

WORK: A HEAVENLY MANDATE

by David Rippe

One of the most inspiring things we can do is to observe someone thoroughly enjoying his work. A professional skillfully plying his craft, a performer or athlete getting into "the zone" - these, unknowingly, are songs of joy to God the Creator from people making full use of His gifts.

We can see the spiritual facet of labor even in lower creatures. Watch the exultation of a working horse or a dog specialized for police work, for search and rescue, for livestock control or for hunting. The animal is never happier than when at work, throwing itself joyously into every task. Its exuberance glorifies its Creator and reflects His satisfaction with creation.

Work is the traditional way we exchange our skills and knowledge for the goods and services we need from each other, and it's how we contribute our share to the common good; but it also has a spiritual dimension essential to man's overall well-being. Man is created in God's image and God is continually at work in His creation.

Human work enables man to use his talents to participate in the work of creation, whether it be in designing software or sweeping a warehouse floor. No matter how insignificant, work that serves human needs is to be valued both for its effects on others as well as for the benefits to its performer. St. Therese of Lisieux taught us that even the most menial tasks have the capacity to bring joy and inner peace when performed in service to God. At that point, work becomes a prayer of praise.

A PRECEDENT FOR WORK

Work gives a person an identity that lends status with peers and helps maintain a healthy self-image. When meeting someone new, one of the first things we typically ask them is what they do for a living. People are identified by their occupations and careers – e.g., John the Baptizer. The Gospel authors note that when our Lord chose His apostles, the group included fishermen, a tax collector and a zealot. The first thing He did was to offer them a new career – fishing for men.

The church is convinced that work is a fundamental dimension of man's existence on earth. So wrote John Paul II in his 1981 encyclical *Laborem Exercens*. Recognizing its essential role in human life, the pope called work the key to solving societal injustice and inequality.

We have been called to work as a reflection of the creating God all the way forward from the Book of Genesis. God left the earth in rough draft status, as it were, so that we could shape, refine and fine-tune it with the talents we inherit from Him. John Paul II stated, *Man is the image of God partly through the mandate received from his creator to subdue, to dominate the*

earth. We are thus created to work in order to develop our world for the betterment of all. In St. Paul's admonition to the Thessalonians - that whoever doesn't work shouldn't eat! - we are reminded that work is a responsibility, not an option.

In fact, the Catechism of the Catholic Church calls work "a duty," and says that through its hardships, work can be redemptive – a collaboration with Christ. "[Man]...shows himself to be a disciple of Christ by carrying the cross, daily, in the work he is called to accomplish."

Expounding on the benefits of work, John Paul II wrote in *Laborem Exercens* that it increases man's dignity and provides a foundation for the formation of family life and education. The lesson is ably exemplified in the Holy Family. Jesus, himself, was a tradesman - a carpenter's son, and later a teacher who spoke in parables about putting to use the gifts the Father gives us in order to advance His kingdom.

Although man was designed to perform labor, John Paul II rightly explains in *Laborem Exercens* that work is for man – not man for work. People are not faceless, soulless drones to be used up, ground down and discarded in the performance of some task. In 1955, Pope Pius XII declared May 1 the Feast of St. Joseph the Worker. The feast was established to coincide with the global communist celebration known as the Day of the International Solidarity of Workers. Joseph is invoked not only as the patron saint of workers, but also as patron of all who fight against communism.

DISSEMBLING WITH HALF-TRUTHS

Each month, the so-called mainstream media trumpets newly released figures showing that unemployment has declined slightly. Always missing from these glossy pronouncements is any discussion of the role of the continually shrinking workforce pool caused by people who have given up hope of finding work and have dropped out. Once people stop looking for work, they are no longer officially counted as unemployed.

Nor is there ever acknowledgment of declining numbers of new jobs or of the fact that many of the newly employed are going into part-time jobs, temporary jobs, full-time jobs with no benefits, or government jobs that create no new wealth. And so, in duplicity, we play games with numbers, pretending we have made the situation better when it is actually worsening.

After factoring for the inconvenient truths that the media ignore, the true unemployment figure is not 7 percent but over 11 percent, and it has been at that level or higher in every month but one since autumn of 2009. That an unemployment rate of 11 percent would persist in America, the beacon of hope, freedom and innovation for the rest of the world, is not just an embarrassment but a tragedy. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics "job distress rate," an index of both unemployment and under-employment is at an even bleaker 14.3 percent.

Breaking out employment statistics by race yields more bad news. Employment of minorities has suffered most of all. Black youth unemployment stands at over 40 percent.

WHY AREN'T PEOPLE WORKING?

It's been said that the best anti-poverty program is a job. Amid a climate of envy and divisiveness, private sector job creators are burdened with high taxes, excessive regulations and the uncertainty of a one-way path into socialized medicine looming on the horizon. Economists estimate that more than three-fourths of new jobs created in 2013 were part-time jobs, largely due to the federal 30-hour per week employer health coverage mandate. It has also been estimated that more than a trillion private sector dollars which would otherwise be invested in creating jobs are instead being held back and guarded because of the high risk financial picture.

Coupled with job destruction, the government is simultaneously luring the victims of unemployment into an entitlement way of life through repeated extensions of benefits. In a desperate attempt to justify the practice, the current administration has made the vacuous and insupportable assertion that extending unemployment compensation creates jobs.

Unemployment benefits were intended to be a temporary stop-gap, not a permanent lifestyle where able-bodied individuals are paid for not working. Repeatedly extending the benefits becomes a disincentive to seeking employment. When people become addicted to the ease of doing nothing, they eventually become willing to settle for lives that are far less than they could have and should have been. Disability payments are similarly being misused as work alternatives. Fourteen million Americans now receive disability benefits.

The value of work and the associated importance of personal responsibility are in the process of being downgraded in the American psyche. Frustrated staffing and employment agencies report an attitude change in clients they assign to businesses. A growing pattern of new employees coming to work drunk, hung-over or stoned, or simply not showing up for work at all suggests an alarming erosion of the work ethic.

True social justice is a combination of private sector job creation and tough love that insists people put their talents to work. America's retarded gross domestic product cannot continue to endure the double whammy of job destruction and of coddling people into becoming career malingerers. Whole generations are being denied the opportunity to use their gifts by a radical element of society hell-bent on making the government into lord, master and provider. Seduced into idleness by the promise of something (albeit small) for nothing, the human spirit languishes, skills go unused, talents atrophy, and lives are reduced to the stagnation of simply enduring the intervals between the arrival of public assistance checks.

American humorist Erma Bombeck wrote: "When I stand before God at the end of my life, I would hope that I would not have a single bit of talent left and could say, 'I used everything you gave me.'"

God is not glorified by idleness. Our lives are to be lived, and our work is a celebration of life. We have all been gifted with skills, some to a great degree, others very limited. But each of us should have the opportunity to make a unique personal contribution, to participate in the ongoing work of creation, to contribute to the common good by using our talents to glorify God and serve our fellow humans. That, unfortunately, is not happening for millions of Americans.

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Catholic Allies in Truth

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