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Pope Francis greets participants in a Vatican consultation, titled "Care is Work, Work is Care," as he arrives for a meeting at the Vatican May 8, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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While the forces of a market economy may obstruct people from advancing social justice, society cannot remain mute in the face of unjust labor practices and exploitative economic structures, Pope Francis said.

Modern society runs the risk of "passively accepting what happens around us with a certain indifference or because we are not in a condition to understand often complex problems and find adequate responses to them," he said May 8.

The pope encouraged academics, employers, workers' organizations, and faith-based actors participating in a Vatican consultation on developing fair labor practices to "focus on the relationship between dignified work and social justice."

"This expression, 'social justice,' that came about in the social encyclicals of the popes, is a word that is not accepted by the liberal, leading economy," he said.

Organized by “The Future of Work, Labor after Laudato Si’” project, the International Catholic Migration Commission and the Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development, the three-day consultation brought 60 participants to Rome from around the world to discuss the dignity of work, environmental transition, migration and social justice.

In his address opening the consultation May 8, Cardinal Michael Czerny, dicastery prefect, urged participants to adopt a "synodal" approach to their discussions, which could see "unlikely allies emerge" united behind the common good.

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Francis told the participants that working conditions must be considered in light of the environmental impact of labor, noting in particular how extractive industries export raw materials "for the sole purpose of satisfying the markets of the industrialized North" but often produce dangerous working conditions, "including mercury or sulfur dioxide pollution in mines."

The pope also addressed the problem of global food scarcity, especially in regions affected by war such as Gaza and Sudan, which he said is caused by extreme weather linked to climate change and exacerbated by "structural weaknesses such as poverty, high dependence on food imports and precarious infrastructure."

He added that society cannot forget about the relationship of dignified work and migration.

Due to "prejudice and inaccurate or ideological information," he said, migrants "are often viewed as a problem and a burden on a nation's costs, when in reality, by working, they contribute to the economic and social development of the country that receives them and the one they come from" by sending money back to their families.

Migration also helps wealthy nations handle the "very grave problem" caused by falling fertility rates, the pope said, but often migrants remain excluded from their full rights in those countries, including by having no access to healthcare, financial protections and social services.