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Perceptions and Experiences of Creole Workers in Catholic Parishes of the Diocese of Port Louis, Mauritius

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EXPERIENCES OF CREOLE WORKERS IN CATHOLIC PARISHES OF THE DIOCESE OF PORT LOUIS, MAURITIUS

Roman Catholics account for 17.7% of the global population, or about 1.285 billion people (The Pontifical Yearbook, 2017). The sheer size of the Catholic Church and its over 2,000-year history suggest the expansive nature of its influence, particularly in the area of moral doctrine and social teachings. Less often considered, however, are workplace conditions within Catholic institutions. In this investigation, we were interested in knowing what it is like to be employed by Catholic organizations, particularly in the increasingly Catholic African region about which little is known. Specifically, we examined the experiences and perceptions of ethnically Creole, parish-based employees on the island of Mauritius.

Catholic Social Teaching on Work

Beyer (2017:248) aptly stated, “Beleaguered workers in the United States and across the globe need more scholars of all faiths to turn to their traditions and place them at the service of labor justice.” In line with his observation, and given that the context for this investigation was the labor experiences of workers in Catholic parishes, we chose to ground the theoretical framework in Catholic social teaching, and especially the principles related to human dignity, the meaning of work in the human experience, workers’ rights, and solidarity.

The church’s position on work and its role in human experience is grounded in its teaching about human worth and dignity. Every person, made in the image and likeness of the Creator, bears the living image of God and thus possesses inalienable dignity. Because Catholic social teaching views men and women as made in God’s image, work and everything the person does can serve to make him or her more human. Through work, people have the opportunity to build up their lives and live a dignified existence.

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The specifically human (and not simply economic) purpose of work is viewed in social teaching as a way to foster the cultural and moral formation of individuals, families, and societies (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). Pope Leo XIII in his prolific work *Rerum Novarum* (1891), stated that people labor for the sake of self-preservation. Ninety years later, Pope John Paul II (1981) extended the meaning of this human element of work by affirming that work corresponds to a person’s dignity and helps one to achieve a sense of fulfillment. Fundamentally, work provides an avenue through which people can advance their identity, be innovative, and reflect the image of God in the world (Pope Francis, 2015). Social teaching is clear that the value of work is not principally in its outcomes but in the persons who offer services or create products through their labor efforts. Simply stated, “work is for man and not man for work” (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004, para. 272). When the activities or products of work are treated as more important than the person, therein lies a foundation for injustice (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004).

While the personal aspect of work is privileged in the Catholic worldview, work also is inherently social (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). The social nature of work signifies the responsibility people have to labor for their own development and for the good of others. This outward aim of work is important, as each person is a part of the human race to which he or she owes something, having inherited the fruits of the labor of past generations (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). As much as people have a duty to work, social teaching is unwavering in its stance for the protection of workers’ rights. People are obliged to work, but they also must be ensured rights so that their personhood is not diminished through harmful working conditions (Pope Leo XIII, 1891; Pope Francis, 2015).

Finally, the principle of solidarity and the church’s understanding of conflict enhance our understanding of work. Pope John Paul II (1981) described solidarity as genuine support and a decided and firm commitment to the preservation of the common good. The dedicated togetherness implied in this understanding of solidarity does not exclude conflict. Indeed, conflict aimed at seeking

justice can become a unifying process between workers and employers. The pursuit of justice from two groups holding opposing perspectives can contribute to a more complete understanding of each other's positions. Catholic social teaching does not endorse a "cheap solidarity" in which workers are forced to accept unjust working conditions simply to maintain a peaceful relationship between themselves and management (Beyer, 2017:239).

Method

The primary research question in this study was: What are the lived experiences and perceptions of Creole, parish-based employees of the Catholic diocese of Mauritius about their treatment as workers? To answer this question, we used an ethnographic (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2003), phenomenologically-oriented (van Manen, 1997), and participatory action-informed methodology (MacDonald, 2012). An ethnographic framework was fitting due to our interest in the church as a cultural institution within Mauritian society. A phenomenologically-oriented approach grounded our interest in knowing about the meaning of work for the participants and how their work environments influenced their relationships with priests and administrators. Finally, the participatory-action stance intentionally attempted to empower participants. This was important to us given the Creole community's documented struggles with racism and discrimination that has had the effect of limiting workers' job possibilities (Boswell, 2014) and because participants all were part of a low-wage strata, which could be disempowering.

Setting and Participants

The co-researchers in this study included the first two authors and ten participants. The first author is a Creole Mauritian Catholic priest and a counselor educator at a university in the United States. The second author is also a counseling professor at an American university. We recruited ten participants from Catholic parishes in the diocese of Port Louis, Mauritius. The purposeful sample included workers who were: (a) ethnically Mauritian Creole; (b) employed in a Roman Catholic parish; (c) holding a full-time, low-skill position such as cook, handyman, secretary, or sacristan; and (d) educated at no higher than a high school level. The sample was drawn from diverse locations on the island, including five different parishes in five different cities. By targeting parishes in both rural and urban settings, we sampled participants from parishes that were poor and those that were more financially stable. In addition, by seeking participants from multiple parishes we ensured that our data was not limited to participants' perceptions about a single parish priest or administrative board (i.e., *fabrique*).

The participants included six men and four women aged 33 to 63 ($M=51$). All participants were married except one who was single and one who was divorced; all of them except two had children. Participants' years of service ranged from 9 to 32 ($M=18$ years). We interviewed two secretaries, five sacristans, one handyman, one cleaning staff, and one person who was a cook and a maid. With regard to salary, the participants reported their starting and current salaries in Mauritian rupees (at the time of data collection in August of 2017, the conversion rate from dollars to rupees was 1:34). The current monthly salary ranged from 6,978 to 14,250 rupees (roughly 205 to 419 US

dollars), with an average monthly salary among participants at 10,098 rupees or 297 US dollars.

Instrumentation

The primary instrument of data collection in this study was a semi-structured interview guide informed by literature that framed the inquiry's theoretical and methodological grounding. Examples of questions from the interview guide include the following: (a) What does it mean to you to be an employee at this parish; (b) Describe your interactions and relationship with the parish priest(s) and parish *fabrique* (administrative board); (c) Catholic social teaching suggests that through work people should have an opportunity to be creative, find meaning, and become "more a human being." What are your thoughts about this statement in light of your daily work? (d) Do you believe you are fairly compensated for your work, including monetarily and in terms of time off for sickness and vacation? Please describe; and (e) What does the parish administration need to know that would contribute to the betterment of your experiences as a worker?

Data Collection

We conducted and audio-recorded 10 individual interviews, each of which lasted between an hour and an hour and a half. During the process of interviewing participants, we discussed our researcher-observations after each interview and recorded these in our field notes. Our observations included impressions about the interviewees and reflections on our theoretical and methodological grounding (Patton, 2003). Prior to beginning each interview, we discussed with the participants the purpose of the study and informed them of their right to withdraw at any time. We transcribed all of the interviews, as well as our audio-recorded researcher observations, which served as the data for analysis.

Analysis

Data analysis co-occurred with the process of data collection. We listened to and then transcribed the interviews throughout data collection, which allowed us to begin to shape our understanding of emerging themes and to corroborate these tentative findings with other interviewees, as well as to refine some of the questions we were asking (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Checking out with interviewees our emerging understandings added trustworthiness to the analysis process (Silverman, 2005). As we read the transcriptions, we started to look for themes related to the workers' lived human experiences (van Manen, 1997) that seemed to recur throughout the interviews. As a further check on the accuracy of the emergent themes, we (the first two authors) invited two doctoral-level research assistants to review the transcriptions, along with our proposed themes and subthemes, in order to provide feedback for refinement about the themes. Finally, we compared the findings across all of the individual cases. The constant comparative work of analysis also allowed us to come up with thick descriptions of participants' experiences and perceptions and to identify main themes and subthemes. By the end of analysis, we identified three main themes and 11 sub-themes.

Results

Personal Meaning of Work and Workplace Relationships. The first main theme related to the personal meaning of work and workplace relationships. We identified three sub-themes related to this main theme that point to the satisfying spiritual aspects of the co-researchers' jobs and the inconsistent relationships with priests and members of the administrative boards or *fabrique*.

Work as spiritual fulfillment and vocation. When asked about the personal meaning they derived from their jobs, participants talked about spiritual aspects of their jobs. Several of the participants described their job as a calling or a vocation. For instance, one sacristan stated, "When I was asked to work here, I saw it as a call and not as a job." A secretary noted that the most meaningful part of her job was to prepare the names of people who came to the church asking for prayer intentions or to give thanks for blessings in their lives and then to offer those prayers at a Friday service. Among the participants, there was a strong sense that working at the parish was a special job that gave them a connection to God.

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Relationship with parish priests: From supportive to disrespectful. Characterizing the style and type of relationship the participants had with the parish priests with whom they worked is complex. Less than half of the participants described positive relationships with the priests. For those that did, they talked about being understood or supported by the priests. For example, one participant mentioned that the priest at the parish provided him a loan to help build his house; another woman said, "I'm very attached to Fr. [name]!" as she described how he seemed to understand her life difficulties, talked to her regularly, and was interested in her family. Conversely, participants also described their relationship with priests in a way that suggested disrespect. One woman described how the parish priest worked with the *fabrique* to increase her work duties and then create a contract requiring the new duties. He further told her that if she did not sign, she would lose her job. Others described being spoken to by priests in ways that were humiliating or hurtful. One sacristan relayed an experience of apologizing to the priest after a mass because he had forgotten to put out the paten on the altar. In turn, the priest reproached him, "You, [name], if I have to forgive you, I have to do that every day."

Unrecognizing, distant, and demanding *fabrique*. In the Mauritian Catholic Church, each parish is administrated by a board of lay persons called the *fabrique*. This board has the authority to hire and release workers, to create and adjust contracts, and to evaluate employees. The interviewees generally recognized the *fabrique* as their boss, though the relationship between the parish priest and the *fabrique* in terms of power and authority did vary across parishes, with a couple of parish boards taking their direction from the priest. Additionally, the membership of the *fabrique* changes on an ongoing basis. Although two participants stated that their interactions with the *fabrique* were positive, the rest characterized their relationship to the *fabrique* as unrecognizing of their work, distant, and even demanding or exploitative. For example, one man stated, "The *fabrique* keeps

changing. Some are very friendly and they want to talk, but others keep their distance—maybe because they think they are better than us. They say we need to be a team, but they do not act like a team.” In response to a query about whether or not he knew if the board was satisfied with his work, another participant stated simply, “There has not been any reproach.” Pressing further, we asked if any gratitude or interest had been expressed in his work and the participant exclaimed, “No! Never.” Speaking to the exploitative relationship he perceived, one handyman said, “They exploit me. If I am around, they will order me to do things that are not part of my job. Sometimes I react against that, but they do not like it, and there are repercussions...Like the priests, the *fabrique* changes, but the mentality stays the same.”

Striving for More: Dignity of Work and Workers’ Rights

A central goal of this study was to understand how parish workers viewed their treatment from the perspective of core church teachings on the meaning of work and workers’ rights. Findings from this theme highlight participants’ perceptions about their wages, the personal and emotional impact of often paradoxically informal yet demanding job structures, and barriers to being creative and innovative in their jobs.

Compensation not in keeping with cost of living. Catholic social teaching describes the rights of workers to a just wage. Therefore, we were interested in what the co-researchers thought about their financial compensation (all of the participants worked full-time and the average hours worked per week was 40). Almost unanimously, the participants agreed that their salaries (averaging \$297 U.S. per month) were insufficient to meet the costs of living in Mauritius. The only participant to state that he was satisfied with his salary also was the only person never to be married or have children; he noted that had he had a family his perception about his salary might be different. All other interviewees described their salaries as “unjust,” or stated, “you cannot do much with that [salary].” As a way to supplement their salary, half of the interviewees engaged in other work to make ends meet. One woman who made sacramentals noted, “My salary is not enough to make ends meet, and I cannot progress unless I do my small business of selling medals – this alone has helped me.” As a follow-up to our inquiry about the sufficiency of pay, we asked all of the participants if they had an opportunity for a raise or a promotion. Every participant stated that the only raise they received was the cost-of-living wage sanctioned by the Mauritian government.

“All will be credited in heaven.” When talking to the interviewees about their compensation, we noticed that for at least half of them, it was difficult to articulate either a desire for or a justification for a higher salary. It appeared that participants were inhibited in articulating their own financial needs due to beliefs about their jobs being vocations or because they were protective of a parish that they believed was too poor to pay them more. For example, when asked what he believed a fair salary would be, one sacristan stated instead, “I count the money and know that the parish doesn’t make much money, so I would not think I should ask for more money.” Exemplifying the blurring between working a job that one sees as a call and accepting an insufficient wage, one secretary who had just confirmed that she sees her work as a vocation stated, “You see this salary—it doesn’t

compensate for what we are doing. What I am doing has no price. My reward will be given there [in heaven]. If I worked elsewhere I would have not done it for this salary. Not at all.”

Informal job structures that engender angst and frustration. To learn about structures that might be in place to protect workers’ rights, we inquired about contracts, employee handbooks, systems of evaluation, and sick and vacation leave. The majority of participants had no meaningful contract; none of the participants had ever seen an employee handbook; none received regular evaluations; and every participant was aware of his or her right to sick and vacation leave, primarily because leave time is regulated by the Mauritian government.

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With regard to the contracts, seven of the ten participants either had no written contract or a contract they considered not meaningful because it did not outline their job duties, salary, and other compensation. One secretary said she had a contract, but “there is nothing in it. The only thing it says is that I have to uphold confidentiality, but it has nothing about my duties or pay.” Those who had no written contract learned about their job responsibilities through word of mouth and by doing what they were told to do by the parish priest or *fabrique*. The lack of a clear job description caused concern for participants because they experienced their job duties being changed when new priests or members of the *fabrique* took over. One participant who was a sacristan for ten years talked about how a new priest and *fabrique* wanted to add the washing of altar linens to her workload. She was aware that another parishioner was doing this washing to earn extra money. When she refused to do the washing, the *fabrique* drafted a contract for her including the washing as part of her duties. She reported being upset, and she refused to sign. She stated, “I wanted to go to a law office, but I thought I should not because I’m Catholic and don’t want to cause a scandal. I feel desperate because there is no one to talk to about this.” Others similarly feared being told that their job duties would be increased with the advent of new leadership. They recognized that they were in a vulnerable position because they did not have a contract or professional advocate that could represent their position. We also specifically inquired with participants about whether or not they had an employee handbook or had awareness of workplace policies. None of the participants knew of such documents.

Barriers to being creative, innovative, and becoming more human through work. When asked about opportunities to be innovative or creative in their work and to talk about instances in which they believed work helped to dignify them, the participants largely struggled to respond. The general sense was that participants experienced barriers to being innovative in their work. For instance, one secretary stated about her ability to be creative, “People come to talk to me, and my compassion makes me want to help, but I refrain because I think this will lead to problems because people see this as not my job.” She explained further that the only thing she feels free to do is modify her duties within the context of what is expected of her. A female sacristan similarly said, “I feel I am ill-

treated and am not being dignified through my work even though the priests will preach about it on Labor Day.”

Call to Action: Recommendations for Enhancing Workplace Conditions

The third main theme relates to the participatory action-oriented method of the study. We were interested in knowing how the participants believed their workplace conditions could be enhanced. This theme has four sub-themes, all of which take the form of recommendations for enhancing workplace conditions.

Union or workplace advocate. The majority of participants expressed a general sentiment that they did not have anyone with whom to speak about their concerns related to workplace issues. The majority also expressed interest either in seeing a union be formed or having some impartial person outside of the parish to whom they could go as an advocate. One participant said that he would like to see a union formed “not as a way to fight against the church, but because it is the right of the workers to be able to come together.” A handyman supported the general idea of a workers’ advocate, saying, “We don’t have anyone to whom we can go when we have work problems. I think we need a team who will speak out for us.”

Interest in professional training and development. There was almost unanimous interest among the participants for having access to professional training that could be useful in their jobs and help them grow professionally.

Just as noteworthy, when the participants discussed the idea of training, they became animated and excited. One participant talked about wanting to get his driver’s license, which he could use to help run errands for the parish. Another said she would like to take a course in flower arranging to be able to create arrangements for the church altar; a third person talked about being trained to use sound equipment so that he would be able to solve problems with the sound system. Two sacristans proposed a variation on the theme of outside training with the suggestion that all of the sacristans get together on a regular basis to discuss how to do their work effectively and efficiently.

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Sensitization of priests and *fabrique* to life and work conditions. This theme had to do with the intersection of work with the participants’ personal lives. Several participants recommended that the priests and *fabrique* develop more compassion for them as they believed the administration did not necessarily understand how difficult it was to make a living on the small salaries they received. Additionally, some participants suggested that empathy be extended to personal life difficulties, especially when they had health problems that interfered with their ability to do their jobs. These participants were disappointed at the harsh and discompassionate responses they received when they needed time off due to sickness.

Regular evaluation and administrative interest about work conditions. Participants described the *fabrique* as being distant and uninvolved with them as workers. A final recommendation, which we called regular evaluation and interest in work conditions, seemed to address this concern of the workers. Participants talked about wanting regular conversations with the administration about their work and simply being noticed for the job they were doing rather than being taken for granted. One man said, “We need a regular conversation between the priests, *fabrique*, and the workers. This doesn’t happen now unless I initiate the conversation. But, others are afraid of losing their job if they speak up the way I do.” Another participant stated, “It has always been my dream that someone would be interested in what I am doing, but there has been no one.”

Discussion

Spiritually Meaningful Work

Our first theme, which focused on the personal meaning of work, clearly evidenced that participants viewed their work as more than a mundane job. While a few people said their job was meaningful because it allowed them to generate income, all participants spoke about a spiritual aspect of work that gave them a sense of purpose. Being an employee of a religious institution offered the interviewees a chance to see their work as more than mere mechanistic acts aimed at productivity (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). Indeed, having jobs that involved a spiritual component and viewing work from a spiritual perspective seemed to engage participants’ whole selves: body and soul; heart and mind; conscience and will (Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2004). Participants’ experiences suggest that they perceived their work as a way to craft a purposeful existence.

Objectification of the Parish Worker

Catholic social teaching recognizes that with work can come a measure of toil and suffering, even injustice in a variety of forms. Pope Leo XIII (1891) affirmed that the working class has the right to a just wage, time for rest, private property, and, most importantly, the right not to be used as instruments for others’ gain. Pope John Paul II (1981) re-affirmed the subjective or personal dimension of work over the objective. This insight is worth considering in light of findings that suggested interviewees often were treated more as the means to accomplish tasks than as people with dignity. Perhaps the best example of objectification was interviewees’ sense that they were not noticed. Participants did not have an opportunity to discuss their work with the parish *fabrique*; others said the only evidence they had of doing a satisfactory job was in not being reproached. More striking, some participants felt exploited by those in authority. There was a sense among participants that they were taken for granted, which is one way the human person can begin to be treated as a means to an end. Notably, participants recommended two actions that offered remedies to the erosion of human subjectivity they

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felt. First, the workers wanted some form of regular evaluation by superiors. Second, many participants also endorsed the idea that priests and the *fabrique* appreciate their whole life, including financial challenges and family obligations. Both of these actions require that the *fabrique* and priests treat parish workers as the persons they are more than the work they produce.

Constrained Ability to Become “More a Human Being”

Work is a fundamental dimension of the human experience that the church sees as a way for people to develop their human capacity (Tablan, 2015). John Paul II (1981, p. 13) wrote, “[T]hrough work man not only transforms nature...but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes more a human being.” In this inquiry, participants struggled to identify how their work helped them advance their development as persons. Rather, they described how they were not able to be creative within their jobs. Our sense was that those in authority might have lacked an inspired view on the low-wage, generally low-skill positions participants held. This, coupled with poor and sometimes disrespectful treatment from priests and the *fabrique*, seemed to act as barriers to the interviewees’ ability to develop their talents. It was striking that participants were interested in training that could expand their skills, transform their duties, and give them a new sense of joy in their work, thus potentially helping them tap into the fulfillment after which people strive in work.

Environment Lacking in Some Basic Workers’ Rights

Catholic social teaching is replete with the affirmation of workers’ rights. Tablan (2015) observed that it is a challenge for employers to satisfy all workers’ rights, but he also contended that employers have a moral obligation to create environments in which rights can be achieved. Not only were participants lacking in some key labor rights, the conditions that would enable them to achieve those rights also were not consistently present. One right seriously lacking was the right to a living wage. According to the most recent poverty analysis by the Republic of Mauritius Ministry of Finance and Economic Development (2015), the poverty line in 2012 was set at a monthly salary of 5,652 rupees for a family of one adult and 13,310 rupees for a family of two adults and two children. Six of the ten participants had two or more children; of these five earned a salary below the 2012 poverty line (the salary range of those with two or more children was 6,985-10,000 rupees). The median monthly salary of all participants was 10,098 rupees. These figures confirm participants’ perceptions that their salaries were not in keeping with the cost of living in Mauritius. Moreover, the finding that at least half of the participants sought other sources of income speaks to the lack of a just wage.

Other concerning findings related to lack of written contracts, fear around requesting a contract, and feelings of disempowerment to self-advocate in instances when job duties expanded upon demand. Achieving improved workplace conditions or job enrichment is always the result of ongoing dialogue between those in management positions and employees (Tablan, 2015). Unfortunately, the conditions for dialogue generally were not experienced by the co-researchers. When asked about how to enhance their work

conditions, participants described wanting regular evaluation by priests and the *fabrique* and the installation of workplace advocates, possibly including a union. Regular evaluation could be an opportunity for forging meaningful relationships among the co-researchers and those in administrative roles that seemed to be lacking. More importantly, forging relationships of genuine interest could be the foundation for enhancing solidarity, or the firm commitment of administrators to addressing parish workers' rights (John Paul II, 1981). Beyer (2017:249) observed, however, that Catholic social teaching does not endorse "cheap solidarity" or a false commitment to workers' rights marked by a prohibition on conflict between employees and management. He further observed that in Catholic workplaces, administrators can endorse the notion of workplace-as-family, only to mask a paternalistic attitude that is used to prevent conflict and convince employees to accept unjust working conditions. Findings indicated that participants held mindsets protective of their church parishes and at times even found it difficult to vocalize their rights as workers. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that they were contending with issues such as limited education and low-skill work that could be perceived negatively by others and be personally disempowering. Together, these factors suggest the importance of interviewees' observation that a workplace advocate or union might be beneficial to ushering in change.

Conclusion

In sum, we found that participants brought a spiritual outlook to their work experiences for which they were overwhelmingly grateful. Concurrently, parish employees lived an existence as workers that was calling out for reform in several key areas of labor rights. The Catholic Church has an expansive, well-developed, and person-centered understanding of the meaning and place of work in the human life. Social teachings can and should be used to further reflection on how to better make the work experience of the most vulnerable workers the church employs congruent with the philosophies it espouses.

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