

Spirituality of Work

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So God created human beings, making them to be like himself. He created them, and said, "Have many children, so that your descendants will live all over the earth and bring it under their control."

- Genesis 1:27-28

Laypeople must realize that their daily work is the primary means by which they help bring about the kingdom of God. Any spirituality which detracts or distracts from work is therefore counterproductive.

In the final sentences of his encyclical **On Human Work**, Pope John Paul II wrote: "Let the Christian who listens to the living word of God, uniting work with prayer, know the place work has not only in earthly progress but also in *the development of the kingdom of God*, to which we are called through the power of the Holy Spirit and through the word of the gospel."¹

There are two important ideas in the pope's teaching on work. First, he elevates work united with prayer to a key place in both the temporal world and the kingdom of God. Work is not mere toil. It is not the punishment for Adam and Eve's sin, but rather an essential element in salvation. Work contributes not only to material well-being but also to the holy kingdom of God.

Second, since we are all called to work in the process of building the kingdom, then work cannot be limited merely to paid employment. All activity which helps build the kingdom is work: on the job, with the family, and in the community. And the value of all work is to be judged not by its monetary remuneration but by its contribution to building the kingdom.

According to Vatican II work refers to any human activity that cooperates with God's on-going creation: "Throughout the course of centuries men have labored to better the circumstances of their lives through a monumental amount of individual and collective effort. To believers, this point is settled: *considered in itself* such human activity accords with God's will. For man, created to God's image, received a mandate to subject to himself the earth and all that it contains." (authors' emphasis)²

John Paul II has this wider notion of work in mind when he call it "a fundamental

dimension of man's existence on earth."³ Worship, sacraments and devotions are important for preparation and reflection, but the mandate of Christianity is the work of building the kingdom.

Because of his broad understanding of human work, John Paul II can refer to the basic Christian way as a "spirituality of work."⁴ This phrase at first sounds strange to those who equate spirituality with pious devotions. But work contains the key to a complete and fulfilling spirituality.

Daily work can unite the sacred and the secular in genuine Christian spirituality. Such a spirituality requires that the world be regarded as proper home to be sustained, improved and completed. The older view of the world as a source of trial and temptation to be overcome, must be replaced by one that sees the world as an incarnation of the love of God.

A spirituality of work also demands blurring the distinction between the church and the world. The church is not longer a spiritual refuge from the evil world but is rather involved daily in the process of creating the world in the image of God.

Finally, a spirituality of work means that there must be a new definition of spirituality for laypeople involved in the world. Rather than implying overly religious acts, spirituality should refer to the integration of faith into the concrete circumstances of a person's life.

Once spirituality comes to mean not only the way a Christian prays, but more completely the way one comes to God through occupational, family and neighborhood responsibilities, then the phrase "spirituality of work" no longer sounds so strange.

At the heart of a work-centered spirituality is the relationship between the perfection of things and institutions on the one hand and the perfection of human beings on the other. The first aim of work is to bring creation toward perfection. If one's work entails production of physical objects, then it means building the best objects possible: spacecraft launchers, automobiles, books, works of art. If one's work is service, then those services must be brought to successful completion: administering therapy, serving a meal, giving a lecture, or finishing the family laundry. If one is responsible for the institutions of society, then work entails making those institutions responsive: by serving on a community board, voting in an election, writing a letter to an editor, participating in a union or professional association.

The second aim of work, however, is the completion, harmonization, and realization of the worker. The perfection of creation must include the perfection of the person doing the work. To finish a job, to do work well, to bring things into perfection, takes more than technical skill. It takes a sense of ownership of the work being performed, a pride in its execution, and a recognition of its value.

Good work requires a respect for its own strict and binding rules. Space exploration,

for example, has its own inner rules which, if not respected, will cause destruction - despite the best intentions of the workers - as demonstrated by the space shuttle Challenger tragedy. This interior virtue allows work to come naturally to the worker.

When both the major areas of work, the product and the producer, are in harmony, a spirituality of work is possible. Spirituality is the way people discipline themselves toward the divine. The church at work in the world can have a spirituality uniquely its own, based on immersion in, rather than withdrawal from, the world.

The first challenge of a spirituality of work is the integration of the three components of each person's work: job, family, neighborhood. Such integration is not a matter of spending an equal amount of time in each area. Rather, it creates a wholeness, or holiness, about work. Laypeople know that they are the same people on the job as they are with the family and around the neighborhood. The same man who makes a real effort to treat his wife as an equal and raise his children to be respectful must also promote the same atmosphere on his job and in community affairs. Failure to do so causes an internal conflict which is a barrier to spiritual growth. His actions in daily life validate or negate his spirituality.

A spirituality of work presents a second challenge for it must be developed in the daily world of mixed motives. Such a spirituality is more difficult than a retreat from the world but at the same time it is more accessible to the average layperson. One worker observed: "Sometimes I see my work as creative and redemptive, but usually I'm thinking about my paycheck." In order to develop a spirituality of work, this layperson must understand that the basic economic motive in no way distorts the creative and redemptive dimensions of working. The recognition and balancing of motives provides the basis for a spirituality of work.

The third challenge of a spirituality of work is competency. "If a man is called to be a streetsweeper," Martin Luther King Jr. often said, "he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music, or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the host of heaven and earth will pause to say 'here lived a great streetsweeper who did his job well.'"⁵ Any notion that good intentions can somehow spiritualize shoddy work must be rejected. John Paul II contradicted such tendencies in an address to business people and industrial workers in Barcelona: "We all have the duty to do our work well. If we wish to realize ourselves properly, we may not avoid our duty or perform our work in a mediocre way, without interest, just to get it over with."⁶ Confident laypeople, doing what they are supposed to be doing and doing it well, are as holy as any monk on a mount. A plumber doing a job with skill and conscientiousness, parents putting their children through school, community leaders protecting the value of their neighborhoods - these are the church at work in the world pursuing their spirituality.

A spirituality of work also challenges the church in preparation and reflection. The models of spirituality that have been explored and celebrated by the church in the past have been basically monastic. Such spirituality implies a view of the active lay life as secular or

non-religious. Most spiritual programs propose that a person step back, at least for awhile, from family, job and community.

Teilhard de Chardin described the prevalent attitude toward spirituality:

I don't think that I am exaggerating when I say that nine out of ten practicing Christians feel the man's work is always at the level of a spiritual encumbrance. In spite of the practice of right intentions, and the day offered every morning to God, the general run of the faithful dimly feel that the time spent at the office or the studio, in the fields or in the factory, is time spent away from prayer and adoration.⁷

Until now, laypeople have not had much help in seeing any part of their work as a spiritual experience. If laypeople cannot find any spiritual meaning in their work, they are condemned to living a certain dual life: not connecting what they do on Sunday morning with what they do the rest of the week. They need to discover that the very actions of daily life are spiritual and enable laypeople to touch God *in* the world, not away from it. Such a spirituality will say to the layperson worried about lack of time for prayer: "Your work is your prayer."

The challenge for a confident laity is to fashion this spirituality out of the ordinary language of daily life. Most workers, for example, cannot readily articulate the overall meaning of their work. The language in which they learned their trade and in which they conduct daily business is not given to speaking about creation, salvation, the common good and the transformation of the world. Instead, the language of the marketplace is mired in individualism, competition and materialism. Students contemplating a career are not in an environment in which choices are made using language like vocation, discerning one's gifts and contributing to the commonweal. Most will embark on a career based on the luck or circumstance of finding their first job. Within a short time, these young workers often find that the individualist parlance does not provide answers to life's deeper questions. They will discover that adult moral life is less a matter of ethics that a search for the *meaning* of family, social and economic life.

In the lifelong grappling with the meaning of work in the light of faith, aided by the church in preparation and reflection, most laity will discover the spiritual dimensions of their lives. This discovery will happen in many ways but laypeople themselves will have to take the initiative, gathering to reflect together on the meaning of their work.

They are already some beginning efforts to link faith and work. These support programs, however, are only a first step toward an integrated spirituality of work. The world-sustaining and -improving dimension of these programs often gets lost in the process of maintaining the mutually supportive small communities they create.

Prominent among the parish-based renewal programs are RENEW, found in 5,000 of the 19,000 parishes in the United States, and Christ Renews His Parish, found in another 400

parishes. These programs encourage the laity to connect faith and daily life.

The Cursillo movement is another major support network.. After making a three-day retreat, *cursillistas* are urged to meet regularly in small groups for short prayers, reflections on piety, spiritual reading, and discussion of "apostolic successes and failures in work, family and environment."

Marriage Encounter and the Christian Family Movement seek to focus on the laity's role inside the family.

Other support movements and loosely-formed small groups follow these general models. Members take turns hosting home gatherings that are structured so that certain elements are always present: prayer, sharing of important events around the home and workplace, and a discussion of reading material.

Some centers try to support the spiritual significance of certain professions. The Boston Labor Guild is among the last remaining Catholic labor schools in the United States. Over 1,000 women and men who are trying to apply the principles of Christianity to their work in labor-management relations belong to the Guild. They attend adult education classes in the areas of labor history, parliamentary procedure, social ethics and affirmative action. The Guild also appreciates the world-improving dimension of faith. Its annual awards program honors those who reorder and humanize institutions from the inside, in accord with social justice. "These men and women," says the Guild, "daily wrestle with the problems of good order and justice in a continually shifting arena of employment relations....Their vocation addresses the promotion and maintenance of orderly justice and dignity in the workplaces of this Commonwealth."⁸

The Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology in St. Louis helps members grapple with the meaning of being Christian in light of the rapid advances in genetics, computers, nuclear physics, and so on. For the past 16 years, the Institute has been building a community of scientists dedicated to both the advancement of scientific and technological development and the support of Christianity in the world.

Some laypeople have taken the initiative to form support groups unrelated to any national movement or specific profession. A Washington, D.C. support group includes a homemaker, a journalist, an urban economist and a government planner. They have met regularly for over five years to share experiences in applying Christian values to everyday life, to give each other support, and to pray.

A group of small-business owners in Hartford, Connecticut, meets every month to talk about how to make their shops more human place to work. They also discuss general problems in the business community: layoffs, housing and unemployment.

Even groups of unemployed Christians are meeting for mutual support and shared prayer in places like Rochester, New York; Orland Park, Illinois; and Cleveland, Ohio.

Some retreat programs are being developed which address a spirituality of work. Market Place Ministries is one such effort. Developed in Canada, it aims at supporting busy laypeople in their civil responsibilities. The Council of Catholic Men/Holy Name of Chicago has sponsored two very successful "Men Ministering to Men" retreats, during which the men became more attuned to naming the activity of God in their work world. Some parishes have used "The Supper Table" retreat developed by Washington's Center of Concern to try to link faith and work.

Even taken together and with hundreds of other initiative currently happening around the country, all these efforts have touched only a minority of American Catholics. Until the church in preparation and reflection, with all its institutional strength, focuses on the vocation of the laity in and to the world, a spirituality of work will continue to be an idea whose time has not yet come.

When laypeople begin to realize that their spirituality is found through their work on the job, with their families and in their neighborhoods, they will assume their proper place as the church at work in the world with competence and confidence. Then the exit signs inside our church buildings will read: "Now entering the mission field. Return when you need reinforcements."

QUESTIONS FOR DIALOGUE

- 1) How can your daily work be a genuine form of Christian spirituality? Is this a way to "pray always," as Paul told Ephesians?
- 2) How does a "spirituality of work" change your view of the world and how can it improve the quality of your work?
- 3) What is your understanding of the wholeness or holiness that a spirituality of work can bring to the lives of laypeople?

FOOTNOTES

1. Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens: On Human Work* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1981), pp.63-64.
2. Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, No. 34.
3. Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, op. cit., p.11.

4. Ibid. p.56.
5. Martin Luther King, Jr., in Barbara Rowes (ed.), *The Book of Quotes* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1979), p.264.
6. Pope John Paul II, "The Gospel of Work," *Origins*, November 18, 1982, p.374.
7. Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), p.65.
8. The Labor Guild, "The Cushing-Gavin Award Brochure" (Boston: The Labor Guild, 1985)