

Homily for the 33 Week of Ordinary Time

The Spirituality of Work

November 13, 2016

Today I want to concentrate my homily on the reading from 2 Thessalonians. Here is a passage that is practical and relevant to us all for it deals with the subject of work.

As I was reading this passage I thought back to the results from Tuesday's US election. One of the things I realized was how Donald Trump was able to address many Americans concerns about their work, especially those in the Rust Belt, whose Electoral College Votes won him the election.

One of the things that he spoke of that resonated with voters, especially in those states, was his intention to revive that part of the Country. This was an area which had been the industrial hub of the nation, due to its proximity to the Great Lakes, canals, and rivers, thus allowing companies access to raw materials and then ship out finished products. This region is called the Rust Belt because the decline in industrial work has left many factories abandoned and uncared for, rusting due to their exposure to the elements.

Mr. Trump seemed to rekindle in people a hope that he could help renew that area and so reignite workers.

The reason I mention this aspect of the president-elect's platform is because he was able to draw the connection between meaningful employment and personal identity in a way that resonated with voters.

Building solidarity among workers galvanized his support in a way Mrs. Clinton was unable to do.

That Mr. Trump grasped something of the importance of work is a theme pertinent for today's Mass when seen in the light of the second reading from 2 Thessalonians. Here we have the Apostle Paul write about the significance of work, a subject that is important to us all because work is an integral part of what it means to be human.

Paul begins by addressing how he himself knew what it meant to work hard. While in Thessalonica, he worked in a way worthy of imitation.

7 For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, 8 and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but 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 imitation. Notice twice he has stated his work ethic is intended to inspire them to also be conscientious workers.

***For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us;
but in order to give you an example to imitate.***

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. These are not the people Paul has in mind. Rather he is thinking about those people, who to put it in contemporary, terms would rather spend their time gaming and wasting their lives in idleness rather than engaged in meaningful labour. He is addressing people who are slothful, and expect others to pay their way. Such an attitude is unbefitting 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 do authentic 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.

Right towards the end of the encyclical he stated it like this:

The Book of Genesis, is in a sense the first "gospel of work". For it shows what the dignity of work consists of: it teaches that man ought to imitate God, his Creator, in working, because man alone has the unique characteristic of likeness to God. Man ought to imitate God both in working and also in resting, since God himself wished to present his own creative activity under the form of work and rest¹

Here again is the language of imitation that we met in St. Paul today. By working carefully and conscientiously we are in a particular way living out our vocation as those made in God's image. That we can work is one of the clearest expressions of our God-like character. But notice that in

¹ John Paul II. (1981). *Laborem Exorcens*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana.

order for the spirituality of work to be properly formed in our lives, we also need to imitate God in learning the way of proper Sabbath rest. For without this balance we can come to believe that the object of our work, that which is the product of our work is more important than the subject of the work, that is the worker. When we get this order turned around and the object takes precedence of the subject than work can become exploitative and lose its inherent meaning.

That work is a way we share in the ongoing creative and providential work of God is most fully understood when we look to Jesus in whom the spirituality of work reaches its summit.

Listen once more to St. John Paul:

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

So whatever your work is, be it as a student, a mother, a labourer, a sale person, business person, a professional, or someone who is no longer actively working in a job but offers yourself to serve the church and your community, know that your work has inherent dignity because it is one of the clearest ways we imitate God.

I give the closing words to St. John Paul II who concluded *Laborem Exorcens* this way:

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

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

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