

WORK “ADDICTION” AND THE CHRISTIAN MEANING OF WORK

On the feast of Saint Joseph the Worker, Pope Francis said: “may no one lack work and may everyone be fairly remunerated and be able to enjoy the dignity of work and the beauty of rest.”¹ Work is the human being’s first vocation. “Work expresses and nurtures the dignity of the human being. It enables each person to develop their God-given capacities, and helps to build up relationships of interchange and mutual help. It enables one to be a collaborator with God in caring for and developing this world, and to feel useful to society and in solidarity with loved ones.”²

The dignity of work is closely linked, among other things, with the need for rest. When the disciples return from their first days of preaching, rejoicing over the miracles, Jesus tells them: *Come away by yourselves to a lonely place, and rest a while (Mk 6:31)*. “He doesn’t spend time giving them compliments or asking questions. Rather, he is concerned about their physical and interior tiredness. And why does he do this? Because he wants to make them aware of a danger that is always lurking there for us too: the danger to be caught up in the frenzy of doing things, to fall into the trap of activism where what is most important are the results that we obtain and the feeling of being absolute protagonists. How many times this happens in the Church: we are busy, we run around, we think that everything depends on us and, in the end, we risk neglecting Jesus and we always make ourselves the center.”³ And the Pope continued: “Let us put a halt to the frantic running around dictated by our agendas. Let us learn how to take a break, to turn off the mobile phone, to contemplate nature, to regenerate ourselves in dialogue with God.” Thus rest “is also a propitious moment for reconciliation, for confronting difficulties without escaping from them, for finding the peace and serenity of a person who knows how to value all the good things in their life.”⁴

Addiction to work

It is not uncommon today to find people who suffer from a kind of “addiction” to their professional work. In the most serious cases, we can speak of a “workaholism syndrome.”⁵ These are people who experience an excessive and uncontrollable need to work incessantly, which affects their health, their family and social relationships and their psychic stability. They seem to have no internal regulator to tell them when to stop.

¹ Pope Francis, Mass in Santa Marta, 1 May 2020.

² Pope Francis, Video message on the occasion of the 57th Idea Foundation Colloquium, 13 October 2021.

³ Pope Francis, Angelus, 18 July 2021.

⁴ Pope Francis, General Audience, 5 September 2018.

⁵ Coined by Wayne Oates, *Confessions of a Workaholic*, World Pub. Co, 1971.

There is a big difference between working diligently and being addicted to work. From time to time, we all put more hours and effort into work than we would like, and hence have less time to spend with loved ones or resting. For example, starting a new business may require almost all of our time at first. Or a new employee may have to put in long hours to make a good impression when starting a job. These examples are exceptions that we can all experience at some point in our life. But “workaholics” live like this all the time, and use their jobs as an escape from other responsibilities in life. One can work long hours to pay off a mortgage, send one’s children to the university, pay for a second car, and still not be addicted to work. Working long hours does not make someone a “workaholic.” But if our friends or loved ones have accused us of neglecting them because of our work, or if we have used or abused our working hours to escape from intimacy or social relationships, perhaps we need to examine our life more closely.⁶

Contrary to popular belief, workaholism is not only a question of extending the working day disproportionately. It manifests itself above all in a way of living and interpreting the activity of work itself. Hence what is key here is the way one works, and the ability or inability to disconnect from it, as well as the ability to resist the pressure caused by competition from other companies or the pressure from one’s own work team because other people often extend their working hours indefinitely.

A characteristic of work addiction is the ease with which it can be passed on to employees, putting at risk their health, well-being and harmonious family life. In the most extreme cases, this syndrome can be a true obsessive-compulsive disorder, and require the intervention of a specialist. But in any case, those afflicted with it need to reflect in depth on their real goals in life and on the true value of the different dimensions in their life.

Human and Christian value of professional activity

Serene reflection on the human and Christian value of work can be very helpful here. Professional work – or study and job training for those who are younger – is the activity that takes up most hours each day in each person’s life. Saint Josemaría says in one of his homilies: “Work, all work, bears witness to the dignity of man, to his dominion over creation. It is an opportunity to develop one's personality. It is a bond of union with others, the way to support one’s family, a means of aiding in the improvement of the society in which we live and in the progress of all humanity.”⁷ The anthropological roots of a person’s need to work are very deep. Hence unemployment, even in the hypothetical case that it does not entail economic hardship, has a devastating effect on a person. “I will never tire of referring to the dignity of work. Work is what

⁶ Bryan E. Robinson, *Chained to the Desk: a Guidebook for Workaholics, their Partners and Children, and the Clinicians who Treat Them*, Introduction, pp. 4-5, New York University Press, 2011

⁷ Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 47.

gives a person dignity. Anyone without a job feels that something is missing in their life, the dignity that work gives, which ‘anoints’ a person with dignity,”⁸ Pope Francis said.

Besides its anthropological and social value, work has a deep metaphysical and moral significance. From the perspective of a metaphysics of creation, work is a participation in the creation and configuration of the world granted by God to man,⁹ an expression of the dignity of the human person and of God’s trust in each man and woman. For a Christian, professional work is also a means of sanctification and apostolate. Work becomes a means by which God sanctifies us, and also the path for transmitting his Love to the world.¹⁰ We make present God’s care for each person and, vice versa, through the work of others we receive their loving care. Indeed, God wants to bestow his gifts through the mediation of other men and women. This is the Christian meaning of all work and the reason why we depend on one another.

From the moral point of view, work is an activity in which almost every human virtue plays a role: “fortitude, to persevere in our work despite the difficulties that naturally arise and to ensure that we never let ourselves be overwhelmed by anxiety; temperance, in order to spend ourselves unsparingly and to overcome our love of comfort and our selfishness; justice, so as to fulfil our duties towards God, society, our family and our fellow workers; prudence, to know in each case what course to take, and then to set about it without hesitation.”¹¹ Social and political virtues also are important here. Work can be a source of economic and social advancement, or in contrast a means for the exploitation of man by man.

Ethical value of work

The ethical importance of work is summed up in these words: “the dignity of work is based on Love. Man’s great privilege is to be able to love and to transcend what is fleeting and ephemeral. He can love other creatures, pronounce an ‘I’ and a ‘you’ which are full of meaning. And he can love God ... That is why man ought not to limit himself to material production. Work is born of love; it is a manifestation of love and is directed towards love.”¹²

Hence rightly ordered work is one of the main expressions of love and self-transcendence in each person’s life, which is the source of its deepest dignity and the key to its right regulation. The most important ethical aspects are three closely related points: 1) quantity and quality of work; 2)

⁸ Pope Francis, Video message on the occasion of the 57th Idea Foundation Colloquium, 13 October 2021.

⁹ Cf. *ibid.* ., and also *Friends of God*, no. 57.

¹⁰ “Now you will understand even better that if anyone among you didn’t love work, his own particular job; if he didn’t feel sincerely committed to some noble occupation in this world so as to sanctify it, or if he were to lack a professional vocation, then that person would never be able to understand the supernatural substance of what this priest is saying to you, for the very good reason that he would be lacking an indispensable condition for doing so: that of being a worker” (*Friends of God*, no. 58).

¹¹ Cf. *Friends of God*, no. 72.

¹² *Christ Is Passing By*, nos. 48-49. Cf. Tomas Melendo, *La dignidad del trabajo*, Rialp, Madrid 1992.

the reason for which one works; and 3) coordination of work with other forms of love and self-transcendence.

Justice requires working carefully and with reasonable intensity during the time established by the employment contract, assuming that the contract is fair. In the case of self-employment, the ethical virtue of industriousness determines what is a reasonable amount of time, taking into account the characteristics of the job, personal circumstances and, if applicable, the legal provisions in force.

The reason why one works can vary depending on the person. For some people, the scientific or intellectual interest of one's work could prevail, while for other the main motive is the need to earn money. But the motive for which one works should never contradict the anthropological, metaphysical and moral meaning of work. If that were to happen, the value of one's work would be diminished, causing damage to the person working, to those around them and to the work itself. Insufficient or incorrect reasons for working include, for example, working "because one has no other choice," which can result in working reluctantly, as little as possible, and with frequent imperfections, which especially in some professions can have serious consequences for others (for example the medical field). Other misguided reasons for working include looking for self-affirmation in one's work, in order to prove one's talent and ability to outdo others; working merely to get ahead of others or with a desire for power over them; seeking in work a shelter from other obligations. All these reasons for working are misguided because, among other things, they remove work from the realm of love and self-transcendence.

If work were viewed not as an expression of personal self-transcendence, but as a path for self-affirmation or personal satisfaction, it would become an end in itself. And this would make it difficult, or even almost impossible, to bring one's work into accord with the other areas in life that are meant to be expressions of love and self-transcendence (one's family, friends, social relationships, religious duties, etc.). Work should never be an enclosed domain. As Pope Francis said, "in a genuinely developed society, work is an essential dimension of social life, for it is not only a means of earning one's daily bread, but also of personal growth, the building of healthy relationships, self-expression and the exchange of gifts. Work gives us a sense of shared responsibility for the development of the world, and ultimately, for our life as a people."¹³

No single way exists to harmoniously unite all these dimensions in a person's life, since the variety of personal circumstances and vocations makes possible a number of different morally correct solutions. But achieving a harmonious union that doesn't sacrifice any of these fundamental dimensions of human existence is of the utmost importance.

Professional work, due to the time and energy it often requires, needs constant vigilance so that it does not become a disturbing element in attaining harmony among dimensions of equal or greater importance in a person's life. In any case, it is the openness to love and self-giving, or in

¹³ Francis, Enc. *Fratelli tutti*, 3 October 2020, no. 162.

contrast the selfish withdrawal and focus on oneself, that determines in the end the ultimate orientation and moral value of one's work.

In summary, we can say that the Christian vision of professional work – seen as a path for attaining sanctity for oneself and for other men and women and for improving the world – depends on the adequate resolution of a radical alternative: seeing work as an activity that refers exclusively to one's own interests and goals or, on the contrary, as a path for transcending oneself and opening one's life to the needs of society and those around us, and first of all to God, who calls us to help bring his work of creation to completion.