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Path to the Centenary (7): Work and Daily Activities Assumed by Christ

The hidden life of Jesus in Nazareth reveals that our ordinary work and daily activities have a deep divine value. They can be a path for close union with God and responding to his call to holiness, by striving to imitate our Lord's entire life.

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Any theology of work should start with a simple yet very significant historical fact: Jesus of Nazareth, the Word made flesh, worked. Just as the theme of human work has not always been present in theological reflection throughout the centuries, neither has the work of the Son of God on earth, generally speaking, occupied a central place in the various spiritualities encouraged in Christian preaching.

Jesus' direct and explicit teachings during his public life – through his parables, discourses, miracles, example – have received much more attention than the years of his ordinary life. Of these thirty years or so, we can assume at least fifteen were dedicated to manual labor. In catechesis, artistic representations, theological works, and patristic and spiritual commentaries, the three years of his public life — culminating in the Paschal Mystery of his death

and resurrection – have understandably received more emphasis than the rest of his life.

Therefore the Church's tradition has often referred to the many years in Nazareth as his "hidden life" – hidden because it was spent away from the limelight, immersed in daily life, similar to that of so many other young men in his town and surroundings. The Gospel testimony is clear on this point: "many who heard him were astonished, saying, 'Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him? What mighty works are wrought by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?' And they took offense at him" (*Mk 6:2-3*).

The Greek term *tékton* that is used in the Gospels to describe the work of Jesus, who is called "the craftsman"

or “the carpenter’s son” (cf. *Mk* 6:3; *Mt* 13:55), encompassed a range of specific manual skills. Translated in the Latin Vulgate as *faber*, it evoked the work of a blacksmith or carpenter, the craft of one skilled at shaping iron and wood. In reality, the term has the broader meaning of an artisan who works with various materials and also includes the activity of the sculptor. It comes from the same root as the English term “technique,” so central to contemporary life.

In his *Dialogue with Trypho*, St. Justin Martyr remarks that “while he was among us on earth, Jesus crafted plowshares and yokes, symbols of peace and justice and of the need for a life of labor” (LXXXVIII, 8).

Undoubtedly, this was paid work, as the living conditions of Joseph and Mary required, and as was the common practice of those who, without wealth or property, earned

their bread by the work of their hands. This is what Jesus did: first as a young man and apprentice in Joseph's workshop, and later as an adult, called to support himself and his family.

Although these were years of hidden life, this doesn't mean that the impact of his work was limited to their home in Nazareth. It is reasonable to assume that his work as an artisan contributed to improving the living conditions of the family's neighbors, by repairing their tools or making useful objects for their homes: furniture, utensils, and other daily-use items. Thus Jesus' hours spent in the workshop had a deep dimension of service, which later, when he began his public ministry, would manifest itself in a different way.

After his years working as a carpenter, during the brief time he

traveled the roads of Galilee and Judea as an itinerant rabbi, Jesus taught, preached, and healed, working as a teacher and physician. “He went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people” (*Mt* 4:23). It is significant that these three verbs (teach, preach, and heal) are the words used most frequently in the Gospels to refer to his activity. Some commentaries handed down by tradition vividly portray Jesus working as a physician. The work of teaching and healing entails, in the Son of Mary, the usual marks of human work. Jesus led an intense life; he experienced weariness, needed sleep, and felt thirst and hunger (cf. *Mt* 14:13-14; *Mk* 1:32-35; 3:20; 4:38; 6:31; *Jn* 4:6).

A “discovery” to announce to the world

Since the Word made flesh took on a perfect and complete human nature (cf. Leo the Great, *Letter to Flavian*, DZ no. 293), it should come as no surprise that every Christian path, whose goal is identification with Christ and the reproduction of his life in the lives of his disciples, must encounter, at some level, the human experience of work. It could not be otherwise. Work is part of the original vocation of every human being, and the perfect humanity of the Incarnate Word necessarily includes this dimension as well.

But at least throughout the second millennium of the Christian era, the proposal of a *sequela Christi* (following of Christ) centered on this specific aspect of his life – his work – has been relatively infrequent. Therefore it is of considerable interest in the recent history of the Church that in 1928 Saint Josemaría felt called by God to begin a

foundation whose members would take their example from Jesus' life of work, stressing especially the importance of imitating the activity he carried out during his ordinary 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. Our Lord wants many people to ratify their vocation during years of quiet, unspectacular living . . . I dream – and the dream has come true – of multitudes of God's children, sanctifying themselves as ordinary citizens, sharing the ambitions and endeavors of their colleagues and friends. I want to shout to them about this divine truth: if you are there in the middle of ordinary life, it doesn't mean Christ has forgotten about you

or hasn't called you. He has invited you to stay among the activities and concerns of the world. He wants you to know that your human vocation, your profession, your talents, are not omitted from his divine plans. He has sanctified them and made them a most acceptable offering to his Father” (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 20).

Two consequences related to this intuition will often be stressed in Saint Josemaría's preaching.

First, ordinary life (precisely because it has been assumed by Christ) not only becomes sanctifiable, but can sanctify those who are engaged in it. It is a place for encountering God, for prayer and service to other men and women, for the practice of virtue; in short, a place for holiness. It is not a secondary or insignificant condition of life, proper to those who have not received a “special” vocation. Ordinary life, the founder of Opus

Dei insists, is the place where everyone can hear God's call to holiness, since this was the life lived by the Son of God on earth. Since everything human, except sin, has been assumed by the Word made flesh, all earthly realities, ennobled by human work, can configure us to Christ.

Secondly, the great variety of circumstances in which ordinary life and daily work take place give this call a truly universal dimension: they make it accessible to the vast majority of men and women of all times.

In Saint Josemaría's early writings, all of this takes on the tone of a "discovery" he eagerly wants to share: a new light stemming from his spiritual experience on October 2, 1928 (cf. *Letter 3*, no. 92; *Letter 16*, no. 3). What the Gospel seemed to have left silent unexpectedly finds its

voice again: the silence of Jesus' ordinary life becomes as eloquent as his public proclamation of the Kingdom.

“Our Lord’s whole life fills me with love for him, but I have a special weakness for his thirty hidden years spent in Bethlehem, Egypt and Nazareth. That period, so long in comparison with his public life and which the Gospels hardly mention, might seem empty of any special meaning to a person who views it superficially. And yet, I have always maintained that this silence about our Lord’s early life speaks eloquently for itself, and contains a wonderful lesson for us Christians. They were years of intense work and prayer, years during which Jesus led an ordinary life, a life like ours, we might say, which was both divine and human at the same time. In his simple workshop, unnoticed, he did everything to perfection, just as he

was later to do before the multitudes” (*Friends of God*, no. 56).

The presence of work at the heart of Opus Dei’s mission in the Church thus responds to a deeply Christological reality. Ultimately, union with Christ attained through work is what enables it to become the axis around which revolve both the virtues that lead to holiness and the apostolic and evangelizing action that directs all human activities towards God (cf. *Letter* 31, no. 10).

For Saint Josemaría, sanctifying work and being identified with Christ are two mutually complementary realities, parts of the same message that he knows he is called to spread (cf. *Letter* 14, no. 12). We can make use here of Saint Augustine’s image of the great variety of flowers that contribute to the beauty of the Church’s one garden (cf. *Discourse* CCCIV, 3,2). While other paths to

holiness have highlighted different dimensions of imitating Christ throughout history, the vocation to Opus Dei is seen as a call to imitate his perfect humanity – particularly his life of work – through which one comes to recognize and adore his divinity.

“Those who want to live their faith integrally and do apostolate according to the spirit of Opus Dei, must sanctify themselves with their work, sanctify their work and sanctify others through their work. While working alongside their fellow men and women, from whom they are in no way different, they strive to identify themselves with Christ, imitating his thirty years of work in the workshop at Nazareth” (*Conversations*, no. 70).

The deepest reason why Christians love the world, and human work and activities is that God himself has

loved them and intended them for his Son. They have always been present in the divine plan for the world and history (cf. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 112).

Reconnecting with early Christianity

Upon closer examination of the message that Saint Josemaría knew he was called to spread, we realize that the “rediscovery” here is unlike anything that has occurred at other similar moments in the Church’s history. Throughout these two millennia, an aspect of Christian life that had to some extent been forgotten has often been brought back to light. For example, Saint Francis of Assisi reminded Christians of the importance of evangelical poverty and detachment, at a time when many members of the Church seemed to have forgotten it. Saint Charles Borromeo exhorted priests to

a life of total self-giving to their ministry, after a period marked by the moral laxity of the Renaissance. And Saint Teresa of Calcutta, in an age dominated by individualism, showed all Christians that mercy and care for one's neighbor knows no limits of religion, language or race, since Christ's tenderness also embraces non-believers, without demanding anything in return. Key features of Christian life that were once understood and lived by all, are recovered thanks to the powerful preaching and example of these saints.

In Saint Josemaría's case, the invitation to seek union with God through ordinary life and daily work – precisely because it was the life lived by the Incarnate Word – follows a different trajectory. What he began encouraging in the 1930s was not so much a recovery of a specific aspect of Christian life, but rather a genuine

shift in perspective that affected how it was understood and the way it was explained.

He taught people that the vocation to holiness and full union with God can be received and carried out by remaining in the world, following Jesus in one's ordinary life and work. This proposal was not a matter of "rescuing" a temporarily forgotten dimension, but rather of "reconnecting" with the life of early Christianity. In those early years of the Church, those who proclaimed the Gospel and bore witness to it through the holiness of their ordinary lives were, generally, ordinary Christians living among their fellow citizens: lay people, men and women without specific offices or ministries in the ecclesial community. All of them strove to reproduce the life of Jesus in their own lives: in their family, at work, in the exercise of their citizenship, both

in the countryside and in the city, in the varied circumstances that shaped the existence of the baptized faithful of the first centuries of the Christian era (cf. *1 Pet* 2:11-17).

We see in the writings of Saint Josemaría how references to the lives of the first Christians closely accompany his initial explanations of the characteristics that the new foundation should have (cf. *The Way*, nos. 925, 971; *Letter* 6, no. 36). And later on, in 1967, in an interview with *Time* magazine, he expressed it in this way:

“If you want a point of comparison, the easiest way to understand Opus Dei is to consider the life of the early Christians. They lived their Christian vocation seriously, seeking earnestly the holiness to which they had been called by their Baptism. Externally they did nothing to distinguish themselves from their fellow

citizens. The members of Opus Dei are ordinary people. They work like everyone else and live in the midst of the world. They live like any other Christian citizen who wants to respond fully to the demands of their faith” (*Conversations*, no. 24).

The new perspective preached by the founder of Opus Dei – which he himself describes as being as old as the Gospel and like the Gospel new (cf. *Letter 24*, no. 1) – quickly reveals itself to be rich in implications for the spiritual life of believers in Christ. Daily work and ordinary life, precisely because they have been assumed by the Incarnate Word, possess a divine value without ceasing to be fully human. The more one is in the world, the more one can be in God. To be divine, one first needs to learn to be deeply human. Hence the invitation to discover the divine element hidden in the most ordinary circumstances of daily life.

Other contemporary authors of his time (or those who came shortly after him) had also reflected on the recovery of a theology of earthly realities and on the responsibility of the laity in the Church's mission. Some of them once again emphasized the sacredness of the created world and the divine value of material realities. But Saint Josemaría's pastoral concern and his deep love for Jesus' hidden life enabled him to see a specific path of spiritual life, a Christian lifestyle that needed to be preached and put into practice, a "program" for identifying oneself with Christ. His starting point was not to defend a theological position, but to fulfill a mission and securely establish a foundation, so that this mission would endure throughout time.

"The fact that Jesus grew up and lived just like us shows us that human existence and all the

ordinary activity of mankind have a divine meaning. No matter how much we may have reflected on all this, we should always be filled with wonder when we think of the thirty years of obscurity which made up the greater part of Jesus' life. He lived in obscurity, but, for us, that period is full of light. It illuminates our days and fills them with meaning, for we are ordinary Christians who lead an ordinary life, just like millions of other people all over the world" (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 14).

What other authors identified as aspects of Christian theology that needed to be recovered or revalued, for Saint Josemaría were a true program for Christian life, embodied in the men and women who followed his teachings. And thus he offered clear guidance for the Church's path in the contemporary world, anticipating in part some of the

Second Vatican Council's conclusions. The founder of Opus Dei is convinced that the mystery of the Incarnation has definitively elevated the dignity of human work and earthly realities, making it possible for countless people to discover God where they had not previously sought Him.

“We are ordinary Christians. We work at the most varied professions. All our activity takes place amid everyday circumstances. Everything follows a customary rhythm in our lives. The days seem the same, even monotonous. But don't forget that our condition which is apparently so common has a divine value. God is interested in everything we do, because Christ wants to become incarnate in our daily activities, to vivify from within even our most insignificant actions . . . Christ is interested in the work we do — whether once or thousands of times — in the office, in the factory, in the

shop, in the classroom, in the fields, in the exercise of any manual or intellectual occupation” (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 174).

The Greek Fathers of the Church used the concept of “divinization” to express the believer’s participation, through grace, in the very life of God. This concept is also found in Saint Josemaría’s writings, where it is no longer limited to the soul, but also extends to a Christian’s deeds and entire life. What the Greek Fathers’ pneumatological perspective emphasize in the realm of the life of grace and the action of the Spirit, Saint Josemaría’s Christocentric vision extends to human work and all that results from it and is achieved through it: “You should never forget that any worthy, noble and honest work at the human level can — and should! — be raised to the supernatural level, becoming a divine task” (*The Forge*, no. 687).

The impulse animating the founder of Opus Dei was not merely the legitimate desire to revalue, in the history of the Church and in theological reflection, essential elements of the Christian message that were in danger of being neglected, nor simply the zeal to reaffirm the profound implications of the mystery of the Incarnation so that they might once again illuminate the lives of Christians. He realized he was the bearer of a mission: to heed the promptings of the Holy Spirit in order to enlighten the lives of countless men and women, announcing to them that “the divine paths of the world have been opened up” (cf. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 21; *Friends of God*, no. 314). This is Opus Dei’s mission, which kindled in the soul of its founder the flame of constant prayer.

“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 Saint 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” (*Friends of God*, no. 72).

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