
Work as Fulfillment in the Thought of John Paul II

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WE'VE ALL HEARD people comment that if they won the lottery they would quit their job and devote the rest of their life to travel and improving their golf game. In fact, at one time or another, most of us have probably had similar thoughts—thoughts which reflect an attitude that work is “a necessary evil.” We recognize that work is necessary for most of us, but we view it as undesirable in itself. Pope John Paul II offers us an entirely different view of work in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (“On human work”), which I shall draw upon throughout this essay. The Holy Father writes:

In spite of all this toil—perhaps, in a sense, because of it—work is a good thing for man. Even though it bears the mark of a *bonum arduum* [a difficult good] in the terminology of St. Thomas. It is not only good in the sense that it is useful or something to enjoy; it is also good as being something worthy, that is to say, something that corresponds to man's dignity, that expresses this dignity and increases it. Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes “more a human being.”

What is John Paul II saying here? He is fully aware that work often brings with it hardship and suffering. Nonetheless, he sees work not merely as an integral part of our human condition, but as contributing to our human fulfillment. In the pope's view, work is a good. It is part of the “good life”—not, of course, in the sense of the *dolce vita*, but in the sense of a life worth living, a life that fulfills, completes, and ennoble the person who lives it. Work is an arduous good, one whose achievement requires effort; but that does not make it any less a good, something we should desire for its own sake and not merely as a means of achieving other things.

Part of God's plan

John Paul II reminds us that work is an essential element in God's plan for us. As he points out, the book of Genesis tells us that from the very beginning, even before the Fall, God commanded Adam and Eve, whom he had created in his own image and likeness, to “be fruitful and multiply and fill the Earth and subdue it.”

Commenting on this passage of Genesis, John Paul II writes:

[E]ven 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. 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.

This is an interesting idea that merits careful consideration. Theologians usually point out that our likeness to God, our being made in his image and likeness, is reflected in our freedom and our abilities to know and to love. John Paul II reminds us, however, that we are also like God in our ability to work. The book of Genesis presents us the image of God as working to create the world. Our work, whatever it may be, is a participation in that divine work. Just as St. Paul describes himself and each of us as “filling up in my body

what is lacking in the suffering of Christ,” so too each of us, through our own work, in some sense completes God’s work of creation. In giving us the ability to work, God made us like himself.

Kinds of work

We might think that this is true only for a few special kinds of work, such as that of an artist, or a poet, or a philosopher. These are people whose work we intuitively think of as creative. But we don’t usually see the work of a clerk, a waiter, or a laborer as being creative in any meaningful way.

To the extent that we see the work of laborers, waiters, or clerks as far removed from sharing in God’s work of creation, our vision is rather like that of the ancient pagans. John Paul II reminds us that the Greeks and Romans classified people according to the type of work they did. Work which demanded the exercise of physical strength, the work of muscles and hands, was considered appropriate for slaves and unworthy of free men.

As Christians, we cannot share such a view of physical labor. The Holy Father points out that Jesus Christ, whom the Church describes as perfect God and perfect man, devoted most of the years of his life on Earth to manual work at the carpenter’s bench. This fact itself constitutes the most eloquent “gospel of work,” showing that the basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done but the fact that the one who is doing it is a person.

Given this understanding, and accepting that the different sorts of work people do can have greater or lesser objective value, let us try nevertheless to show that each sort is judged above all by the measure of the dignity of the subject of work, that is to say the person, the individual who carries it out.

This is a very radical challenge to our usual way of thinking about work. It is not to suggest that, in the objective order of things, Beethoven did not contribute more to humanity than his barber, for example. It does mean, however, that what is more important is not how unlike their material activities or products were. Instead, what is fundamentally important is the fact that both did work of like value, which derives from the fact that both men were persons created in the image and likeness of God.

“Created equal”

We can perhaps understand this in the context of our own political tradition, which affirms that “all men are created equal.” This doctrine, on which the American republic is built, does not suggest that the obvious differences among persons do not exist or should be ignored. Rather, it bespeaks a conviction that the fundamental, essential similarity of all human beings outweighs all of those differences. This is what John Paul II means when he says in *Laborem Exercens*, “[T]he sources of the dignity of work are to be sought primarily in the subjective dimension [that is, who is the subject doing the work] not in the objective one [that is, what the subject is doing].”

All work is or should be an instrument for the full human development of the person who carries it out. As written in the first passage cited above, it ought to be the case that through work each person “achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes ‘more a human being.’”

This statement is illuminating. It shows how important it is to structure society and the economy so that everyone can find work. The availability of generous unemployment benefits is no substitute for providing an opportunity to work. John Paul II even calls for special efforts to offer appropriate work to the disabled and those with handicaps:

Since disabled people are subjects with all their rights, they should be helped to participate in the life of society in all its aspects and at all the levels accessible to their capacities. The disabled person is one of us and

participates fully in the same humanity that we possess. It would be radically unworthy of man, and a denial of our common humanity, to admit to the life of the community, and thus admit to work, only those who are fully functional. To do so would be to practice a serious form of discrimination, that of the strong and healthy against the weak and sick. Work in the objective sense should be subordinated, in this circumstance too, to the dignity of man, to the subject of work and not to economic advantage.

Without denying that this is a complex and difficult task, one may still hope that a correct understanding of labor in the subjective sense will help make it possible for disabled people to feel that they are not cut off from the working world or dependent on society, but that they are full-scale subjects of work—useful, respected for their human dignity, and called to contribute, according to their particular capacities, to the welfare and progress and of their families and communities.

Similarly, the personal dignity of the worker requires both adequate wages (the pope calls for a “family wage”) and recognition of both the rights of workers to organize and the role of unions as a “factor of social order and solidarity.” While these are vitally important topics, I would like to focus here on some of the less directly economic dimensions of the Holy Father’s view of work as an expression of the human person and an occasion for personal development.

Work and the family

Human persons are defined by their ability to love. The possibility of giving one’s self to another in an I-thou relationship is central to being a person. This aspect of the human person as open to love is expressed very concretely in the family. Work, if it is to be truly human, must therefore take into account the fact that the worker is not an isolated individual but a member of a family.

In this context we should emphasize that, on a more general level, the whole labor process ought to be organized and adapted so as to respect the requirements of the person and his or her proper roles in life, including above all life in the home, taking also into account the person’s age and sex.

This means it is necessary to harmonize work and family duties. The pope addresses this question specifically in the context of women working outside the home. He notes:

The true advancement of women requires that labor should be structured in such a way that women do not have to pay for their advancement by abandoning what is specific to them and at the expense of the family, in which women as mothers have an irreplaceable role.

The principle here applies much more broadly and directly affects the attitudes toward work that each one of us has. No one, whether man or woman, should sacrifice his or her role as spouse and parent in order to work. This reflection is important and relevant on both the social and personal levels. While social structures can and should be changed in order to accommodate both work and family responsibilities, each of us personally needs to be willing to sacrifice a certain degree of professional success in order not to neglect family life.

A school of work

Work and family are also connected in that the family should be a school of work. If work is a vital element in the development of personality and family is the setting in which personality is primarily developed and nurtured, the family must teach work. John Paul II calls the family “the first school of work.” This is an interesting subject, but one we do not have space to develop here. In his booklet entitled “Successful Fathers”

(#181/182 of the Scepter Booklet series), educator James Stenson presents some interesting insights on the matter.

In addition to their ability to love, their free and self-determining character defines human persons. Freedom, or the power of autonomous choice, is a great gift of God. Work ought to be an opportunity for the development of this freedom. Work is more human to the extent that it allows a person to exercise his freedom. As John Paul puts it:

[T]he person who works desires not only due remuneration for his work; he also wishes that, within the production process, provision be made for him to be able to know that in his work, even on something that is owned in common, he is working “for himself.” This awareness is extinguished within him in a system of excessive bureaucratic centralization, which makes the worker feel that he is just a cog in a huge machine moved from above, that he is for more reasons than one a mere production instrument rather than a true subject of work with an initiative of his own. The Church’s teaching has always expressed the strong and deep conviction that man’s work concerns not only the economy but also, and especially, personal values.

There seems to be growing recognition of this fact in our society. For example, managers are increasingly attempting to encourage and incorporate workers’ autonomous decision-making and creative input into the production process. This may be a way to contribute fruitfully to the implementation of the pope’s teaching.

Even if we do not have much opportunity for influencing the development of large-scale structures, at least in our own work we can try to promote the free and intelligent participation of those who collaborate with us. This may often require taking a little more time to explain to a fellow worker the larger picture of the work that is being done, so that he or she can make an intelligent contribution rather than simply follow instructions. It may also require us to overcome a certain “dictatorial” tendency to believe that our way of doing things is the only correct way. Leaving room for freedom and personal initiative may mean that in many cases things will not be done exactly as we would have done them, but this does not mean that they will necessarily be done not as well. In teaching others how to perform their jobs, we need avoid stifling them by being too controlling. This is also important when it comes to teaching children to work.

Work and virtue

Our development as full human beings requires the acquisition and development of a whole range of virtues. Work can and should be a setting in which virtue develops.

This is most obviously true with respect to the virtue of justice. The demands of justice are many, and they vary according to the concrete circumstances of each individual. One aspect of justice common to us all, however, is summed up in the old adage of giving an honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay. Justice requires that we work diligently and give full value for our pay. Even in a work environment where many slack off and do less than a full day’s work, a Christian cannot be content with a substandard performance. Similarly, for an employer or one who has a say in determining wages, justice requires that an honest day’s pay be given for an honest day’s work. In this way we can contribute to justice on the broader social scale, while also practicing the virtue in our own personal lives.

Justice is relevant to work in many other ways. It will, for instance, dictate what means of competition we may properly use. The focus of this essay, however, is not so much on how we exercise justice in our work; rather, I wish to emphasize the need for us to see work as an occasion for practicing this essential virtue.

Order and charity

Order is another virtue that comes readily to mind in the context of a discussion of work. Far from the most important of the virtues, it is one that is especially germane to work, as work provides an opportunity for practicing order on multiple levels. At the most material and mundane level, order affects how we keep our files, process the papers that come across our desks, and so on. At a slightly higher level, it requires using our time well and setting a schedule that permits us to accomplish the many things we need to do in the course of the day and the week. At an even higher level, order involves a sense of priority and hierarchy, of doing first what is most important and leaving for later that which is less important. As already mentioned in connection with work and the family, order requires practical recognition of the fact that family obligations are more important than work obligations.

Work also offers us an opportunity to practice the most important of all of the virtues—charity, or love of God and our fellow men. Charity, and in many cases justice, requires that we work with a spirit of service, that we see our work as an opportunity for service to others, not merely as an occasion for self-promotion. Charity demands a concern for those who work with us—that we see them not merely as useful cooperators in material tasks but as individual human beings for whom we should have affectionate concern. In this regard, charity will often require us to make the effort to facilitate the others' work, by going out of our way, for instance, to get things to others early so they will not face unnecessary crises as deadlines approach.

Finally, work can be the setting for practicing charity in its highest sense: love of God. As Christians, we can and should do our work, precisely because it is what God wills for us. Our work can be an expression of our love of God and a means of growing in love for him.