

Work and Rest

God wants us to work hard to help build up his creation, but also to rest. We offer an article that draws on the teachings of John Paul II and St. Josemaria on this topic.

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"Man ought to imitate God both in working and also in resting, since God himself wished to present his own creative activity under the form of work and rest."^[1]

These words of John Paul II refer to the Creation account, the first "gospel of work."^[2] The sacred author, after describing how over the course of six days God gave existence to the heavens, to the earth and all that was in it, concludes: *And on the seventh day God finished his work which he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all his work which he had done in creation.*^[3]

From then on men and women are called to perfect this divine work through their own work,^[4] not forgetting that they too are creatures, the fruit of God's love and called to a definitive union with him. Resting on the seventh day, hallowed by God, takes on a deep human significance. As well as a need, it is the appropriate time to acknowledge God as the author and Lord of all

creation, and an anticipation of the definitive rest and joy of the Resurrection.

A life that is lived under the constant pressure of work, without time to consider the source from which all things come and to which all things tend as their final goal, could lead people "to forget that God is the Creator upon whom everything depends"[5] and to whom everything is directed.

Doing everything for the glory of God, unity of life, means living with a solid foundation and a supernatural meaning and goal. It means resting on our divine filiation as we work and converting our rest into a service to God and others.

"In the Work, everything is a means of holiness: work and rest; life of piety and the joys of living together; happiness and pain. In a word, every moment in our life contains a

possibility for sanctification: in all things we ought to love and fulfil God's will."^[6]

Place of work and rest

Work is a gift of God and creation itself is already a call.^[7] The fact that God calls a free creature into existence out of love implies a vocation that asks for a reply.

Work is the place of encounter between God's creative freedom and human freedom, the place for our response, and therefore for prayer and contemplation, expressed in deeds. When a person sees God's hand in all created realities, especially in others and in himself, he strives to do everything with the perfection willed by God, seeking in this way his own fulfillment.

The divine invitation to work comes from the heart of a Father who wishes to count on the cooperation of

his children. Our response has to be a humble and child-like response, undertaken out of love, not an autonomous initiative that seeks our own glory.

St. Josemaria used a graphic image that can be applied to our work. A little boy goes to help a group of fishermen as they haul in a net. He grabbed hold of the net "with his tiny hands and began to tug away with evident clumsiness. The tough, unsophisticated fishermen must have felt their hearts soften, for they allowed the child to join in, without chasing him away, even though he was more of a hindrance than a help."^[8]

God knows his creatures well. While inviting us to collaborate with him, he knows that our nature is fragile and vulnerable. The divine calling to work includes the need to rest. As we see in the creation account, "the

alternation between work and rest, built into human nature, is willed by God himself."^[9]

This need is due in the first place to our physical limitations. If we were to overestimate our own strength, or misunderstand the true meaning of a spirit of sacrifice, we could cause damage to our own health that is not willed by God and that could end up limiting our ability to serve him.

There are times, certainly, when our Lord may ask us for more of an effort or place us in situations that require a heroic detachment even from our health in order to carry out his will. Don Álvaro, who rose from his sick bed with a very high fever to go looking for money when Villa Tevere was being built, is an example of this unconditional love.

At the same time, however, and for the same reason, in order to serve God, we need time to relax, as our

Father indicated on numerous occasions: "I think it is appropriate to remind you about the need for rest. If sickness comes, we receive it joyfully as coming from the hand of God. But we cannot provoke it by our own imprudence. We are human and we need to restore our strength." [10]

It would be a pity if, despite the opportunity to rest, our strength were to be undermined because we failed to make use of this opportunity. Knowing that we belong to God and not to ourselves, we have the responsibility to look after our health, in order to be able to give all the glory to God.

Rest is also a spiritual need, "something *sacred*, because it is man's way of withdrawing from the sometimes excessively demanding cycle of earthly tasks in order to renew his awareness that everything is the work of God." [11]

Time spent away from the demands of work, with its deadlines, goals, risks and uncertainties, facilitates the serenity required to get a broader perspective on life.

Discerning when to disconnect ourselves periodically from these demands can sometimes require an act of abandonment in our Lord. It also helps us to see our job in the right perspective, "convinced that the triumphs of the human race are a sign of God's greatness and the flowering of his own mysterious design."^[12]

We work out of fidelity, out of love, so that God can use our self-giving as he wishes, never attributing any results to ourselves: *So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.*^[13] Taking a break from our usual work helps us to value the disproportion between our personal

contribution and the fruits of holiness and apostolate it produces.

If we are objective, with the objectivity that comes from faith and from being close to our Lord, we will see that even the effort we put into our work is a gift of God, who sustains, guides and encourages us. Professional work, whether in the laboratory, factory, workshop, field or family home, is the hinge of our holiness and the framework for our existence. But it should never absorb other aspects of our life that are equally important.

"If after six days of work...people look for time to relax and to pay more attention to other aspects of their lives, this corresponds to an authentic need which is in full harmony with the vision of the Gospel message."^[14]

Time spent with family and friends, or to improve one's formation and

culture, or to talk more calmly with our Lord, are wonderful opportunities to seek holiness, where "daily concerns and tasks can find their proper perspective: the material things about which we worry give way to spiritual values; in a moment of encounter and less pressured exchange, we see the true face of the people with whom we live."^[15]

Leisure thus also responds to the need to be vigilant, to slow down sufficiently to correct our direction so as to place God at the center and discover him in those around us. Workshops, a walk with one's family, times of prayer, get-togethers, retreats, are all examples of activities which, in their own way, meet this need to be vigilant.

They also have the essential elements of meaningful rest: restoring bodily and spiritual strength through a

change of activity (because to rest does not mean to be idle), which helps us set aside daily concerns and put them in their proper place.

This is particularly important in spheres where excessive competitiveness motivated by the quest for success tends to absorb so much time and energy that it is hard to meet other obligations. God's way of working is the model for our own work. If God "rested and was refreshed" on the seventh day, we too should rest and ensure that those around us, especially those in need, "are refreshed."^[16]

"Sunday rest then becomes 'prophetic,' affirming not only the absolute primacy of God, but also the primacy and dignity of the person with respect to the demands of social and economic life, and anticipating in a certain sense the 'new heavens' and the 'new earth,' in which

liberation from slavery to needs will be final and complete. In short, the Lord's Day thus becomes in the truest sense *the day of man* as well."^[17]

Foretaste of the Resurrection

In Christ, with the fullness of Revelation, work and rest are ennobled, inserted into the plan of salvation. As a foretaste of the Resurrection, rest illuminates the weariness of work and reveals it as union with the Cross of Christ.

"'My Father is working still' (Jn 5:17)...He works with creative power by sustaining in existence the world that he called into being from nothing, and he works with salvific power in the hearts of those whom from the beginning he has destined for 'rest' (Heb 4:1.9-16) in union with himself in his 'Father's house' (Jn 14:2)."^[18]

Just as Christ's Cross and Resurrection are inseparably united, although one occurs after the other in time, so too should work and rest constitute a living unity in our own life. Therefore, above any temporal events or change of occupation as we take a break from our work, we rest *in our Lord*, we find repose *in our divine filiation.*

This new perspective places rest alongside work as a filial task, even though it does not rid work of the effort and tiredness it involves. But what is eliminated is the tiredness that stems from working out of pride and self affirmation, or solely for human motives. God doesn't want this kind of tiredness: *It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil.*
[19]

"Rest, my children, in your divine filiation. God is a Father, full of

tenderness and infinite love. Call him Father often, and tell him, when you are alone with him, that you love him, that you love him greatly, that you feel the pride and strength of being his children."^[20]

The *strength of being God's children* leads us to work with more sacrifice and abnegation, embracing the daily Cross with the strength of the Holy Spirit, so as to fulfill God's will faithfully. It enables us "to work without rest," because the tiredness produced by work becomes redemptive. It is worthwhile, then, expending all our energies in our work, not only for the material reward we can expect, but because we are bringing the world to Christ.

When we work with this goal, we experience the supernatural reward of peace and joy: *Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a little, I will set you over*

much. Enter into the joy of your master.[21] And our work yields apostolic fruit: Well done, good servant! Because you have been faithful in a very little, you shall have authority over ten cities.[22]

Therefore, work "cannot consist in the mere exercise of human strength in external action; it must leave room for man to prepare himself, by becoming more and more what in the will of God he ought to be, for the 'rest' that the Lord reserves for his servants and friends."*[23]*

In the account of the Transfiguration, we are told that *six days after announcing his passion and death, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John his brother, and led them up a high mountain apart. And he was transfigured before them.**[24]* St. Thomas, in commenting on this passage, relates the seventh day when God rested from his work of

creation to the seventh day (*six days after announcing...*) when our Lord revealed himself to his disciples to give them an anticipation of his glorious Resurrection, so that they would raise their sights and not settle for purely earthly goals.[25] The three disciples, overcome by the contemplation of the glory to which they have been called, express the joy of resting in the Lord and with the Lord: *Lord, it is well that we are here; if you wish, I will make three booths here,*[26] Peter exclaims, anticipating the joy and peace of heaven.

This moment would not yet last forever. Nevertheless, the light and peace of Tabor will be the source of strength to continue on the path that passes through the Cross and leads to the Resurrection. We too find rest in our filial abandonment, the peace and serenity of knowing that behind the tiredness, difficulties and

concerns that life here on earth brings, we have an eternal and all-powerful Father who upholds us.

Working with a vision of eternity prevents useless worries and sterile anxieties, and infuses every task with the desire to see the face of Christ definitively. Sanctifying rest, and especially Sunday, which is the paradigm of Christian rest and a celebration of our Lord's Resurrection, helps us to discover the sense of eternity and to renew our hope.

"Sunday symbolises that truly singular day which will follow the present time, the day without end which will know neither evening nor morning, the imperishable age which will never grow old; Sunday is the ceaseless foretelling of life without end which renews the hope of Christians and encourages them on their way." [27]

Sanctifying rest and relaxation

The first Christians lived their faith in a pagan and hedonistic environment. From the beginning, they realized that following Christ was incompatible with forms of rest or relaxation that corrupt and dehumanize people. St. Augustine, referring to this type of entertainment, said in a homily: "Refuse to go; assert control over the concupiscence of your heart and be strong and persevering." [28]

We shouldn't be surprised to see once again today, in "neo-pagan" environments around us, blatant expressions of this spiritual poverty. "Therefore, among the forms of culture and entertainment which society offers, the faithful should choose those which are most in keeping with a life lived in obedience to the precepts of the Gospel." [29]

It is not a question of shutting ourselves up in a hermetically sealed environment. Each of us, with initiative and daring, and with genuine love for souls, needs to strive to transmit the Christian meaning and joy of rest to the society around us. As Don Alvaro reminded us, each of us is called to strive to foster "a Christian tone in social life, in entertainment, in the way free time is spent."^[30]

Jesus, Mary and Joseph show us that family life can allow time for rest and celebration: *Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover.*^[31] The family, a spiritual space, is a school for learning how to rest while thinking of others. Therefore it is important to plan holidays well, to spend leisure time with one's children, in order to get to know them well and converse with them, and play with the younger ones.... We need to learn

how to make family life pleasant, and not fall back on the easy option of leaving the younger children in front of the television or surfing the Internet.

Today it is more important than ever to select interesting programs on television and watch them with the children, to teach them temperance in the use of the computer, so that they learn to use it above all as work tool and always with a specific goal in mind.

St. Luke's Gospel also shows us how the boy Jesus, moved by the Holy Spirit, took advantage of the Passover journey to Jerusalem to bring light to those around him: *and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.* [32]

The need to rest is not an interruption in our apostolic efforts. On the contrary, it opens new possibilities, new occasions to

deepen in our friendship and to get to know people and environments where we can bring the light of Christ. The Second Vatican Council encouraged all Christians to take on the challenging effort "to animate the cultural expressions and group activities characteristic of our times with a human and a Christian spirit."^[33]

The Church needs people with a *lay mentality* to help implement this aspect of the *new evangelisation*. "It is urgent that we strive to rechristianise popular celebrations and customs. It is urgent that public amusements should no longer be left to face the dilemma of being either 'soppy' or pagan. Ask God to provide laborers for this much-needed work, which could be called the 'entertainment apostolate'."^[34]

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Footnotes:

[1] John Paul II, Encyclical *Laborem exercens* (14 September 1981), 25

[2] Ibid.

[3] Gen 2:1-3

[4] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 307

[5] John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini* (31 May 1998), 65

[6] *Alone with God*, 29

[7] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2566

[8] *Friends of God*, 14

[9] John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini* (31 May 1998), 65

[10] St. Josemaria, *Letter* 15 October 1948, 14

[11] John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini* (31 May 1998), 65

[12] John Paul II, Encyclical *Laborem exercens* (14 September 1981), 25

[13] 1 Cor 3:7

[14] John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Dies Domini* (31 May 1998), 67

[15] Ibid.

[16] Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2172

[17] John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Dies Domini* (31 May 1998), 68

[18] John Paul II, Encyclical *Laborem exercens* (14 September 1981), 25

[19] Psalm 127 [126]:2

[20] *Alone with God*, 221

[21] Mt 25:21 and 23

[22] Lk. 19:17

[23] John Paul II, Encyclical *Laborem exercens* (14 September 1981), 25

[24] Mt 17:1-4

[25] Cf. St. Thomas, *In Matth. Ev.*, XXVII, 1

[26] Mt 17:4

[27] John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Dies Domini* (31 May 1998), 26

[28] St. Augustine, *Sermo 88*, 17

[29] John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Dies Domini* (31 May 1998), 68

[30] Don Alvaro del Portillo, *Family Letters (I)*, 386

[31] Lk 2:41

[32] Lk 2:47

[33] Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, 61

[34] *The Way*, 975

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