

*Work is a universal experience of man
and thus one of the most
direct and easily accessible paths to holiness.*

The gospel of work

By Cynthia Toolin

■ In the mystery of creation, God gave man the directive to subdue and dominate the earth in Gen. 1:28: "And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'" John Paul II says, "Even though these words do not refer directly and explicitly to work, beyond any doubt they indirectly indicate it as an activity for man to carry out in the world." Further, he adds,

Indeed, they show its very deepest essence. Man is the image of God partly through the mandate received from his Creator to subdue, to dominate, the earth. In carrying out this mandate, man, every human being, reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe.¹

In a much later speech, John Paul II simply stated, "Work is the implementation of God's original command...."²

Work is any transitive manual or intellectual activity, regardless of its nature or circumstances, that begins in man and is directed toward an object external to him, upon which he will have some effect or will leave some stamp of himself. Usually work is thought of as involving a job and payment for the job. This is wrong. Work is not only activity done on a job for pay—doing housework, tending a garden, preparing a nice meal, reading a bedtime story to a child and volunteering to deliver "meals on wheels" to the elderly are all work in the technical sense of the word.

In the objective sense of work, it is through this activity that man dominates and subdues the earth (e.g., through cultivating and transforming its natural products and extracting its natural resources³). In the process, he not only has some effect on the external world, he shows that he, a self-determining person,

by following God's command and participating in his work of creation, becomes a clearer image of him. This is the subjective sense of work.⁴

In referring to both the objective and subjective senses of work, John Paul II says, "As a person he works, he performs various actions belonging to the work process; independently of their objective content, these actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfill the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity."⁵ And further,

Understood as a process whereby man and the human race subdue the earth, work corresponds to this basic biblical concept only when throughout the process man manifests himself and confirms himself as the one who "dominates." This domination, in a certain sense, refers to the subjective dimension even more than to the objective one: this dimension conditions the very ethical nature of work. In fact there is no doubt that human work has an ethical value of its own, which clearly and directly remains linked to the fact that the one who carries it out is a person, a conscious and free subject, that is to say a subject that decides about himself.⁶

Thus in work—this basic dimension of man's life—he reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe. Daily he lives out God's mandate to subdue and dominate the earth by sitting at the workbench constructed by the generations of laborers who preceded him. At it, man works to support himself and his family, to contribute to the scientific, cultural and moral common good of his community, and to find fulfillment as a person.

Regardless of gender, age, ethnicity, religion, race, social class or educational level, this experience of work—of subduing and dominating the earth and (perhaps without awareness) of fulfilling one's call to be a person—is universal. Each and every man works as God commanded while man was in the state of original justice in Paradise. After the Fall, when man had entered the state of original sin, the experience of toil also became universal—hard and/or dangerous physical

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labor and difficult intellectual labor, fraught with conflict, jealousy, competition and tension among workers and between workers and their employers. In the context of the mystery of creation we know man was always meant to work, but after original sin it became unpleasant, in some cases, extremely unpleasant—an effort, a penalty. John Paul II says, "Precisely for these reasons, work is sometimes experienced as toil unavoidably linked to survival, rather than a way to fulfill oneself and reach the goal desired by God."⁷

Work is good for man, otherwise it would not have been a requirement in the Garden. Therefore, original sin has not damaged that value of work for man. It is still good for man, his family, society and culture, but now it is belabored with difficulties, dangers and unpleasantness between and among social groups and individuals.

These universal experiences of work and toil in many ways dominate man's life. As a young person he prepares for work through at least some education, in many instances through much education. Once the preparation is over, daily, week-in and week-out, for decades of his life, until unemployment, disability, death or retirement occurs, he works. Sometimes the only thing that sustains man through these decades is hope for a better opportunity, a nicer position with a better title, a higher pay and more vacation time. This daily oppressive grind is filled with the busyness of work, and it dominates his life as

he negotiates work-place politics, unsatisfied or unsatisfiable customers and unreasonable and demanding managers. In the process, work can not only dominate man's life, it can also either enslave him or be turned into a god by him.

Yet in spite of all this we know that a mystery is occurring here; that man's work in some way fulfills God's command to subdue and dominate the earth and also helps perfect his creation. Further, in some way work, when it is shared with Christ, contributes to redemption. Even more, in some way, this same work perfects man and contributes to his sanctification. Through work man contributes to the mission of the Church given by Christ. Thus, in any theological analysis of work, eventually the question must arise as to what the ultimate purpose of work is.

The value of work, the very dignity of work, is not the objective sense of work—what is done—but the subjective sense of work—that it is done by a person, the subject. To expand upon a quotation from John Paul II used above,

...the primary basis of the value of work is man himself, who is its subject. This leads immediately to a very important conclusion of an ethical nature: however true it may be that man is destined for work and called to it, in the first place work is "for man" and not man "for work." Through this conclusion one rightly comes to recognize the pre-eminence of the subjective meaning of work over the objective one.⁸

The emphasis in this passage is that "work is 'for man' and not man 'for work.'" How can this crucial phrase be interpreted?

Creation, redemption, sanctification and the mission of the Church

That work is "for man" is apparent in that through it he, as a person, participates in the works *ad extra* of the three persons of the Trinity—creation, redemption and sanctification. Further, through his work he continues the mission that Christ gave to his followers to

work for the earthly and eschatological fulfillment of the Kingdom of God.

In all of visible creation only man works, and this fact is one of the things that distinguish man from subpersonal creation. Man is a person with intellect and will, and as such, he is made in the image and likeness of God. What a wonderful way to show that image! Through his own work, man is involved with, participates in and in some ways assists in completing God's own work. By knowing the truth in the intellect and loving the good in the will, man—who knows the end and the means necessary to achieve it—can work in union with God to fulfill his providential design.

First, man works to complete creation. John Paul II sums this up: "[Work is man's] way of taking an active and responsible part in the marvelous work of the Creator...;"⁹ "[man's] work itself is an unfolding of the Creator's intention and a contribution to the realization in history of the divine plan;"¹⁰ "[men] are ... to contribute by their work to the betterment of creation itself";¹¹ and "the one who works knows that he is accomplishing something of the divine, something that can be linked to the initial work of the Creator."¹²

Work in this respect has both a vertical and a horizontal dimension. It involves man's relationship with God, and that contribution to the completion of his creation is also an effective way of benefiting others; that is, it contributes to the common good.¹³ Accordingly to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,

Human work proceeds directly from persons created in the image of God and called to prolong the work of creation by subduing the earth, both with and for another.¹⁴

The common good, defined as the relatively easy access to the things necessary for man's fulfillment (i.e., the things that fulfill his nature), is found in the end product of work.¹⁵ For example, the common good that results from work done in a hospital is healthy people; of a school, educated people; of a police

force, safe people. Ultimately work contributes to the common good not only as found in the end product and in the individuals who are helped by the work, but also as regards the impact on the one doing the work.

With the advent of original sin, man's nature, as well as the natural world and the world of work, was damaged. Work became fraught with difficulties and unpleasantness. All these things need to be redeemed in Christ. In becoming not only a human, but a human who worked, the Divine Person teaches us about work—that it has dignity and that its value is not in what is done but in that it is done by a human.¹⁶ By working, Christ redeemed human work and returned it to its original meaning in Genesis.¹⁷ And by uniting his work to Christ, man's work can also be redemptive. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*,

[Work] can also be redemptive. By enduring the hardship of work in union with Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth and the one crucified on Calvary, man collaborates in a certain fashion with the Son of God in his redemptive work. He shows himself to be a disciple of Christ by carrying the cross, daily, in the work he is called to accomplish. Work can be a means of sanctification and a way of animating earthly realities with the Spirit of Christ.¹⁸

The primordial value of labor stems from man himself, its author and beneficiary. By means of his labor man participates in the work of creation. Work united to Christ can be redemptive.¹⁹

Work is also the usual and most accessible path to sanctification.²⁰ By working, man participates in God's creative activity and becomes fulfilled as man.²¹ Benedict XVI has stated this, saying,

May you as Christians be committed to living and testifying to the "gospel of work," in the awareness that the Lord calls all the baptized to holiness through their daily occupations.²²

[On] May 1, 1955, [Pope Pius XII] established the Feast of St Joseph the Worker to point out to all the world's workers the way to personal sanctification through work.²³

Josemaría Escrivá, a saint of our times, notes in this regard that since Christ who worked as a craftsman took it into his hands, "work has become for us a redeemed and redemptive reality. Not only is it the background of man's life, it is a means and path of holiness. It is something to be sanctified and something which sanctifies."²⁴

How man works, the attitude he brings to his work, is of crucial importance, because this mundane activity that man is involved with every day has eternal repercussions. Consider two housewives who prepare and serve identical nutritious meals, pleasing to the eye. One does this with anger and resentment because she has to, because it is part of her role within her family. The other does it with love and joy, because she cares for her family and wants its members to be happy and healthy. The objective work is the same for both, but the effects on the subject are not. Only one of the women is using this work as a potential path to holiness.

Further, Christ gave to his disciples the mission to build up the earthly and eschatological Kingdom of God, his Church. One way Christians now carry out this task is through work.

Pius XII, in speaking to the Catholic Association of Italian Workers, said, "The basic purpose of your generous efforts is to establish and extend the Kingdom of God."²⁵ John Paul II says,

"Whatever you do, whether in speech or in action, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Col. 3:17). In union with Jesus Christ, your work and your efforts to transform the world take on the quality of a sacrifice pleasing to God. By offering "what earth has given and human hands have made" you prepare the way for God's kingdom. That is the deepest meaning of your labor.²⁶

And Benedict XVI says,

For believers, moreover, the ultimate aim of work is the building up of the Kingdom of God.... Today, more than ever, it is necessary and urgent to proclaim "the gospel of work," to live as Christians in the world of work and become apostles among workers.²⁷

The Holy Family

The members of the Holy Family model this accessible path to holiness. The Holy Family lived a simple, ordinary and obscure life that could not be differentiated from those of the people with whom they interacted regularly—extended family, neighbors and friends. They could be considered a “normal” family in the artisan class, which today might be considered lower middle class.

As head of the family, Joseph was guardian, protector and supporter of its members. Through Mary’s pregnancy, their life as refugees and aliens in a strange land, their return to Israel and their continued residence in Nazareth, Joseph was responsible for the physical survival of his family both by following God’s commands to avoid political persecution and through plying his skills as a carpenter.²⁸ This was not an arbitrary obligation put on Joseph by God—it was an act of love he willingly carried out through his entire familial life.

More to the point of this paper, Joseph worked. As a carpenter he probably had a shop either attached to or in close proximity to his home, with a workbench, tools of the trade and necessary supplies and products in various stages of completion. Because Nazareth was a small town, Joseph probably was not a specialist but worked at a wide range of tasks to satisfy his customers—general construction, carpentry, joining, cabinetry and maybe even some stonework and ironwork. He was a strong, honest and widely skilled artisan; he experienced work and he experienced toil. And it was at his workbench in his shop, using his tools, that Jesus learned how to be a carpenter.²⁹

Joseph worked outside the home, but also in it. He gave paternal direction and care to Jesus, teaching him how to be a Jewish man. When Jesus was about age three, Joseph would have taken over his son’s religious and spiritual formation from Mary. He would have taught him the law, rituals, history, traditions and prayers of Israel. And he taught him how to work.

Mary worked within the home³⁰ as a wife and mother. Like Joseph, her days were full of the productive activity necessary for the running of a household. She would spin, weave, sew, clean, gather food, water and fuel, go to the market and make, prepare and serve meals. She gave maternal direction and care to Jesus throughout his life, but was primarily responsible for him probably until about age three. She gave him the basic training of being a Jewish man, including primary moral and religious instruction. She taught him little prayers and the commandments, the annual cycle of Jewish celebrations and remembrances, and the stories of past men and women who were the heroes and heroines of the Jewish faith.

Joseph and Mary also taught him by example so that he could imitate them. They showed him how to be religious by going to the synagogue, saying prayers and participating in pilgrimages. They showed him how to obey the law and to be compassionate by visiting the old, sick and poor and by helping those in need. They taught him about familial

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and interpersonal relationships by their loving conduct toward each other and him, as well as with others—family, friends, neighbors, Jews and non-Jews, aliens and strangers in the land, widows and orphans. They taught him how to work because they were both hard workers. He gained his experiential knowledge from them and through this, they helped form him into the kind of man he became. Their success can be seen in the parables he told in his adulthood—he had learned the lessons of human life, and of human work, well.³¹

Although a divine person, Jesus in his human nature had to learn as all men learn. Everything had to be explained to him in a progressive manner. He had to learn how to be a practicing Jewish man in the Palestinian culture of two thousand years ago.

This leads to an interesting theological aside. Consider that Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, creator of the universe. As man, he learns how to work with natural resources

from his foster father Joseph. As God, he created the natural resources and placed Joseph's soul in his body at conception. As man, he learns the things all infants and toddlers need to learn from their mothers from his mother Mary. As God, he performed her Immaculate Conception. As man, he learns about the history of the chosen people. As God, he called those people to be his own and made the Old Covenant with them. As man, he learns about the heroes and heroines of Judaism. As God, all of them were his "friends"—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses. As man, he learns how to worship Yahweh as a devout Jew and later says "before Abraham was, I am." As God, he is the one worshipped. One must ponder with awe the wonder of the hypostatic union.

Let us return to the subject at hand. Jesus also worked and it was Joseph who taught him how to be a carpenter. He worked side by side with him, an apprentice who became a journeyman and finally a carpenter in his own right. As a young boy, he probably sat in his foster father's shop and watched him work. Eventually he would be given little jobs to do, like sweep the floor or fetch the nails. By the time he was twelve and was teaching the wise men in the Temple, he was probably well on his way to being a carpenter. As he progressed he learned how to use the tools and apply them to the wood to make completed projects. Like Joseph, he was probably not a specialist, but had a wide range of skills in carpentry and the related trades.

During the hidden decades of his life prior to the beginning of his public ministry, he earned his living in the village plying the trade he learned from his foster father. Jesus spent most of his time on earth working. This clearly shows the importance of work in the eyes of God.

John Paul II refers to this mystery of Jesus' work in great detail. He says,

While the Jubilee Year turns our gaze to the mystery of the Incarnation, it invites us to reflect with particular intensity on the hidden life of Jesus in Naza-

reth. It was there that he spent most of his earthly life. With his silent diligence in Joseph's workshop, Jesus gave the highest proof of the dignity of work.

The Son of God did not disdain being called a "carpenter" and did not want to be spared the normal condition of every human being. "The eloquence of the life of Christ is unequivocal: he belongs to the 'working world,' he has appreciation and respect for human work. It can indeed be said that he looks with love upon human work and the different forms that it takes, seeing in each one of these forms a particular facet of man's likeness with God, the Creator and Father" (*Laborem exercens*, #26).³²

Though it seems to many to be nothing more than an oppressive necessary evil, work can in fact transform man and the world. Theologically speaking, if man follows God's command to work, he participates with him in his Providence. Man's work helps complete creation; when united with Christ, it shares in redemption; when done properly, it leads to holiness; and altogether, it builds up the Kingdom of God.

The emphasis, I would argue, has to be on sanctity. Work is a universal experience of man and thus one of the most direct and easily accessible paths to holiness.

Consider the works *ad extra*. Clearly God does not "use" man to complete creation or redemption, as if man is nothing more than an inanimate tool in his hands, anymore than he used the authors of Scripture as takers of dictation. By growing in holiness, man participates with God in his works *ad extra*, and becomes a clearer image of the One who creates, redeems and sanctifies.

The process is interesting theologically. The procession of the Son from the Father in the intellect and of the Holy Spirit from the Father and Son in the will occurs in eternity. The Father, originator of his perfect image, the Son, in the act of generation, then sends him into time on his mission. The Father and Son, as one originator of their perfect love—the Holy Spirit, in the act of spiration—then send the third person of the Trinity into time on his mission. These missions in time in some sense continue the processions occur-

ring in eternity as only the originator can send those originated.

Man, by accepting God's grace and love, participates with the three persons in the works *ad extra*. One way is by his daily work; thus man grows in sanctity. For Catholics this is of particular interest. Growing in sanctity through work does not occur in a spiritual vacuum. As man grows in holiness, he is more likely to accept, receive and make use of the means of grace that Christ has made available in the one place where his true Church subsists. That "double" growth in holiness, through work and through the Church, helps transform the world but also helps build up the holiness within the Church. The Church becomes more clearly what Christ wants her to be—the spotless bride of the lamb without blemish. These contribute to the mission Christ gave his disciples, to build up the Kingdom of God on earth for its ultimate eschatological fulfillment. Man's holiness in the work world attracts others to the Church; and the

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holiness of the Church attracts others to her.

On the individual level another point of theological interest occurs. Man's holiness of course includes the indwelling of the three persons of the Trinity in his soul. God comes and makes his home within the man. Accordingly, man's charity increases and he loves more deeply the God whose image and likeness he reflects ever more clearly and more purely. If he persists in grace until the end, when he dies that wonderful charity will determine the amount of glory God gives him. It in turn determines how clearly man sees God face-to-face for all eternity; how clearly he will see the three persons whose works *ad extra* and whose mission for the Kingdom he participated in through his work.

This must give pause to the man who works. The husband as he labors in the factory, the bank, the mechanic's shop, the mine; the wife as she labors in the home, at the grocery store, at the day care center; the parents as they labor at the child's sick bed; and the children as they labor at the parent's death bed. Done properly in love, in union with God's grace, this work leads to sanctity, to being a clearer image of God in this life, and ultimately to seeing a clearer image of him in the next life.

Yes, work is for man and not man for work. ■

End Notes

¹ John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, #4. Henceforth, *LE*.

² John Paul II, *Address to the Workers of Malta*, 5/26/1990, #4. Henceforth, *Malta*.

³ Op. cit., *LE*, #5.

⁴ It is not work done only to support self and family, to pay taxes and buy the necessities of life, to pay bills and hopefully have enough to save for emergencies, invest for retirement and even enjoy some of the luxuries of life. Those things result from the objective dimension of work. The subjective dimension is not only as important, it is more important, because it has ramifications for the development of the per-

son and repercussions for where eternal life is spent.

⁵ Op. cit., *LE*, #6.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ John Paul II, *Letter on the Gospel of Work to the Diocese of Rome*, 12/8/1998, #4. Henceforth, *Letter on the Gospel of Work*.

⁸ Op. cit., *LE*, #6.

⁹ John Paul II, *Malta*, #1.

¹⁰ Op. cit., referring to *Gaudium et Spes* #34, *Malta*, #6.

¹¹ Op. cit., *Letter on the Gospel of Work*, #3.

¹² John Paul II, *Address at Olivetti*, 3/19/1980. In *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, March 26, 1990, p. 1.

¹³ John Paul II, *Malta*, #6.

¹⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2427. Henceforth, *CCC*.

¹⁵ "From the Christian vision of work springs the constant commitment to give priority in every circumstance to the good of the person and to his full spiritual, cultural and social development . . . Thus, in hospitals it is the sick person who must be the center of every medical, nursing or administrative service; in schools and universities, it is the student who should be helped, through teaching and formation, to be trained one day to fulfill his own task in society; in factories and in the offices of public and private firms, in commercial and business activities, it is the achievement of a better quality of life and not merely increased output and profits which are the absolute and indispensable law; in professional life, in administrative offices and in the service sector, it is honesty, competence and quality services which should be given priority in satisfying people's requests; in communications the primary value is service to the truth, which must be maintained with constant fidelity; in the administration of justice it is the right of every person and respect for lawfulness which must guide magistrates and lawyers; in sports, tourism and hospitality it is the growth of the human person that should be promoted in all his abilities and in his physical and spiritual needs." Op. cit., *Letter on the*

Gospel of Work, #5.

¹⁶ Op. cit., *LE*, #6.

¹⁷ St. Irenaeus: "Whatever was not assumed was not healed."

¹⁸ Op. cit., *CCC*, #2427.

¹⁹ Op. cit., *CCC*, #2460.

²⁰ John Paul II, *Guardian of the Redeemer*, 8/15/1989, #22 and #24. Henceforth, *Guardian*.

²¹ Michel Gasnier, O.P., *Joseph the Silent*, Trans. by Jane Wynne Saul, R.S.C. J. "Before God, labor is not only a necessity; it calls for pride, nobility, a spirit of reparation. There is nothing slavish about it. On the contrary it is a kind of prayer, a way of finding God, a means of salvation." (New York: P.J. Kenedy & Sons, 1962, p. 37).

²² Benedict XVI, *Address to the Directors and Members of "Confartigianato" an Association of Italian Artisans*, 3/31/2007. Henceforth, *Association of Italian Artisans*.

²³ Benedict XVI, *Address to the Italian Christian Workers' Association (A.C.L.I.)*, 1/27/2006.

²⁴ Benedict XVI, quoting *Christ Is Passing By*, homily, n. 47, in Op. cit., *Association of Italian Artisans*.

²⁵ Pius XII, *The Christian Way of Life Among*

Workingmen, 5/1/1955.

²⁶ Op. Cit., *Malta*, #7.

²⁷ Benedict XVI, *Message to the Participants in the 9th International Youth Forum*, 3/28/2007.

²⁸ That he acted in such a way is shown in Scripture when Jesus taught the wise men in the Temple. When Mary found him, she said, "Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? Behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing." Luke 2:48.

²⁹ Op. cit., *Guardian*, #22.

³⁰ To be accurate, we do not know that she worked only in the home. She may also have worked outside of the home or taken in sewing or needlework for pay.

³¹ His parables include, for example, fig trees, growing seed, vineyard laborers, dinner guests, shepherds, householders, laborers, landowners, fisherman, sowers, stewards, servants, builders, new cloth, new wine, tares, sheep and goats.

³² John Paul II, *Homily on the Jubilee of Workers*, 5/1/2000, #2. See also *Gaudium et Spes*, #22: Jesus "worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved."



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