the work that each of us does contributes to a joint *human* venture, adding to the national and international treasure. Most of us, I suspect, will give little thought this Labor Day to the meaning of human work and will simply be glad for an extra day off *from* work. Labor, in other words, has become a job, and jobs, like the goods we purchase at the mall, become a mere means to other ends. The value of a job is measured by what it pays.

What does this tell us about the world of labor today? It tells us, among other things, that much of the social capital and mutual trust that holds our society together is undervalued. Too few people think of their work as a calling or vocation from God, the deepest value of which is found in being able to use talents and training that complement the talents and training of others so that together we can serve God and one another. Although we are building a so-called service economy, the service function is increasingly digitized, automated, commodified, and even depersonalized. What we need is a strengthening of commitment to work as mutual service, as cooperation in a common cause.

While the American economy as a whole continues to grow, our valuation of many who work does not appear to be keeping pace. Poverty in America increased again for the fourth straight year in 2004. The gap between rich and poor continues to widen. The work that many do is not valued highly enough on the market to yield an income adequate to support a family or to buy health insurance.

What we human beings need is a growing appreciation and celebration of work as a gift from God for human development, which is valued as more than a cost factor in economic growth. We need to see labor as soul and soul as community treasure.

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