

PROFESSIONAL FORMATION (II): In Order to Be Christ in our Work

Who has never dreamed of living a great adventure? An adventure involving unimaginable discoveries and new lights on how to overcome our personal limitations, an adventure filled with personal encounters shared with our fellow travelers. That is what the holiness each of us dreams of achieving is about: a great adventure of attaining a deeper relationship with God in the middle of the world.

For a business person, an engineer, a student or a healthcare worker, this adventure of holiness unfolds in their professional work day by day, carried out with effort and great dreams, with or without enthusiasm, collaborating side by side with colleagues or working online. For many people, work is the axis, the center around which their struggle for holiness and their apostolic efforts revolve in the middle of the world. And its scope is reflected in that well-known expression of Saint Josemaría: *sanctifying work, sanctifying oneself in work and sanctifying others through work.*

But to attain this goal we need to have the resources required to carry it out. We are not talking here about isolated tools or strategies, but about the formation required in every dimension of our life in order to become Christ in our work.

Personal encounter with God in work

The first dimension is the spiritual one, since it entails doing our work with love, as a meeting place with my Father God, striving to present Him with a “pleasing offering,”¹ united to the sacrifice of his Son on the Cross renewed in each celebration of the Mass.² Hence we strive to carry out our job “through Him, with Him and in Him.”³ And we find in our work an opportunity to serve others, whether directly (as in so many jobs such as cooks, delivery people, teachers, psychologists...), or indirectly, because all work is a service to society. This effort embraces all our daily actions, turning the study table, the office, the university classroom, the workshop or the field, into an “altar” where, as Saint Josemaría taught, God awaits us each day,⁴ where we offer each hour of our life to Him.

This spiritual dimension also entails our effort to never forget that the important thing in our work is not what we do, but what God does through us. Therefore amid our work we frequently raise our heart to God, to glorify Him, thank Him, ask for forgiveness and beseech his help, in accord with the four aims of the Mass: adoration, thanksgiving, reparation and petition.⁵ And we realize that God is looking at us, listening to us and smiling at us, because He sees the effort we are making to love Him.

¹ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2569.

² Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1350.

³ Cf. Eucharistic Prayer, final doxology.

⁴ Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 114.

⁵ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1407 and 1414.

Perseverance in our work brings with it tiredness, fatigue; a physical fatigue for those who work in construction or sculpting a work of art; a mental fatigue for those who focus on a screen to create a new algorithm or struggle to be patient in attending to the next customer. Spiritual formation helps us to see this effort as an opportunity to draw closer to Christ, who took our suffering upon Himself,⁶ closer to God the Redeemer. Sanctified work (done through Christ, with Him and in Him) “is born of love, manifests love and is ordered to love.”⁷ Christ's love for the Father and for us – his brothers and sisters – is the life-giving and unifying principle of all his activity and mission; as it is of our work, when we strive to care for the world and our fellow men and women, trying to imitate Jesus, becoming one with Him.

Ultimate meaning of work

If we had to define what gives meaning to our existence, what defines us as a person, what situates us in the world, one of the aspects we would highlight is our work. Even if the work we are doing right now is not “my dream job.” In contrast, what would our life be without our work? “The vocation that God gives us is very beautiful: to create, to re-create, to work,” Pope Francis said. “Work involves every aspect of a person’s being: their thought, their action, everything in their life.”⁸ This fundamental role of work in giving meaning to our entire existence requires a deeper philosophical and theological understanding. This is the formation we need on the intellectual plane. The better we understand this reality – that *the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it*,⁹ that is, the vocational meaning of human work) – the better we will grasp the dignity that our work entails, since it makes us resemble God, our being created in his *image and likeness*.¹⁰

This effort can involve various disciplines, seeking to understand the meaning of creation in greater depth, the redemptive meaning of the years Christ spent working alongside Joseph, the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross, the action of the Holy Spirit in history, the role of the laity in imbuing society with a Christian meaning, etc. Of special importance here is everything related to the virtue of justice and the moral requirements of each profession. Thus serious study offers us new perspectives to understand how to sanctify our own work and strengthens our desire to do it better, in close union with Christ.

Moreover, we also need to delve more deeply into the social repercussions and capacity to transform the world of our professional dedication. As Saint Josemaría said: “We need a formation that fosters in us, amid each one’s professional work, the instinct and healthy concern to conform that task to the demands of a Christian conscience, to the divine imperatives that need to govern society and human activities.”¹¹ Anyone who has experienced work as a place for sanctification wants that experience to

⁶ Cf. Saint Josemaría. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 95.

⁷ Saint Josemaría. *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 48.

⁸ Francis, “Work is man’s vocation,” homily in Santa Marta, 1 May 2020.

⁹ Gen 2:15.

¹⁰ Cf. Gen 1:26.

¹¹ Josemaría. *Letter*, 6 May 1945, no. 15; in Ernst Burkhart and Javier López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de San Josemaría*, III, Rialp, Madrid 2013, p. 574.

reach all men and women, not only by providing spiritual resources that imbue each one's work with meaning, but also by actively striving to ensure that everyone has a worthy and meaningful job.

More capable of doing good

Daily work provides an opportunity for the exercise of human virtues. It is very useful training ground for anyone who wants to improve in their human qualities. Just as in gymnastics, where reaching a high level of performance requires frequent practice, although in this case, thanks to God's grace, a great dose of supernatural help is also provided.

Human formation in our daily life helps us to focus on virtues that enable us to make our desire to serve other people a reality, virtues that we could call social. For example, it is good to strengthen our concern to listen to others at work with an active interest, with the desire to learn from them. As Pope Francis said, speaking about the conversation between Jesus and the rich young man: "When we listen with our heart, the other person feels welcomed, not judged; free to talk about their own life experience and spiritual path."¹² Also, in a broader sense: "The Spirit asks us to listen to the questions, concerns and hopes of every Church, people and nation. And to listen to the world, to the challenges and changes that it sets before us. Let us not soundproof our hearts; let us not remain barricaded in our certainties. So often our certainties can make us closed. Let us listen to one another."¹³

Closely linked to this ability to listen, the virtue of humility leads us to recognize that we need others, as well as to realize what we can contribute on our part and to do so generously. The ability to collaborate with others and rely on them is a requirement of the world of work today. Although techniques and skills for this can be learned, Christian virtue also adds an important attitude, a real concern for the other person, seeking to (and with practice learning how to) strengthen each one's freedom and responsibility, employing all their talents.

Another virtue that needs to be strengthened is commitment, a word that can sometimes provoke fear. Hence we need to reflect on the consequences the fear of commitment can lead to. How can I build something valuable that lasts over time without commitment? How can I reach a specific goal without setting aside other possibilities along the way? We know very well the answer. But as in other areas of our life, commitment in our work can be arduous at times, since it involves renunciations or requires continuous effort.

Commitment is also essential to live uprightly, with justice and social responsibility. It facilitates the ability to be faithful to what one's own conscience dictates as just, even when contrary behavior is widespread in our professional setting. It reinforces the active concern to make work environments more human and to foster dignified working conditions for all men and women.

¹² Francis, Homily, Mass for the Opening of the Synod of Bishops, 10 October 2021.

¹³ Ibid.

Strong friendships at work

In interpersonal relationships, kindness and magnanimity are highly prized qualities. In an individualistic and competitive society like ours, these virtues make charity present. Christians should seek to strengthen and transmit them in their own environment without falling into naivety or mere philanthropy, and at the risk that sometimes kindness may be viewed as weakness. Learning to ask for forgiveness, to rectify, and above all to forgive. Being honest with oneself and with others. Being sincere and loyal in one's relationships with colleagues. Treating customers with kindness and patience. Many more virtues could be mentioned here, but the desire to be better and to love better those alongside us is part of the adventure professional life entails.

The setting of one's own work is the natural environment for creating many strong friendships, as the Prelate of Opus Dei reminds us in his 1 November 2019 letter,¹⁴ as well as for sowing the peace and joy that is so proper to the Christian spirit. As Saint Josemaría, quoted by the Prelate in his letter, wrote: "It can truly be said, my dearest children, that the greatest fruit of Opus Dei's apostolic work is what its members obtain personally by their apostolate of example and loyal friendship with their colleagues at work: in a university or factory, in the office, in the mines or in the fields."¹⁵ There we can share our concerns, collaborate with others and dedicate many hours to carrying out a common task. This effort strengthens bonds and enables us to get to know others well, and helps prevent instrumentalizing relationships by reducing them to a path for self-advancement in a culture of immediate success. "The birth of a friendship comes like an unexpected gift,"¹⁶ the Prelate writes. It is a "gift of God that brings us consolation and joy,"¹⁷ a gift that reminds us of the Blessed Trinity's freely bestowed love for each one of us. And it makes the tasks we share with others more enjoyable, since "friendship is itself a dialogue in which we give and receive light. In friendship plans are forged as we mutually open up new horizons. In friendship we rejoice in what is good and support one another in what is difficult; we have a good time with one another, since God wants us to be happy."¹⁸

And with professional competence

Besides strengthening human virtues, professional formation is a key part of one's own sanctification and helps us confront the cultural and social challenges in today's society. Professional competence is essential for sanctifying our job, since first we have to do it well. At least as well as the others, and if possible better, since work involves our desire to perfect creation, to adore the Creator and assist in co-redeeming,¹⁹ putting into exercise the priestly soul acquired in Baptism, being Christ at work.

¹⁴ Cf. Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral Letter*, 1 November 2019, no. 20.

¹⁵ Saint Josemaría, *Letter no. 6*, no. 55.

¹⁶ Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral Letter*, 1 November 2019, no. 20.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 23.

¹⁸ Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral Letter*, 9 January 2018, no. 18.

¹⁹ Cf. Fernando Ocáriz, *Pastoral Letter*, 14 February 2017, no. 17

In Opus Dei's early years, Saint Josemaría stressed that intellectual and professional formation should lead to "seeking out the highpoints," not the "level plains",²⁰ in one's own work and job. That is, it spurs each one to fully develop his or her own personality and abilities in the field where they can best contribute to improving society, helping to make the environment around them more human.

The training and qualifications needed to carry out one's job with professional competence are acquired in the institutions created for this purpose: universities, technical schools, academies, online training platforms, public entities that offer refresher courses or job placement services... The possibilities are wide and varied, and each one should strive to take advantage of them. This effort entails continuous and demanding professional training in order to keep up to date, an "obligation to acquire the appropriate professional training," taking advantage of "the same opportunities other citizens have."²¹

The formation provided by the Prelature

Hence anyone sincerely seeking holiness in the middle of the world needs a formation that affects every aspect of their professional work and helps each person to mature in the path of identification with Christ. This is what the Prelature provides.

In first place, we are encouraged to love our profession, as the place where we encounter God and share in his creative work. We can ask ourselves throughout the day: how I am transforming the world today? Perhaps the answer includes: not reacting aggressively to a tense situation when a deadline is drawing near, thanking a colleague for their help, granting maternity leave for a mother. Our work involves so many moments and decisions in which we are called to transform the world, improve our environment and contribute to bringing it to God.

In addition, the formation we receive helps us to carry out our work in a consistent Christian manner, that is, in accord with the professional ethics intrinsic to our job and with the eagerness to collaborate with our colleagues in building up a more truly human society. And it reminds us that we need to get to know in depth and put into practice the ethical and moral requirements of our job with a sense of mission, being exemplary in our professional work. This effort is clearly important for lawyers, gynecologists, customs officials or stock investors, but it is equally important for those who care for the elderly, are interns in a local radio station or prepare takeout food.

Along with this, this formation strengthens our desire to use the means available to deepen our professional training, growing in the knowledge needed for our job or trade. This can involve setting up professional associations or actively participating in them, dedicating time to get to know one's profession better, on one's own or with others. All of this requires time and energy, which we never have enough of,

²⁰ Cf. Ana Sastre, *Tiempo de Caminar*, Rialp, Madrid, 1989, footnote 18, p. 232. The author cites a Newsletter sent by Saint Josemaría in July 1939 with advice about choosing one's studies at the university: "Don't undertake your university studies as though everything were on a level plain. Seek out the high points. Have personality. Trace out your own furrow. And may the furrows of everyone make the field of the Father of families fertile."

²¹ Cf. Prelature of the Holy Cross and Opus Dei, *Ratio Institutionis*, Rome, 2007, no. 14.

but it is an enrichment we need. Saint Josemaría said: “I consider the professional knowledge of a barber to be as important as that of a researcher; and that of a student to be as important as that of a domestic employee. Each one must have the culture required by his or her own job or occupation.”²²

Formation facilitates the acquisition of specific values for each one's profession or job: the value of life and health, in professions related to medicine; solidarity, among firefighters and police; equality, for those who work in unions... There are values that, while universal and necessary in all jobs, stand out in a special way in some of them and need to be accompanied by the skills required to live them. By doing so for the glory of God and the good of souls, our work attains a supernatural value that strengthens our identification with Christ.

The spiritual accompaniment provided by the Prelature helps us to face with realism – with human and supernatural maturity – the opportunities and demands that life offers, also in one's professional path over the years, doing so with hope, discernment and supernatural outlook.

Finally, in order to contribute to the well-being of our family and to the apostolates of the Work, we are eager to increase the financial support we can provide though our own work.

We have looked at many aspects of formation that help make our work truly the work of a Christian. Saint Josemaría summed up the importance of this effort in the following words: “Let us ask our Lord Jesus for light, and beg him to help us discover, at every moment, the divine meaning which transforms our professional work into the hinge on which our calling to sanctity rests and turns.”²³

²² Saint Josemaría, Notes from a brief circle, 19 April 1964; in *Meditations*, vol. I, p. 658.

²³ Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 62.