

Work At All Times

The beginning of one's working life and the end of it are two important stages in life that bring with them special challenges in striving to sanctify work.

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Saint Josemaría wrote that for us work is “a contagious, incurable and progressive disease.”^[1] A clear symptom of this disease is not knowing how to be doing nothing. The desire to give glory to God is the ultimate reason for our

industriousness, our eagerness to sanctify time, offering God every minute of every hour, every hour of every day... and every stage in life. “A hardworking person makes good use of time, for time is not only money, it is glory, God’s glory! He does as he ought and concentrates on what he is doing, not out of routine nor to while away the passing hours, but as the result of attentive and pondered reflection.”[2]

The sensible man gives thought to his steps,[3] says the Book of Proverbs. Giving thought to our steps in our professional work is part of this “attentive and pondered reflection” that Saint Josemaría speaks about, which leads us to reflect on the goal of our work, and to rectify our intention. A prudent person discerns in every situation the best way to reach the desired goal. And our goal

is God. When circumstances change we need to keep our heart attentive to perceive God's call in and through these changes and new situations.

Let us stop to consider two specific stages in our professional life: the first steps and the final ones.

Reflecting on these two specific time periods can help us grasp more clearly some aspects of the sanctification of work. Among others: being vigilant, with the fortitude of faith, to keep a right intention; the relative value of the material aspect of what we are doing; the fleetingness of successes and failures; the need to always have a youthful and sporting attitude, ready to begin anew, out of love for God and others, as often as needed.

Start of professional life

One of the essential marks of the spirit of Opus Dei is unity of life. To live in unity means to direct

everything to a single aim: to seek “only and in all things’ the glory of God.”[4] Those who devote the greater part of the day to professional work need to integrate this into the whole purpose of their life. The start of professional life is one of the most important moments in this learning process. It brings with it changes, new challenges and possibilities, and also difficulties it is wise to be aware of.

In some places, for example, young professionals are asked for an unrestricted dedication to their work schedule and commitments, as though work were the only dimension in their life. These practices, based on motivational techniques and incentives to work harder, also reflect a mentality that makes professional success an absolute good above any other dimension in a person’s existence. Through a variety of means the goal

is to foster an attitude in which commitment to one's company or working team is placed above any other concern. And it is precisely in people with a real love for their professional vocation, who want to carry out their work very well, that these practices can become entrenched. Therefore Saint Josemaria, a wise teacher on how to sanctify work, warned of the danger of putting work in first place. "You really do need to make an effort and put your shoulder to the task... Nevertheless, you should put your professional interests in their place: they are only means to an end; they can never be regarded—in any way—as if they were the first thing. How often 'professionalitis' makes union with God difficult!"[5]

The demand for this exclusive dedication is not usually the result of rigid rules, but rather of making it known that the esteem given to a

person and future possibilities depend upon this unconditional availability. Thus one is urged to work the maximum number of hours, including weekends and time usually spent resting with family or friends, even when no real need exists. These and other forms of achieving maximum availability are often accompanied by the incentive of liberal rewards or benefits: first-class hotels on business trips, gifts.... In contrast, any limitation on one's availability is seen as a dangerous departure from the "team mentality." The work team or company thus tries to absorb the whole of a person's energies. Any other external commitment must be subordinated to work. Saint Josemaria warned us against false excuses in this regard. "An impatient and disordered anxiousness to climb up the professional ladder can mask self-love under the appearances of 'serving souls.' It is a lie—and I really

mean that—when we seek to justify our actions by saying that we must not miss certain opportunities, certain favorable chances.”[6]

It is not difficult to imagine what effects such a mentality can give rise to in those who may lack a clear hierarchy of values, or the fortitude of faith needed to maintain legitimate professional aims within the order subordinating them to love for God. We can think, for example, of the difficulties encountered in family life when the father or mother have neither the time nor strength needed for their home life; or how they cut corners in their relationship with God when they lack control over their own situation at work.

Those who let themselves be “dragged along” by this pressure at work, or who lose their right intention seduced by human success (very different from the human and

professional prestige that becomes the “hook” for apostolic fishing) will never achieve a harmonious life. They will find it impossible to integrate their professional life within the order of charity, which includes attending to other spiritual, family and social duties.

The determined effort to give glory to God and the supernatural fortitude of grace enable us to harmonize the different facets in our life, clarifying priorities and bringing order to our work, with faith that God does not ask the impossible. An order that is not rigidity, but rather an order of love: doing what we ought to do at each moment and refusing to take on what we need to refuse. At times a bit of cunning is enough to know how to say no without directly confronting someone; at other times we will need to speak clearly, bearing friendly witness to a life consistent with our own convictions, a witness

backed up by the prestige of one who works like the best. In any case, we should never lose our peace, convinced that God permits difficulties for our own good and that of many other people.

For those who are God's children, their first concern is to please their Father, to seek and carry out his will, trying to live and work in his loving presence. This is the aim, what gives meaning to everything, what spurs us to work and to rest, to do this thing or another; what gives us strength, peace and joy. Everything else has a relative value. To Christianize any professional environment, human and supernatural maturity is required, along with a lot of human and professional prestige, which goes beyond mere productivity.

Those who are children of God have been freed by Christ on the Cross. We

can make this freedom our own or reject it. If we make it our own by our own response, we will live far from the slavery of worrying about the opinions of others, the tyranny of our passions, or pressures that try to bend our will to serve masters other than our Father God.

Those who truly decide to work for love of God will learn to evaluate, in light of God's will, the importance of the various demands life brings. They will be able to harmonize a demanding professional work with dedication to their family and friends, with the time and energy required by each task.

Frequently they will need a good dose of fortitude, and the interior freedom to say no to demands on their time (perhaps good in themselves) that could separate their heart from God. There are no fixed rules for this. Prudent action in a

matter of such importance calls for a clear awareness of the goal—a solid interior life, a firm desire to give glory to God—along with a humble and vigilant attitude, open to receiving advice.

The result will be to keep firm control of one's life, without letting professional work, while certainly an important aspect, come to occupy a place that belongs only to God. Only He is worthy of giving direction to all that we do, including our work. In the first years of professional life, new situations and relationships usually arise, new challenges to find ways to stay close to God throughout the day. One has to be careful not to give way to a desire for self-affirmation, to proving one's worth, and other such temptations, while constantly rectifying one's intention, curbing with a sporting spirit the vain pretension of success at any price.

The end of one stage, the beginning of another

Another stage in life that brings with it specific demands is old age, when the lessening of physical energy impedes working at a profession with the same intensity as before. Or when, while still having the strength to continue working with the same effort, retirement comes, perhaps obligatory. These sudden changes require adapting to many practical aspects, and above all a youthful spirit, ready to undertake a new stage in life.

Then is a good time to once again reflect on the significance of sanctifying our work and the ordinary activities of daily life, when personal limitations can come more clearly to the fore. At times it will require recovering a childlike spirit —with the simplicity of accepting calmly and joyfully the loss of a

professional position that possibly made one feel important, with people who were dependent on that work.

The temptation can come then to feel that one is useless, renouncing out of fear of failure or lack of confidence in one's own capacities the taking on and bringing forward of new activities with a bold spirit. And nevertheless, this new phase in life is a splendid opportunity to find new ways to be useful to God and to our neighbor, with a renewed spirit of service, more serene and upright, in so many small or larger initiatives.

The possibilities are endless. For some it will involve keeping up with part of one's previous professional activity, preparing people who can continue the work that one is leaving. In other cases, one's abilities will be directed to other activities, perhaps a social or charitable work:

care for sick people, supporting educational or formational initiatives... It could also mean assisting family, cultural or environmental associations; or consumer interest or media "watchdog" groups, or getting involved in political activity. These are all areas that can have a decisive influence on public opinion, and that need people with experience and the possibility of devoting time to them

Naturally, for anyone with children and grandchildren, a big part of their time can be dedicated to assisting the families begun by their own children. For young families, the grandparents' help is very valuable. Their generous and cheerful availability will often be a strong support and example for the way to raise their own children.

The apostolic possibilities of seniors are quite broad. It is important to

confront this new stage in life in an intelligent and active way. The passage from a professional activity that absorbed much of one's time to a situation with greater freedom in scheduling the use of time should leave no room for comfort-seeking. From cultivating hobbies to dedicating time to social initiatives, everything can be imbued with a strong apostolic content. The opportunities for making contact with other people can often be greater than before, and the wisdom and experience accumulated in life should be put at the service of others, also in so far as possible in the apostolic work with youth. Likewise the apostolate of public opinion offers many opportunities for anyone with the proper preparation, contributing to small or large newspapers, radio or television programs. Some may be able to write books, or initiate a series of lectures, or any other means to make the

teachings of the Church more clearly heard in society.

One needs to confront these years with the spirit of the “perennial youth” of a Christian and with the holy daring that should accompany it. “While the human spirit has some part in the process of bodily aging, in some way it remains ever young if it is constantly turned towards eternity.”^[7] Saint Josemaria, in the latter years of his life, when his physical strength was diminishing, continued to initiate daring projects such as the shrine of Torreciudad. The example of John Paul II was also quite striking, who continued giving vigorous impetus to many daring initiatives despite the great physical restrictions he suffered from.

We could apply to John Paul II these words of his that invite us to greatly esteem this last stage in life “We are all familiar with examples of elderly

people who remain amazingly youthful and vigorous in spirit. Those coming into contact with them find their words an inspiration and their example a source of comfort. May society use to their full potential those elderly people who in some parts of the world—I think especially of Africa—are rightly esteemed as 'living encyclopaedias' of wisdom, guardians of an inestimable treasure of human and spiritual experiences. While they tend to need physical assistance, it is equally true that in their old age the elderly are able to offer guidance and support to young people as they face the future and prepare to set out along life's paths.

"While speaking of older people, I would also say a word to the young, to invite them to remain close to the elderly. Dear young people, I urge you to do this with great love and generosity. Older people can give you much more than you can imagine.

The Book of Sirach offers this advice: *Do not disregard what older people say, because they too have learnt from their parents* (8:9); *Attend the meetings with older people. Is there one who is wise? Spend time with him* (6:34); *for wisdom is becoming to the elderly* (25:5)."[8]

[1] Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, 15 October 1948, no. 14.

[2] Saint Josemaria, *Friends of God*, no. 81.

[3] *Prov 14:15.*

[4] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 921.

[5] Saint Josemaria, *Furrow*, no. 502.

[6] *Ibid.* no. 701.

[7] John Paul II, *Letter to the Elderly*,
1 October 1999, no. 12.

[8] *Ibid.*

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