Sanctifying with our Work

“Sanctity, for the vast majority of people, implies sanctifying their work, sanctifying themselves in it, and sanctifying others through it,” the Founder of Opus Dei tells us.

06/27/2014

Download article in pdf format

In the history of the Church and mankind, the spirit God entrusted to St. Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer in 1928 brings with it a teaching as old

and as new as the Gospel, with all its power to transform the world and the men and women who live in it.

The sanctification of ordinary work is a living seed, able to yield fruits of holiness in an immense number of souls. “Sanctity, for the vast majority of people, implies sanctifying their work, sanctifying themselves in it, and sanctifying others through it.”[1] In this concise sentence, as the Prelate of Opus Dei stated in his homily on October 7, 2002, the day after the Founder's canonization, St. Josemaria “summed up the nucleus of the message which God had entrusted to him, in order to remind Christians of it.”[2]

The divine Sower has sown this seed in our lives so that it may grow and bear fruit: *thirtyfold, sixtyfold and a hundredfold*.[3] Calmly considering each of these three aspects in our prayer can frequently form the heart

of our dialogue with God: Am I sanctifying my work? Am I sanctifying myself in my work, that is to say, am I being transformed into another Christ through my daily jobs? What apostolic fruit am I producing with my work?

In a living unity

These three aspects in which St. Josemaría summed up the spirit of sanctifying work are as intimately united as the root, stem and grain in a stalk of wheat.

The first aspect, *sanctifying one's work*, making holy our work by doing it for love of God, with the greatest possible human perfection, and offering it to God in union with Christ, is the most basic and, as it were, the root of the other two.

The second aspect, *sanctifying oneself in one's work*, is, in a certain sense, the result of the first. A person who

tries to sanctify his or her work necessarily becomes holy. That is to say, they allow the Holy Spirit to sanctify them, identifying them ever more closely with Christ. Yet just as in the case of a plant it is not sufficient to water the roots (one must also ensure that the stalk grows straight, at times using a stake so that the wind doesn't bend it, and protecting it against animals and diseases), so too one must have recourse to many means to become identified with Christ: prayer, sacraments and the means of formation through which Christian virtues are developed. These very virtues strengthen the root, and as a result sanctifying one's work becomes almost second nature.

With the third aspect, *sanctifying through one's work*, something similar happens. Undoubtedly it can be deemed to be a result of the other two, for by sanctifying one's work

and becoming identified with Christ, Christians necessarily produce fruit; they sanctify others through their work, in keeping with our Lord's words: *He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit*.[4] But this doesn't mean that a Christian needn't worry about producing fruit, as though fruit came spontaneously from the root and the stalk.

In sanctifying work, the three aspects are united *in a living way* to one another and mutually influence one another. A person who doesn't seek to sanctify others with his work and is only concerned with sanctifying what is *his* would not really be sanctifying it. He would be like the barren fig tree which so displeased our Lord since, while having roots and leaves, it produced no fruit.[5] Indeed, "a good indicator of an upright intention, which you ought to have in your daily work, is precisely

the way in which you take advantage of the social dealings and friendships that your work occasions to bring souls closer to God."[6]

We will now consider in greater detail this third aspect of the sanctification of work, for in some way it makes known the other two, just as fruit makes known the plant and the root. In our Lord's words: *You will know them by their fruits*.[7]

'I chose you and appointed you…'

If we considers our work from a purely human point of view, we could come to the conclusion that it is owing to a number of different circumstances—abilities and interests, obligations and chance occurrences—that we have come to be doing this particular job rather than another. But Christians need to see things with greater depth and perspective, with a supernatural sense that allows them to discern in

what they are doing a personal call from God to holiness and apostolate.

What appears to be merely a chance situation takes on a sense of mission, and one begins to act in a different way in the very place where one is.[8] One is no longer there as someone who simply happens to be in that place but as someone who has been sent there by Christ. *I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide*.[9] Our workplace, the professional environment in which we find ourselves, is our apostolic field, the very soil where the good seed of Christ has to be sown and cultivated. Jesus' promise will not fail: when one tries to sanctify one's work and oneself in it there is always apostolic fruit.

Nonetheless we should not be deceived by appearances. Jesus warns us that our heavenly Father

prunes whoever is producing fruit so that he*may bear more fruit*.[10] God works in this way because he wishes to bestow still further blessings on his children. He prunes them in order to improve them even though the pruning process may cause suffering. Often the pruning comes from the very difficulties he allows so that the soul may be purified and cleansed of what is superfluous. Sometimes, for example, human enthusiasm for our work dries up and we have to work against the grain, with no joy other than that of doing it for love of God. At other times it may be a serious economic difficulty, which perhaps God allows so that we may continue to employ every human means, but also with more childlike trust in him, as Jesus taught us,[11] not letting ourselves be overcome by sadness or worry about the future. At still other times it may involve confronting failure in one's work, which can completely

dishearten those who work with a merely human outlook but which places on the Cross those who desire to co-redeem with Christ. The pruning process often involves a delay in the production of fruit, and can even be the very fact of not seeing the apostolic fruit of our efforts.

In any case it would be wrong to equate this situation with the one described by Jesus in the Gospel parable: *A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vinedresser, 'Lo, these three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down; why should it use up the ground?'*[12] This is the situation of someone who does not produce fruit because of laziness and love of comfort, which leads to being concerned solely or chiefly about oneself. Then the lack of fruitfulness is not merely

apparent; it springs from a lack of generosity, effort and sacrifice. In a word, it comes from a lack of good will.

Jesus himself teaches us to distinguish between these situations by their signs. *From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near*. [13] Those pruned by God seem to bear no fruit but they are full of life. Their love for God has other clearly visible signs such as care for their times of prayer, charity with everyone, persevering effort to use all the human and supernatural means in the apostolate.... These signs are as indicative as the tender leaves put forth by the fig tree; they are harbingers of the fruit that will come in due course. Those who have been pruned sanctify other souls through their daily work because "any honourable work can be prayer

and all prayerful work is apostolate.”[14] Work changed into prayer wins from God a shower of graces bearing fruit in many hearts.

Others, however, neither produce fruit nor are they on the road to doing so. But they are still alive and can change, if they want to. God will listen to the prayers of their friends, like the owner who listened to the vinedresser’s suggestion for the fig tree. The vinedresser *answered him, ‘Let it alone, sir, this year also, till I dig about it and put on manure. And if it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’*[15] One can always overcome a voluntary apostolic barrenness. The time for conversion and bearing much fruit, with God’s grace, is always at hand.“Don’t let your life be barren. Be useful. Make yourself felt. Shine forth with the torch of your faith and your love.”[16] Only then does one’s work become fully

meaningful; only then does its beauty and attractiveness appear; only then does a new enthusiasm, until then unknown, burst forth. It is like the enthusiasm of St. Peter who obeys Jesus' command to put out into the deep,[17] and who after the miraculous catch of fish hears the promise of greater fruit: *Do not be afraid; henceforth you will be catching men*.[18]

In our lives both these situations can crop up; sometimes the first, sometimes the second. From the outside they may look alike in that the apostolic fruit isn't seen, but it is not difficult to distinguish the one from the other. It is enough to be sincere in our prayer, and answer the following questions: Am I using whatever means I have to sanctify others through my work, or am I negligent and content with doing little, knowing that I really could do much more? Do I love those who

work alongside me? Do I endeavour to serve them? And do I allow demands to be made of me in spiritual guidance? This is the path to holiness and apostolic fruitfulness.

Like a burning ember

Transforming work into a means of apostolate is an essential part of sanctifying our work and a sign that it is truly being sanctified. Holiness and apostolate cannot be separated, just as love for God and love for others cannot be divided.

"You have to act like a burning coal, spreading fire wherever it happens to be; or at least, striving to raise the spiritual temperature of the people around you, leading them to live a truly Christian life."[19] It is in our daily work that these words of St. Josemaría should become a reality, as we strive to help those around us receive the warmth of Christ's love. We need to give them an example of

cheerful serenity, listening to them and being understanding, serving them.

Those who work alongside us should notice the good influence of someone who raises the tone of the workplace. A spirit of service, loyalty, friendliness, cheerfulness, a genuine effort to overcome one's defects—combined with profession competence—will never pass unnoticed.

All this forms part of the "professional prestige" we need so as to attract others to Christ. This prestige does not stem simply from working well from a technical point of view; it is a prestige that is woven of virtues informed by charity. Thus "professional work, whatever it may be, becomes a lamp to bring light to your colleagues and friends."[20] Without charity, however, there is for us no Christian professional

prestige, at least not the one God asks of us,“our ‘bait’ as ‘a fisher of men’”[21] and an instrument for apostolate. Without charity it is impossible to draw souls to God, for *God is love*.[22] It is worthwhile emphasizing this idea: an effective and competent professional person, if he or she fails to go beyond justice and practise charity, lacks the professional prestige needed by a child of God.

In any case, such prestige is not an end but a means: a means “to draw souls closer to God with the right word at the right time, through an apostolate I have from time to time called an apostolate of friendship and confidence.”[23] Together with our divine filiation, we have received in Baptism a sharing in Christ’s priesthood, and thus in the threefold office of sanctifying, teaching and guiding others. Therefore we have every right to enter into others’ lives,

reaching through our apostolate of friendship and confidence as many people as possible in the broad spectrum of workplace relationships.

This includes not only those who work alongside us, or who are more or less our own age. We have to reach all the people who, for one reason or another, we come in contact with us through our work. We should look for opportunities to meet them and to speak in a one-to-one conversation, to have a meal with them, or to play some sport with them. It is a question of spending time with others and being available to them, learning to find the right moment to speak. We should never be afraid to speak about God. We have to bring Christ into the lives of those around us: with astuteness, through our prayer and good humor, through little mortifications, through our good example and human

attractiveness, through professional prestige and sanctified work.[24]

Giving direction to society

With our daily work each of us can contribute effectively to imbuing the whole of society with a Christian spirit. Moreover, sanctified work necessarily sanctifies society, for "human work done in this manner, no matter how humble or insignificant it may seem, helps to shape the world in a Christian way."[25]

As Saint Josemaria wrote in *The Forge*: "Struggle to make sure that those human institutions and structures in which you work and move with the full rights of a citizen, are in accordance with the principles which govern a Christian view of life. In this way you can be sure that you are giving people the means to live according to their real worth; and you will enable many souls, with the

grace of God, to respond personally to their Christian vocation.”[26]

Striving to live in accord with the norms of professional ethics is a fundamental requirement in our apostolic work. But we must also aspire to make these norms better known, helping others to know and live by them. We can’t use as an excuse the fact that immoral practices are quite widespread and it’s hard to counteract them. Just as these practices are the result of the accumulation of personal sins, so too will they disappear only through a serious personal effort to practise Christian virtues.[27] Frequently we will have to ask for advice. In prayer and in the sacraments we will find the fortitude, when required, to show with deeds that we love the truth above all things, even at the price, if need be, of our own employment.

“Ever since 7th of August 1931, when, during the celebration of holy Mass, the words of Jesus echoed in his soul: *And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself* (*Jn* 12:32), Josemaría Escrivá understood more clearly that the mission of the baptised consists in raising the Cross of Christ over all human reality, and felt arise in his soul the exciting call to evangelize all environments.”[28] This ideal of shaping society with a Christian spirit “can be fulfilled; it is not an empty dream.”[29] St. Josemaría, the Pope went on, “continues to remind us of the need not to allow ourselves to be frightened in face of a materialist culture, which threatens to dissolve the most genuine identity of the disciples of Christ. He liked to reiterate with vigor that the Christian faith is opposed to conformism and interior inertia.”[30]

Our Lord warned us of a time when, because *wickedness is multiplied, most men's love will grow cold.*[31] Put on guard by his words, instead of being discouraged by the amount of evil, including our own wretchedness, we should react with humility and trust in God, having recourse to the intercession of our Lady. *We know that in everything God works for the good with those who love him.*[32]

Javier Lopez

---

[1] Saint Josemaria, *Conversations*, 55; cf. *Christ is Passing By*, 45, 122

[2] Bishop Javier Echevarria, *Homily* 7 October, 2002

[3] *Mk* 4:20

[4] *Jn* 15:5

[5] Cf. *Mt* 21:19

[6] Saint Josemaria, *Letter* 15 October 1948, 31

[7] *Mt* 7:16

[8] Cf. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.* I, 43, 1c

[9] *Jn* 15:16

[10] *Jn* 15:2

[11] Cf. *Mt* 6:31-34

[12] *Lk* 13:6-7

[13] *Mt* 24:32

[14] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 10

[15] *Lk* 13:8-9

[16] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, 1

[17] Cf. *Lk* 5:4

[18] *Ibid*. 5:10

[19] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*,, no. 570.

[20] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, 61

[21] Saint Josemaria, *The Way*, 372

[22] *1 Jn* 3:8

[23] Saint Josemaria,, *Letter* 24 March 1930, 11

[24] Cf. *Christ is Passing By*, no. 166.

[25] Saint Josemaria, *Conversations*, 10

[26] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 718.

[27]Cf. John Paul II, Apost. Exhort. *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, 2 December 1984, 16; Enc. Letter, *Centesimus annus*, 1 May 1991, 38.

[28] John Paul II, *Homily*, 6 October, 2002

[29] Saint Josemaria, *Christ is Passing By*, 183

[30] John Paul II, *Homily*, 6 October, 2002

[31] *Mt* 24:12

[32] *Rom* 8:28

pdf | document generated automatically from https://opusdei.org/en-lk/article/sanctifying-with-our-work/ (12/16/2025)