

The Christian Idea of Work

Jesús A. Izaguirre, Ph.D.

December 6, 2000

1 Introduction

In this brief document, I try to explore the question of the meaning of work in the light of the Christian faith, particularly in the modern circumstances of work.

Work holds a key to the *understanding of the modern world*, as is evident in *technological and scientific progress*. It has often been forgotten, however, that it holds a key to the *understanding of the human person*, both in itself (what makes a human a person) and in the individual lives of millions of women and men.

These reflections are particularly addressed to you, a student at the distinctively Catholic University of Notre Dame. They are intended to present in a simple way, what the Catholic faith has to say about the question of the role of work in the development of persons and societies. Its sources are primarily Scriptures, the documents of the magisterium of the Church, and writings of contemporary spiritual writers. Finally, they present some speculations trying to explore some ethical issues in the current practice and directions of computer science.

2 Modern understanding of work

Work occupies a central place in contemporary thought, legislation, and speculative thinking. Often, however, work is understood as either a *means to economic development*, particularly through the use of technology, or as a means of individual *self-fulfillment* alone.

The former view tends to emphasize the *objective* aspects of work: namely, the ennoblement of matter through the intervention of men and women, often through the mediation of human-made machinery and computers. It emphasizes the value of *capital* over *labor*, and tends to de-humanize work. An extreme example of this posture is the quasi-religious motto of the Nazis: “Work will redeem Germany.” The latter view, often as an over-reaction to the detrimental effects of the obsession with productivity, tends towards the worship of the individual, emphasizing the *subjective* aspects of work: the self-fulfillment achieved through work, understood materially and in terms of external marks: success, fame, or monetary satisfaction.

Both approaches frequently lead to an attitude of *worship of work*: an idol to which should be sacrificed the whole human person, his or her family, and ultimately the whole of

society. These *utilitarian* views of work lead to a feeling of hopelessness, to the sad suspicion that our labor lacks any meaning.

3 Development of the Christian idea of work

Christianity has contributed greatly to the understanding of work. For example, Stefan Cardinal Wyszynski relates in his excellent book entitled *Work*, that “the pagans despised every kind of work, even artistic work. They regarded physical work as unworthy of man. It was the duty of slaves. It could not be reconciled with the sublimity of the free mind, for it limited it too much.(...) Christianity did away with this error as well. It brought about the real liberation and elevation of human work. The first Christians, even the rich ones, sometimes showed their membership of the Church by doing physical work.(...) What is more, the Christian world emphasized the importance of uniting spiritual and physical work. We see this especially in monastic life (...).” [Wys60, Ch. II]

However, after the stabilization of the structure of the Church, a certain mentality developed that tended to alienate common faithful from this subtle understanding. Only work directly related to religious duties, or to the service of neighbor, was considered “holy”. This mentality persists to this day, when people think that only social service or clerical jobs within the Church are properly “Christian.”

The social teaching of the Church, particularly through the Vatican II Council, and the teaching of the modern Popes (since Leo XIII, and particularly our present Pope, John Paul II), has clarified these matters greatly, and recovered the understanding of the first Christians, which was never lost, but that remained unknown to most faithful.

A modern spiritual writer summarizes this teaching as follows:

Professional work—and the work of a housewife is one of the greatest of professions—is a *witness to the worth of the human creature*. It provides a chance to *develop one’s own personality*; it creates a *bond of union with others*; it constitutes a *fund of resources*; it is a way of helping in the *improvement of the society* in which we live in, and of promoting the *progress of the whole human race...* For a Christian, these grand views become even deeper and wider. For work, which *Christ took up as something both **redeemed** and **redeeming***, becomes a means, a way of holiness, a specific task which *sanctifies* and can be *sanctified*. (emphasis added, [Esc87a, No. 702])

Let us examine briefly each one of these points:

The worth of the human person.

A person is “a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself, and with a tendency to self-realization. *As a person, man is therefore the subject of work.*” [II81, Ch. II.6]. Work is a need of the rational nature of men and women. Work must lead to the complete development of our spiritual powers and to the perfecting of men and women. Thus *the whole person*, our mind, will, feeling, and

physical strength must share in it. None of these gifts should be barred from participation in work. This happens when human beings are instrumentalized, when he or she is made into a machine. It is worth noting that machines can help us prevent this situation. For example, the possibilities created by new *virtual reality* technologies allow the whole person to engage in her or his work. These technologies, however, can sadly become a trap when used as a means of escaping reality, particularly by young people.

Pope John Paul II summarizes this principle saying that **work is for the person and not the person for work**. If work is only considered in terms of its output, then the perfecting of the human person at work will be forgotten. “The myth of payment for work has conquered in us all (...) Man is lost in the pursuit of profit (...) Moreover, we are becoming the slaves of things. We are so absorbed in and engrossed by the perfecting of what we do that we completely forget about ourselves. *We even consider that excess of work frees us from the duty of moulding our own souls*” [Wys60, Ch. III] It follows that we have to *pay particular attention to how we do our work*.

Work as participation in God’s creation.

The understanding of work as participation in God’s creation is present in the great monotheistic religions of the world. However, in Christianity it is strikingly illustrated by the example of Christ, the “son of the carpenter.” Human work is thus understood as man’s cooperation in completing the act of creation, as an act of submission to His Will, and as a lively expression of the petition “give us this day our daily bread.”

The faithful, therefore must learn the deepest meaning and the value of all creation, and its orientation to the praise of God. Even by their secular activity they must assist one another to live holier lives. In this way the world will be permeated by the spirit of Christ and more effectively achieve its purpose in justice, charity and peace... Therefore, by their competence in secular fields and by their personal activity, elevated from within by the grace of Christ, let them work vigorously so that by human labour, technical skill, and civil culture created goods may be perfected according to the design of the Creator and the light of his Word. [Cou65, No. 36]

4 Towards a Christian spirituality of work

The model worker for a Christian should be Christ. There are four aspects of Christ’s work that are relevant: (i) It is hidden and ordinary; (ii) It is well done, with attention to little details; (iii) It is done in obedience to God the Father’s will and for His glory; (iv) It is done for the salvation and sanctification of all of God’s children (redemptive value). All of these aspects point to something important: in Christ, *work is converted into prayer*.

Sanctification of *ordinary* work.

Any honest work can be a place of encounter with God’s creation, with God’s grace and help to carry it out, and an occasion of love. Thus, any kind of work can be made holy. This is a radical departure from the views of the world, which create classes of workers (“blue” and “white” collar, “intellectual” or “manual”, etc.).

As a modern writer puts it: “Before God, no occupation is in itself great or small. Everything gains the value of the Love with which it is done.” [Esc87a, No. 487] This consideration also solves the problem of the “pietistic” conception of work that we described above (“only clerical jobs are holy”). Any work can be made holy.

Rectitude of intention.

This means that work is done, not primarily to “feel good about ourselves”, or “to enjoy the weekends”, but rather as an act of obedience to God’s will manifested in his ordinary providence. St. Paul writes: “In eating, in drinking, in all that you do, do everything as for God’s glory.” And Blessed Josemaría Escrivá says: “Add a supernatural motive to your ordinary work and you will have sanctified it.”

This is a personal act, and thus can take many forms: a short prayer before beginning or ending our task (such as our Hail Mary before class, or the prayer of grace before meals), asking for help when difficulties are encountered, or giving thanks when things work out.

Work well done.

It is said in the Acts of the Apostles that Christ “did all things well.” The same should be said of Christians. This implies paying attention to details, without being a perfectionist. Some other interesting points are suggested to us next:

- Heroism at work is to be found in *finishing* each task. [Esc87b, no. 488]
- To finish things you have to start them. It seems a truism, but you so often lack that simple decision. And how satan rejoices in your ineffectiveness! [Esc87b, No. 492]
- You cannot sanctify work which humanly speaking is slapdash, for we must not offer God badly-done jobs. [Esc87b, No. 493]
- Forgive my insistence: the instrument, the means, must not be made into an end. If a spade were to weigh a hundredweight instead of what it should, the labourer would be unable to dig with it. He would use up all his energy humping it around, and the seed could not take root, for it would remain unused. [Esc87b, No. 503]
- When you parcel out your time, you need also to think how you can make use of the odd moments that become free at unforeseen times. [Esc87b, No. 513]

Redemptive value of work.

The toil at work gives us a means of identifying with Christ on the Cross, of offering it up as a way of achieving our purification, and of praying for the salvation of all men and women.

We can offer our work in the Mass, achieving a more complete identification with the sacrifice of Christ, and gaining more graces for ourselves and others. This is the most sublime aspect of the Christian spirituality of work, that which makes it a means of holiness. Here is what the Church teaches about this aspect:

Hence the laity, dedicated as they are to Christ and anointed by the Holy Spirit, are marvellously called and prepared so that even richer fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. For all their works, prayers, and apostolic undertakings, family and married life, daily work, relaxation of mind and body, if they are accomplished in the Spirit—indeed even the hardships of life if patiently born—all these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. In the celebration of the Eucharist these may most fittingly be offered to the Father along with the body of the Lord. And so, worshiping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God, everywhere offering worship by the holiness of their lives. [ftCotCC95, No. 901]

Work also has a social character. When we work with others, a bond is created. This bond is historical (we build open others' shoulders) and temporal (in connection with people throughout the world). Work should create an universal good, that can be shared by all peoples. I think that open source endeavors rightly champion this noble aim. This notwithstanding, we should also recognize the value of property as a means of achieving individual goals. One particular aspect of work, is that it should produce *useful* goods. We should try that our work creates new possibilities of work for our neighbor. For example, several entrepreneurs are establishing software companies in developing countries.

Joy.

Perhaps the most distinctive virtue of a true Christian is Joy. Joy in our ordinary life comes from the knowledge that we are children of God the Father, that we are in his hands, that our work is cooperation in the “family business”, and that through it we become brothers and sisters to all people.

Paraphrasing (poorly, I'm afraid) what G.K. Chesterton wrote in his marvelous work, *Orthodoxy: the Romance of Faith*, we see that the faithless modern prophet wants to deny us joy in the big things (such as the meaning of life and of work, the afterlife, the role of suffering and pain) and wants us to seek happiness in the little things. We see this sometimes in people who are very serious about their work, their things, and get very upset if something goes not as they wished (we all tend to do this, actually). Whereas the Christian faith does just the opposite: it does not take away the little things, but teaches us that by sometimes sacrificing them we are led to the certain hope of the greater ones. The great secret of Christ as he walked on earth, was His mirth, his great joy. With a little bit of good humor, and with the grace of God, that Joy should also be ours everyday.

5 Conclusion

The Christian idea of work is a lofty one: It calls us to a sincere gift of ourselves to God and others, and it promises total fulfillment through that gift of self. The goal of most writing is to move us to action. And nothing moves us more easily to action than human needs. Thus, this is an invitation to consider the needs of those around you, including yourself: their material and spiritual needs. For example, there are ways to get involved to help build a more Christian community in our own department:

- Continue your professional formation in solidarity with other students. Groups of interest to deepen one's professional competence are being formed (George Viamontes and Aaron Walters can tell you about them).
- Reach out towards younger classes. Serving as teaching assistant is one way of doing that. Tutoring is another, and the chapter of the ACM, of which George Viamontes is president, is thinking on facilitating such program.
- Reach out the larger community, through programs such as EPICS. There is a meeting today at 4 PM, in the Engineering Board Room - 258 Fitz.
- Integrate your professional and your spiritual life, by incorporating more strongly prayer into your daily life, and perhaps by bringing joys, sorrows, and plans of your work to the Mass.
- Consider ethical issues in computer science, such as the instrumentalization of the human person, the impact of means of communication in the global community, the possibilities of cooperation with developing countries, the applications of computing in medicine and biology, the solidarity that can be lived through open source projects.

References

- [Cou65] Second Vatican Council. *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* Lumen Gentium. St. Paul Editions, 1965.
- [Esc87a] Blessed Josemaría Escrivá. *The Forge*. Scepter Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1987. More information available at <http://www.opusdei.org>.
- [Esc87b] Blessed Josemaría Escrivá. *The Furrow*. Scepter Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1987.
- [ftCotCC95] Commission for the Catechism of the Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1995.
- [II81] John Paul II. *On Human Work*. St. Paul Editions, 1981. Also available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens_en.html .
- [Wys60] Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński. *Work*. Scepter Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1960.