opusdei.org

Path to the Centenary (4): Role of Human Work in God's Plan for the World

This article, the fourth in the series, presents St. Josemaría's vision of work as a participation in God's creative work, in continuity with the biblical tradition and the Church's magisterium. Human work is seen as an active cooperation in perfecting the created world.

06/01/2025

Pdf: Role of Human Work in God's Plan for the World

From the middle of the 19th century on, the topic of work and its purpose became more relevant for theological reflection. This is the epoch of the industrial revolution that brought with it great social and cultural changes. Tensions heightened between social classes. Family and community life experienced new forms of organization. With the publication of Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum novarum* (1891), the first in a long tradition of social encyclicals, the Social Doctrine of the Church gradually developed. In the first decades of the twentieth century, a theology of the role of the created world began to develop more fully, which would soon enter into

relationship with an incipient theology of the laity. Not long afterwards, before and around the Second Vatican Council, new forms of pastoral action came about, destined to spread the Gospel in the new situations in society and work.

The question of the value of work and the role of human activities in building up the Kingdom of God was an important part of the Council's discussion, reflected in new developments in the constitution *Gaudium et spes*, especially in numbers 33-39. The Council Fathers are not afraid to raise demanding questions:

"Through his labors and his native endowments man has ceaselessly striven to better his life. Today, however, especially with the help of science and technology, he has extended his mastery over nearly the whole of nature and continues to do

so . . . In the face of these immense efforts which already preoccupy the whole human race, men raise numerous questions among themselves. What is the meaning and value of all this activity? How should all these things be used? To the achievement of what goal are the strivings of individuals and societies heading?" (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 33).

In the middle of the twentieth century, several theological works appeared that addressed these same questions. In reflecting on the meaning of human work, several authors attempted to clarify how the light from Christ's paschal mystery can help to resolve the challenges being confronted in the social, technical and scientific progress taking place. Where should Christian hope be placed: in the building up of the Kingdom of Christ already present in history, in its future fulfillment at the end of time, or

somewhere in between? Where is the focus of the light that orients the meaning of human activities: in the mystery of the Incarnation or in its eschatological tension towards the heavenly Jerusalem?

Many theologians contributed their own reflections to this debate. Among them were Gustave Thils, in *Theology of Earthly Realities* (1946); Marie-Dominique Chenu, in *Towards a Theology of Work* (1955); Alfons Auer, in *Open to the World* (1966); Johann Baptist Metz, in *Theology of the World* (1968); and Juan Alfaro, in *Towards a Theology of Human Progress (*1969). All agree in emphasizing that human activity in the world has a spiritual dimension and that men and women, created in God's image and likeness, cooperate actively and freely in his plan for creation.

In the philosophical and poetic works of Karol Wojtyla, and later in the pontifical magisterium of St. John Paul II, human work holds a central place. As a professor of ethics in Lublin, Wojtyla stressed the importance of work for the human subject, that is, its contribution to the dignity of the human person and to the formation of each one's identity. In his poetic writings, Wojtyla showed how the fatigue inherent in work can be overcome through generosity and affection for those who benefit from it, thus revealing a commitment to love. Therefore the greatness of human work resides not in the final material product, but in the subject who carries it out. The mystery of the Incarnate Word underlies both the dignity of the person who works and the dignity of the material that work transforms. Many elements in Karol Wojtyla's "theology of work" would later converge in his encyclical *Laborem*

exercens (1981), the most extensive and deepest magisterial document to date on the human and Christian meaning of work.

Over the course of time, the Church's magisterium has accompanied and continues to try to shed light on questions arising from social and technical progress, since human society and work are evolving rapidly. Mankind's extraordinary progress, both in knowledge of the created world and the capacity to transform it, is also giving rise to new challenges that require moral guidance.

A dignity anchored in Scripture

A number of authors have discussed St. Josemaría's teachings on work, placing them in the context of the theological and social framework of his time.[1] His writings did not enter into debate with the theology being advanced during his life, nor did

they try to develop the magisterium of the Second Vatican Council. But the founder of Opus Dei transmitted a specific vision of work that merits careful study. The foundational light he received from God led him to a renewed understanding of the biblical message on the role of human activity in the world and provided him with a new and deeper understanding of the meaning of the Incarnation.

The founder of Opus Dei often spoke about the presence of human work in Sacred Scripture (especially in the book of Genesis) in the context of the creation of man and woman, and in reference to the mandate received from God to cultivate and look after the earth (cf. *Friends of God*, no. 57; *Christ is Passing By*, no. 47). The world and material realities are good because they have come from God's hands, and human beings are called to act in accord with his plans (cf.

Christ is Passing By, no. 112; *Conversations*, no. 114). St. Josemaría also made frequent reference to the Wisdom books, especially passages that praise human virtues, work well done and the wise administration of the world received from God's hands.

In the New Testament, marked by the radical newness of the Incarnation of the Word, St. Josemaría often stressed that Jesus of Nazareth, true God and true man, in taking on human nature also took upon himself work, exercising the trade of *tekton* or a craftsman, which he learned in Joseph's workshop (cf. *Christ is Passing By*, no. 55). To explain the Christian meaning of work as a path to holiness in the middle of the world, he often pointed to the example of the first Christians. Following the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, the early Christians carried out a great variety of upright and sanctifiable activities,

transforming the society in which they lived with Christ's charity and making it more human (cf. *Conversations*, no. 24; *Furrow*, nos. 320, 490).

While the medieval period did not develop a "spirituality of work" as such, the modern world has tended to present man in opposition to God, exalting his reason and technical capacity as the foundations of a dignity and autonomy opposed to the Creator's authority. Neither of these historical periods, with a few exceptions, offered a theological or spiritual framework that emphasized the human person as cooperating with God's creative power, who through work participates in his plan for the world. Nevertheless, St. Josemaría was convinced that the new foundation God was asking him to bring about in the Church required the spread of this new vision of work; or rather, the

recovery of a perspective that the passing of the centuries had caused to fall into oblivion.

"Work is a participation in the work of creation; it is a bond of union with others and a means of contributing to the progress of all humanity. Work is a source of the resources needed to support one's own family, an opportunity for personal growth, and (it is important to say this very clearly) a way and a path to holiness, a sanctifiable and sanctifying reality" (*Letter* 14, no. 4).

The dignity of work is anchored in the mandate given by God to our first parents and, in the New Testament, in the work carried by the Word Incarnate in the daily life of the Holy Family in Nazareth. Re-emphasizing this perspective is an integral part of the mission St. Josemaría saw Opus Dei was being called to carry out:

“Our Lord gave rise to Opus Dei in 1928 to remind Christians that, as we read in the book of Genesis, God created man to work. We have come to call attention once again to the example of Jesus, who spent thirty years in Nazareth, working as a carpenter. In his hands, a professional occupation, similar to that carried out by millions of people all over the world, was turned into a divine task. It became a part of the Redemption, a path to salvation” (*Conversations*, no. 55).

Perfecting creation

Presenting human work as a *participation in God’s creative power* is possible when one realizes that creation possesses an intrinsic historical dimension, being created *in statu viae* (“in a state of journeying”), and therefore is destined to be *brought to completion* precisely through human work. A

point from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* illustrates this aspect clearly: “Creation has its own goodness and proper perfection, but it did not spring forth complete from the hands of the Creator. The universe was created ‘in a state of journeying’ (*in statu viae*) toward an ultimate perfection yet to be attained, to which God has destined it” (CCC, no. 302). The Second Vatican Council had clearly stressed this same perspective, developing it at various points in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes,* in order to make clear the value of human activities, their legitimate autonomy and their elevation, through charity, into Christ’s paschal mystery:

“Throughout the course of the centuries, men have labored to better the circumstances of their lives through a monumental amount of individual and collective effort. To

believers, this point is settled: considered in itself, this human activity accords with God's will . . . For while providing the substance of life for themselves and their families, men and women are performing their activities in a way which appropriately benefits society. They can justly consider that by their labor they are developing the Creator's work, looking to the advantage of their fellow men, and are contributing by their personal industry to the realization in history of the divine plan" (*Gaudium et spes,*no. 34).

By prolonging the work of the Creator, men and women, as creatures, do not share in the transcendence of God's creative act, but cooperate in its development over time. Their participation is part of the progress that creation has undergone and will continue to undergo in history. And they do so so

with creativity, a reflection of their being created in God's image and likeness.

Understood and seen as a *participation in God's creative power*, work ceases to be a mere extrinsic and transitory activity, limited to the satisfaction of material needs. Nor can it be reduced to a burden inexorably imposed on us, a source only of fatigue and stress. Although this conception is frequent, to adopt it implies adopting a theologically and anthropologically erroneous perspective:

"We must be convinced therefore that work is a magnificent reality, and that it has been imposed on us as an inexorable law which, one way or another, binds everyone, even though some may try to seek exemption from it. Make no mistake about it. Man's duty to work is not a consequence of original sin, nor is it

just a discovery of modern times. It is an indispensable means which God has entrusted to us here on this earth. It is meant to fill out our days and make us sharers in God's creative power. It enables us to earn our living and, at the same time, to reap 'the fruits of eternal life' (*Jn 2*: 36), for 'man is born to work as the birds are born to fly' (*Job* 5:7)" (*Friends of God*, no. 57).

Our Christian faith, therefore, invites us to change our attitude towards work. It would be reductionist to see it only as an unavoidable necessity that we would rather do without or as an obstacle to the fulfillment of our desires and our personality. On the contrary, biblical anthropology presents it as an intelligent contribution to the progress of creation, a creative mandate that God gave to the first human beings before Adam's sin:

“From the beginning of creation man has had to work. This is not something that I have invented. It is enough to turn to the opening pages of the Bible. There you can read that, before sin entered the world, and in its wake death, punishment and misery, God made Adam from the clay of the earth, and created for him and his descendants this beautiful world we live in, *ut operaretur et custodiret illum* (*Gen* 2:15), so that we might cultivate it and look after it” (*Friends of God*, no. 57).

Extending the work of creation through our own work, however, is not an automatic process. It is not a matter of mechanically inserting human activity into a divine creative act present throughout history. To share in God’s creative work through our own work, we need to be docile to the Holy Spirit, the creative Spirit, and strive to identify ourselves with Christ, in whom the world is

reconciled with God. To truly cooperate in the divine action, whether in the work of creation, redemption or sanctification, one needs to be in a state of grace, which ensures the real presence of God's love in the human person. In short, only by being men and women of prayer, and by *striving to transform work into prayer* (cf. *Furrow*, no. 497; *Friends of God*, nos. 64-67), does work become "the meeting point of our will with the saving will of our heavenly Father" (*Letter* 6, no. 13).

An endeavor of this magnitude is possible only if work *becomes part of the prayer life of the person who carries it out*, part of one's personal dialogue with God. Only in this way can the will of the one who works be identified with the will of God. One comes to understand where and how to exercise charity and the other Christian virtues. One receives light to examine one's conscience, to guide

one's activity towards the truth and the good, and to promote programs that foster the common good and the spread of Christ's Gospel.

Giving the world the "form of Christ"

By incorporating work into their personal prayer, Christians learn how to graft their activity into the divine work of creation and salvation. Following the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, they learn how to *transform* the world by giving it *the form of Christ*, and thus convert human work into *opus Dei*, work of God. This is the ultimate meaning of St. Josemaría's statement that work should be the "hinge" around which revolves the holiness and apostolate of those who become part of the new foundation that God, through him, was raising up in the Church (cf. *Letter* 31, nos. 10-11).

This central role of work is not merely circumstantial, since each one's virtues and apostolate ordinarily develop in the relationships and places linked to one's working life. Each person strives to order earthly realities to God precisely through what each one plans and carries out in his or her own work.

We are in a world still under construction, in an "open history." That is why we need to listen carefully to the Spirit in order to understand, in the changing situations of life, how to give human work the *forma Christi*. "As you carry out your work, whatever it may be, my children, examine yourselves to see, in God's presence, whether the spirit that inspires your work is in fact a Christian spirit, bearing in mind that changing historical circumstances (with the changes they introduce into the configuration of

society) can cause what was just and good at a given moment to cease to be so" (*Letter* 29, no. 18). Still on the way to the city of God, Christians are called, by their baptismal vocation, to build up the city of man (cf. *Friends of God*, no. 210). Therefore we need to give great value to all the dimensions that contribute to human progress: knowledge, technology, art, science (cf. *Furrow*, no. 293).

The positive vision of human progress and scientific research (the result of viewing work as a participation in God's plan for the world) does not overlook a legitimate concern for the ethical questions that scientific and technical progress can raise. But the Christian spirit leads to focusing attention above all on the growth of virtues in those who work, so that they can act responsibly in the search for truth and goodness. This implies achieving a mature synthesis between faith and reason,

ethics and technology, scientific progress and true human progress. This effort is inspired by a Christian optimism and a passionate love for a world which, created good by God, has been entrusted to the care of men and women to perfect it through their work (cf. *Conversations*, nos. 23, 116-117).

"The Lord wants his children, those of us who have received the gift of faith, to proclaim the original optimistic view of creation, the *love for the world* which is at the heart of Christianity. So there should always be enthusiasm in your professional work, and in your effort to build up the earthly city" (*The Forge*, no. 703).

As the father of a specific path in the Church and of a new foundation, St. Josemaría's view of the role of human work in God's plans is reflected not only in his abundant teachings on the spiritual and

theological meaning of work, but also in the numerous apostolic undertakings inspired by him and set up by his sons and daughters throughout the world.

Conveying a positive vision of the dignity of work, such as that bequeathed to us by the writings and preaching of the founder of Opus Dei, has important consequences for men and women today. In fact, work continues to be a field of tensions and challenges: it gives rise to conflicts in trying to reconcile one's profession and family life, as well as in finding the right balance between the time and effort put into one's work and the rest each one requires. These are questions that need to be confronted and resolved. Moreover, an ethical life based on justice becomes difficult in an environment of relationships often marked by selfishness, self-assertion and the excessive pursuit of profit.

All this enables us to understand why, in a history marked by human sin, cooperating in the task of bringing a world created *in statu viae* to its full perfection also implies reordering what is disordered, healing what sin has wounded. In short, it means participating in Christ's work of redemption (cf. *Christ is Passing By*, nos. 65, 183). This participation is in itself a gift from God and only becomes possible when, in one's own life, each one rejects sin and lives in grace, as a child of God guided by the Spirit.

The next article in this series will offer some reflections on the historical dimension of human activity, situating work at the intersection between creation and redemption.

This series is coordinated by Prof. Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti. Contributors

include professors at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross (Rome).

---

[1] Jose Luis Illanes, *La sanctificación del trabajo (*1980); "Trabajo" (2013), in *Diccionario de san Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*; *Ante Dios y en el mundo. Apuntes para una teología del trabajo (*1997); Pedro Rodríguez, *Vocación, trabajo, contemplación* (1986); Ernst Burkhart - Javier López, *Ordnary Life and Holiness in the Teaching of St. Josemaria*, vol. III, ch. 7 (2013); G. Faro, *Il lavoro nell'insegnamento del Beato Josemaría Escrivá* (2000); Antonio Aranda, "Identidad cristiana y configuración del mundo" (2002), in *La grandezza della vita quotidiana*, vol. 1.
