

THE FRANCISCAN CONTRIBUTION TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF WORK

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*Let them esteem work both as a gift
and as a sharing in the creation, redemption and service of the human community. (Art. 16)*

What is the Franciscan contribution to a Christian understanding of work? If we could only convey that understanding using a single word it would be "gift." Work is a gift! Work is a gift? Now only a moment's thought should lead you to conclude that St. Francis had a perspective on work that was uncommon (should that surprise us?) Have you ever thought of work as a gift? The songwriter who penned the words "you can take this job and shove it" certainly didn't. My son, named after the Poverello, is now doing the dinner dishes and I can assure you that the idea that this activity is a gift is nowhere to be found in his adolescent mind.

While St. Francis' understanding of work as gift is counter intuitive to most of us it is very consistent with his Christ-centered worldview. For him, all of creation was a gift of the heavenly Father through his Son. "Through him God made all things; not one thing in all creation was made without him." (John 1:3) Francis perceives "a world that is seen and received as gift."

We know that Francis included work in his view of the world as gift because he said so! In his Rule for the friars he states: "These brothers to whom the Lord has given the grace of working, should do their work faithfully." The words "gift" and "grace" are nearly synonymous. We see this similarity of meaning in our own Constitutions, which read: "For St. Francis, work was a gift and to work was a grace." (art.21)

The importance of work to Francis is evident in his Rules of 1221 and 1223 where entire chapters are devoted to the importance of working and to how the friars should conduct themselves while working. Some of his statements were startling to me: "Everyone should remain at the trade and in the position in which he was called...They are allowed to have the tools, which they need for their trade.... As wages for their labor they may accept anything necessary for their temporal needs, for themselves or their brethren, except money in any form." Why are these straightforward statements so startling? Because the most powerful images that I have had in mind of Francis and his early followers finds them at prayer or preaching or begging. Yes, there are some images of work - rebuilding San Damiano, caring for the lepers - but these are not the most predominant. There are no images at all of early friars metal smithing, or cobbling or woodworking or any of the countless other labors that made Assisi run. I never realized they continued to do these things after joining the brotherhood.

Francis meant what he said about the importance of work as illustrated in the well-known story of Brother Fly:

There was a brother who never worked and yet ate more than several at table. When the saint observed that he was a friend of the belly, one who shared the fruits without sharing the labor, he said to him: "Go your way, brother fly, for you want to eat the sweat of your brothers and to do nothing in God's work. You are like brother drone who wants to be first to eat the honey, though he does not do the work of the bees."

Work was important to St. Francis. He understood work as grace, as gift. To deepen our own understanding in this regard, the next two articles in this series will consider "work as gift" from two aspects: first as a gift given and then as a gift received.

Dialogue starters

1. What are your own most powerful images of St. Francis? Do any include Francis working?
2. Do you ever experience your own work (paid and otherwise) as gift or grace? Share these graced moments.