

Human Work

It would have been fitting to put this article out closer to Labor Day but at that time we were in the midst of a little series on Sacred Scripture. So, prompted by Labor Day, we will take up the topic of human labor now.

First, though, is this not a strange topic for a bulletin article? Shouldn't the Church just keep its mouth shut on this topic? Isn't this just a matter of politics or economic theory, an entirely materialistic endeavor? Isn't human labor a purely man-made and man-centered topic, with the sole purpose of maximizing my satisfaction and comfort? Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, these mentalities or false beliefs have caused man much strife, angst, and difficulty, especially in our current times.

Sacred Scripture bears out explicitly that God created "human labor" (or activity) and commanded it. As just one example, the second chapter of the very first book of Scripture (Gen 2:15) says: "The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it." This was *before* original sin. Sacred Tradition also bears copious witness to work being given to man by God. Some Popes have written entire encyclicals on work, including Pope St John Paul II, again bearing witness that God has something to say about labor. Perhaps most of all is our Lord's own example. Thirty of His 33 years in human form on earth were spent doing hidden, humble labor in the workshop of His foster father. Jesus once said to one of the mystics of the Church that He gave as much glory to His Father in those 30 years as He did in His 3 years of public "ministry."

The point thus far, then, is simply this: clearly human work/labor/activity is *not* something man-made, a social construct, a product of evolution, or any other such thing. It is something created and intended by God, for man, from the beginning. That means: 1) it has a God-given purpose, and 2) it is *good* for man. That second point is an important one that we will return to. First, though, what is the God-given purpose of work?

This should not be too difficult to grasp. With just a little thought, we can know even from our own simple, everyday experience that if (say) a son works with his dad, especially day in and day out, he comes to know the father in a fuller and deeper way, in a way that he might not otherwise know him – so much so that he even takes on the characteristics of the father. The same thing is true with our Lord. The work that God gave to Adam and Eve was a participation in His own work; to the extent that they carried out that work faithfully, they grew in knowledge and love of God precisely through participation in His work.

Now when we hear "Garden of Eden," sometimes called Paradise, *we* might expect that that would mean there was no work prior to original sin. What kind of Paradise is that where I have to labor every day! Prior to original sin, however, Adam & Eve would have experienced "work" as a pleasurable activity (which is why I also used the word "activity" in referring to work initially). Imagine some activity you really like – chatting away, playing some game, watching a movie, or whatever it might be – something you really like doing. That is what "work" was like for Adam & Eve prior to original sin. It was only after sinning that work became toil: by the sweat of your brow you will now earn the food you eat. Why? Because now the sacrifice (which is the language of love) must be greater to repair that which was broken. But this is an important point: after original sin the *purpose* of work remained the same – it is still meant for the good of man. It is still part of man's participation in the work of God, part of his worship of God. It is to be done for His sake.

One of the options that the Church allows for Mass on Labor Day is to offer a Mass for: The Sanctification of Human Labor. This is a very fitting title. Sanctification means to be made like Christ. The Mass for sanctification of human labor, then, is praying that my labor does exactly that – makes me like Christ.

The most important aspect of any work is to make it a service to the Lord – purity of intention.

What that means is that I *choose* to offer all my work to the Lord, I don't do it because I just want to or like it or anything else – those things might be true but I do it first and foremost because He wants me to. To live and work for the sake of another is a great unburdening. This too is not hard to understand. A man might hold down a lousy job without any loss in his own personal happiness. Why? Because in his mind he takes his wife and kids with him to work every day. He has always before his mind the food, shelter, and so forth that his work provides for his kids and how happy that makes them; he has always before his mind that little gift in the

shop window that he wants to get for his wife. His happiness is the happiness his work brings to his family. This is how we are to be with our Lord. Now if that man were to lose his family, there would be no purpose to his work and it would become a dread, a burden. The same is, again, true in our relation to the Lord. If the deepest root of my motivation for work is not service to the Lord, it will – sooner or later – turn into drudgery.

But let us come now to another important point about work. If labor is something good for man and meant to be one of the things that leads him to Heaven, one thing that means from the perspective of the kingdom of misery known as hell, is that it has to be attacked and corrupted. And indeed it has been in numerous ways for eons. Today we are *surrounded* by ways and mentalities to corrupt the good of work and we will get drawn into them if we're not aware of them. And so attention will now be turned to some of these corruptions.

I believe it is safe to say that of all the various ways in which work can be, has been, and currently is corrupted at the core of them all is corruption of its purpose, a false motive for work. And the most basic of those is take an entirely or even just predominately materialistic outlook on work. Listen, says this temptation, work is about getting stuff; that's all it is. This was the flagrant error of Communism. After the downfall of the Soviet Union, a scientist from Poland came to the college I was at to study U.S. dairy farms. Why? Under Communism the Soviet Union had huge state farms with massive government funding. Shouldn't they be the best farms in the world? This Polish scientist said they were in terrible shape. I asked him why and he said, very simply: because nobody cared about them, nobody cared about their work. Their work had no real, sustaining purpose. But is this materialistic outlook towards work not common in our own country today? Russia has indeed spread her errors throughout the world, as our Holy Mother said it would at Fatima.

Today, in our own country, more and more people, especially young people, are becoming fascinated with socialism. What is socialism? I heard one person say that it means: you make the money (do the work) and I spend it. "The government" pays for almost everything. Everything is free! It's great! Of course it begs the question of: who makes all the stuff, who does all of the work, that makes it possible for you to get everything free?! It is a false, materialistic outlook on the true purpose of work. It is a denigration of the God-given gift of work. It is designed to end in misery and it will not do other than what it is designed to do.

A guy I was in seminary with was an accountant before seminary and he told me once that what is taught is the bottom line, that's the only thing that matters – low cost, high price, profit; do whatever it takes, no matter what the human cost. There is little if any sincere interest in service to the other in business today – get whatever you can, however you can, is the rule. This is the product of a materialistic outlook on work.

Another branch of this materialistic corruption of work is to use work for self-glorification. "They worship the work of their hands" was an accusation that the Lord laid against the Israelites on multiple occasions in the Old Testament. Does any more even need to be said about this? Is it not blatantly obvious how often this happens in our own country today? This is so destructive, and tempting, that it can infiltrate and corrupt truly good works, even our religious practices. I can, for example, start to count all of the rosaries I've said, all of the Masses I've been to, and so on and pretty soon I say to myself: well, oh my, yes, I am pretty good at that; and, well, I am certainly much better than that guy over there. And any goodness in the work I've done is lost.

Ladies and gentlemen, what will we do with these words, these truths? The great inclination is to look outside of ourselves and turn to things like politics and say "this" is the solution. It is true that public policies (civil law) have their place and that these do influence people's thinking. But politics will never be a final solution. Relying on politics as an ultimate solution will only result in tyranny. The only true solution is conversion – to know what is right and good and true and be determined to live by it, come what may. And conversion has to begin, not "out there," but with me. We have to always begin by examining ourselves and if I find that these mentalities have crept into my own mind, well the first thing is to not be too surprised by it; you are, after all, bombarded with them. It's not the end of the world if I have slipped into them. "The end of the world" would be to have them and refuse to see or acknowledge them or give them up. So if I see them in myself, I can bring them to Confession and make the firm purpose of amendment to purify my motives. You will then be able to serve God further by teaching others to do the same, starting with your own family. God bless you, Fr Kuhn.