

# Human Work and the Work of Creation and Redemption

## Path to the Centenary (5)

Created in God's image and likeness, men and women are called to cooperate freely in the Creator's plan. This freedom, however, was tested at the beginning and succumbed to pride and selfishness. And since then, throughout history it has continued to be damaged by sin. What sin divides, degrades, and wounds needs to be reconciled, raised up, and healed. The mystery of the humanity of the Word, which is at the very origin of God's creative plan, is seen in the *history of salvation* as a gift of mercy and a mystery of death and resurrection.

Human work shares in both dimensions of God's one salvific plan. The previous article emphasized our free cooperation, through work, in the divine plan to lead creation towards its fulfillment. The sad experience of sin and the wounds inflicted on our human condition invites us to consider now the second dimension: how work can be integrated into God's salvific plan through our sharing in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection.

### Redeemed and redeeming activity

The Son of God, by becoming man, redeemed all human realities (cf. Leo I, *Letter to Flavianus*, DZ 293). He wanted to share in the experience of work and ordinary life, making these a way not only to assist God's creative plan, but also to share in the work of redemption. Indeed, since it is a single plan that points towards a renewed creation, men and women, with their freedom redeemed by Christ, lead creation towards a fullness that also involves reconciling what is divided, reordering what is scattered, and healing what is wounded. The consequences of sin for human work are not limited to toil and sweat (cf. *Gen* 3:17-19); sin can also distort the very meaning of work, transforming it into an instrument of selfishness and pride, of exploitation and violence. But since human work has been taken up and redeemed by Christ, we can also speak here, as the Church sings in the Easter Proclamation, of a *felix culpa*: the ability to share in the work of salvation confers on human work an even greater dignity and value.

The Second Vatican Council's Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* teaches that human activity, constantly threatened by pride and disordered self-love, needs to be purified and healed by Christ's cross and resurrection (cf. no. 37). This is followed by a long in-depth discussion on how human activity is elevated and perfected through the paschal mystery. From the example of Jesus' life, we come to realize that charity, which leads us towards holiness, is also the fundamental law of the transformation of the world (cf. no. 38). Redeemed work – work *in Christ*, informed by service and charity – thus becomes capable of renewing the world and bringing it to God purified and healed. The Council also emphasizes the value of small things done out of love. The law of love,

which strengthens fraternity and transforms human relationships and work, “is not to be sought only in important events, but above all in ordinary life” (Ibid.).

St. Josemaría’s preaching on work, even quite a few years before the Council, offers this same perspective. It is Christ’s charity and the grace of his paschal mystery that gives work a salvific value, transforming it into *the work of God*. It is love that saves, that gives greatness to what seems small:

“Human work, no matter how humble or insignificant it may seem, helps to shape the world in a Christian way. The world’s divine dimension is made more visible and our human labor is thus incorporated into the marvelous work of Creation and Redemption. It is raised to the order of grace. It is sanctified and becomes God’s work, *operatio Dei, opus Dei*” (*Conversations*, no. 10).

In a text published in *The Forge*, the founder of Opus Dei described work as *a redeemed and redeeming activity*:

“Professional work – and working in the home is also a first-class profession – is a witness to the dignity of the human creature; a chance to develop one’s own personality; a bond of union with others; a fund of resources; a way of helping in the improvement of the society we live in, and of promoting the progress of the whole human race. For a Christian, these grand views become even deeper and wider. Because 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” (*The Forge*, no. 702).

## **A divine work**

When he spoke about Opus Dei’s mission and what the vocation to this path in the Church entails, Saint Josemaría presented human work as a *divine work*: an activity that is not limited to only the natural order, but that also can be raised to the order of grace. Hence the vocation to Opus Dei is a call to “divinize” earthly activities, to open up the *divine paths* on earth – to transform into gold, like King Midas, what seems of a less noble or precious material (cf. *Friends of God*, no. 308). But obviously it is not we human beings who divinize what is human. God himself, through his grace, makes our human activity redemptive. And hence the need to work *in Christ*, as God’s children, participating in the mission of the Incarnate Word in history. As Saint Josemaría told his spiritual sons and daughters:

“When you work, you don’t carry out a merely human task, because the spirit of Opus Dei is that you transform it into a divine work. With God’s grace, you give your professional work in the middle of the world its deepest and fullest meaning, by orienting it towards the salvation of souls, relating it to Christ’s redemptive mission” (*Letter 14*, no. 20).

An important part of the foundational light that Saint Josemaría received (and that he passed on to those who followed him) was the conviction that a great number of men and women are called, by virtue of their Baptism, to strive for sanctity without abandoning the setting of their daily lives. Their mission there is to raise up their ordinary activities to the order of grace:

“God did not create us to build a lasting City here on earth (cf. *Heb* 13:14), because ‘this world is the way to that other, a dwelling place free from care.’ Nevertheless, we children of God ought not to remain aloof from earthly endeavors, for God has placed us here to sanctify them and make them fruitful with our blessed faith, which alone is capable of bringing true peace and joy to all men wherever they may be. Since 1928 I have constantly preached that we urgently need to christianize society. We must imbue all levels of mankind with a supernatural outlook, and each of us must strive to raise their daily duties, their job or profession, to the order of supernatural grace. In this way all human occupations will be lit up by a new hope that transcends time and the inherent transience of earthly realities” (*Friends of God*, no. 210)

### **Reconciling the world with God**

Therefore the work and secular activities of Christians are meant to be means by which redemption extends to the whole world. And thus grace reaches the most hidden aspects of human activity, even in those things we often tend to consider as merely “profane”:

“To christianize the whole world from within, showing that Christ has redeemed all humanity: that is the mission of a Christian” (*Conversations*, no. 112)

“Christ has ascended to heaven, but he has given to every upright human reality the specific possibility of being redeemed” (*Christ is Passing By*, no. 120)

“By the very fact of being human, Christians have a full right to live in the world. If they let Christ live and reign in their heart, they will feel — quite noticeably — the saving effectiveness of our Lord in everything they do. It does not matter what their occupation is, whether their social status is ‘high’ or ‘low.’ For what appears to us to be an important achievement can be very low in God's sight; and what we call low or modest can in Christian terms be a summit of holiness and service” (*Christ Is Passing By*, no. 183).

To state that our work shares in the work of redemption is equivalent to saying that men and women who work cooperate, in Christ, in the *salvation* of the world. Through work that is well done, carried out in a spirit of service and out of love for one’s neighbor, every baptized person contributes to healing the wounds of sin, making society more human, and restoring creation to its original beauty. This idea appears repeatedly in the writings of Saint Josemaría, where the verbs “reconcile” and “reorder” are frequently used as synonyms for the verb “redeem,” often in the context of the establishment of Christ’s Kingdom:

“Our Lord calls us to come nearer to him, to be like him, as imitators of God, as his dearly beloved children (cf. *Eph* 5:1). He calls us to cooperate humbly but fervently in the divine purpose of mending what is broken, of saving what is lost, of bringing back order to what sinful man has put out of order, of leading to its goal what has gone astray, of re-establishing the divine balance of all creation” (*Christ is Passing By*, no. 65).

“Christ our Lord was crucified; and from the height of the Cross he redeemed the world, thereby restoring peace between God and men. Jesus reminds all of us: ‘And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all things to myself.’ If you put me at the summit of all earthly activities, he is saying, by fulfilling the duty of each moment, in what appears important and what appears unimportant, I will draw everything to myself. My kingdom among you will be a reality!” (*Christ is Passing By*, no. 183).

The teachings of the founder of Opus Dei on the redemptive value of work fit naturally into two major theological perspectives that the Magisterium of the Church and the liturgy have made explicit: the fact that the Christian people, by virtue of Baptism, are *a priestly people*; and that human work has a *Eucharistic dimension*.

### **Working with a priestly soul**

The participation by Christian faithful in the work of redemption is carried out through their common priesthood, which all receive in Baptism. In the New Testament, both Saints Peter and Paul speak about a spiritual worship that believers offer to God with their entire lives (cf. *1 Pet* 2:5; *Rom* 12:1). In the second chapter of *Lumen Gentium*, the Council Fathers spoke about the People of God as a *priestly people*, thus reaffirming the teaching of the common priesthood of the faithful: “The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, so that through all their works they may offer spiritual sacrifices and proclaim the power of Him who has called them out of darkness into His marvelous light” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 10).

When consecrating an altar in 1975, St. Josemaría said that every Christian faithful is, in some sense, an “altar of God”:

“Whenever I consecrate an altar, I try to draw out personal implications. Look at what is done to an altar to consecrate it to God. First, it is anointed. You and I were anointed when we became Christians: on the chest, and on the back, with holy oil. We were also anointed on the day we were confirmed. We priests had our hands anointed. And I hope that, God willing, we will be anointed on the day we receive Extreme Unction, which doesn’t frighten us. What joy, to experience being anointed from the day one is born to the day one dies! To realize that one is an altar of God, something of God’s, a place where God carries out his sacrifice, the eternal sacrifice according to the order of Melchizedek” (AGP, P01 1975, p. 824; cit. in Andres Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, vol. III, p. 554).

For Saint Josemaría, the sanctification of work and the common priesthood of the faithful are two inseparable dimensions of the same reality. And he frequently exhorted people to live with a *priestly soul*, an expression he often linked to the need to act with a *lay mentality*. Thus he emphasized that the exercise of the common priesthood is not limited to a series of religious practices, but is carried out especially through one's commitment to temporal activities, which are proper to the lay faithful by virtue of their secular vocation (cf. *Letter 25*, no. 3; *Letter 10*, no. 1; cf. also *The Forge*, no. 369; *Conversations*, no. 117).

Christians exercise their priestly soul not only through prayer, spiritual practices and apostolic works, nor only by patiently offering up their daily difficulties. For Saint Josemaría, the privileged setting for the exercise of the common priesthood are one's work and ordinary occupations, those that fill the day of a person living in the middle of the world. He taught that the work desk is like an altar, and he added that even the marital bed of spouses is like an altar, thus emphasizing that the work he was referring to included, in a broad sense, all of ordinary life and the duties of one's own state. For any Christian, he said, one's daily work is analogous to celebrating Holy Mass: a Mass that lasts all day.

We have to serve God “not only on the altar, but in the whole world, which is an altar for us. All the works of men are done as though on an altar, and each one of you, in the union of contemplative souls that is your day, in some way says ‘his Mass,’ which lasts twenty-four hours, in expectation of the Mass to follow, which will last another twenty-four hours, and so on until the end of our lives” (Notes taken in a meditation, 19 March 1968).

All the earthly activities in which the faithful exercise the Christian virtues (caring for one's family, bearing witness to Christ in social life, rest and leisure lived in a Christian way) converge in that “Mass” Saint Josemaría described. Nevertheless, the exercise of one's daily work, whether intellectual or manual, seems to occupy a privileged place here. During a family gathering in Latin America, he remarked that a surgeon, when putting on a gown before entering the operating room, can see this action as similar to a priest donning his vestments when preparing to celebrate the Eucharist. Similarly, a small crucifix placed on the study table can remind us that an hour of study, for a modern apostle, is an hour of prayer. And thus intellectual effort, when directed to the service of others and the common good, become a pleasing offering to God (cf. *The Way*, nos. 277, 302, 335).

### **The Eucharistic dimension of work**

In Saint Josemaría's preaching on the sanctification of earthly activities, the exhortation to work with a priestly soul is tied to the theological truth of work's profound Eucharistic dimension. Christian tradition throughout history implicitly expresses this reality when it speaks of the *offering up of work*, a deeply rooted custom in the lives of many Christians. Work, in this sense,

is a sacrifice offered to God. But what exactly does this offering involve? Is it simply a matter of raising up to God the effort and sacrifice that work entails, as if it were a form of prayer?

In reality, the Eucharistic dimension of work goes beyond external circumstances, such as the difficulties it confronts, and the interior experience of sacrifice and effort. Work is a Eucharistic offering because *it transforms the material world* and consecrates it to God. Just as at Mass the bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, work done in Christ also brings about a transformation: that of the world, making it more in conformity with God's plans. To work in a Christian way is to give human activities a new form, the form of Christ's charity. Through their work, Christians can *transform* and thus *consecrate* what passes through their hands (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 34). Thus those who work can bring truth where there is falsehood, trust where there is distrust, love where there is enmity, abundance where there is poverty, unity where there is division, and healing where there is sickness, both physical and spiritual.

The Eucharistic dimension of work is seen in an especially clear way in the liturgy of the Mass, which the Church celebrates by faithfully following the words and actions of Jesus. Unlike the Old Covenant, where fruits taken directly from the earth or animals from the flock were offered on the altar, bread and wine are presented on the altar. These are not products that nature provides ready-made, but rather require the intervention of human work for their elaboration. This is expressed in the offertory rite in the prayers of the Missal reformed after the Second Vatican Council, which describes the bread and wine as "fruit of the earth and work of human hands" and "fruit of the vine and work of human hands."

In an astonishing way, human work is thus integrated into the supreme act of redemption, the sacrifice of Calvary, made present in an unbloody manner in every Eucharistic celebration. The work of a doctor and a teacher, of a computer scientist and a nurse, of a manual worker and a theater actress, of an artist and an engineer, of a cook and a businesswoman, of a lawyer and a politician, the care that a father and mother put into educating their children, as well as all the other countless forms of work, humble or outstanding, that make up the immense variety of upright human activities – all have a place on that altar. All can be offered together with the work that produced the bread and wine, thus sharing in Christ's redemptive mystery. As Saint Josemaría stressed: "Any work, even the most hidden, even the most insignificant, when offered to the Lord, is charged with the strength of God's life!" (*The Forge*, no. 49).

There is a particularly significant moment in the life of the founder of Opus Dei where his teaching on the Eucharistic dimension of work was captured in an eloquent image. We refer to the celebration of Holy Mass on the campus of the University of Navarra, in Pamplona, on October 8, 1967:

"Reflect for a moment on the setting of our Eucharist, of our act of thanksgiving. We find ourselves in a unique temple. We might say that the nave is the university campus; the altarpiece, the university library. Over there, the machinery for constructing new buildings;



above us, the sky of Navarra. Surely this confirms in your minds, in a tangible and unforgettable way, the fact that everyday life is the true setting for your lives as Christians. Your ordinary contact with God takes place where your fellow men, your yearnings, your work and your affections are. There you have your daily encounter with Christ. It is in the midst of the most material things of the earth that we must sanctify ourselves, serving God and all mankind” (*Conversations*, no. 113)

After this theological explanation of the participation of human work in the work of creation and redemption, in the following articles we will reflect on some other teachings of Saint Josemaría. We will see how human work, ordinary activities, and the vocation to Opus Dei illuminate each other, outlining a specific way of participating in the mission of the Incarnate Word: as God’s children in the Son.

*This series is coordinated by Professor Giuseppe Tanzella-Nitti. It includes other contributors, some of whom are professors at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross (Rome).*