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Reflection Paper

Building the Future of Work Together

A Christian social ethics perspective on EU employment policy

SQUARE DE MEEÛS 19 – BE-1050 BRUSSELS | TEL. +32 2 235 05 10 | EMAIL: COMECE@COMECE.EU
WWW.COMECE.EU | TWITTER - FACEBOOK - INSTAGRAM: @COMECEEU

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With this publication, COMECE's **Social Affairs Commission** seeks to discuss the role and value of work for the dignity of the human person and for social cohesion. The Commission follows up on its 2018 reflection entitled '*Shaping the Future of Work*'. The current document presents social ethical reflections on the future of work and addresses today's challenges and opportunities in the European labour market. It further offers recommendations to the European Union to shape fair and sustainable policies in the context of work and labour. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to ensuring that the future of work remains just, resilient, and sustainable in the face of economic, technological, and demographic transformations.

Abstract

The entire world of work is undergoing a profound transformation driven by technological innovation, demographic change, ecological transition and new forms of employment. These developments create opportunities for productivity and innovation but also raise fundamental ethical questions regarding dignity, justice and social cohesion. The European Union plays an important role in shaping these changes in Europe.

Within the scope of the EU's competences and drawing on the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, COMECE's Social Affairs Commission offers a reflection on the future of work focusing on human dignity, the common good, solidarity and subsidiarity. In this respect, the document emphasises that work is not merely a commodity or economic input but a central dimension of human flourishing and social participation.

This document examines four key dimensions shaping the future of work in Europe: (1) just labour and decent working conditions, (2) the relationship between work and family life, (3) the ethical governance of artificial intelligence and digitalisation, and (4) the importance of participation and subsidiarity in economic transformation.

Based on this analysis, the Commission formulates policy recommendations addressed to EU institutions to ensure that technological and economic change strengthens social cohesion, protects workers' rights and supports a human-centred European economy.

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In a nutshell: Four perspectives on the future of work

The Social Affairs Commission presents **four perspectives on work and relevant EU labour policies**, to address today's challenges. These challenges are assessed through the lens of Catholic Social Teaching, resulting in the formulation of policy recommendations for the EU institutions. The following four perspectives aim to provide a coherent response to the transformations shaping the future of work. European labour policies grounded in human dignity, solidarity and the common good can help work and economic activity to remain innovative, socially cohesive and profoundly human.

The first perspective, ***Promoting human dignity and the common good through just labour***, examines what justice means in the concrete realities of work. The dignity of each worker demands fair wages, decent conditions, and secure employment. The chapter highlights the moral responsibility of employers and political decisionmakers to create systems that serve the common good. When labour is treated as a disposable resource rather than a human vocation, societies suffer moral and social impoverishment, and social cohesion erodes. Upholding justice in work is therefore not only a matter of ethics, but also of long-term economic resilience and of mitigation of societal polarisation, ensuring that economic development enables everyone to live a dignified life within the means of our common home.

The second perspective, ***Work, integral human development and flourishing families***, emphasizes that work is central to personal development, a flourishing family life and social cohesion. Stable and fairly compensated employment is important for skills development, responsibility and self-worth. At the same time, work goes beyond paid employment and includes the essential contribution of care within families. Labour and social policies should therefore enable people to reconcile employment with parental care, care for elderly people and other family responsibilities. Practical measures, like parental leave and job security, show how labour policies can strengthen individuals, families, and social cohesion.

The third perspective, ***Artificial Intelligence and robotisation: their impact on work and labour***, addresses one of the most urgent challenges facing policymakers today. The rapid spread of AI and digital technologies promises innovation and efficiency, but without ethical governance it can deepen inequality and erode human agency. From a Catholic standpoint, technology must remain a tool for integral human development – serving people, not replacing them. Pope Leo XIV recently expanded the scope of Catholic Social Teaching on the field of AI with his encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*. The challenge is not to slow down technological progress, but to humanise it, ensuring that the digital economy fosters participation, social cohesion and the common good.

The fourth perspective, ***Participation, subsidiarity and responsibility at work***, reflects on how the autonomy and responsibility of people in the world of work are realised through work. It further highlights that workplaces can embody democratic values, allowing individuals to engage meaningfully, exercise judgment, and contribute to collective decision-making at the appropriate levels. True involvement of the human person as subject of one's work comprises ethical

responsibility toward others and strengthens the individual sense of autonomy as well as social cohesion.

Introduction

The Social Affairs Commission bases its contribution on the Christian foundations described below and follows up on its reflection *Shaping the future of work*,[1] published in October 2018, which called for a decent, sustainable and participative world of work for all, since work is not only a source of income but also an integral part of human identity. In light of the digital and ecological transformations, the reflection encouraged EU institutions to work on a common European vision of the future of work.

Following on from this, the current text emphasises that the world of work is at a historic turning point. Technological transformation, demographic shifts, and ecological challenges are rapidly reshaping how societies produce, organise and value work. Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digitalisation are redefining skills and employment structures. An ageing population and migration are altering labour markets, and growing inequality is testing social cohesion. These developments present not only economic questions but profound ethical ones: What is the meaning of work in society? Who benefits from innovation and change? How can economic activity and development be genuinely human-centred?

Labour force in the EU in 2024: 213.6 million
Employed persons in the EU in 2024: 200.7 million
/Eurostat 2025/
Expected duration of working life in the EU: 37.5 years
/Eurostat 2026/

In this time of transition, Catholic Social Teaching offers a moral framework of intrinsic value – one that combines ethical depth with practical wisdom for policymaking. Since the pontificate of Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903), it has articulated a vision of work that places the human person at the centre of economic and political life. Catholic Social Teaching insists that work[2] is not a mere commodity, but a vital expression of human dignity and social participation. Economic systems detached from moral, local and communal responsibility will lead to alienation, inequality, and conflict – a risk that is particularly relevant today.

For work to fulfil its primary purpose in human society, the principal concern should be its subjective dimension, the sense that it is an activity of a human person and, as such, should serve integral human development. Work goes beyond formal employment, including family work and voluntary activities. The Church's Social Teaching highlights the importance of contributing to society. Caring for our common home and society is not limited to employment. By recognising and supporting all forms of

[1] Shaping the future of work, COMECE reflection paper https://www.comece.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2022/01/pdf_20181105.pdf

[2] In this reflection, "*work*" is understood in a broad sense as human activity that contributes to personal development, economic and social life, family and community life and the common good. "*Employment*" refers more specifically to remunerated work within the labour market. The term "*labour*" refers to the economic and social dimension of work and is also used in established expressions in social and EU policy, such as labour market, labour relations and labour policy.

work, we can foster a more just society that values all forms of contribution.

The Catholic Church calls on policymakers, business leaders, trade unions and society alike to ensure that work serves integral human development, the common good, and the flourishing of families and communities. These moral and social principles do not hinder economic growth; on the contrary, they foster long-term productivity, social stability, and innovation. Economies and societies that uphold human dignity, fairness, and responsibility in work are more resilient, sustainable, and ultimately more prosperous. Moreover, stable and meaningful work that strengthens individuals' sense of self-worth can reduce social fragmentation and counteract polarisation, reinforcing cohesive communities. These principles are not isolated policies; they reflect the deeper, structuring and life-giving values of Catholic Social Teaching. Human dignity, solidarity, the pursuit of the common good, and responsible freedom are not only ethical guidelines for work – they are core expressions of a vision of life in which the economic, social, and spiritual dimensions of human existence are integrated. These principles, articulated by Leo XIII, reaffirmed, enriched and further developed by his successors and the Magisterium of the Church, provide a coherent framework for addressing today's complex labour challenges. They remind us that economic progress must serve the human person as well as the whole of the human family and Creation, not the other way around.

1. Promoting human dignity and the common good through just labour

Work is a fundamental dimension of human life. It promotes integral human development and enables people to live meaningful lives, participate in society and contribute to the common good. Access to dignified employment is fundamental for democracy and social inclusion and decent wages help protect people and their families from poverty and enable them to live in accordance with their human dignity. As Pope Francis notes in *Fratelli Tutti*[3], "*in a genuinely developed society, work is an essential dimension of social life".* Catholic Social Teaching insists that a just economy is not one that serves only the capable or competitive, but one that ensures that everyone has the opportunity to contribute and participate according to their capabilities.

Guaranteeing the right to work that respects human dignity

Employment, and human access to it, is not merely an economic issue; it is a deeply moral question and ethical concern. The right to work is rooted in the inherent dignity of the human person, created in the image of God. Work is not just a means of income but a vocation, a participation in the creative mission of God, and a vital expression of human dignity. Therefore, to be excluded from meaningful employment is not only a social failure – it is a moral injustice.

Unemployed persons in the EU in 2024: 13.0 million.
Youth unemployment (15–24): 6.1%
/Eurostat 2025/

Every person has a right to work and thus to participate in social life. Society has a duty to structure

[3] Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, Encyclical Letter on Fraternity and Social Friendship (2020), § 162
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html

economic life so that this right is accessible to all, especially the most vulnerable. As Pope John Paul II teaches in *Centesimus Annus* [4], "*The obligation to earn one's bread by the sweat of one's brow also presumes the right to do so*." This means public institutions bear a positive responsibility to promote policies that ensure access to employment opportunities across all sectors of society. Within its competences, the EU should assist the Member States in this responsibility, by means for example of the European Pillar of Social Rights or by offering coordination of national social policies.

While the EU unemployment rate has been steadily declining over the past decade, this overall improvement conceals significant disparities between Member States. Long-term unemployment remains a persistent issue, with some countries experiencing very high rates. Long-term unemployed individuals face greater barriers to re-entering the workforce, and the risks of poverty, social exclusion, and even health problems increase the longer they remain out of work. Supporting job creation and measures to enhance job participation for the long-term unemployed brings significant benefits to these individual persons and for society as a whole.

29.9% of unemployed persons in the EU in 2024 have been unemployed for 12 months or longer.
/Eurostat 2025/

Ensuring dignified working conditions and better recognising essential workers

Ensuring dignified conditions of work is crucial for promoting the integral human development of individual persons and society. The issue of dignified wages is central to ensuring human dignity and justice, as (among others) emphasized by the Church. In response to growing concerns over in-work poverty, the EU adopted the *Adequate Minimum Wages Directive* in 2022. While this initiative represents an attempt to address wage inequality across Member States, its effectiveness will depend largely on how it is implemented and complemented by broader labour market policies. When implementing this Directive, Member States should make use of the options available to them in favour of workers, also to prevent negative effects such as an increase in the shadow economy. We therefore call on EU institutions to support Member States in their efforts to transpose and apply the Directive as fully and effectively as possible, aligning an adequate minimum wage with the EU target of 80% collective bargaining coverage, which is statistically one of the most effective ways to ensure decent payment of workers and help lift the working poor out of poverty, while also limiting zero-hour contracts as well as "on-call" work. The latter two should be banned where they are exploitative as they can be primary drivers of poverty, especially for young people.

Approximately 8.2% of the EU workforce is classified as "at risk of poverty" meaning their equivalised disposable income is below 60% of their national median income, despite being employed.
/Eurostat 2025/

A particular concern is the situation of the working poor – individuals who, despite being employed, live below the poverty line. The danger of falling into this category mostly affects younger people and those in low work-intensity

[4] Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, Encyclical Letter on the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum (1991), § 43
https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_01051991_centesimus-annus.html

households. Once more, considerable discrepancies are evident among member states on this matter. We encourage the EU institutions to improve the situation of these workers within the scope of EU competences.

All workers should receive decent wages without the need to take extra or night shifts in order to reach an adequate level of income. Increased pressure is put especially on employees in the low-wage sector to accept unsocial working hours[5], as it is very difficult to earn an adequate income without the associated allowances for working at night, on weekends, or on public holidays. These allowances are often necessary for low-wage workers to earn a viable income, especially in regions with high living costs (e.g., due to expensive rent). This should be seen as unfair, and all workers should receive adequate salaries for a life in dignity at the minimum living standard – without having to rely on bonuses for special efforts.

Employed persons usually working Saturdays: 11.8%
Employed persons working atypical (unsocial) working hours: 33.9%.
/Eurostat 2025/

Further, due to demographic decline in Europe, labour shortages have become a significant issue across many countries. These shortages create critical gaps in essential services such as public transport and medical care, both of which are vital for maintaining social cohesion and supporting vulnerable populations. Sectors like healthcare, construction, and education are experiencing the most acute shortages, affecting service delivery and public well-being. The COVID-19 crisis revealed how essential jobs in the EU are undervalued. These roles, particularly in sectors like healthcare, transportation, food production, and long-term care, faced increased demands during the crisis. By recognizing the real value of essential workers, the EU can foster a more just and inclusive society, ensuring these critical sectors are resilient in future crises.

Just and sustainable work: integrating ecological responsibility

The future of work cannot be separated from ecological responsibility. Work structures, production models and organisational cultures must progressively align with principles of environmental sustainability and prudent resource management. This includes reducing material waste, improving energy efficiency in workplaces, promoting sustainable mobility, encouraging circular economy practices, and rethinking consumption patterns within professional environments. True justice in work must therefore integrate both social and ecological concerns.

The EU should pursue an integral approach that promotes environmentally sustainable policies while safeguarding access to dignified employment, especially for vulnerable populations. Migrant workers, seasonal workers, particularly in agriculture, informal workers and those in precarious employment remain especially exposed to exploitation and unstable working conditions and therefore require particular attention in this transition. This includes support for green job creation, re-skilling

[5] Within EU labour policy frameworks, **unsocial working hours**, defined as any work performed outside standard daytime hours (typically, Monday–Friday, 08:00 to 18:00), are recognized as a primary driver of work–life interference and occupational health risks.

programmes, and transitional support for regions dependent on high-emission sectors. Economic transformation must be guided by the principles of solidarity and subsidiarity. A truly just transition, which places people at its centre and ensures that environmental objectives are pursued in ways that uphold human dignity, is essential.

EU initiatives addressing the social dimension of ecological transformation, including the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR) and the concept of a "just transition" indicate an increasing recognition of the link between environmental and labour policies. However, ensuring that these frameworks effectively protect workers and communities during the ecological transition remains an ongoing task.

2. Work, integral human development and flourishing families

Work is a fundamental dimension of human existence, essential and indispensable for integral human development as well as for personal, family and societal flourishing. As *Laborem Exercens* [6] teaches, it is one of the characteristics that distinguish humans from other creatures, as we are called to transform and care for the world through creative activity.

Work and integral human development

The essential meaning of work lies in its contribution to integral human development, including care for our common home; it proceeds from a person and should be ordered towards the human person, in whom it has its final goal (*Compendium*[7]). This is the way we can ensure and affirm that *"work is for man and not man for work."* (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*[8]) This reminder is particularly relevant in contemporary policy debates, where labour market participation is often treated as the primary indicator of social inclusion. While access to decent employment is important for social participation and can support integral human development, it is equally important to recognise the social value of forms of work that are not always reflected in labour market statistics. All kinds of care work within families, voluntary engagement, and community activities make a significant contribution to social cohesion and the common good. Public policies should therefore promote employment while also recognising and supporting these forms of social contribution.

The proper understanding of Integral Human Development requires a multidimensional understanding of the human person and of the development process *(Frankl*[9]*)*. Multiple dimensions of the human person are involved at work, independent of the circumstances, and thus leaders and other shapers of work organisations and conditions should be aware of this opportunity and

[6] Laborem Exercens – St. John Paul II (1981), §§ 1, 4, 6
https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html

[7] Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church – Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2004), § 272
https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/justpeace/documents/rc_pc_justpeace_doc_20060526_compendio-dott-soc_en.html

[8] Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992), § 2428
https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/__P8D.HTM

[9] Frankl, V. E.: Der Pluralismus der Wissenschaften und das Menschliche im Menschen. In: Frankl, V. E.: Der Mensch vor der Frage nach dem Sinn. Eine Auswahl aus dem Gesamtwerk, 14. Aufl., Piper Verlag, München, 2002

responsibility. Work should enable the simultaneous development of people physically, mentally, emotionally, aesthetically, socially, morally and spiritually *(Alford and Naughton*[10]*)*. It is crucial that human development is not restricted in any of these dimensions at work, since the effective mutual interaction of these is the fundamental condition and criterion for "integral human development".

Work, including employment, has an educational function, contributes to the free development of the individual, gives meaning to life, promotes the ability to take on responsibility and enables people to participate autonomously in social life. Work thus has an integrative effect and makes people feel a meaningful part of society. Work helps combat loneliness and isolation and strengthens people's role as responsible citizens. These are essential qualities, especially in a free and democratic society that is based on the willingness of each and every person to contribute to it. Furthermore, contact with people from different backgrounds and origins in everyday working life helps to break down prejudices and open up new horizons.

Work and flourishing families: Eroding interference between life spheres of work and family

As Pope John Paul II affirmed, *"work constitutes a foundation for the formation of family life"* (*Laborem Exercens*[11]), not only by securing means to found and sustain a family, but also through its role in education and character formation within a family. We need to recognise and uphold the profound dignity of work carried out inside the family, mostly devoid of any employment relationship or economic exchange, and emphasise its significance and critical contribution to a flourishing society *(Laudato si' [12])*.

The life spheres of work and family intensively permeate each other; any dysfunction in this relationship or in one of the spheres manifests itself in both domains. It is worth questioning whether current social and economic arrangements adequately support families with young children, particularly where parents are expected to work full-time without access to affordable childcare, flexible working conditions, adequate and sufficient parental leave, or enough income security. The current and profound transformations concerning the future of work present us with both a necessity and an opportunity to rediscover the proper unification of the spheres of family and work, in which these two can *properly permeate each other. (11)* Young families should be able to combine work and care without facing income insecurity, discrimination or stigma. This requires adequate parental leave, affordable and high-quality childcare, flexible working arrangements, fair pay and social protection that does not penalise or stigmatise parents who reduce their working hours. We need to acknowledge that *"the family is simultaneously a community made possible by work and the first school of work, within the home, for every person"* (*Laborem Exercens*[11]). As vital cells of society, families are pivotal in addressing the challenges of an increasingly fragmented world. *"The family is*

[10] Alford, H. J., & Naughton, M. J. (2001). Managing as if faith mattered. *Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame*
[11] Laborem Exercens – St. John Paul II (1981), § 10
https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html
[12] Laudato si' – Pope Francis (2015), § 128
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

a good which society cannot do without, and it ought to be protected" (*Amoris Laetitia*[13]).

Demographic projections indicate that the current EU workforce will not be fully replaced in the coming decades, as fewer people are expected to enter the labour market than leave it. This is expected to lead to a significant structural imbalance, as an ageing population not only reduces the number of active workers but also increases demand for pensions and elderly care services. If left unaddressed, this demographic shift will put significant strain on Europe's social and economic systems and likely overwhelm potential young parents who will not be able to simultaneously meet these increasing work demands and challenging parental expectations.

The current solutions do not reach the roots of these challenges nor offer long-term remedies. Labour shortages and challenges of cost competitiveness can be tackled temporarily by hiring a significant migrant workforce. This option, however, is often merely a superficial solution that risks exploiting migrant workers through inferior work conditions and their families, who regularly remain separated in distant countries where they do not have to pay the high living costs of EU locations. Such separation contradicts the integral dignity of the family emphasized in *Familiaris Consortio*[14], which calls for the family to be recognised as both subject and object of social and economic life.

Summing up the factors above, we see a unique opportunity to establish a new connection between the spheres of family and work, in which they can permeate each other in a healthier way. As *Caritas in Veritate*[15] reminds us, authentic development must be "people-centred," harmonising economic and social goals with respect for the family and human dignity. In the case of young parents raising children, the possibility of part-time work should be accessible and accompanied by wages that enable decent living conditions in this situation. Public policies should respect and enable families' freedom to organise work and care responsibilities according to their circumstances. Families who wish to have one parent temporarily withdraw from paid employment to care for children should be able to do so without facing economic disadvantage or social stigma. Adequate parental leave, portable social protection, affordable childcare and re-entry pathways into decent work are essential to ensure that this is a real choice. COMECE encourages the EU to place the human person at the centre of its value-based approach and to reflect this principle in its policy agenda.

Good work requires good living conditions

In order to guarantee personal freedom, good work requires a well-developed social infrastructure that supports people in need and prevents the misuse of the social safety net. Often, those who are most in need of help are unable to access the social support system. The EU should promote exchange between Member States to improve social security across Europe. However, good living conditions for a dignified and responsible life go beyond protection against life risks. Equally important are

[13] Amoris Laetitia – Pope Francis (2016), § 44 https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html

[14] Familiaris Consortio – St. John Paul II (1981), § 46 https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html

[15] Caritas in Veritate – Pope Benedict XVI (2009), § 25 https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate.html

affordable housing and local social services, such as short distances to schools and daycare centres or community-based social services supporting families with a handicapped or elderly member in need of care or dignified retirement homes in familiar surroundings. Good mobility networks and a well-developed, resilient public infrastructure are also of utmost importance for decent working conditions.

Human-centred working conditions, work schedules and the right to rest

For the appropriate balancing and interconnecting of work and family life spheres, it is essential that work schedules and demands take into consideration the societal well-being, health and integral human development of workers. The constant monitoring of workers, including live tracking by end customers themselves, for example in the delivery industry, places a high psychological strain on these workers. The increasing pressure for round-the-clock work (so-called "always-on culture") enabled by online communication, fuelled by globalisation and digitalisation, has eroded the distinction between work and personal time. This constant state of availability or the frequent application of shift work (especially night shifts) greatly complicates the fulfilment of family-related responsibilities and prevents people from engaging in collective social activities, weakening community bonds and diminishing social cohesion. The increasing individualisation of society reinforces unlimited consumption, which explicitly emphasises the value of 'one's own' while devaluing collective and institutional time. This increasing relativisation of available free time risks jeopardising all aspects of life based on the possibility of collectively agreed time together. Non-stop working and shopping in one's free time destroys social ties instead of building them, resulting in numerous social and psychological problems associated with participation in this consumerist spiral.

While some industries and professions require continuous operations, policies should be implemented to ensure that employees in all sectors can enjoy daily rest periods and uninterrupted family time in the evening. COMECE, as part of the European Sunday Alliance, welcomes the European Commission's initiative to explore legislative measures on fair telework and a right to disconnect. In this respect, COMECE advocates for including a specific provision on Sunday rest protection. A fundamental aspect of a balanced work-family-life is the Weekly Synchronized Day of Rest, traditionally observed on Sunday. Without the possibility of shared resting time, social cohesion may be at risk, as it is precisely this joint effort – largely social, voluntary – that creates civil society. We cannot coordinate such activities in a world in which there is no time to rest and to engage in activities outside employment. It is therefore essential to protect a weekly common day of rest, along with the right to disconnect, and by extension the common Sunday rest, from further erosion and to re-establish it as a framework for leisure and social life. At the same time, promoting simple and sustainable lifestyles, where well-being, community, and mindful living take precedence over constant productivity, can prevent distress, anxiety and depression that affect many workers. We support the focus of the EU institutions on an Initiative on Mental Health and well-being at Work, especially with a preventive and proactive approach, fostering healthy workplaces through human-centred work demands and schedules and a common day of weekly rest.

Digital technologies also increasingly reshape the organisation of work. Remote and flexible working

arrangements may offer important advantages, including improved work-life balance. At the same time, they may blur the boundaries between professional and personal life, creating pressures of constant availability and accelerating work rhythms. Protecting adequate rest periods and ensuring the effective implementation of the right to disconnect therefore remain essential for safeguarding human dignity in the digital workplace.

The rise of digital platforms has also contributed to the expansion of new forms of work organisation. Many platform workers are formally classified as self-employed, which may deprive them of access to adequate wages, social protection and labour rights. The recent Platform Work Directive represents an important step towards addressing misclassification and improving transparency in algorithmic management. Nevertheless, its effective implementation will require continued attention to enforcement and the protection of workers' rights.

3. Artificial Intelligence and Robotisation: their impact on work and labour

In the Christian understanding of work, human intelligence and creativity are gifts entrusted to humanity for the service of the common good. As the Book of Genesis reminds us, human beings are called to "cultivate and care for" the earth *(Gen 2:15)*. Technological innovation, including artificial intelligence, should therefore be understood not as a substitute for human responsibility but as a tool that supports human flourishing and participation in society, and contributes to the common good.

The rapid development of artificial intelligence and robotisation is already transforming the world of work and will continue to do so in the decades ahead. These technologies offer opportunities to increase productivity, improve decision making through better data analysis, and reduce hazardous or monotonous tasks. At the same time, they raise serious concerns regarding job displacement a danger of skills loss and skills gap due to using AI instead of human learning at work, possible threats to privacy because of new surveillance techniques, as well as social and societal consequences arising from biases and discrimination in poorly designed AI models and a possible loss of participation by trade unions and works councils. The challenge is therefore not only technological but also social and ethical.

The Catholic Social Teaching's perspective on AI and work

AI and robotisation are two intertwined transformative forces in contemporary society. They both increasingly influence economic and social structures, affecting employment, decision-making, and resource allocation. Faced with the increasing use of AI in the world of work, the Catholic Church expresses a position of welcoming technical innovation when it serves the common good. Catholic Social Teaching calls for a responsible and thoughtful use of artificial intelligence.

With his first encyclical letter *Magnifica Humanitas*[16], Pope Leo XIV presents a Catholic Social Teaching's comprehensive response to the opportunities and challenges posed by AI. Already in

[16] Magnifica Humanitas – Pope Leo XIV (2026), §§ 9, 105, 150, 156, 165–169
https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/encyclicals/documents/20260515-magnifica-humanitas.html

January 2025, the Holy See's note *Antiqua et Nova*[17] highlighted the moral responsibility associated with AI. *Magnifica Humanitas* takes up and expands these first perspectives of *Antiqua et Nova*, stressing the need for policies that promote ethical AI governance. Pope Leo addresses the fundamental ethical question of what this technology means for humanity, human dignity and the common good. Thus, he does not discuss the technology itself, which, as he states, "*is not a solution to humanity's problems, just as it is not inherently evil".* He places the human being at the centre, stressing that "*responsibility must be clearly defined at every stage: from those who design and develop these systems to those who use them and rely on them for concrete decisions*". He further criticises the fact that, in the "*convergence of automation, robotics and AI",* people are faced with a promise of improved working conditions, the outcomes of which, however, can subject them to pressure to conform and to social control. As with other changes brought about by AI, the Pope emphasises the responsibility for dignity and justice in the economy and the world of work. He highlights various areas where this responsibility is particularly acute, be it in political regulation, corporate governance or the social disparity between growing absolute wealth and, at the same time, rising inequality. Pope Leo further links this, in the context of the social consequences of unemployment, to issues of education and training, family and young people. He focuses specifically on the human person when he formulates social criteria for innovation and lists as the first priority that "*every introduction of automation and AI should be accompanied by verifiable measures to protect the employment, retraining and participation of workers. In this way, technology will be oriented toward freeing up human time and capabilities, rather than producing exclusion*".

Put together, this means that the fundamental changes brought about by AI systems require clear individual as well as institutional responsibility. Therefore, these changes must be accompanied by legal regulations and supported by an ethical framework. For this reason, the Catholic Church encourages as an important step the implementation of the EU Artificial Intelligence Act *(AI Act)* by the EU Member States, addressing also the six principles set out by the *Rome Call for AI Ethics*[18] in 2020, namely: *inclusion, transparency, security, fairness, confidentiality and reliability*. On this basis the Church calls for further necessary adjustments for the implementation of the EU AI Act.

Consequences for AI and robotisation in the workplace

Artificial intelligence is increasingly shaping decision-making processes in many areas of economic life. In a growing number of sectors, algorithms assist or automate tasks such as data analysis, administrative decision-making and performance evaluation. While such systems can increase efficiency and support human decision-making, their growing influence in the workplace also raises important ethical and social questions.

AI systems may generate insights that appear less dependent on human subjectivity, but they lack the human capacities of understanding, responsibility and moral judgement that are necessary for many decisions affecting people's lives and livelihoods. Technological innovation should therefore aim to

[17] Antiqua et Nova – Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith and Dicastery for Culture and Education (2025) https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_ddf_doc_20250128_antiqua-et-nova_en.html

[18] Rome Call for AI Ethics – Pontifical Academy for Life (2020) https://www.romecall.org/the-call/

help human judgement rather than replace it. Ensuring transparency and interpretability in AI systems is essential to maintain trust and to guarantee that human beings remain responsible for decisions that affect other persons.

In this context, regulatory frameworks play an important role. The EU's AI Act recognises certain applications as "high-risk", including systems that may significantly affect people's health, safety or fundamental rights. However, important questions remain regarding the scope of these classifications, particularly in employment contexts where algorithmic systems may influence hiring decisions, task allocation or performance evaluation. In addition, the reliance on self-assessment by companies may limit effective oversight and enforcement.

66% of Europeans think AI will destroy more jobs than it creates
77% think workers should participate in shaping workplace technologies
/Special Eurobarometer 2025/

Public opinion in Europe reflects widespread concern about these developments. According to a recent Eurobarometer survey, a majority of Europeans believe that AI could destroy more jobs than it creates, while a large majority support the involvement of workers in shaping technological change in the workplace. This highlights the importance of ensuring that employees and their representatives are meaningfully involved in decisions concerning the introduction and use of AI systems.

The organisation of work and the qualification of workers in the digital age

Beyond institutional transparency, workers must also be equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to understand, use and critically evaluate AI systems. Education and training should therefore not only focus on technical use but also on developing the capacity to question automated decisions and to recognise potential biases or risks. Ensuring broad and equitable access to such knowledge is particularly important for vulnerable or marginalised groups.

Artificial intelligence, automation and robotics hold significant potential to support human work by reducing hazardous tasks and enhancing human capabilities. However, if technological development is primarily directed towards the substitution of human labour, it risks reducing the availability of meaningful employment and increasing economic inequality. For this reason, technological innovation should be guided by policies that prioritise human-centred work and the protection of workers' rights. In light of these developments, COMECE's Social Affairs Commission calls on EU institutions to ensure stronger transparency and accountability in the use of algorithmic management systems and to guarantee the effective recognition and protection of workers' employment status in the digital economy.

4. Participation, subsidiarity and responsibility at work

Transformations in global economic systems and the labour market require strategic decisions with long-lasting consequences for all stakeholders. It is essential that these decisions are based on transparent evaluation and a cooperative discussion of viable alternatives. Effective and responsible governance of economic and technological transformation requires structured cooperation between

governments, employers and workers' representatives. Appropriate legal frameworks should ensure meaningful opportunities for workers' associations to represent their interests in these decision-making processes. In line with the principles of the European Pillar of Social Rights, which emphasise information and consultation of workers, these frameworks should ensure that worker representatives are effectively involved in key decisions shaping the future of work.

EU labour law emphasises the importance of worker participation, a principle also reflected in recent EU legislation such as the AI Act. As an essential pillar of a fair working environment, collective bargaining and worker representation must not be weakened in the context of technological transformation. Future policies should ensure that evolving technologies go hand in hand with fair pay, job security and meaningful workers' participation. Trade unions and other workers' associations are not adversaries of employers in zero-sum negotiations over working conditions. Rather, they should be perceived and addressed as partners, contributing valuable perspectives and practical expertise that help identify and implement pathways for the future of work that are productive, sustainable and effectively contribute to the common good. Strengthening structured social dialogue at the workplace, company, sectoral, national and European levels can ensure that economic transformation proceeds in a responsible, balanced and socially sustainable manner.

Subsidiarity and shared responsibility in shaping the future of work

The principle of subsidiarity can be an effective guide to aligning the roles of government, companies, and workers' associations. Democratically elected governments are empowered to make decisions about economic policy and legal frameworks that foster the common good. Within this legal framework, companies operate with strategic autonomy that enables them to pursue competitiveness and innovation. Workers should have meaningful opportunities to influence their technological contexts, job tasks and work conditions, as they are often best informed about their practical implications and most directly affected by them. The autonomy granted to workers contributes to work engagement, integral human development and societal flourishing. Mechanisms such as cooperative, transparent workplace information and consultation procedures, just worker representation structures, and advanced sectoral platforms can ensure that this participation is effectively realised in practice.

In pursuing competitiveness and regulatory simplification, the European Union should ensure that existing safeguards for worker rights, participation, information and consultation are preserved. Reducing administrative burdens must not come at the cost of weakening social dialogue or diminishing the role and rights of workers and their representatives in shaping the future of work.

Technological transformation and worker involvement

Recent and anticipated technological developments are rapidly reshaping labour markets, eliminating entire job groups and fundamentally transforming many occupations. It is essential that governments and representatives of workers' associations play a significant role in this process, helping to guide technological development in a direction that does not merely ensure higher economic efficiency but also supports both integral human development and the common good. In particular, workers and their representatives should be involved in decisions concerning the introduction and implementation of new technologies and workplace restructuring, ensuring that digitalisation and artificial

intelligence are only deployed in ways that respect human dignity and promote access to quality employment. This includes participation in the governance and workplace deployment of digital systems, including AI-based tools and algorithmic management systems that increasingly shape working conditions. The distinction between human-substituting and human-augmenting properties of technological changes plays a very significant role.[19] The human-substituting properties of technologies should focus on substituting hazardous, demanding, or monotonous job tasks, while the human-augmenting properties of technologies should expand human competences, creativity and judgment.[20]

The accelerating transformation of labour markets amid economic uncertainty and technological disruption underscores the shared responsibility for reskilling and lifelong learning. Cooperation is necessary between governments, employers, workers' associations, and education institutions to anticipate changing skill and competence requirements and to ensure that workers have access to appropriate and effective training and upskilling opportunities throughout their working lives. In line with the objective of a fair and just transition, policies and resources generated by efficiency gains should support workers whose jobs are significantly transformed or displaced by technological change, providing alternative pathways to work and employment. The active involvement of social partners in predicting and identifying skill needs, and in designing training and development systems, can help ensure that these efforts respond to real labour market developments and needs, while strengthening social resilience and cohesion. A cooperative approach among governments, employers, and workers' representatives can help shape technological change in ways that support quality employment, continuous skills development, transparency and a just transition for all workers.

Autonomy, dignity and inclusion in evolving labour markets

Autonomy at work is supported and strengthened through genuine involvement in the workplace. This includes collective bargaining, the participation of workers in decision-making processes at the appropriate level within companies and workplaces, as well as the promotion of transparency and fairness oriented towards the common good. As Pope Francis reminds us, work is not merely a job or a profession but a fully human experience that allows individuals to develop their capacities and creativity and to act autonomously and responsibly.[21] In this sense, autonomy and responsibility at work are closely linked. At the same time, increasing individualisation

Persons in part-time employment in the EU: 35.6 million.
Of whom 18.3% involuntary,
which represents approximately 3.3% of the entire EU workforce (employed persons aged 20–64)
/Eurostat 2025/

These figures illustrate the increasing diversification of working arrangements and the importance of ensuring predictability and fair conditions.

[19] Brynjolfsson, E., "The Turing Trap: The Promise and Peril of Human-Like Artificial Intelligence," (2022)
[20] Furendal, M., & Jebari, K. (2023). The future of work: augmentation or stunting? *Philosophy & Technology*,
[21] Laudato si' – Pope Francis (2015), § 125
https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html

of working conditions can create new situations of voicelessness and marginalisation, alongside more traditional forms affecting precarious workers, low-wage workers and discriminated groups. For this reason, the involvement of workers' and employers' organisations remains crucial. It should also be complemented by actors representing emerging forms of work and the informal economy, including gig workers, street vendors and others who often lack adequate social protection.

Flexible forms of employment are often presented as an advantage that allows individuals to better organise their professional and family lives. Arrangements such as temporary teleworking, hybrid work or part-time work may indeed contribute positively to this balance. However, flexibility must not lead to forms of employment that undermine stability, predictability and social protection.

Particular attention should be paid to practices such as misclassification of employment as self-employment, which can deprive workers and their families of social protection and labour rights, as well as the growing use of short-term or highly fragmented contractual arrangements that limit income stability, especially for young workers. While recent EU initiatives have begun to address these challenges, further efforts are needed to ensure that labour market flexibility does not come at the expense of dignity, security and responsibility in work. The regulation of the labour market must always be guided by the principle that the freedom and dignity of the human person remain at its centre.

Policy recommendations to the EU institutions

The EU should strive for genuine improvement in social conditions. It must not overlook the fact that, despite some of its attempts in the social sphere, the situation of many workers, especially those from certain social groups (young unemployed people, the working poor, homeless people, migrants, ethnic and cultural minorities) remains very poor, especially in certain regions. What is needed is a realistic, well-funded policy approach across the different policy areas concerned, without which the crisis of legitimacy of European institutions would only deepen.

COMECE's Social Affairs Commission formulates the following policy recommendations to the EU institutions and decision makers responsible at EU level:

I. Working conditions and social protection

1. Revise the Working Time Directive (2003/88/EC) to incorporate flexible work arrangements that support family life and personal responsibilities, while safeguarding workers from precarious forms of employment.

2. In alignment with civil society partners, we reiterate the call for a binding EU Directive on the Right to Disconnect for all workers. This should include safeguards against intrusive workplace surveillance. Such legislation is essential to transform the current "always-on" culture into a sustainable digital work environment that respects rest and family life, as highlighted in the Quality Jobs Roadmap.

3. Recognise a common weekly day of rest in all countries of the European Union, which according to the custom and tradition of each country is, in principle, Sunday, and encourage policies that

limit non-essential commercial activities on that day. The European Commission's initiative on the Right to Disconnect (see recommendation 2) should include a specific provision recognising the need for a common weekly day of rest.

4. Encourage EU Member States to ensure adequate legal protections for family caregiving, recognising these contributions as essential to society. This should include financial recognition and protection from discrimination for family caregivers caring for elderly relatives, persons with disabilities or children, as well as measures to improve their pension rights and access to healthcare benefits. Member States should further support widely accessible community-based services, including childcare and long-term care, that assist families in balancing caregiving and professional responsibilities.

5. Ensure that the implementation of the EU Anti-Poverty Strategy explicitly addresses the situation of the working poor, recognising that employment alone does not always guarantee a dignified life. Measures should tackle the structural causes of in-work poverty, including inadequate wages, unstable employment and insufficient social protection, in order to ensure decent living and working conditions for all.

6. Support EU Member States' efforts to effectively implement the Adequate Minimum Wages Directive by providing additional guidance and coordination following the Court ruling. Both raising wage floors to meet the Directive criteria and adopting or strengthening national action plans to meet the target of 80% collective bargaining coverage are important means of reducing in-work poverty and improving working conditions.

II. Governance of Artificial Intelligence in the workplace

7. Clarify the scope of high-risk AI in employment. Clearer and more precise definitions of high-risk AI systems in employment contexts are needed, particularly regarding worker monitoring, task allocation and performance evaluation systems. AI tools used for worker surveillance, profiling or automated decision-making should not be excluded from high-risk classification. Annex III of the AI Act should be regularly reviewed to ensure that emerging workplace technologies are adequately covered.

8. Ensure genuine and effective human oversight. Greater emphasis should be placed on meaningful explainability of AI systems used in employment. Employers should provide clear explanations of how such systems function, including the logic of scoring systems, the data used and the criteria guiding automated decisions. The EU should clarify that human review requires real authority and competence to modify or overturn AI-generated outcomes. The EU should support Member States in establishing regulation that safeguards against purely symbolic or "rubber-stamping" review procedures. This includes the promotion of training for managers and supervisors to critically assess AI outputs rather than automatically relying on them.

9. Guarantee strong worker participation in AI deployment. Encourage stronger binding rights for information, consultation and participation of trade unions and works councils in the design and deployment of AI systems. Workers should have effective rights to contest AI-based decisions

and request human review, in line with existing EU labour law principles on information and consultation. This includes an explicit recognition that algorithmic management falls within the scope of collective bargaining. Particular attention should be paid to the situation of workers in non-unionised environments, where safeguards may be weak.

10. Protect platform and gig workers from algorithmic exploitation. Coherent implementation between the AI Act and the Platform Work Directive is necessary to ensure adequate protection for workers in platform-based employment. AI-driven decisions affecting platform workers should not escape scrutiny simply because they fall outside current high-risk thresholds. Continued efforts are also required to ensure proper recognition of employment status and to prevent bogus self-employment.

11. Integrate sustainability and energy responsibility into AI policy. The environmental and energy impacts of AI systems should be systematically considered in economic and regulatory assessments. Public funding and procurement policies should prioritise energy-efficient and resource-conscious AI solutions. The development of AI must remain aligned with the EU's climate and sustainability objectives.

III. The Quality Jobs Act

12. Ensure that the Quality Jobs Act effectively addresses in-work poverty by moving beyond mere job creation and promoting access to stable employment that provides a living wage and adequate social protection.

13. Include provisions to limit precarious forms of employment, including zero-hour contracts and abusive on-call arrangements, which disproportionately affect young and vulnerable workers.

14. Strengthen collective bargaining systems and promote progress towards broad coverage, recognising their proven role in reducing in-work poverty and improving working conditions.

15. Guarantee the right to upskilling and reskilling, including access to training during paid working hours, in order to support career progression and prevent workers from being trapped in low-paid and low-intensity employment.

16. Establish safeguards for algorithmic management systems, including AI-based scheduling tools, to ensure predictability of working hours, transparency and protection from exploitative automated management practices.

Conclusion

Europe stands at a decisive moment for the future of work. Technological transformation, demographic change and ecological transition are reshaping labour markets and social structures across the continent. These developments present not only economic challenges but also moral choices about the kind of society Europe seeks to build.

Catholic Social Teaching offers a vision in which work is understood as a fundamental expression of human dignity and social participation. Economic and technological progress must therefore remain oriented towards the flourishing of the human person, the stability of families and the cohesion of communities.

The European Union has an important role to play in ensuring that these transformations lead to greater justice rather than deeper inequality. By strengthening social dialogue, protecting workers' rights, governing digital technologies responsibly and promoting dignified work for all, EU institutions can contribute to a future of work that is both innovative and profoundly human.

A European economy that places the dignity of the person at its centre will not only be more just. It will also be more resilient, cohesive and sustainable for generations to come.

Members of the COMECE Social Affairs Commission:

- H.E. Mgr. Joseph Galea-Curmi, Chair (MT)
- Prof. Dr. Petra Steinmair-Pösel (AT)
- Prof. Dr. Sophie Izoard-Allaux (BE)
- Igor Jakobfi (HR)
- Monica Kalakoutis (CY)
- Dr. Jakub Jinek (CZ)
- Raymond Friel (EAW)
- Fr. Grégoire Catta, S.J. (FR)
- Oliver Rau (DE)
- Dr. Roland Ferenc Szilas (HU)
- Dr. Gary Carville (IE)
- Dr. Giovanna Corbatto (IT)
- Arũnas Kučikas (LT)
- H.E. Marie-Louise Coleiro (MT)
- Arthur Miedema (NL)
- Dr. George Joseph (SE)
- Fr. Jan Krupka (PL)
- Joao Pereira (PT)
- Leon Cosma (RO)
- Viktor Porubsky (SK)
- H.E. Alojz Kovšca (SL)
- Prof. Jesús Pérez Mayo (ES)
- Matthieu Bruynseels (FAFCE)
- Peter Verhaeghe (Caritas Europa)
- Lucy Anns (Caritas Europa)
- Fr. Dr. Manuel Barrios Prieto (COMECE)
- Alix De Wasseige (COMECE)
- Lenka Mačugová (COMECE)

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