

**WORK AS  
FULFILLMENT**

IN THE THOUGHT OF  
ST. JOHN PAUL II

By John F. Coverdale

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Dedicated to all the people  
who bless others and sanctify  
themselves through their normal  
every day work activities.

**WE'VE ALL HEARD** people comment that if they won the lottery they would quit their job and devote the rest of their life to travel and improving their golf game. In fact, at one time or another, most of us have probably had similar thoughts — thoughts which reflect an attitude toward work as “a necessary evil.” We recognize that work is necessary for most of us, but view it as undesirable in itself.

**S**t. John Paul II offers us an entirely different view of work. In spite of all this toil — perhaps, in a sense, because of it — work is a good thing for man. Even though it bears the mark of a *bonum arduum* [a difficult good] in the terminology of St. Thomas. It is not only good in the sense that it is useful or something to enjoy; it is also good as being some-thing worthy, that is to say, some-thing that corresponds to man’s dignity, that expresses this dignity and increases it. Work is a good thing for man — a good thing for his humanity — because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes “more a human being.”\* What is St. John Paul II saying here? The Pope is fully aware that work often brings with it hardship and suffering. Nonetheless, he sees work not merely as an integral part of our human condition, but as contributing to our human fulfillment. In the Pope’s view, work is a good. It is part of the “good life,” not, of

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\* The quotations from the writings of Pope St. John Paul II cited in this booklet are taken from his encyclical *Laborem Exercens* (On human work).

course, in the sense of the *dolce vita*, but in the sense of a life worth living, a life that fulfills, completes, and ennobles the person who lives it. Work is an arduous good” one whose achievement requires effort, but that does not make it less a good, something we should desire for its own sake and not merely as a means of achieving other things.

## PART OF GOD'S PLAN

**S**t. John Paul II reminds us that work is an essential element in God's plan for us. As the Pope points out, the Book of Genesis tells us that from the very beginning, even before the fall, God commanded Adam and Eve, whom he had created in his own image and likeness, to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the Earth and subdue it."

Commenting on this passage of Genesis, St. John Paul II says:

...even though these words do not refer directly and explicitly to work, beyond any doubt they indirectly indicate it as an activity for man to carry out in the world. Indeed, they show its very deepest essence. Man is the image of God partly through the man-date received from his Creator to sub-due, to dominate, the earth. In carrying out this mandate, man, every human being, reflects the very action of the Creator of the universe.

This is an interesting idea and one that merits careful consideration. Theologians usually point out that our likeness to God, our being made in his image and likeness, is reflected in our freedom, and in our ability to know and to love. St. John Paul II, however, reminds us that we are

also like God in our ability to work. The Book of Genesis in fact presents us the image of God as working to create the world. Our work, whatever it may be, is a participation in that divine work. Just as St. Paul describes himself, and each of us as “filling up in my body what is lacking in the suffering of Christ,” so too each of us through our work in some sense completes God’s work of creation. In giving us the ability to work, God made us like himself.

## KINDS OF WORK

We might think that this is true only for a few special kinds of work. We can see it in the case of an artist, or a poet, or a philosopher. They are people whose work we think of as creative. But we don't usually see the work of a clerk, a waiter, or a laborer as being in any way creative.

To the extent that we see the work of the laborer, the waiter, or the clerk as far removed from sharing in God's work of creation, our vision is rather like that of the ancient pagans. As St. John Paul II reminds us, the Greeks and Romans introduced their own typical differentiation of people into classes according to the type of work done. Work which demanded from the worker the exercise of physical strength, the work of muscles and hands, was considered unworthy of free men, and was therefore given to slaves.

As Christians, we cannot share such a view. St. John Paul II points out that Jesus Christ, whom the Church describes as perfect God and perfect man devoted most of the years of his life on earth to manual work at the carpenter's bench. This circumstance constitutes in itself the most eloquent "Gospel of work," showing that the basis for determining the value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being

done but the fact that the one who is doing it is a person. The sources of the dignity of work are to be sought primarily in the subjective dimension [the person doing the work], not in the objective one [the work being done]....

Given this way of understanding things, and presupposing that different sorts of work that people do can have greater or lesser objective value, let us try nevertheless to show that each sort is judged above all by the measure of the dignity of the subject of work, that is to say the person, the individual who carries it out.

This is a very radical reality which seriously challenges our usual way of thinking about work. It does not imply that in the objective order of thing Beethoven did not contribute more to humanity than his barber. It does mean, however, that the fundamentally important reality is not the differences between what they did but the fact that each of them was a person created in the image and likeness of God whose work derived its value primarily from its source in a human person rather than from its material content.

## “CREATED EQUAL”

**W**e can perhaps understand this in the context of our own political tradition which holds that “all men are created equal.” That doctrine, on which the American republic is built, does not imply ignoring the obvious differences among persons. It is a conviction that their fundamental similarity as human beings outweighs all of those differences. This is what St. John Paul II means when he says “the sources of the dignity of work are to be sought primarily in the subjective dimension [i.e., who is the subject doing the work] not in the objective one” [i.e., what the subject is doing.]

All work is or should be an instrument for the full human development of the person who carries it out. As the Pope said in the passage we read, through work each person ought to “achieve fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, become ‘more a human being.’”

This has many consequences. For example, it makes apparent the extraordinary importance of structuring society and the economy so that everyone can find work. The availability of generous unemployment benefits is no substitute for providing an opportunity to work. St. John

Paul II even calls for special efforts to offer appropriate work to the disabled and those with handicaps:

Since disabled people are subjects with all their rights, they should be helped to participate in the life of society in all its aspects and at all the levels accessible to their capacities. The disabled person is one of us and participates fully in the same humanity that we possess. It would be radically unworthy of man, and a denial of our common humanity, to admit to the life of the community, and thus admit to work, only those who are fully functional. To do so would be to practice a serious form of discrimination, that of the strong and healthy against the weak and sick. Work in the objective sense should be subordinated, in this circumstance too, to the dignity of man, to the subject of work and not to economic advantage.

Without hiding the fact that this is a complex and difficult task, it is to be hoped that a correct concept of labor in the subjective sense will produce a situation which will make it possible for disabled people to feel that they are not cut off from the working world or dependent upon society, but that they are full-scale subjects of work, useful, respected for their human dignity and called to contribute to the progress and welfare of their families and of the community according to their particular capacities.

Similarly, the personal dignity of the worker requires both adequate wages (the Pope calls for a “family wage”) and recognition of the rights of workers to organize and of the role of unions as a “factor of social order and solidarity.”

While these are vitally important topics, I would like to concentrate here on some of the less directly economic consequences of St. John Paul II's view of work as an expression of the human person and as an occasion for his or her development.

## WORK AND THE FAMILY

**H**uman persons are defined by their ability to love. The possibility of giving one's self to another in an I-Thou relationship is central to being a person. This aspect of the human person as open to love is expressed in a very concrete way in the family. Work if it is to be truly human must therefore, take into account that the worker is not merely an isolated individual, but a member of a family.

In this context it should be emphasized that, on a more general level, the whole labor process must be organized and adapted in such a way as to respect the requirements of the person and his or her forms of life, above all life in the home, taking into account the individual's age and sex.

This means that it is necessary to harmonize work and family duties. The Pope addresses this question concretely in the context of women working outside the home. He notes that The true advancement of women requires that labor should be structured in such a way that women do not have to pay for their advancement by abandoning what is specific to them and at the expense of the family, in which women as mothers have an irreplaceable role.

The principle applies much more broadly and affects very directly the attitudes of each one of us toward work. No one whether man or woman, should sacrifice his or her role as spouse and parent to work. This has important implications for the social organization of work. But it is also a question of our personal attitudes. While social structures can and should be changed to make it possible to accommodate work and family responsibilities, each of us may at times need to sacrifice a certain degree of professional success in order not to slight family life.

## A SCHOOL OF WORK

Work and family are also connected in that the family should be a school of work. If work is a vital element in the development of personality and family is the setting in which personality is primarily developed and nurtured, the family must teach work. St. John Paul II calls the family “the first school of work.” This is an interesting subject which we do not have space to develop here. In his booklet entitled *Successful Fathers* (#181/182 of the Scepter Booklet series) educator James Stenson gives some interesting insights into this question.

Human persons are also defined by their free and self-determining character. Freedom is a great gift of God. Work ought to provide scope for the development of that freedom, or autonomous choice. Work is more human to the extent that it allows the person who does it to exercise his freedom. As John Paul puts it: the person who works desires not only due remuneration for his work; he also wishes that, within the production process, provision be made for him to be able to know that in his work, even on something that is owned in common, he is working “for himself.” This awareness is extinguished within him in

a system of excessive bureaucratic centralization, which makes the worker feel that he is just a cog in a huge machine moved from above, that he is for more reasons than one a mere production instrument rather than a true subject of work with an initiative of his own. The Church's teaching has always expressed the strong and deep conviction that man's work concerns not only the economy but also, and especially, personal values.

There seems to be growing recognition of this fact in our society. Increasingly, managers are attempting to allow scope for autonomous decision making by workers and for creative input by workers into the production process. This may be an area in which we can contribute to implementing the Pope's teaching.

Even if we do not have much opportunity for influencing the development of large-scale structures, at least in our own work we can try to leave scope for the free and intelligent participation of those who collaborate with us. This may often require taking a little more time to explain to a fellow worker the larger picture of what he or she is doing so that he or she can make an intelligent contribution rather than simply carrying out directives. It may also require us to overcome a certain "dictatorial" tendency to believe that our way of doing things is the only right way. Leaving room for freedom and personal initiative will necessarily mean that in many cases things will not be done exactly as we would have done them, but this does not mean that they will necessarily be done

less well. We need to strike a delicate balance between teaching the proper way of doing a job and a stifling degree of control. This is also important when it comes to teaching children to work.

## WORK AND VIRTUE

**O**ur development as full human beings requires the acquisition and development of a whole range of virtues. Work can and should be a setting in which virtue develops.

This is most obviously true with respect to the virtue of justice. The demands of justice are many and vary according to the concrete circumstances of each individual's work. One aspect of justice which is common to us all, however, is summed up in the old adage of giving an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. Justice requires that we work diligently, that we give full value for pay. Even in a work environment in which many slack off and do less than a full day's work, a Christian cannot be content with a substandard performance. Of course, if we are the employer or have a say in determining wages, justice also requires that an honest day's pay be given for an honest day's work. This involves not only social structures but also our own practice of the virtue of justice.

Justice obviously has many other facets and implications. It will, for instance, dictate what means of competition we

may properly use. For purposes of this topic, however, the question is not so much how we exercise justice in our work, but rather that we see work as an occasion for practicing this essential virtue.

## ORDER AND CHARITY

**A**nother virtue which comes easily to mind in this context is order. While far from being the most important of the virtues, it is one which finds particular applicability in work. Work provides an opportunity for practicing order on multiple levels. At its most material and mundane, the virtue of order affects how we keep our files, process the papers that come across our desks, etc. At a slightly higher level, order requires good use of time, having a schedule which permits us to accomplish the many things we need to do in the course of the day and the week. At an even higher level, order involves a sense of priority and hierarchy, of doing first what is most important and leaving for later that which is less important. As we already mentioned in connection with work and the family, order requires practical recognition of the fact that family obligations are even more important than work obligations.

Work also offers us an opportunity to practice the most important of all of the virtues, charity, or love of God and of our fellow men. Charity, and in many cases justice, dictates that we work with a spirit of service, that we see our work as a service to others, not merely as an occasion for self-

aggrandizement. Charity demands a concern for those who work with us, that we see them not merely as useful cooperators in a material task, but as individual human beings for whom we should have an affectionate concern. In this regard, charity will often require us to make the effort to facilitate the work of others, going out of our way, for instance, to get things to others early so that they will not face an unnecessary crisis as deadlines approach.

Finally, work can be the setting for practicing charity in its highest sense, which is love of God. As Christians, we can and should do our work because it is what God wills for us. Our work can be an expression of our love of God and a means of growing in love for him.

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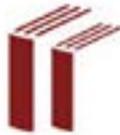


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