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Very Human, Very Divine (VII): Our Work, Divine Leaven

When we work out of love for God and our fellow men and women, our work becomes "divine leaven" that, united to Christ's sacrifice, helps transform the world. A new article in the series on the virtues.

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The humdrum toil of daily work was an ever-present reality in the lives of

those who listened to Jesus. Perhaps that is why it appears so often in his preaching and from so many different angles: the sower scattering seed in the field, the merchant in search of fine pearls, the fisherman casting the net into the sea... One day, to explain something as important as the way God works in the world, Jesus makes use of one of the most ancient human chores: that of making bread. *And again he said, "To what shall I compare the kingdom of God? It is like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of flour, till it was all leavened"* (Lk 13:20-21). This is how the Kingdom of God develops in history: side by side with our lives, to the rhythm of our daily work, as leaven that transforms the world from within. God is always working in the world, transforming it from within: *My Father is working still, and I am working* (Jn 5:17).

Through the image of a woman leavening the flour, our Lord endows with immense dignity a daily task that, since it is so ordinary, seems unsuited to such a lofty topic. To describe something so momentous as the growth of the Kingdom of God in the world, those listening to our Lord might have expected an example taken from the work of a nobleman, or from the duties of those more directly charged with divine worship. But Jesus himself, while being the Son of the Most High, had carried out a humble manual trade. So instead of referring to a prestigious position of political influence or financial power, he points to the work of the humble people who had to wake up early to prepare bread for the first meal of the day, to ensure that it would be fresh.

Three measures of flour

In describing the scene of the woman kneading the dough, Jesus mentions a significant detail: the exact amount of flour used. In the Jewish world of that time, three “measures” of flour were equivalent to approximately twenty-two liters of dough—enough to produce bread for a hundred people. Such a large amount of flour tells us that the woman is not working only for her own family, but rather for the whole village. So it is easy to imagine how she puts her heart into her work, thinking of all those who will enjoy the savory bread.

This is true of all our work, which places us in relation with others and gives us the opportunity to contribute to their good. As Pope Francis said, “The most intense joys in life arise when we are able to elicit joy in others, as a foretaste of heaven. We can think of the lovely scene in the film *Babette’s Feast*,

when the generous cook receives a grateful hug and praise: ‘Ah, how you will delight the angels!’ It is a joy and a great consolation to bring delight to others, to see them enjoying themselves.”[1]

So much bread for so many people would require considerable time and effort. But this woman confronts the challenge and perseveres in her work *till it was all leavened* (Lk 13:20). Finishing the task undertaken, and finishing it well, requires fortitude, concentration, perseverance, punctuality... To work as well as this woman requires overcoming laziness, which is usually “the first front on which you will have to fight.”[2] We know that Saint Paul had no hesitation in correcting the idleness that had seeped into the lives of the first Christians in Thessalonica. Some of them may have thought that our Lord’s second coming was imminent,

and therefore that working no longer made much sense. They were *living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work*. And Paul warns them: *If anyone will not work, let him not eat* (2 Thes 3:10-11).

The Prelate of Opus Dei has spoken to us about the possibility of finding in our work a way to express our love and freedom, also when it costs us more effort. “We can carry out joyfully even duties that we may find unpleasant. As Saint Josemaria tells us, ‘we shouldn’t think that the only work we can do joyfully is what we find pleasing.’ We can carry out joyfully—and not reluctantly—what we find hard, what doesn’t please us, if we do it for and with love, and therefore freely.”^[3] This also applies to trying situations such as a period of unemployment or illness, a loss of energy as the years go by, tensions in our workplace, etc. Saint Josemaría, aware of how common these types of

situations are in life, said with realism that “illness and old age, when they come, are transformed into professional work. And thus the search for holiness, in accord with the spirit of the Work, is not interrupted, a search that depends, like the door on its hinge, on professional work.”[4]

When love is present

We can have many good reasons for persevering in our work: the responsibility to support those who depend on us, the desire to serve others, the eagerness to create something new, etc. However, even good intentions can little by little be tainted by self-love, with a desire to receive recognition, or to show others how smart and talented we are. We can also fall prey to the temptation to work too hard: a subtle deviation that is often disguised as virtue. Perfectionism and

workaholism are found in this kind of disorder. What was originally a sincere effort to do things well, as effectively as possible, can lead to what Saint Josemaría called “professionalitis”[5]—an excessive dedication to work that robs others of the time we owe them. “Your work,” he once wrote, “must be responsible, perfect, insofar as any human job can be perfect. It should be done with love for God, but bearing in mind that the best is usually the enemy of the good. Do things well, without manias or obsessions, but finishing them, always putting the last stone and caring for details.”[6]

The problem of “professionalitis” lies not so much in the way one works as in the importance that work is given in one’s life. It is very good, even for one’s mental and physical health, not to lose sight of the fact that work is ordered to a greater mission, and

that only this mission gives meaning to the life of a son or a daughter of God. Prudence will help us to integrate our work, here and now, within a horizon that goes far beyond the work itself. A horizon that is focused not on goals or deadlines, but on people: first God, who wants us to care for those special times when we strengthen our relationship with Him, and then those around us (where our Lord is also waiting for us) and who need our time, our affection, our attention.

The image of the woman kneading the dough presents us with the best reason to work. She transforms her work into a gift, into a blessing. Besides the bread, the woman is also giving others her love. For when we give someone a gift, “the first thing we give them is the love with which we desire the good for them.”^[7] The woman does not limit herself to giving her neighbors what is owed to

them: when love is present, one truly *gives oneself*. Hence Saint Josemaría said that we cannot limit ourselves “to doing things, to producing objects. Work is born of love; it expresses love and leads to love.”^[8] When someone works for us like this, it leads us to love, because it shows us the meaning of self-giving. One love begets another, just as a smile begets another smile, transforming hearts one by one. The love of this woman, an image of God’s love, is the living leaven that transforms, as her gift, those who receive the bread that she has worked with her hands.

The whole world is an altar for us

The allusion to the three measures of flour has yet another meaning, understood from its scriptural precedents. It is the same measure that Abraham and Sarah offer in honor of the three mysterious men who visit them in Mambré (cf. *Gen*

18:6); it is also the measure that Gideon uses to offer a sacrifice that the Lord consumes with the fire of an angel (cf. *Judg* 6:19-21). Perhaps for a Jew listening to Jesus, the mere mention of measures of flour would evoke these sacred actions (even though sacrifices were usually made with unleavened bread). With this allusion, our Lord seems to want to remind us that this woman's work is an offering to God, just as ours can be when we unite it to the Holy Mass. Thus we transform what is human, our hours of work, into something holy. And thus "the entire world" can become "an altar for us." [9]

Saint Josemaría encouraged us to make the Eucharist "the center of our interior life, so that we learn how to be with Christ, keeping Him company throughout the day, closely united to his sacrifice. This is the meaning of all our work. And this will lead us during the day to tell our

Lord that we are offering ourselves through Him, with Him and in Him to God the Father, uniting ourselves to all his intentions, on behalf of all creatures. If we live like this, our whole day will be a Mass.”[10]

The image of the woman working the flour with her hands surely dates back to Jesus' childhood. Perhaps He was even thinking of his mother Mary, who so often prepared the bread. We can imagine her concentrating on her work, doing what is needed for the natural process of leavening. As happens in our work: when we do it face to face with God, we let Him use our efforts to spread his Kingdom, with his divine leaven. This is how he helped Saint Josemaría see it: “I already contemplate, down through the ages, even the last of my children ... working professionally, with the

wisdom of an artist, the happiness of a poet, the sureness of a master, and a modesty more persuasive than eloquence, seeking the good of all mankind, as they strive for Christian perfection in their profession and place in the world.”[11]

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[1] Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Amoris laetitia*, no. 129.

[2] Saint Josemaría, *Letters* 2, no. 10.

[3] Monsignor Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral Letter*, 9 January 2018, no. 6. The internal quote is from Saint Josemaría’s *Letter* dated 29 December 1947, no. 106.

[4] Saint Josemaría, Notes from his preaching, cited in Ernst Burkhart, Javier López, *Vida cotidiana y*

santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría, Rialp, Madrid 2013, vol. III, p. 165.

[5] Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, no. 502.

[6] Saint Josemaría, *Letters* 36, no. 38; cited in Ernst Burkhardt, Javier López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría*, Rialp, Madrid 2013, vol. III, pp. 189-190.

[7] Saint Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.*, I, q. 38, a. 2, resp.

[8] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 48.

[9] Saint Josemaría, Notes taken from a meditation, 19 March 1968. Cited in Javier Echevarría, *Vivir la Santa Misa*, Rialp, Madrid 2010, p. 17.

[10] Saint Josemaría, Notes taken from his preaching, 27 May 1962.

[11] Saint Josemaría, *Letters* 3, no. 4.

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