With millions unemployed in this economy, it is important to understand how Catholic social thought considers unemployment. It is not just another "economic indicator." Unemployment undermines a just society since work is at the heart of the social question.

The tradition of modern Catholic Social Teaching that begins with Rerum Novarum in 1891 focuses first on the situation of the worker, whom Pope John Paul II later called the sole "subject of work." In John Paul's writings, he makes it clear that, by their work, workers are continuing and perfecting the creative activity of God the Creator and thus deepening the reality of being made in God's image. Unemployment assaults that profound spiritual identity.

Pope Benedict XVI describes the same centrality of workers in his most recent encyclical Caritas in Veritate in these words: "…the primary capital to be safeguarded and valued is man, the human person in his or her integrity..." In a single paragraph later in the encyclical, the pope reiterates certain traditional particulars about human work: that it be freely chosen; respectful of the worker; without discrimination; enabling a family to meet their needs and the educational needs of their children; prohibiting child labor; allowing organization of workers (unions) and their voices to be heard; providing "enough room" for personal and spiritual development; and supportive of a decent retirement.

Turning to unemployment, Benedict reminds us that mobility and deregulation in a more globalized economy, aggravated by the current global crisis, create a kind of unemployment that causes psychological instability, provokes new forms of economic marginalization, and—with or without public assistance—undermines the freedom and creativity of the person and his family, "causing great psychological and spiritual suffering." It is in light of the dignity of the human person and the demands of justice that we continue to "prioritize the goal of access to steady employment for everyone."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church underscores the relationship of unemployment to human dignity and family life:

Unemployment almost always wounds its victim’s dignity and threatens the equilibrium of his life. Besides the harm done to him personally, it entails many risks for his family.

We can better understand the damage of unemployment from the multiple purposes of work, as does the Vatican’s recent Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church: "Work is needed to form and maintain a family, to have the right to property, to contribute to the common good of the human family." Conversely, unemployment is seen as an evil by the Church because it undermines family life, assaults human dignity, and marginalizes the unemployed workers, creating "victims of social exclusion" and, when high, becomes "a real social disaster."

The Catholic Church recommends at least three responses: first, "Full employment' therefore remains a mandatory objective for every economic system oriented towards justice and the common good;" second, educational systems must provide sufficient human and technological formation needed for access to jobs and encourage people to undertake ongoing updating and retraining; and third, as Pope John Paul II put it, the obligation to provide unemployment benefits suitable for the basic support of unemployed workers and their families is a "duty springing from the fundamental principle of… the common use of goods or, to put it in another and simpler way, the right to life and subsistence."