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Path to the Centenary (6): Work, the natural condition of the human person

Beginning with the evolution of work throughout history, this article offers reflections on its dignity and importance in human life. Inspired by St. Josemaría's teachings, it presents work as a place of encounter with God and a means of sanctification.

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VI. Work, the natural condition of a human person

When we look back at human history, it is surprising to see how work has evolved over the centuries. Just 12,000 years ago, our ancestors – who had previously been dedicated to hunting and gathering – began to cultivate the land. Animal husbandry gradually improved, becoming more and more productive. The development of mechanical tools, initially rudimentary and then increasingly complex, transformed craftsmanship, agriculture, construction, and textile production. Energy, which initially relied on natural elements and the strength of animals or humans themselves, was replaced by steam engines in the late 18th century, and later by internal

combustion engines and jet propulsion systems. The advancement of science allowed for the discovery and use of electricity, the transmission of electromagnetic waves, and the control of nuclear energy. Throughout the 20th century, technology became widely incorporated into the world of work. In recent decades, microprocessors have facilitated information processing and machine control. The way we build, travel, communicate, teach, and learn has changed. Our way of working has changed, and will continue to change.

Is there anything stable amidst this constant development? What defines human work beyond all these changes, anthropologically? Unlike other living beings, humans do not work solely to meet their basic needs, like as survival, food, or reproduction. We are also capable of planning for the future, transforming

the environment according to our vital needs, creating works of art, and passing on knowledge to future generations, making progress possible. Ultimately, work keeps us alive.

However, in the ancient world – both in Greco-Roman culture and in other non-biblical traditions – work did not enjoy any particular dignity. It was rather linked to servility, characteristic of a fatigued and subordinate human condition. True fulfillment in life was found in leisure, understood as an opportunity to engage in intellectual pleasures, such as philosophy, or various forms of distraction and hedonism. Perhaps due to this underlying conception, some currents of Christian asceticism in later centuries would see work as a mere means to keep busy, almost a remedy against the dangers of idleness and daydreaming.

Modern and contemporary philosophy has often considered the relationship between human beings and technology, frequently oscillating between two extremes: on one hand, an optimistic confidence that history will lead us to ever greater achievements, even to the point of surpassing work through the complete replacement of humans by machines; and, on the other hand, a catastrophizing pessimism that fears uncontrolled technical-scientific progress will ultimately lead to the destruction of humanity and the planet that sustains it.

As is well known, the Church's theology and Magisterium have extensively reflected on work, focusing mainly on its ethical and moral dimensions, giving rise to the Social Doctrine of the Church. Reflection on the spiritual value of work is much less developed, however. It is not common to find

authors or documents that speak of the dynamism that work contains in Christian spiritual life; of work as a place of dialogue between God and man and a space for the proclamation of the Gospel and the construction of the Kingdom of God. This is why St. Josemaría Escrivá's teachings arouse particular interest today. The founder of Opus Dei taught that work – and, by extension, ordinary life – is a place of encounter with God and the sphere where most people can seek holiness. Work generates a network of human relationships that favor Christian apostolate and constitutes the *material* that must be sanctified to make the society in which we live more Christian, and therefore more human. In fact, we can speak of a specific vocation to holiness *in* and *through* work. The proximity of the centenary of the foundation of Opus Dei (1928-2028) is an opportunity to rediscover the relevance of this

message and to appreciate its contribution to the mission of the Church and to social life, in a world wherever new forms of work shape the present and guide the future.

A blessing, not a punishment

Those who approach the teachings of the founder of Opus Dei are often surprised by his insistence on emphasizing the dignity of work, a dignity that he places within the context of creation, even before Adam's sin:

“As I have been preaching since 1928, work is not a curse; nor is it a punishment for sin. Genesis had already spoken about the fact of work before ever Adam rebelled against God. According to Our Lord's plans work was to be a permanent feature of man who, through work, would cooperate in the immense task of creation” (*Friends of God*, no. 81).

“Make no mistake about it. Man's duty to work is not a consequence of original sin, nor is it just a discovery of modern times. It is an indispensable means which God has entrusted to us here on this earth. It is meant to fill out our days and make us sharers in God's creative power. It enables us to earn our living and, at the same time, to reap ‘the fruits of eternal life’ (Jn 4:36), for ‘man is born to work as the birds are born to fly’ (Job 5:7)” (*Friends of God*, no. 57).

Work, then, is the initial condition and the natural vocation of every human being: “Work is man’s original vocation. It is a blessing from God, and those who consider it a punishment are sadly mistaken. The Lord, who is the best of fathers, placed the first man in Paradise *ut operaretur*, so that he would work” (*Furrow*, no. 482).

If we want to understand the meaning and value of work, we must start with the image of God imprinted on every human being, not with sin and its consequences. The mission of the new foundation St. Josemaría felt called to form in the Church is to restore the original value and dignity of work:

"Certainly, my daughters and sons, by coming to Opus Dei and acting in this way, all we have done is recall that God wants us to love work. When the Scripture narrates the creation of the first man, it tells us that *the Lord God took man and put him in the garden of Eden*, ut operaretur, *to work* (Gen 2:15). Work is the same reality after sin, though now – because of that sin – connected to pain and fatigue: *you shall eat bread by the sweat of your brow* (Gen 3:19), we read in Genesis. Work is not something accidental. It is a law for man's life" (*Letter* 14, no. 3).

Indeed, it is a matter of "recalling" something certain interpretations of Genesis may have overlooked: work is not a punishment, but a blessing. Our first parents did not receive a simple order or a servile task from God. He gave them a true blessing: "God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth'" (Genesis 1:28). Nothing could be further from the biblical spirit than looking at work as a curse. Men and women are still, after Adam's sin, "stewards" and "guardians" of the earth, as the Creator intended, though their work now requires effort and often precarious and insecure. Although they are exposed to the risk of sin, as the story of the Tower of Babel (cf. Gen 11:1-9) shows us, human beings can worship God through their careful, diligent work: they build

altars, make the ark of the covenant, and construct the Temple of Jerusalem.

As long as there are men and women on the earth

The fact that, from the beginning, work is an existential dimension of any human life, together with the diversity of ways in which human activity manifests itself, led St. Josemaría to formulate two fundamental considerations. The first is that the vocation to holiness in the midst of the world, to which God calls each person of Opus Dei, must somehow *include* the professional and human vocation that each of them already exercises or is preparing to exercise:

"Be convinced that our professional vocation is an essential and inseparable part of our condition as Christians. Our Lord wants you to be

holy in the place where you are, in the job you have chosen for whatever reason. To me, every job that is not opposed to the divine law is good and noble, and capable of being raised to the supernatural plane, that is, inserted into the constant flow of Love which defines the life of a child of God" (*Friends of God*, no. 60).

Secondly, given the richness and diversity of the forms that human work takes and the specific circumstances of ordinary life, a call to holiness in and through work implies, almost as a natural consequence, a universal call to holiness.

The path the new foundation lays out is intended to endure until the end of time, because, as St. Josemaría writes, there will always be working men and women on earth: "The Work will exist for as long as there

are men and women on the earth" (*Letter* 3, no. 92).

Undoubtedly, the universality of the call to holiness is grounded in the sacrament of baptism, not in work. It is baptism that configures believers with Jesus Christ, inviting them to fully live out that identification with Him throughout their entire life. All members of the People of God – ordained ministers and laypeople, religious and consecrated individuals, men and women, healthy and sick – are called to strive for Christian perfection.

However, comprehending that holiness could be pursued through work and ordinary life (cf. *Letter* 3, no. 2) allowed the founder of Opus Dei to demonstrate that this universality was, in practice, accessible to everyone. In this way, he asserted, the divine paths of the earth were opened up (cf. *Christ is*

Passing By, n.. 21; *Friends of God*, n.. 314), because all work and daily activities can become places of encounter with God (cf. *Friends of God*, nos. 149, 208).

Here are two particularly significant texts:

"Go, my children, to every corner of the earth. Wherever an honest person can live, there we will find air to breathe. We must be there, bringing our joy, inner peace, and eagerness to bring souls to Christ. Where are the places I describe: where the intellectuals are? Yes, where the intellectuals are. Where manual workers are? Yes, where manual workers are. And which of these tasks is the best? I will tell you what I have told you before: whichever work is done with greater love of God is more valuable. When you work and help your friend, colleague, or neighbor in such a way

that they do not notice, you are healing them; you are Christ who heals; you are Christ who lives without disdain, with those who need health, as any of us might at any time" (Gathering at the Coliseo Theater, Buenos Aires, 23-VI-1974).

"Do you think it is a small thing to say that we can and must be holy in the middle of the street, that the person selling ice cream from a cart, the employee working in the kitchen all day long, the bank director, university professor, field worker, and the porter carrying suitcases on his back… can and must be holy? We are all called to holiness!" (Gathering in São Paulo, 30-V-1974, quoted in S. Bernal, *Msgr. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer; A Profile of the Founder of Opus Dei*, Scepter, London 1977).

Both texts, especially the second one, develop the universality of the call to holiness by making direct mention of

a variety of activities, professions, and trades. If all honest work can be sanctified and become a place of encounter with God, then the call to holiness is as universal as the countless facets of the working world, carried out by men and women of all times.

St. Josemaría's conviction that the new foundation he felt inspired to begin would endure over time was based on a simple yet profound certainty: since working is the natural condition of the human being, the sanctification of work will always be possible. It will always be possible to love and live in the presence of God in ordinary life.

The path he proposes is not an adaptation for laypeople of other forms of Christian witness that, by virtue of a specific consecration or canonical vows, require total dedication to contemplative prayer

and different forms of separation from the world. St. Josemaría knew that he was addressing people immersed in secular activities. They too can reach peaks of intense prayer life and union with God. This is suggested, for example, by the insistent use of the adjective "contemplative" and the expression "contemplatives in the middle of the world" (cf. *Furrow*, no. 497; *The Forge*, nos. 738, 740), used to refer to the ordinary life of working people. Laborers, mothers, scientific researchers, and artists can attain the same depth of prayer that a contemplative religious, with a lifestyle far removed from the world, aspires to:

"By raising up his Work in these years, our Lord has willed that this truth never again be unknown or forgotten: that everyone has the duty to sanctify themselves, and that the majority of Christians must sanctify

themselves in the world through their ordinary work. Therefore, the Work will exist for as long as there are men and women on earth. There will always exist the phenomenon of people in every profession and trade seeking holiness in their state, in their own profession or trade, by being contemplative souls in the midst of the world" (*Letter* 3, no. 92).

Work, a place of mission

Experts in the sociology of work affirm that approximately one third of children born today in developed countries will have jobs that do not yet exist. The dynamics of social life will shape new professions in the coming years, before those children enter the job market. Despite these rapid transformations that characterize our time, we are convinced that the teaching of St. Josemaría on the sanctification of work remains fully relevant, because

it refers to the *person* who works, not to the specific *type* of work they do.

The spiritual profile that the founder of Opus Dei outlined in his preaching for Christians immersed in the realities of the world actually provides clear answers to many of the uncertainties we face today.

In the contemporary world, work is often perceived as an obstacle that prevents one from dedicating time to oneself, family, or personal interests. Life, *true* life, seems to begin only when the workday ends. Emblematic of this view is the opposition between weekdays and the weekend: workdays are endured while waiting for the weekend to arrive; the long months of work are endured because of the relief provided by vacations. Even people who practice the Christian faith tend to think that they can only dedicate themselves to others, participate in apostolic

initiatives, engage in prayer, and cultivate their inner life after work.

Although this perception has some truth to it – both because work demands time and energy that cannot be devoted to other activities, and because many workers labor in conditions unworthy of the human condition – the implicit conclusion is that spiritual life, a relationship with God, and care for others flourish only outside the work environment, in spaces separate from ordinary life. Cities themselves seem to reinforce this logic, pushing their inhabitants to seek alternative places for leisure, reflection, and meaning.

However, in continuity with the Gospel – for Jesus preached in both cities and the countryside, worked with his hands, and was familiar with the reality of human work – St. Josemaría's preaching presented another perspective. He taught *unity*

of life and the *sanctification of everyday things*: we find God in the exercise of our daily activities; work not only does not hinder prayer, but can become prayer; work has a place on the altar, alongside the Eucharist. Christian commitment, apostolate, and the human and spiritual growth of society often take place through work.

This does not mean that these objectives cannot also be pursued outside the context of work, as we all know from personal experience. But it does tell us that work *does not hinder* Christians' life or mission. On the contrary, for many people, it is *the place where that life and mission are naturally expressed and nourished*.

Many of our contemporaries see work as a mirror to project their own image, turning professional commitment into a form of self-

affirmation. Professional achievements become a calling card to the world, a proof of self-worth. On the other hand, failures not only sadden but can even nullify the person.

When work is seen as the privileged space for personal self-affirmation, we may easily begin to "worship" it, even to the point of being willing to "sacrifice" our time, health, and interpersonal relationships for it. At that point, consciously or unconsciously, work becomes an idol. And the idol is really ourselves.

Even technological tools, if not oriented towards serving others and the common good, can become idols. It is no coincidence that a recent document from the Holy See, *Antiqua et nova* (2025), on artificial intelligence, warns about this very risk. It cautions us against pouring our deepest expectations (the desire

for relationships, certainties, security…) into these technologies, because that would be equivalent to turning them into a technological idol (cf. *Antiqua et nova*, no. 105).

Far from that idolatrous vision, a coherent view of work, like the one seen in the Gospel, which St. Josemaría reread and communicated to our age, helps us to keep the true order of the ends of human effort clear: to give glory only to God, serve our neighbor, and promote the good of society. But it also means accepting the sacrifice of the Cross, trusting above all in God, and not in human securities.

The founder of Opus Dei urged us to work well, competently, professionally, avoiding superficiality or unmeditated solutions, insisting that that was not only a necessary condition for offering our work to God as a

pleasing sacrifice, but also a transformative force capable of healing many of the ills of our time.

In an era where haste prevails over reflection, the obsession with results at any cost compromises professionalism and respect for procedures and laws. Fear and emotion often replace calm and reasoned analysis of facts. The call for a job well done – even if it requires time and effort – is thus a providential invitation. With this perspective, success and failure take on new meaning.

Competence, professionalism, and study not only protect our work from errors, but also prevent harm to others and the waste of resources. Teaching people to work well is undoubtedly one of the greatest services that can be provided not only to society but also to the Church, which is not immune to clericalism

when there is a lack of skills or insufficient knowledge of reality and the dynamics of the world.

Finally, understanding human work as participation in the work of creation and redemption – a recurring idea in St. Josemaría's writings – give us a deeply balanced view of progress. It means recognizing technology as a legitimate expression of creativity and the spiritual dimension of the human being, created in the image and likeness of God.

From this perspective, technical-scientific progress and the development of the person cannot be seen as opposing forces. Technology and ethics, science and wisdom, can – and should – harmoniously cooperate. Christian life does not endorse the idea that we need "less science and more humanity,"

because it is through science and knowledge that humanity also grows.

The autonomy and freedom with which men and women guide progress, as St. Josemaría would say, are not absolute, but filial; exercised as children of God, aware of their vocation to serve. In the Kingdom of Christ, to reign is to serve. When work is truly guided by charity and a spirit of service, scientific progress becomes true human progress.

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