

## WORK AND HIDDEN LIFE

### *The Christian value of ordinary life*

*The fact that Jesus grew up and lived just like us shows us that human existence and all the ordinary activity of men have a divine meaning* writes St Josemaría Escrivá at the beginning of a Christmas homily. And immediately he adds: *No matter how much we may have reflected on all this, we should always be surprised when we think of the thirty years of obscurity which made up the greater part of Jesus' life among men. 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.*<sup>1</sup>

In life, both in that of individuals as well as in that of families and nations, there are striking events, which are extraordinary in one way or another. But the reality is that our existence is made up of a succession of days filled with commonplace events, very often similar to those of previous days. All these occurrences have a value before God. The previously cited words of St Josemaría highlight one of the central truths of Christianity, which finds a particular echo in the spirit of Opus Dei. God is not a distant being, who limits himself to creating the world and giving it laws. Rather, he is a God that is close by, *delighting in the sons of men.*<sup>2</sup> He is a God who loves his creatures individually and who loves them to the extreme by becoming man in Jesus Christ, participating in our own way of being, in little and in big things.

The light of faith shows, in sum, that all events and situations, which go to make up our existence, are in fact the many calls that God directs to man so that he may enter into a relationship with Him, open himself up to the fulfilment of the divine will, and be ready to serve others, with an attitude of trust in God and of self-giving. *God waits for us every day... Understand this well: there is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to each one of you to discover it.*<sup>3</sup>

The Christian, every Christian – including those who spend their lives in the middle of the world without any spectacular or extraordinary event – must live by this profound truth. In that ordinary and simple life, one can and ought:

a) to relate with God, to be conscious of being in his presence, to solicit his help, to respond personally to divine love even in what might appear irrelevant. And this, because God is interested in everything that is ours. *Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?* Jesus once asked his disciples. And he answered: *And yet not one falls to the ground without your Father knowing. Why, every hair on your head has been counted. So there is no need to be afraid; you are worth more than hundreds of sparrows;*<sup>4</sup>

b) to contribute through the fulfilment of one's own occupation and tasks, to the progress of the human society and to the realization of the great divine plan of salvation. All this, in the measure that those tasks, carried out with love, in fulfilment of the divine will and embracing with docility the inspirations of the Holy Spirit, are united to the offering that Christ made of his own life and consequently participate in his effective redemption.

<sup>1</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is Passing by*, 14

<sup>2</sup> *Prov* 8:31

<sup>3</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 114

<sup>4</sup> *Mt* 10:29-31

c) to participate through the example of a coherent and ordinary life, and the testimony of a simple and opportune word, in the mission entrusted to the entire Church – that of spreading over the centuries the message of the Gospel until they attract the whole of humanity towards Christ and in Christ to the Father.

## 2. *Ordinary life and work*

Ordinary existence is made up of a wide diversity of realities and tasks: work, rest, games, culture, family life, social relations and friendship, economic activities and politics, health, sickness, sorrows, joys. These realities are present in different measure and in one form or another, in each person's life. Although, naturally, not all of them have the same importance. Among these, one that has very diverse manifestations, but which is always found in the life of every man and woman, can be highlighted: work.

Along with family, this is one of those realities that the biblical narrative on the creation of the human being makes reference to. *God blessed them, saying to them, 'Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all living animals on the earth.'*<sup>5</sup> Human history makes manifest the constant presence of work and its development through the progressive usage of a wide variety of instruments that have facilitated man's dominion over nature. A particularly decisive aspect of that development is the introduction of what is usually termed 'division of labour'. This refers to the orientation of human beings towards activities that they specialize in, thus giving rise to better results. And, thanks to the subsequent exchange of goods, it contributes to the overall progress of society. This led to the appearance of professions and the qualification of work as 'professional work' – work to which one dedicates oneself in a stable manner and which defines, to a large degree, one's position in society.

St Josemaría has summed up, in a particularly concise text, the dimensions of human work, natural and religious and Christian. *Work, all work, bears witness to the dignity of man, to his dominion over creation. It is an opportunity to develop one's personality. It is a bond of union with others, the way to support one's family, a means of aiding in the improvement of the society in which we live and in the progress of all humanity. For a Christian these horizons extend and grow wider. For work is a participation in the creative work of God. [...] And, moreover, 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.*<sup>6</sup>

Breaking down the above paragraph analytically, we can indicate that work – and more specifically, work understood, not as the mere occupation of the hands, but as professional work – possesses:

- a dimension that is cosmic and dominating, inasmuch it is an expression of man's capacity to dominate nature, orientating it towards ends that he conceives with his intellect and, as such, placing it at his service;
- an anthropological dimension, since man acquires maturity and consciousness of himself, and consequently grows and develops as man, not only but more especially, through the serious, continuous and responsible fulfilment of his own tasks;
- a socio-family dimension, since work, in contributing goods, allows for the formation and subsequent sustenance of a family;
- a social and historic dimension, in that work – and more specifically its progressive division and development – is one of the fundamental factors that contributes to the structuring and progress of societies;
- a theological-creational dimension, since it presupposes that God has not wanted to give life to a completely finished and closed universe, but to count on human action and history as realities that contribute to the final plenitude;
- a soteriological dimension, given that work, united to the self-giving of Christ, contributes to

<sup>5</sup> Gen 1:28

<sup>6</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 47

the task of salvation. This, both in moments of personal satisfaction – and of the joy, which can be lived in communion with God – as well as in moments of effort, failure or tiredness, which, united to the sacrifice of the Cross, acquire the value of salvation.

The link between these aspects is very well summed up in another text of St Josemaría referring to the Christian who sanctifies himself in the ordinary ambitions of all men: *Your human vocation is a part – and an important part – of your divine vocation.*<sup>7</sup> As such, work, which on earth occupies the days of all men, confirming their personality, and which is each person's particular way of being in the world, is not alien to God's plans.<sup>8</sup> The Christian vocation thus leads one to carry out work and all the daily occupations, out of love for God and with a spirit of service to others.<sup>9</sup>

In the encyclical *Laborem exercens* that St John Paul II dedicated to work, he analyses this human reality, distinguishing between what he calls: “work in the objective sense”, and “work in the subjective sense”. The former is work considered as an act that, in subjugating the earth and using the natural resources, is objectivized in realization, knowledge, methods and procedures while the latter deals with the development of man as a person in virtue of the act of working.<sup>10</sup>

Work acts on nature and as a consequence modifies the context in which the human being lives. But its objective impact does not end there, given that the desire to dominate the earth implies the growth of the sciences and the technology that makes this dominion and thus, the development of knowledge and of the intelligence. For this reason, work bears within itself a dynamism like a historical force. That reality led some authors – Karl Marx, among others – to see in work the decisive factor with regard to the humanization of history. However, since they started from materialistic presuppositions, a one-dimensional and deterministic interpretation was given to that process, forgetting that man, inasmuch as he is a spiritual being, is the one who makes work possible. This ensures that true social progress would not be automatic. Rather, it will depend on the adequate development of man as man, that is, as a spiritual being. Work, then, in its objective sense has to be at the service of work understood in its subjective sense, that is, of man as the source, subject and end of work.<sup>11</sup>

In other words, technology must be imbued with ethics, and ethics in turn has to be informed by spirituality. Hence St John Paul II could conclude his encyclical by indicating that the solution to social problems, linked in their historical evolution to the development of work, depends on man living a true spirituality of work.<sup>12</sup> That is to say that it depends on man, the subject of work, to be conscious of his spiritual dimensions and to put them into practice. And in the act of working, the consciousness of his personal dignity – of his condition as a creature made in the image of God – contributes to the whole ensemble of social life.

### **3. Sanctify work, sanctify oneself in work, sanctify with work**

St Josemaría summed up the programme of a spirituality of work in a synthetic phrase: *sanctify work, sanctify oneself in work, sanctify with work* – or, as he also said, in the same sense: *sanctify the profession, sanctify oneself in the profession and sanctify others with the profession.*<sup>13</sup>

#### **a) Sanctify oneself in work**

Every Christian is called to sanctity, that is, to the fullness of charity and of dealings with God. That call is a divine gift, an offer that God makes out of his own love. It is, at the same time, a demand, an invitation to the surrender of one's life in correspondence to the offering that God makes of Himself. That surrender to God, and the love from which it is born, cannot be confined to

<sup>7</sup> ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 46.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *Conversations*, 10 and 27.

<sup>10</sup> ST JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical, *Laborem exercens*, 5-6.

<sup>11</sup> On this same topic, though related to technology and economics, see also BENEDICT XVI, Enc. *Caritas in veritate*, 68-69.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. ST JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical, *Laborem exercens*, 26.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 46 and *Friends of God*, 9.

the ambit of human living and acting: it must be situated at its centre and from there radiate to one's entire existence. This, for each of the Christian faithful – called by God to sanctify oneself in the place that one occupies in the world – implies an invitation to imbue with that love the totality of earthly or secular realities and occupations one enjoys in life. Thus work acquires in this way a new horizon: it is no longer just a human task, but, additionally and inseparably, a part of the Christian vocation.

Occupations and secular tasks present themselves, in the light of faith and under the action of the Holy Spirit, as opportunities to express love with deeds, to make of one's own life a pleasant and acceptable offering to God<sup>14</sup> and, in this way, to enter into an intimate and personal relationship with Him. This is because prayer ought not to be reserved only for isolated moments or situations or special places. Rather, it should be a disposition of the soul and an effective dialogue that informs the whole of life, and is nourished as such by the incidents of ordinary life, by the effort that work demands, by the joys that it brings, and by the sorrows that accompany it on some occasions.

#### b) Sanctify with work

The mission conferred by Christ on the Church with regard to the salvation of the world implies a wide range of tasks: the preaching of the word that announces the saving will of God, the administration of the sacraments that communicate divine grace; the concrete instances of the practice of charity; the testimony of one's life, the coherent existence imbued with the Spirit of Christ. This manifests the capacity that spirit has to inspire every human situation: the Christian vigour to the world, imbuing temporal structures with a Christian spirit, in such a way that human society becomes a society worthy of man and of his condition as a child of God.

From this perspective, professional work is presented, as the hinge on which the apostolic vocation of a Christian revolves or the channel through which it is expressed. This applies, more specifically, to the lay faithful, to whom it belongs by a specific vocation to “seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God”.<sup>15</sup> Professional work is a task that, in virtue of its own dynamics, demands solidarity and service. In the Christian, charity is also required, a love that leads those human attitudes to their perfection or fulfilment. This thus involves the witness of an exemplary life. Since a man of faith must always be ready to give a reason for his love and hope,<sup>16</sup> this witness, by its very nature, aspires to extend itself in the word, which manifests and reveals the basis of one's actions. That is, one will seek to make Christ known and invite others to draw close to Him. This witness, as such, is prolonged in a true and personal apostolate – one that develops starting with the inter-personal relationships and the bonds of companionship and friendship that work gives rise to, as well as the multiple and varied incidents – some joyful, others difficult – that fill each working day.

#### c) Sanctify work

Personal sanctification and the apostolic action to which reference has just been made, are not merely articulated and developed starting from work or using the occasion of it. Rather – in a way that is very distinct because it excludes superficiality or instrumentalization – they are interwoven with work, forming one thing with it. To sanctify oneself in work and to sanctify others with work presupposes and implies sanctifying the work itself, making the work itself a profoundly human and Christian task.

In the first place, this requires technically well finished work, with full knowledge and respect for the laws proper to each activity. Consequently, not only effort and dedication, but also study, becomes an indispensable prerequisite for acting professionally with competence and seriousness. But what has been said, even though it is a lot, is not everything. If we were to remain at that level, we would not have captured what the sanctification of work implies. For it demands, together with technical efficacy, the ethical meaning and the Christian spirit.

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Rm* 12:1

<sup>15</sup> SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogm. Const. *Lumen gentium*, 31.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *1 Pet* 3:15

Science and technology do not include, in and by themselves norms for their own use. Work is a task carried out by a subject who is free and who is called to contribute to the good of other men. It presupposes, for its proper exercise, upright ethical judgment and, in consequence, it requires a vision of man and of the world, which are the basis for that judgment. Reflection on one's own task so as to perceive the ethical and spiritual demands and implications that it connotes, must occupy an important place in the experience of the one that is called to fulfil his Christian vocation in the middle of the world. And, therefore, as the doctrinal background from which the reflection proceeds, and from which will be born the consequent and free concrete decisions, one requires an adequate knowledge of dogma, of natural and Christian ethics and of the social doctrine of the Church.

To sanctify work, to sanctify oneself in work, to sanctify with work, are presented to us not as three ends or parallel dimensions but as three aspects of a single vital phenomenon: the Christian life in the world, which has work as one of its determining hinges.

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October 2009

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