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Working for Love

"Sanctifying oneself in work means allowing oneself to be sanctified by the Holy Spirit, who increases our capacity to love." 8th article in the series "Sanctifying our Work."

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“Work is born of love; it is a manifestation of love and is directed towards love.” [1] On reading these words of St. Josemaría, questions may arise in our heart that lead to a

sincere dialogue with God: Why do I work? Do I work well? What am I trying to achieve in my work? These questions can help us to remember that the aim of our life is not "to produce things" but to love God. "Holiness does not consist in doing more difficult things every day, but in doing them every day with greater love." [2]

Many people work, and work a lot, but fail to sanctify it. They make things, construct objects, look for results. They work out of a sense of duty, or to earn money, or driven by ambition. Sometimes they are successful; other times they fail. They may find their work interesting and exciting, or tedious and boring. Their work may give rise to human fulfilment, but also to concerns and worries. Some give in to activism, others to laziness. Some work until exhaustion; others try to avoid tiredness at all costs.

All these attitudes have one thing in common: they stem from a human nature wounded by the consequences of sin, with all its conflicts and confusions. It is like a labyrinth in which people wander, as St. Paul says, *according to the flesh* (the “*animalis homo*”), entrapped and unable to find the path to the true meaning of freedom.

This path can only be discovered by raising our sights to contemplate life and work with God's light, who sees from on high. “Most people,” St. Josemaría writes in *The Way*, “have a plane-like vision, stuck to the earth, of two dimensions. When you live a supernatural life, God will give you the third dimension: height, and with it, perspective, weight and volume.”[3]

Work born of love

What then does it mean for the Christian that “work is born of love;

it is a manifestation of love and is directed towards love?" [4] In the first place, we need to have clear what kind of love St. Josemaría is referring to. People can have what is called a "love of concupiscence" when they love something to satisfy their own desires. In the final analysis, the work of a child of God does not stem from this kind of love, even though he or she may often work with great interest and enthusiasm.

Christians should not work only or principally when they feel like it or when things are going well. Their work stems from a higher kind of love: the "love of benevolence," which directly wills the good of another person (*benevolentia*), not one's own advantage. If the love of benevolence is mutual it is called "love of friendship," [5] all the more so if one is ready, for friendship's sake, to give not just some object, but

oneself: *Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.*[6]

We can love God with the love of supernatural friendship, because he has made us his children; he wants us to have recourse to him with filial trust, and to see others as his children and our brothers and sisters. This is the love to which the Founder of Opus Dei refers when he writes that “work is born of love”; it is the love of the children of God, a supernatural love for God and for others for his sake: *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*[7]

To want the good for someone doesn't mean always trying to please them. It may happen that what they want is not for their own good, as is the case when mothers don't give their children everything they want

because it might do them harm. In contrast, to love God means always wanting to do his will, because God's will is the good.

Consequently, for a Christian, work is born of love for God, since filial love leads us to want to do his will, and his will is that we work. [8] St.

Josemaría used to say that for love of God he wanted to work like a donkey, like a donkey at the water-wheel. [9]

And God blessed his generosity, pouring out abundant graces that have given rise to countless fruits of holiness all over the world.

It is worthwhile asking ourselves frequently: why do we work? Is it for love of God or love of self? We might come up with other answers: for example, working out of necessity. However, this would indicate that our examination wasn't going deep enough, because working out of necessity is not the ultimate answer.

We also have to nourish ourselves out of necessity, in order to live. But what do we live for: for the glory of God, as St. Paul exhorts us, [10] or for our own glory? This is also the reason why we eat and why we work. This is the fundamental question that goes right to the heart of things. If we examine ourselves sincerely, asking God for light, we will come to see clearly what is the real motive behind our professional efforts. And God will also give us the grace to purify our heart and to yield all the riches of love that he expects from the talents he has given us.

Work as an expression of love

A Christian's work expresses love, not only because, as we have seen, love for God leads us to work, but also because it leads us to work well, since that is what God wishes. Human work is truly a participation in the work of creation, [11] and God,

who created everything out of Love, wants all his works to be perfect— *Dei perfecta sunt opera* [12] —and he wants us to imitate him in the way we work.

A perfect model for our work is Christ, who, as the Gospel tells us, *did all things well* . [13] These words of praise that welled up spontaneously when people saw his miracles, worked by virtue of his Divinity, can also be applied to his toil in the workshop at Nazareth (as St. Josemaría does), carried out through his Humanity. It was a work done out of love for the Father and love for us; and it expressed this love precisely through the perfection with which it was done, not only technical perfection but a deep human perfection—the perfection of all the virtues that love puts into effect in a full and harmonious way, giving them an unmistakable tone: the

joyful tone of a loving heart eager to give itself totally.

Our professional work is able to be an expression of love for God when it is well done. This doesn't imply that it necessarily has to turn out well, but rather that we try to do it as well as possible, using all the means available in the given circumstances.

Between the toil of a person who works out of self-love, and that of the same person who begins to work out of love for God and for others because of God, there is as much difference as that between the sacrifice of Cain and Abel. Abel strove to offer the best to God, and his offering was found acceptable. Our Lord expects the same of us.

“For a Catholic work is not just a matter of fulfilling a duty—it is to love, to excel oneself gladly in duty and in sacrifice.” [14] “Carry out your work in the knowledge that God

contemplates it: *laborem manuum mearum respexit Deus* (Gen 31:42), God regarded the work of my hands. Our work therefore has to be holy and worthy of him: not only finished down to the last detail, but carried out with moral rectitude, nobility, loyalty, justice." [15] Then our professional work will not only be upright and holy but will also be prayer as well. [16]

When a person works for love of God, their professional activity reveals this love in one way or another. A simple glance at different people doing the same activity would probably not be sufficient to grasp the motive for which it is being done. But if one could observe with greater detail their overall attitude to work—not only the technical care, but also human relations with other colleagues at work, the spirit of service, loyalty and cheerfulness—it would be difficult not to recognise

anyone possessing the *bonus odor Christi* , [17] the aroma of Christ's love.

At the end of time, Jesus teaches, *two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left* . [18] They are doing the same work, but not in the same way: one is pleasing to God and the other is not.

Nevertheless, the strong materialistic environment around us can often make us forget that we are called to share in eternal life, and we end up thinking only about immediate sensible goods. Therefore St. Josemaría stressed: “Work facing God, without seeking human glory. Some people see in work a means for winning recognition, or for acquiring power or wealth that gratifies their personal ambition, or for feeling the

pride of their own capacity for work." [19]

In this sort of climate, it will be hard not to notice a person who works for love of God. How could one fail to notice when justice is informed by charity, rather than being merely a dry and cold justice? Or when someone is striving for uprightness before God, rather than a self-serving uprightness before men, serving others out of love for God, not self-interest?

If one's work fails to express love for God, perhaps it is because the fire of love is quenched. If the warmth isn't noticed, if after a certain time of daily interaction with one's professional colleagues they cannot tell whether they are dealing with a committed Christian or just a decent and reliable person, then perhaps it is that the salt has become insipid. [20] Love for God is contagious,

seeking to share with others the greatest good possible. Is my work an expression of love for God? This question can give rise to abundant prayer.

Work directed towards love

Work, when carried out for love and with love, is work directed towards love—to the growth of love in the one who carries it out, to the growth of charity, which is the essence of holiness, of the human and supernatural perfection of a son or daughter of God. It is a work, therefore, which sanctifies us.

Sanctifying oneself in work means allowing oneself to be sanctified by the Holy Spirit, subsistent intra-Trinitarian Love, who dwells in the soul in grace and infuses it with charity. It means cooperating with him, putting into practice the love which he pours into our hearts as we fulfil our tasks. If we are docile to his

action, if we do our work for love, the Paraclete will sanctify us; he will increase our charity, our capacity to love and to have an ever deeper and more continuous contemplative life.

The fact that work is directed towards love, and therefore to our sanctification, means that it also perfects us: it is directed to our identification with Christ, *perfectus Deus, perfectus homo* . [21] To work for love of God, and love of others for God, requires putting into practice the other Christian virtues. Above all, faith and hope, which charity presupposes and vivifies. And also the human virtues, through which charity operates and unfolds, giving them shape. Our professional task has to be *the arena where we exercise the whole gamut of human and supernatural virtues: industriousness, order, good use of time, fortitude to finish each task well, care for small things...; and so many small points of*

service to the others, which are manifestations of a sincere and refined charity.[22] The practice of the human virtues is essential if we are to be contemplatives in the middle of the world, and specifically to transform our professional work into prayer and an offering pleasing to God, a means and an occasion of contemplative life.

St. Josemaría remarked on one occasion: “I contemplate because I work; and I work because I contemplate.” [23] Loving and knowing God—contemplation—led him to work, and thus he said: “I work because I contemplate.” And work in turn becomes a means of sanctification and contemplation: “I contemplate because I work.”

It is like a circular movement—from contemplation to work, and from work to contemplation—focusing more and more on its center, Christ,

who draws us to himself, attracting all things along with us, so that through him, with him, and in him, all honor and glory is given to God the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit. [24]

The reality that the work of God's children is directed towards love, and consequently that it sanctifies them, explains why, from the perspective of holiness (which is what matters in the end), we cannot speak of professions of greater or lesser importance.

The "dignity of work is based on love." [25] "All work can have the same supernatural quality. There are no great or mean tasks. All are great if they are done with love. Those which are considered great become small when the Christian meaning of life is lost sight of." [26]

If charity is lacking, work loses its value before God, no matter how

outstanding it may appear to human eyes. *If I understand all mysteries and all knowledge...but have not love, I am nothing*,^[27] writes St. Paul. What is truly important is the “effort to divinize human things—be they great or small. For love gives a new dimension to everything.” ^[28]

J. Lopez

Footnotes:

[1] *Christ is Passing By* , no.48

[2] St. Josemaría, notes from his preaching, cited by Ernst Burkhardt and Javier Lopez, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de san Josemaría*, Madrid 2013, vol. II, p. 295.

[3] St. Josemaría ,*The Way* , no. 279

[4] St. Josemaría ,*Christ is Passing By* , no. 48

[5] Cf. St.Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* , II-II, q.23, a.1, c

[6] *Jn* 15:13

[7] *Rom* 5:5

[8] Cf. *Gen* 2:15; 3:23; *Mk* 6:3; *2 Thess* 3:6-12

[9] Cf. St. Josemaría, *The Way* , no. 998.

[10] Cf. *1 Cor* 10:31

[11] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens* (14 September 1981), 25; *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2460

[12] *Deut* 32:4 (Vg). Cf. *Gen* 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* , no. 302

[13] *Mk* 7:37

[14] St. Josemaría, *Furrow* , no. 527.

[15] St. Josemaría, *Letter* 15 October 1948, no. 26, cited by Ernst Burkhardt and Javier Lopez, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de san Josemaría*, Madrid 2013, vol. III, p. 183.

[16] Cf. St. Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 65.

[17] *2 Cor* 2:15

[18] *Mt* 24:40-41

[19] St. Josemaría, *Letter* 15 October 1948, no. 18, cited by Ernst Burkhardt and Javier Lopez, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de san Josemaría*, Madrid 2013, vol. III, p. 193-4.

[20] Cf. *Mk* 5:13

[21] Athanasian Creed

[22] Bishop Javier Echevarría, Pastoral Letter, 4 July 2002, no. 13.

[23] St. Josemaría, Notes taken in a get-together, 2 November 1964; cited by Ernst Burkhardt and Javier Lopez, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de san Josemaría*, Madrid 2013, vol. III, p. 197.

[24] *Roman Missal* , conclusion of the Eucharistic Prayer

[25] *Christ is Passing By* , no. 48

[26] *Conversations* , no. 109

[27] *1 Cor* 13:2

[28] *Christ is Passing By* , no. 60

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