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Combat, Closeness, Mission (21): He Works With Me; The Transformative Power of Work

When we allow God's wisdom to remain and work with us, our efforts are not simply dedicated to Him: they become God's own work.

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“Send forth wisdom, O Lord, from your throne of glory to be with me in

my daily toil, that I may know what is pleasing to you.”^[1] At the beginning of Ordinary Time every year, the Church prays with these words, inspired by the Book of Wisdom (cf. Wis 9:10). Wisdom is “a taste for good,”^[2] the ability to recognise what truly matters, the one thing necessary and the better part (cf. Lk 10:42). More and more people are coming to value this intangible treasure. Disillusioned by imperatives of success and comfort, which have left them empty, they begin to look beyond. Sometimes this search leads them to the Christian faith; at other times it takes them to explore the ancient religious and philosophical traditions of the Far East, Greek schools such as Stoicism, or even New Age spiritualities.

“Send forth wisdom, from your throne of glory”: with these words, the Church goes to the heart of human longings and proclaims God

as the sole source of true wisdom. For a believer, there is nothing unusual about such a prayer. But what does it mean that this wisdom from on high should “be with me in my daily toil”? In several of the traditions just mentioned, everyday work is seen as an *obstacle* in the search for wisdom and for a fulfilled life. In the Bible, by contrast, wisdom — God’s plan of salvation for his people, gradually revealed in the Law and the Prophets — makes its way through people’s lives and work. First expressed in the work of creation, it reaches its summit in the Incarnation of the Word; in the words, gestures and work of Jesus of Nazareth.

“A supernatural motive”

In his preaching, St Josemaría frequently repeated the fact that Jesus’ salvation, the definitive revelation of wisdom, includes not

only his teaching, his miracles and his sacrifice on the Cross, but also his daily work in Nazareth. “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.”^[3] —

Through Jesus’ work in Nazareth, all the activities directed towards meeting the various needs of human life have been incorporated into God’s plan.

“We cannot say that there is any noble human reality that does not have a supernatural dimension, for the divine Word has taken on a complete human nature and consecrated the world with his presence and with the work of his hands.”^[4] — Everything we do thus takes on a new meaning: the wisdom that “is with me in my daily toil” is

Jesus Himself, who associates my work with his own. My work can then become an expression of this divine wisdom, and this is what it means to “sanctify” it: to make it something that belongs to God, an extension of God’s abiding blessing upon the world (cf. Gen 1).

This horizon, beautiful as it undoubtedly is, may be difficult to see, or it may become clouded. Many people find themselves simply exhausted or crushed under the weight of their profession, or “burnt out” after years of intense work. Others suffer from an unsuccessful search for employment or are rebuilding their lives after a major professional failure. And some bear with difficulty the “forced inactivity”^[5] brought about by age or illness. Yet for all people, in every situation, what St Josemaría wrote in *The Way* can be applied: “Add a supernatural motive to your

ordinary work and you will have sanctified it.”^[6] The sentence may seem simple, but it contains a vision of the world that remains both new and striking. My work, my effort to look for work, and my struggle to serve others despite my physical limitations all have a place in the plan of God’s wisdom. My “ordinary work,” the very thing I would probably be doing on my own if I had no faith, becomes holy and mysteriously fruitful. Indeed, my work already “belongs” to God before I offer it, because its very nature makes it capable of becoming holy, if only I have the right disposition in my heart.

Our “supernatural motive” can be seen in the quality and the warmth of the work: “An essential part of this work — the sanctification of ordinary work — which God has entrusted to us, is to do the work itself well, with human perfection

and the faithful fulfilment of all professional and social obligations.”^[7] Let us take a moment to ponder these words. The “perfection” of work, St Josemaría tells us, is measured in terms of “professional and social obligations.” This brings us to the very heart of the holiness of work and its distinctive way of belonging to God.

When work takes on a face

All types of work are understood within the context of relationships: they are services owed to particular people or communities; the worker has undertaken to meet someone else’s need. Hence the word “profession,” from the Latin *professio*, a public declaration of a commitment. The network of exchanges that arises in this way make work a genuinely human task. Despite the apparent depersonalisation of many forms of

work in the twenty-first century, these relationships still exist quietly in the background: the cleaner who undertakes to provide a pleasant environment for the rest of the staff; the aeronautical engineer who feels responsible for the lives of the passengers; the architect who designs spaces thinking of the lives of the people who will inhabit them; the warehouse worker who strives to ensure the timely, undamaged delivery of goods; the heritage conservator who preserves cultural assets for future generations...

For someone who seeks to sanctify their work — in other words, to place it within God's plans — these relationships come to the fore: work becomes personal; it takes on a face. And it is precisely within this network of human relationships that the “supernatural motive” which sanctifies work is to be found: “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 transcend 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 toward love."^[8]

In other words, the "supernatural motive" is none other than love of God and of others. In these lines, as on other occasions, St Josemaría capitalizes the word, because Love, the source of all other loves, is God. It is the love that dwells within me when I allow myself to be loved by God, when I open my eyes to his personal presence beside me, when I learn to speak to Him as a friend,

face to face. This is the love that “opens heaven’s gates” and gradually turns our own reality into heaven, since we are with the One who loves us infinitely, receiving that love and returning it with grateful joy. In this way, we transcend “what is fleeting and ephemeral,” reaching the goal sought by all who search for wisdom: to love and to bless, as God does. This love consists in saying “you” and “I” and meaning these pronouns in their fullest sense; breaking out of the prison of our selfishness and discovering the other, as if for the first time.

This is why St Josemaría says that “man ought not to limit himself to material production.” In our work, especially in today’s culture, we all face the temptation of limiting ourselves to carrying out a series of tasks or objectives; or measuring our success or failure in terms of material efficiency, with results that

can be pointed to and measured. In almost every working environment, the pressure of time constraints, competition, or unexpected changes make it more difficult to look behind the “things” that are our immediate concern and see the people behind them. Company staff, airline passengers, customers waiting for their purchases... all these people can easily be pushed into the background, overtaken by other demands.

In the face of this complexity, St Josemaría insists that the true value of work is measured by love. It is love that gives work its transformative power, as he says at the end of the paragraph: if it is God’s, it “is born of love” because only a heart that knows itself to be loved can conceive of work as a way of loving; it is a “manifestation of love” because it reflects God’s way of being; it is “directed toward love”

because it honestly aims to serve, help, and care for people and the world. This love is the reason why we always want to improve the quality of our work. It has nothing to do with anxiety over efficiency, perfectionism, or fear of failure: it is because we want to serve the people we love better.. We do things well, with care, because we are thinking of people. And if love is what moves us, even what may seem, humanly speaking, a failure can be, in God's eyes, a triumph. For, in the end, "God has not called me to be successful; He has called me to be faithful."^[9]

In a recent message, the Prelate explained what it means for the "motive" that enables our work to be sanctified to be truly supernatural: "It is not only a question of working for God, but at the same time and necessarily it is the *work of God*. He is the one who loves first and, through the Holy Spirit, makes our

love possible.”^[10] When we allow God’s wisdom to remain with us and to work with us, our efforts will not merely be dedicated to God and inspired by God: they will be God’s own work. Then we will truly be able to make Jesus’ words our own: “My Father is working still, and I also am working (...); the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing” (Jn 5:17, 19). When this happens, our work becomes a flashpoint for God’s love in history; a small but vital piece of his great plan of salvation. And this gives our ordinary, everyday work a transforming power, an evangelising potential that only God can calculate or foresee: we contribute in a real way to the salvation of the world.

^[1] *Liturgy of the Hours*, Thursday of the 3rd Sunday of Ordinary Time,

Office of readings. This is the Latin text: “Emitte, Domine, sapientiam de sede magnitudinis tuae, ut mecum sit et mecum laboret. Ut sciam quid acceptum sit apud te.”

[2] St. Bernard, *Sermon* 85, 5.

[3] St. Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 47.

[4] *Christ is Passing By*, no. 120.

[5] St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 294.

[6] *The Way*, no. 359.

[7] St. Josemaría, *Letter* 24, no. 18.

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

[9] Cf. L. Maasburg, *La Madre Teresa de Calcuta. Un retrato personal*, Madrid, Palabra 2012, pg. 208.

[10] F. Ocáriz, Message, 10-X-2024.

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