

PROFESSIONAL FORMATION (IV): Leadership By Serving

In the teachings of Saint Josemaría, what is currently called “leadership” is always understood and exercised as service, with the desire to contribute to building a common project for the benefit of all. A leader is not just the person who plays a certain role in a team. He or she wants to improve the world, and quickly realizes that it is best to start with the immediate environment. And how does one do so? Saint Josemaría summed it up in one phrase: “in order to be useful, serve.”¹ And he advised: “acquire all the professional prestige you can for the service of God and souls.”²

The aspiration to lead by serving implies two challenges that our formation can help us to confront: developing a more relational vision of our own work (both in the sense of working *with* others – starting with God – and *from* and *for* others) and the effort to cultivate human virtues (wanting to improve oneself not in order to seek self-perfection, but to give oneself to others).

Relational beings, relational work

A relational vision of one’s professional work entails the ability to raise one’s sight and discover that the work I do every day goes beyond the production of services or goods, performance and efficiency, and mere self-improvement. In the end, it consists in generating “relational goods” which are always produced and enjoyed with others, even in professions not directly oriented to the person. A person clearly interacts with others when selling goods at a market stall, visiting apartments with potential renters, or defending an accused person in court. But working in a logistics center, an assembly line or a biochemistry laboratory is also relational, although not in such an obvious way. This is true even of the person who works from home or studies for an exam, without seeming to interact with anyone

Christ is recognized by his trade (*Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?*³) and by that of his father (*“Is not this the carpenter’s son?”*⁴). In Exodus, we can find a foreshadowing of Saint Joseph in the artisans who, due to the quality of their work and their relationship with others, were selected to build the sanctuary.⁵ Moses praises them by saying that God has called them by name and filled them with his Spirit, endowing them *with ability, with intelligence, with knowledge, and with all craftsmanship*,⁶ and inspired them to teach others.⁷ Jesus added a new dimension to the

¹ Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 50.

² Saint Josemaría, *Furrow*, 491.

³ *Mk* 6:3.

⁴ *Mt* 13:55.

⁵ Cf. *Ex* 35:30-36.

⁶ *Ex* 35:31.

⁷ Cf. *Ex* 35:34.

relational sense of his daily toil in the workshop. By building a table, he not only created an artifact, but in some way all the people who would use it over the years were present there, along with what he had learned from Joseph, the joy of family life with our Lady, the needs and concerns of his neighbors, the reminder of the work of Creation, the caress of the wood that he would later find on the Cross, the desire to glorify the Father, the redemption of all mankind.

This relational dimension of work is based on what it means to be human, since openness to others – to know and love them – is part of our being created *in the image and likeness* of God, of our Triune God. “I often ask myself: With what spirit do we do our daily work? How do we deal with fatigue? Do we see our activity as linked only to our own destiny or also to the destiny of others? In fact, work is a way of expressing our personality, which is relational by its nature,”⁸ Pope Francis said. “Work is also a way to express our creativity: each one of us works in our own way, with our own style; the same work, but with different styles.”⁹

As a consequence of this relational nature of work, part of our professional formation is not only acquiring the knowledge and skills needed for our work, but also relying on other people for this: the advice from that veteran colleague or that other younger one, from that mentor, from that conversation with the members of our team, from that teacher to whom we return for advice years after passing through their classroom, from that dissatisfied client. Christ himself was an apprentice, and learned so much from Joseph. “For Jesus must have resembled Joseph: in his way of working, in his character traits, in his way of speaking.”¹⁰

An instrument in my hands

One result of taking good advantage of professional formation is usually the esteem of others that we acquire in our field. True professional prestige (which is a means and not an end) is the result of the resources that each of us puts into becoming more competent in carrying out our profession. A biomedical worker will always seek to employ the means needed to learn more about possible treatments for patients; a teacher will try to improve in teaching skills with the good of students in mind; a merchant will look for new products suited to clients’ needs; and those who work in the world of communication will strive to ensure that the information they transmit is reliable and of real interest to many people. Each one’s skills are updated with the tools at hand: courses, readings, workshops, research... The formation the Work offers helps us to be eager to stay up to date in our field, to give priority to this effort, to persevere in it, so as to give more glory to God in our work and render more effective service to others.

Professional prestige, seen in this light, is very different from pursuing personal success, understood as seeking results that others will see as outstanding, the result of one’s extraordinary

⁸ Pope Francis, General Audience, 12 January 2022.

⁹ Pope Francis, General Audience, 12 January 2022.

¹⁰ Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 55.

talents. Saint Josemaría always encouraged people to develop their talents as fully as possible, and never tried “to clip anyone’s wings.” He once said: “there is no excuse for those who could be scholars and are not.”¹¹ But his message of working with human excellence never lost sight of the real world. In fact, even a responsible person, with all the skills and experience acquired over the years, can meet with failure at work, with errors that require rectification, with the need to start over again from scratch. These are opportunities to learn and to confront the future with hope, without being scarred by the fear of failing again.

The key to professional prestige, for Saint Josemaría, is not fame, but serving others out of love: “the Christian’s pilgrimage in the world must express itself in a continuous service in all kinds of ways, varying with each person’s circumstances, but always motivated by love of God and of our neighbor. Being a Christian means rising above petty objectives of personal prestige and ambition and even possibly nobler aims, like philanthropy and compassion for the misfortunes of others. It means setting our mind and heart on reaching the fullness of love that Christ showed by dying for us.”¹²

In short, the meaning of professional prestige is to be able to use our talents for the service of God and our fellow men and women. As Saint Josemaría said: “As the motto of your work, I can give you this one: *If you want to be useful, serve*. For, in the first place, in order to do things properly, you must know how to do them. I cannot see the integrity of a person who does not strive to attain professional skills and to carry out properly the task entrusted to their care. It’s not enough to want to do good; we must know how to do it. And, if our desire is real, it will show itself in the effort we make to use the right methods, finishing things well, as perfectly as possible.”¹³

Each person, therefore, is called to be a leader in their own setting (at work, in their family, in their social milieu), to strive to improve it. And all of us men and women can contribute through our professional preparation and personal growth to this improvement. It is very inspiring to see how the pandemic has brought to light many hidden leaders and has been a call to responsibility for each one of us. The first life I can improve is my own, and if I don’t do it no one else will do it for me.

Serving through professional prestige

“Serving” can be understood in the sense of “being competent” or “being of use for a specific task.” In order to serve others—to show charity through our deeds, imitating Christ who *came not to be served, but to serve*¹⁴—we need to be suited for our job, and this suitability comes from study and practice, but also from human virtues. A hard-working, determined, bold, orderly, polite,

¹¹ Saint Josemaría, *The Way*, 332.

¹² Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 98.

¹³ Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 50.

¹⁴ Mt 20:28.

friendly person is well-suited both to contribute effectively to a common project, and to respond to the demands of charity in the exercise of their duties. The expression “in order to be useful, serve” is, therefore, a call to acquire the necessary qualities to be useful, and thus cultivate the virtues that allow us to provide appropriate services to others. Saint Josemaría, when speaking about this topic, was referring both to intellectual work of apparent importance in the world of culture or politics, as well as to the competent work carried out in a mechanical workshop, in the kitchen of a restaurant, or on a farm...

Prestige makes it easier for us to be a reference point in our work, and enables us to advise and accompany others, besides passing on to them the needed knowledge and skills. For example, we can stay in touch with former students and offer advice on their careers, pass on experience to a young doctor working alongside us in the hospital, suggest new opportunities to friends who have lost their jobs, inform a colleague about new machinery, or help cool down a tense conversation at work.

Serving others can also involve making it easier to join a union or a professional association, in order to seek improvements in our profession, or promoting various initiatives to achieve fairer working conditions (helping to organize a strike, collecting signatures, speaking with managers, etc.). Pope Francis pointed to all the humanly degrading aspects of work that we can help to overcome with our competent and honest professional work: the “gruelling work in the mines and in some factories,” “those who are exploited through undocumented work,” “children who are forced to work,” etc.¹⁵

Sometimes, prestige can give us a platform that enables us to solve more sensitive issues. At a conference or on a business trip, declining after dinner drinks and talking about one’s family at home can change the tone of the conversation among colleagues. Passing on our experience can help someone else find time to attend Mass. This is true even when our work environment can seem to be a desert, “a parched place where faith nonetheless has to be preserved and communicated,”¹⁶ as Pope Francis said. There too “we are called to be living sources of water from which others can drink.”¹⁷

To transform oneself and others

It is specific persons who change the world. Personal formation always represents a step forward both in social responsibility and in the skills needed to be able to contribute our best efforts to society. “For it is through free, creative, participatory and mutually supportive labor that human beings express and enhance the dignity of their lives,”¹⁸ as Francis points out. “Work is not only a

¹⁵ Cf. Francis, General Audience, 12 January 2022.

¹⁶ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 86.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 192

means of earning a living: it is also a place where we express ourselves, feel useful, and learn the great lesson of concreteness, which helps keep spiritual life from becoming spiritualism.”¹⁹

The spiritual formation that the Work offers, which always aspires to be reflected in each one’s life, can help us ask ourselves these questions: How can I better understand that my work is a service? How can I encourage improvements in others and in society through my own profession? What type of social problem could I help resolve with my work? What improvements, innovations, solutions can I help bring about with the knowledge gained in my own profession?

To lead by serving others through our work we need more than just knowledge. Therefore the professional formation provided by the Work is aimed at helping each person to acquire the human virtues and personal skills that enable us to work well, with professional competence. That is: to work attentively, without carelessness or sloppiness, with the care and sense of responsibility of someone who works out of love for God and others, cooperating with those alongside us. This also entails discovering ways to better care for the people around us, for those who will benefit more directly from this work, for the common good of society as a whole.

These so-called “soft skills” are not learned theoretically, but through acquiring effective inter-personal aptitudes for relating to others in resolving the pressing issues of today’s world. They are learned through practice, in carrying out our work. And thus it is good for each of us to explicitly reflect on them and take good advantage of the “feedback” received from others, in order to better understand how to develop them on a day-to-day basis, so that they inform our way of being and acting, and therefore the way we exercise our profession. Haven’t we all felt the desire to express our thanks for the attentive attitude of a health care professional who has treated us with affection, or the empathetic look (even through a mask) of an administrative official who has helped solve our problem?

Some qualities of a more personal nature can be highlighted, such as common sense, a positive attitude, self-esteem, creativity, resilience and flexibility. For example, flexibility can be defined as openness to different ways of being and working, which facilitates inter-generational, inter-cultural, inter-disciplinary work, etc. Thus we help create a space in which everyone is comfortable and can contribute the best of themselves.

There are other skills that could be viewed as more social, since they contribute constructively to the fabric of relationships that make up our lives: managing those under us, overcoming our own and others’ stress, the ability to listen and dialogue, communication and empathy with others, etc.

Christ also learned these human skills, not just a trade. In highlighting the figure of Saint Joseph, Pope Francis said that “we can be sure that his being a ‘just’ man was also reflected in the

¹⁹ Pope Francis, General Audience, 12 January 2022.

education he gave Jesus. ‘Joseph saw Jesus grow daily *in wisdom and in years and in divine and human favor* (Lk 2:52): so the Gospel says’ (*Patris corde*, 2).”²⁰

The image of Christ washing the apostles’ feet on Holy Thursday symbolizes the service that every Christian is called to carry out. *I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.*²¹ We can recall here how our Lord himself served the inhabitants of Nazareth for many years through his work, his advice, his affection, in the shadow of Saint Joseph’s professional prestige. “I am sure Joseph knew how to lend a hand in many difficulties, with work well done. His skilled work was in the service of others, to brighten the lives of other families in the town; and with a smile, a friendly word, he would restore confidence and happiness to those in danger of losing them.”²²

²⁰ Pope Francis, General Audience, 19 January 2022.

²¹ *Jn* 13:15.

²² Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 51.