

Faith at Work:

Introduction to the theological basis of the meaning of human work from a catholic perspective

This article by Bob Carlson of the Faith at Work team provides a short summary of the scriptural and biblical foundations for the meaning and dignity of human. It is based on arguments from the following encyclicals of Pope John Paul II.

Laborem Exercens - On Human Work – published 14 September 1981

Centesimus Annus - “New Things” One Hundred Years Later – published May 1 1991

(This encyclical takes a fresh look at the 1891 encyclical Rerum Novarum by Pope Leo XIII on the dignity and rights of workers.)

The Encyclicals in Everyday Language - John Paul II - by Joseph G Donders from Orbis Books (ISBN: 9 78 1570 750519)

Work is a fundamental dimension of humanity’s existence on earth. Work is what a human being does when exercising dominion (or better, husbandry) over the earth as commanded by God in Genesis. Work is the activity of the human person who is created in God’s image and who shares in God’s creative activity by and through their work. Every person is created in God’s image and is charged with God’s life and immortality which imbues each person with a dignity that must be respected; and from that dignity flow inalienable rights that no-one or no state may legitimately transgress. This dignity and these rights are the fundamental basis of a just society and any substitution of relativism or subjectivism or humanitarianism or atheism ultimately denies the supremacy of the value of human life and inevitably leads to suppression of individual freedom in the name of a human generated collective authority that has always led to totalitarianism and enslavement.

Since work is always done by a person, both body and spirit are involved; and work is part of our salvation as through our work we come closer to God and share and collaborate in Christ’s redemptive mission as priest, prophet, and king. Work entails every imaginable human activity including paid and unpaid, physical and mental, teaching and doing, striving and relaxing, nurturing and caring, praying and serving. Work is as old as human life itself and as new as the current issues and tasks facing individuals, families, countries, and the entire human race today. Work can be physical, intellectual, or spiritual; producing food, goods, knowledge, or services. Work is inherent in the biblical calls to “take dominion” over God’s creation; and to earn one’s bread “by the sweat of your face”. Our model is Jesus’ mission and work of revelation and self sacrifice to redeem mankind.

While we eat the bread made by our own hands, or purchased with the earnings of our work, which feeds our physical bodies, we also need the bread of science and progress, of civilization and culture that are also the fruit of work. The work of motherhood and childcare is central to society. The toil involved in providing the needs of infants and children (for care, love, education and affection) are

essential to the proper maintenance, and security of the family which is the fundamental unit of human society. So too, the work of caring for the sick, less-abled, mentally challenged and aged is a central measure of the quality of life and health of society.

God created, sustains, and loves every human being, and we must respect and honour the dignity His presence bestows in every human being just as Jesus did - by serving, feeding and healing all who sought his help. Our work as Christians is to accept Jesus' mission as our own and as he commissioned us to do. Predominantly, in the present context of faith at work, that means following Jesus' exhortation to be the salt of the earth, and it means listening to John's gospel which reminds us to bring the gifts of the Holy Spirit into every daily human contact no matter how mundane.

It is here and now that we are sent by God and it is here and now that we must live our daily lives in the image of Jesus - by following his way, shining his light, and spreading his love in tangible acts of charity, forgiveness, and service to our neighbours in need. Our neighbour, as Jesus described in the parable of the Good Samaritan, is anyone in need - including every person we meet in our daily activities - even our enemies.

In our dealings with those of other faiths or no faith we must remember that every authentic prayer is inspired by the Holy Spirit who resides within the heart of every human being. We must not further divisions within humanity but follow and work towards Jesus' prayer that we all may be one as Jesus and the Father are one. We must work towards dialogue with our neighbours of all faiths or none, seeking to reconcile the truths and the desire for reconciliation with God that the Holy Spirit has placed in every human heart and we must be willing to share the truths of our own faith generously - not casting pearls before swine, but engaging in respectful dialogue and always being honest seekers after truth wherever we can find it. Only peaceful dialogue can bring about the reconciliation of the human race with God that Jesus directed us to work toward. The Holy Spirit inspires at least some part of his truth in everyone and we are commanded to listen to the Holy Spirit as we seek an ever deeper understanding of the truth revealed in the scriptures and by Jesus. Above all, we must focus on removing the log from our own eye so that we can see clearly and be spiritually prepared before we presume to humbly remove a speck from the eye of someone else.

Preaching evangelism is the calling of some, but not most. And, most evangelising is best and most effectively done through actions rather than words. We must never overlook Jesus stern warning that He would hold preachers and teachers to a higher standard; and that He would disown even those who called him Lord, and preached and performed great miracles in His name - if they hypocritically failed to love their neighbour in their hearts. Usually, our own testimony of God's love for us and of the peace we receive from our relationship with Him, is the best gospel message we can give to others - by simply and humbly living it out in their presence. We must always remember that Jesus told us to strive to enter the Kingdom by the narrow door of humility and service.

Work is a fundamental dimension of man's existence as it reflects and shares in the creative activity of God. Work presupposes God's assignment of dominion over the earth to mankind - so the measure of work is the self-realization of the human being - the value of the work is the measure of the dignity it gives to the person doing it - not the payment received for it - the work is for the worker not the other way around. Through work we transform the world and by work we are transformed and become more human.