

Homily for the 33 Week of Ordinary Time

The Spirituality of Work

November 16-17, 2019

On November 9th Premier Kenney gave the keynote address at the Manning Conference in Red Deer. He was discussing the particular challenges Albertans have faced in the past five years socio-economically. I would like to quote part of his speech:

We have been going through five years of hardship in this province. Our economy is smaller today than it was five years ago. Between 2014 and 2018 business bankruptcies rose more than 50 per cent. And thousands upon thousands of Albertans have lost their homes, their small businesses and their hope.¹

This statement by the Premier was brought home for me a week ago Friday. I was shopping at Safeway and the man bagging my groceries was my age. He said this was his first half hour on the job, having never worked in a grocery store before. This is because for thirty years previously he had worked in the energy industry.

I begin my homily the way I have because of our reading from 2 Thessalonians. Here is a passage that is practical and relevant to us all for it deals with the subject of work. Because so many in our province and here in our parish have been adversely affected by what has happened in the past five years, I want to talk with you about the theme of work as taught by St. Paul. Paul begins by addressing how he himself knew what it meant to work hard. While in Thessalonica, he worked.

7 For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, with toil and labour, we worked night and day so that we might not burden any of you.

Paul did not expect a free meal ticket but was willing to toil and labour. Paul saw work as an important part of his vocation as a Christian. He put in long hours as a tent maker, working both night and day. He also was able to highlight that work requires perseverance and commitment – what he describes as toil and labour.

Paul goes on to state that:

This was not because we do not have that right, but in order to give you an example to imitate.

Paul is saying in effect that as an apostle he could have asked for the Thessalonian's financial support. But he does not ask this of them because he wanted to set an example worthy of

¹ <https://www.alberta.ca/release.cfm?xID=6608502355B7E-A6AE-7F2E-6A20884E613662CC>

imitation. Notice he states his work ethic is intended to inspire them to also be conscientious workers.

For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us;

So important is the value of work that he goes on to recall for his readers:

10 For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. 11 For we hear that some of you are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work. 12

Now there are reasons why people cannot work due to illness, disability, an injury or other types of limitations. Unemployment has been exacerbated in our province by the challenges in the energy sector resulting in unprecedented layoffs. These are not the people Paul has in mind. Rather he is thinking about those people, who are idle rather than engaged in meaningful labour. He is addressing people who are slothful, and expect others to pay their way. Such an attitude is unbecoming those who are followers of Jesus and so he exhorts:

Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.

So why is it, that work is such an integral part of human identity and meaning?

To answer this question I would like to talk about the spirituality of work. What do I mean by this? When we work we are participating in God's ongoing creation and providence.

Think back to the Book of Genesis. What do we discover in the opening pages of the Bible? God is a worker who is forming the universe in a careful and systematic way. By working, he brings order out of chaos. When he commissions the man and the woman he tells them to be fruitful and multiply and to subdue the earth. The fruitfulness refers to the birth of children for sure. But it also has a broader implication that speaks of a creative participating with God in his work. Subdue the earth does not mean to dominate it in an exploitative sense. Rather it means to work with God in creating order and meaning by the work we do.

This participation in the work of God is further emphasized in chapter two where Adam by speaking names the creation with whom he shares the garden. Remember how in Genesis One God speaks creation into being. In chapter two Adam speaks creation into meaning. By naming every creature he is able to understand the world in which he lives.

Pope St. John Paul II wrote an encyclical in 1981 entitled *Laborem Exorcens*. Encyclicals are papal teaching documents that help the faithful to better understand dimensions of our Catholic life and discipleship. The titles are always in Latin and quote the opening two words of the

Letter. *Laborem Exorcens* in English is: “Through work” would be the literal translation. A more vernacular stating of this might be: “Carrying out work”

One of the insights St. John Paul II made in this letter is that by our work we are participating in God’s ongoing creation.

The truth that by means of work man participates in the activity of God himself, his Creator, was given particular prominence by Jesus Christ—the Jesus at whom many of his first listeners in Nazareth “were astonished, saying, ‘Where did this man get all this? What is the wisdom given to him?... Is not this the carpenter?’.. Jesus was himself a man of work, a craftsman like Joseph of Nazareth. Jesus belongs to the “working world”, he has appreciation and respect for human work. It can indeed be said that he looks with love upon human work and the different forms that it takes, seeing in each one of these forms a particular facet of man’s likeness with God, the Creator and Father.²

May I suggest that one of the things that has made this such a hard time for many Albertans is that meaning has been diminished in their lives, not to mention the impact on the ability for their families to live, because their identity through work has been taken from them?

John Paul further accentuates the importance of our work with these words:

Let the Christian who listens to the word of the living God, uniting work with prayer, know the place that his work has not only in earthly progress but also in the development of the Kingdom of God, to which we are all called through the power of the Holy Spirit and through the word of the Gospel.³

In other words, the work we do is a way we help to develop God’s kingdom that when joined with our prayer is the way we exercise our discipleship in daily life.

In the Collect for today we prayed that “we would be devoted to God for it is full and lasting happiness to serve with constancy the author of all that is good.”⁴ Our work is one of the ways we most readily serve with constancy the author of all that is good.

I thank God for that peer who willingly and cheerfully talked with me on November 8th as he packed my groceries during his first hour at Safeway. May we pray for those who are out of work, those who are working and those looking for work as we give thanks for how human work

² John Paul II. (1981). *Laborem Exercens*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

³ John Paul II. (1981). *Laborem Exercens*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana

⁴ [*The Roman Missal: Renewed by Decree of the Most Holy Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, Promulgated by Authority of Pope Paul VI and Revised at the Direction of Pope John Paul II.*](#) (2011). (Third Typical Edition, p. 493). Washington D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.

is a way for us to know what it is to partner with Jesus, the man who is God and joined in our work.