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"A Supernatural Motive"

An article on one of St. Josemaria's key teachings: how to sanctify our daily work.

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St. Josemaría said that the spirit of Opus Dei contains the marvelous truth that all worthy and upright human undertakings can be turned into divine ones.

Many people have experienced a complete turnaround in their lives when they came to know this

teaching, sometimes after simply hearing the phrase *sanctification of work*. These were men and women who were working with earthly horizons of just two dimensions but who became filled with enthusiasm when they learned that their professional work can take on eternal significance. We can think here of the joy of that person in the Gospel who, on finding a treasure hidden in a field, went and sold all that he had to buy that field![1]

The Holy Spirit helped St. Josemaría discover this teaching in the Gospels, particularly in the many years Jesus spent in Nazareth: "He lived in obscurity, but, for us, that period is full of light." [2] "His hidden years are not without significance, nor were they simply a preparation for the years which were to come after—those of his public life. Since 1928 I have understood clearly that God wants our Lord's whole life to be an

example for Christians. I saw this with special reference to his hidden life, the years he spent working side by side with ordinary men."[3]

Thanks to a divine light the founder of Opus Dei always taught that professional work can be sanctified and can sanctify. The Church's Magisterium, above all since Vatican II, has stressed this simple but great truth.[4] The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that "work can be a means of sanctification and a way of animating earthly realities with the Spirit of Christ." [5]

"With supernatural intuition," John Paul II stated, "Blessed Josemaría untiringly preached the universal call to holiness and apostolate. Christ calls everyone to become holy in the realities of everyday life. Hence, *work too is a means of personal holiness and apostolate when it is done in union with Jesus Christ.*" [6]

God chose St. Josemaría to be an instrument to spread this teaching, which opens up immense perspectives on personal holiness for a vast number of Christians and on the sanctification of human society from within, that is, from the very core of the professional activities that shape society.

This seed will yield all the fruit God expects, provided we strive to meditate on it in God's presence and to put it into practice with his help. The sanctification of work is not just an idea to be understood, but an *ideal* to be sought and acquired through love for God and under the guidance of his grace.

Meaning of work

From the very beginning of Scripture, in the Book of Genesis, we are shown the meaning of work. God, who made all things good, "freely willed to create a world 'in a state of

journeying' towards its ultimate perfection."[7] And he created man *ut operaretur*,[8] so that by working "he would, in a certain way, prolong the work of creation and attain his own perfection."[9]

As a consequence of sin, work is accompanied by fatigue, and often too by suffering.[10] But on assuming our nature in order to redeem us, Christ our Lord has transformed this fatigue and suffering into means for showing love for and obedience to God's will and making up for the disobedience of sin. "That was the way Jesus lived for thirty years, as the son of the carpenter (*Mt* 13:55)....He was the carpenter, the son of Mary (*Mk* 6:33). And he was God: He was achieving the redemption of mankind and drawing all things to himself (*Jn* 12:32)."[11]

As well as seeing in Jesus' hidden life a revelation of the deepest meaning

of human work, we have to remember that through grace we have been made children of God, forming one single reality with Jesus Christ, one single body. His supernatural Life is our own life, and he makes us sharers in his priesthood so that we may become co-redeemers with him.

This deep union of the Christian with Christ sheds light on the meaning of all our activities, and especially our work. In St. Josemaría's teachings, the foundation of the sanctification of work is the sense of our divine filiation, the awareness that "Christ wishes to become incarnate in our tasks." [12]

This Christian vision of the meaning of work is summarized in the following words of St. Josemaria: "Work is part and parcel of man's life on earth. It involves effort, weariness, exhaustion, signs of the

suffering and struggle which accompany human existence and which point to the reality of sin and the need for redemption. But in itself work is not a penalty or a curse or a punishment: those who speak of it that way have not understood Sacred Scripture properly....

"Work, all work, bears witness to the dignity of man, to his dominion over creation. It is an opportunity to develop one's personality. It is a bond of union with others, the way to support one's family, a means of aiding in the improvement of the society in which we live and in the progress of all humanity.

"For a Christian these horizons extend and grow wider. For work is a participation in the creative work of God . . . And, moreover, since Christ took it into his hands, work has become for us a redeemed and redemptive reality. Not only is it the

background of man's life, it is a means and path of holiness. It is something to be sanctified and something which sanctifies."[13]

Sanctifying work

A familiar phrase of St. Josemaría brings us right to the heart of the splendid panorama of holiness and apostolate in the carrying out of our professional occupation: "Sanctity, for the vast majority of men, implies sanctifying their work, sanctifying themselves in it, and sanctifying others through it."[14]

These are three inseparable aspects of one and the same reality. The first is to sanctify, to make holy, a specific task, the activity of working.[15] To sanctify work is to sanctify that particular activity, to make the act of the person who is working holy.

It is on this that the other two aspects depend, since work that is sanctified

is also sanctifying: it sanctifies the one who works and is a means for the sanctification of others and for imbuing society with a Christian spirit. It is worthwhile, therefore, for us to pause to consider this first point: what does it mean to make professional work holy?

Any action of ours is holy when it is an act of love for God and for others, for his sake. That is, when it is an act of supernatural love, of charity, which in this world presupposes faith and hope. Such an act is *holy* because charity is a participation in infinite Charity, the Holy Spirit,[16] the subsistent Love between the Father and the Son. Therefore an act of charity is a sharing in the supernatural Life of the Most Holy Trinity, a sharing in the holiness of God.

In the case of professional work, whether cultivating a field, research

in science, providing services, etc., in order for it to be humanly good and sanctifiable it has to be an exercise of the human virtues. But that is not sufficient for it to be holy.

Work is truly sanctified when done for love of God, to give him glory (and consequently as God wants, fulfilling his will, which entails practising the Christian virtues informed by charity) so as to offer it to God in union with Christ: "through Him, with Him, and in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honor and glory is yours Almighty Father, forever and ever." [17]

"Add a supernatural motive to your ordinary work, and you will have sanctified it." [18] These few words of St. Josemaría give us the key to the sanctification of work. The human activity of working is sanctified when it is carried out for a *supernatural motive*.

What really matters, therefore, is not that it "turn out well" but that we work out of love for God. For *God looks to the heart.*[19] What is decisive is that one has a *supernatural motive*, the ultimate goal, the rectitude of intention in one's will to work for love of God and to serve others for God. "Work is thus raised to the order of grace. It is sanctified and becomes God's work, *operatio Dei, opus Dei.*"[20]

A supernatural motive

Our *supernatural motive* is sincere if it effectively and radically influences our way of working, leading us to complete our task with perfection, as God wants it, within our personal limitations, which he always takes into account.

A *supernatural motive* that makes work holy is not merely something added on to professional work. Rather, it is love of God and love of

others for God, which radically influences the activity itself. It leads us to do our work well, with competence and perfection because "it is no good offering to God something that is less perfect than our poor human limitations permit. The work that we offer must be without blemish and it must be done as carefully as possible, even in its smallest details, for God will not accept shoddy workmanship. *Thou shalt not offer anything that is faulty*, Holy Scripture warns us, because it would not be worthy of him (*Lev 23:20*). For that reason, the work of each one of us, the activities that take up our time and energy, must be an offering worthy of our Creator. It must be *operatio Dei*, a work of God that is done for God: in short, a task that is complete and faultless." [21]

A "good intention" that did not lead one to work well would neither be a good intention nor an act of love for

God. It would be an ineffective and hollow intention, a weak desire incapable of overcoming the obstacle of laziness or comfort. True love is shown through one's work.

Working for a *supernatural motive* is not a matter of simply adding on something holy to the activity of working. To sanctify work it is not enough to pray while one is working, although this is a sign, when it is possible to do so, that one is working for love of God and is a means to grow in that love.

In order to have a *supernatural motive* and sanctify one's work it is essential to seek, in one way or another, the presence of God, often concretized in acts of love and aspirations. At times this will involve taking advantage of a break in one's work or other like circumstances, and making use of "human devices."

However, it is worth insisting that this in itself is not enough, since sanctifying work is not essentially a matter of doing something holy at the same time as one is working. Rather, it is a matter of making the work itself holy by having a supernatural motive which shapes that activity and affects it so deeply that it turns it into an act of faith, hope and love, and transforms our work into prayer.

Another important consequence of the fact that the root of sanctifying one's work lies in a *supernatural motive* is that all professional work can be sanctified, whether outstanding to human eyes or quite humble, since sanctifying work depends on the love for God with which it is done. One has only to think of the work of Jesus, Mary and Joseph in Nazareth, who carried out everyday tasks like millions of other

people but did so with the greatest love.

"The dignity of work depends not so much on what is done as on the one who does it, on the human person, who is a spiritual, intelligent and free being." [22] The value of work depends on its goodness as an action that is spiritual and free, that is to say, arising out of a love that can choose its end, which is the characteristic act of freedom.

"It is well to remember that the dignity of work is based on Love. Man's great privilege is to be able to love and to transform what is fleeting and ephemeral. He can love other creatures, pronounce an 'I' and a 'you' which are full of meaning. And he can love God, who opens heaven's gates to us, makes us members of his family and allows us also to talk to him in friendship, face to face. This is why man ought not to

limit himself to material production. Work is born of love: it is a manifestation of love and is directed towards love."[23]

Love for God makes little things big: small details of order, punctuality, service and amiability, which contribute to the perfection of work. "Do everything for Love. Then there will be no little things: everything will be big. Perseverance in little things for Love is heroism."[24]

A person who realizes that the sanctifying value of work depends essentially on the love for God with which it is done and not on its social and human prominence will have great regard for little things, especially those that pass unnoticed to others and are seen only by God

In contrast, working for selfish motives, seeking self-affirmation or prestige out of vanity, pursuing one's own plans and likes, or making

power or money one's supreme goal, radically prevents one's work from being sanctified because it means offering it up to the idol of one's own self love.

Rarely do such motives present themselves in a "pure state;" often they are intermingled with noble intentions and even supernatural ones, while remaining hidden, even for a long time, like clumps of dirt in the depths of clean water. It would be imprudent to ignore them, because at any moment—possibly on the occasion of a humiliation or a professional failure—they could be stirred up and cloud one's whole behavior. It is important to detect these selfish motives, to sincerely acknowledge them and combat them, purifying one's intention with prayer, sacrifice, humility, generous service to others and care for little things.

Let us frequently turn our eyes to Jesus' work during the years of his hidden life, to learn to sanctify our daily work. "Lord give us your grace. Open the door to the workshop in Nazareth so that we may learn to contemplate you, together with your Holy Mother Mary and the holy Patriarch St. Joseph, whom I love and revere so dearly, the three of you dedicated to a life of work made holy. Then, Lord, our poor hearts will be enkindled; we shall seek you and find you in our daily work, which you want us to convert into a work of God, a labor of Love." [25]

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Footnotes:

[1] Cf. Mt. 13: 44

[2] *Christ is Passing By*, 14

[3] *Christ is Passing By*, 20

[4] *Lumen Gentium*, 31-36; *Gaudium et Spes*, 33-39; *Apostolicam actuositatem*, 1-3, 7.

[5] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2427

[6] John Paul II, Homily, 17 May 1992.
Cf. Discourse, 19 March 1979;
Discourse, 12 January 2002, 2.

[7] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 310

[8] Gen 2:15. Cf. Gen, 1:28.

[9] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2427. Vatican II, Past. Const. *Gaudium et Spes*, 34-35

[10] Cf. Gen, 3:18-19

[11] *Christ is Passing By*, 14

[12] *Ibid.* , 174

[13] *Ibid.* , 47.

[14] *Conversations* , 55. Cf. *Christ is Passing By*, 45; *Friends of God*, 120

[15] Cf. John Paul II, Enc. *Laborem exercens*, 14 September 1981, 6

[16] Cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *S. Th.* II-II, q. 24, a.7 c

[17] *Roman Missal*, Canon of the Mass

[18] *The Way*, 359

[19] I Kgs 16:7

[20] *Conversations*, 10

[21] *Friends of God*, 55

[22] John Paul II, Discourse, 3 July 1986, 3

[23] *Christ is Passing By*, 48

[24] *The Way*, 813

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