

PROFESSIONAL FORMATION (III): Citizens who work with others

The desire for meaningful work normally includes the eagerness to construct something of value and contribute to improving society. As the old story goes, when producing bricks, a person can view this work as simply making bricks, building a wall, or constructing a cathedral. Our desire is to build cathedrals with our profession: something humanly valuable and a sign of God's presence in the world.

Pope Francis encourages us: "We need to remember that men and women have 'the capacity to improve their lot, to further their moral growth and to develop their spiritual endowments.' Work should be the setting for this rich personal growth, where many aspects of life enter into play: creativity, planning for the future, developing our talents, living out our values, relating to others, giving glory to God."¹

However, the situation in many countries today has clouded this view. In some the working conditions are inhuman; in others the majority of jobs barely allow one to survive; and in the West rapid changes and successive crises have brought about a precarious situation that has led to a certain negativity. The dominant narrative or personal experience can reduce work to an activity that we need to survive, but that often makes us unhappy and frustrated. This especially affects young people who are well qualified and talented, but who can only find jobs that barely allow them to support themselves and find it hard to view the future with hope. They may even consider moving to another country to seek better possibilities. And many end up looking for fulfilling work outside their professional field.

In such a context, when so many people find themselves in these situations, Saint Josemaría's message on sanctifying work illuminates this crisis with *the hope of the Gospel*. As Pope Francis said: "Those who fail to view a crisis in the light of the Gospel simply perform an autopsy on a cadaver. They see the crisis, but not the hope and the light brought by the Gospel. We are troubled by crises not simply because we have forgotten how to see them as the Gospel tells us to, but because we have forgotten that the Gospel is the first to put us in crisis. If we can recover the courage and humility to admit that a time of crisis is a time of the Spirit, whenever we are faced with the experience of darkness, weakness, vulnerability, contradiction and loss, we will no longer feel overwhelmed. Instead, we will keep trusting that things are about to take a new shape, emerging exclusively from the experience of a grace hidden in the darkness."²

The light shed by faith on human work highlights the original truth that man was placed in the Garden of Eden *ut operaretur*,³ in order to work and cooperate with God in constructing the world,

¹ Francis, *Laudato si'*, no. 127. Internal quote is from Paul VI's Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, no. 274.

² Francis, *Christmas Greeting of the Holy Father to the Roman Curia*, 21 December 2020, no. 6.

³ *Gen* 2:15.

in creating human society and culture. In short, work is something positive and good, an opportunity for personal and social fulfillment, the hinge of our holiness and “a bond of union with our fellow men and a means to contribute to the progress of all humanity, as a source of resources for the support of one’s family, as an opportunity for personal progress.”⁴

Here we will focus on the social repercussion of work, which expands in concentric circles from one’s immediate environment to help bring about the effective transformation of the world.

Love for the world

Love for the world and the desire to improve it and bring it to God is a central aspect of the vocational call to the Work and is at the core of its message. This spirit leads us to find a divine call in all the circumstances of ordinary life, as Saint Josemaría stresses: “We have to love God so as to love his will and desire to respond to his calls. They come to us through the duties of our ordinary life: duties of state, profession, work, family, social life, our own and other people’s suffering, friendship, eagerness to do what is right and just.”⁵

A glance at the tragedies, injustices and sufferings in the world today, and the superficiality with which so many people live, could lead us to think that our current world is not “lovable,” at least as long as it doesn’t improve. And the feeling of being unable to do much to contribute to that change can lead us to enclose ourselves in the circle of our own little world of relationships, problems, interests and projects. At least there we feel we can do something positive.

Nevertheless, the awareness that God is our Father spurs us out of our comfort zone when we remember Psalm 2’s promise: *I will make the nations your heritage*.⁶ A son receives this inheritance with the desire to make it bear fruit, with the hopeful optimism of seeing the trust of his Father and with a lively sense of responsibility towards this world that God places in our hands. Nothing is foreign to the heart of a child of God, because it is the world itself – everything and everyone – that constitutes this inheritance.

Love for the world as a gift that God the Father entrusts to us leads us to realize that “we need in-depth knowledge of the time we live in, its dynamics and potential, and also of the limitations and injustices, sometimes serious ones, that afflict it.”⁷ This is not a question of a merely an intellectual understanding, but of going out to meet specific people, with their dreams and hopes, their sensitivities, needs and criticisms. Thus knowledge is transformed into empathy, into listening, into an effort to take responsibility for others and commit oneself to seeking their good, into love shown in deeds. As Benedict XVI said in his encyclical *Caritas in veritate*: “To love someone is to desire that person’s good and to take effective steps to secure it. Besides the good

⁴ Saint Josemaría, *Letter* No. 14, 15 October 1948, no. 4.

⁵ Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 17.

⁶ Cf. *Ps* 2:8: *Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession.*

⁷ Fernando Ocariz, *Message*, 7 July 2017.

of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society: the common good. It is the good of ‘all of us,’ made up of individuals, families and intermediate groups who together constitute society. It is a good that is sought not for its own sake, but for the people who belong to the social community and who can only really and effectively pursue their good within it. To desire the *common good* and strive towards it *is a requirement of justice and charity.*”⁸

It is from love – for God, other men and women, and the world – that the dignifying and transforming force of work springs, which enables us to contribute to building up with others the “good of all of us” through the specific contribution of our own profession. The model of compassionate love for our fellow citizens is the parable of the Good Samaritan. Pope Francis said that “Jesus’ parable summons us to rediscover our vocation as citizens of our respective nations and of the entire world, builders of a new social bond.”⁹ But, as he goes on to point out, “even the Good Samaritan needed to have a nearby inn that could provide the help that he was personally unable to offer.”¹⁰ It is work, our own and others’, that enables us to contribute to the solution of human needs.

A way of being in the world

A lay mentality is based on the fact that work, social and political relations, leisure, etc., are a meeting place with God and a task proper to ordinary Christians. Furthermore, work is the specific way each person has in order to “care for the inheritance” and collaborate in the building up of society. Our lives would be very different without farmers, teachers, truck drivers, and engineers. As Saint Josemaría said: “Work is the vehicle through which man inserts himself into society, the means by which he becomes part of the ensemble of human relationships, the instrument that assigns him a place, a setting, in human coexistence. Professional work and existence in the world are two sides of the same coin; they are two realities that demand one another, so that it is impossible to understand one apart from the other.”¹¹

That personal place where God waits for each of us is a privileged setting to engage our freedom as the capacity to generate good things with and for others, which are also good for oneself. “Let us return to promoting the good, for ourselves and for the whole human family, and thus advance together towards an authentic and integral growth.”¹² In the hairdressing salon, the office, the classroom, the orchard or the factory, it is in the “here and now” of our work where the decisive question arises: Lord, what is the good that You expect of me? And this very effort to

⁸ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 7.

⁹ Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 66.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 165.

¹¹ Saint Josemaría, *Letter* No. 11, 6 May 1945, no. 13.

¹² Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 113

seek Christian perfection in one's profession, to give "good example, each one in their own place, is already to seek the good of all humanity."¹³

At the same time, it is easy to realize that bringing about the good is a task that surpasses the capability of one person. Rather this is a common task, a "shared struggle," as the pandemic has made us realize. Pope Francis said: "No one can face life in isolation. We need a community that supports and helps us, in which we can help one another to keep looking ahead. How important it is to dream together. By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together. Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travelers sharing the same flesh, as children of the same earth which is our common home, each of us bringing the richness of his or her beliefs and convictions, each of us with his or her own voice, brothers and sisters all."¹⁴ And experience confirms that doing good together breaks the barrier of ideological differences, different lifestyles or the lack of faith.

There will always be institutions in the Church oriented towards social assistance, and all of us as Christians are called to be the good Samaritan who stops on encountering our wounded brother. But as lay people we have the inalienable mission of being present in the places where society is configured, especially those related to our profession. An architect, for example, can demonstrate against pollution, vote for a family-friendly party and volunteer to help the homeless in one's city. But if he or she works in the field of urban planning, they are irreplaceable in creating, with their colleagues, greener, intergenerational, safer environments, with basic services, common spaces, etc., in a way that directly influences air quality, family relationships and access to housing.

With charity and justice

This Christian way of being and living in the world, working with others and for others, carries within itself the greatest potential for transforming society. "What illuminates our conscience is faith in Christ, who has died and risen and is present in every moment of life. Faith moves us to play our full part in the changing situations and in the problems of human history. In this history, which began with the creation of the world and will reach its fulfilment at the end of time, the Christian is no expatriate. He is a citizen of the city of men, and his soul longs for God."¹⁵

If we focus on the field of work, we can ask ourselves what characteristics of the Christian way of living are the most effective agents of this transformation. The answer would be a broad gamut of qualities, but two virtues stand out for their special value: charity and justice, seen in their social dimension. Both lead to a range of attitudes that people recognize today as essential values for carrying out a common enterprise, and that the social doctrine of the Church

¹³ Saint Josemaría, *Letter* No. 3, 9 January 1932, no. 4

¹⁴ Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, no. 8.

¹⁵ Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 99.

encourages. These teachings offer guidelines that illuminate with the light of the truth of the Gospel the possible ways of acting in the most diverse social, cultural, etc. situations.

For example, friendship, solidarity and social participation lead to “building relationships that go beyond mere work and strengthen beneficial relationships.”¹⁶ Saint Josemaría, in a 1939 letter on the Christian’s mission in social life, stressed the following: “A Christian cannot be individualistic. He or she cannot ignore others, living selfishly, turning one’s back on the world. A Christian is essentially social: a responsible member of the Mystical Body of Christ.”¹⁷

The fostering of integral human development – of all men and women and of the whole person – presupposes the responsible freedom of the person and of peoples, since no structure can guarantee development from outside of and above human responsibility.¹⁸ Cooperation stems from the conviction that it is not possible to find the solution to problems from a single perspective, and leads to proactive openness, to teamwork (also with those who don’t think as we do), and sincere dialogue.

Justice is giving the other person their due, what corresponds to them according to their being and actions. It is the first path of charity and inseparable from it.¹⁹ At the same time, it calls for a higher perspective, since society cannot be helped to advance only through fair relations of rights and duties, but, first and foremost, through gratuitous relationships of mercy and communion.²⁰

The social values of transparency, honesty and responsibility,²¹ although they may create short-term disadvantages (those involved in taking on the risk of trusting others) are solid foundations for creating an environment and a way of working that calls for shared reciprocal duties, thus mobilizing people much more effectively than the mere claiming of rights.²²

The possibilities are endless, depending on the circumstances of each person. Participation in professional associations, mentoring young people, collaborative “open source” projects or adult literacy programs, for example, can be initiatives promoted with the help of one’s colleagues. The prioritization of the investigation of neglected diseases, *pro bono* services for relevant causes, the commitment to a cleaner industrial process, the rejection of bribes, the improvement of working conditions... All these are initiatives that can be promoted within the company or institution in which one works.

¹⁶ Francis, *Christmas Greeting of the Holy Father to the Roman Curia*, 23 December 2021.

¹⁷ Saint Josemaría, *Letter No. 5*, 2 October 1939, no. 37.

¹⁸ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 17.

¹⁹ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 36.

²² *Ibid.*, no. 43

Transforming the work environment

Love for the world, along with the awareness of one's own freedom and responsibility, lead to commitment in and from one's own work place in striving to improve society. Work is not simply a place for individual "self-realization," but a platform from which to display, in all its breadth, human and Christian concern for others and for the social conditions that make true human development possible.²³

Seeing work as a means to contribute to the progress of humanity requires, first of all, helping to make the work environment itself more human. For example, when faced with situations of conflict that can arise at work, as in any human relationship, the crucial thing is not to allow oneself to be dominated by them or end up with what Pope Francis calls the "logic of conflict,"²⁴ which always seeks "guilty" parties to stigmatize and tries to "justify the just."²⁵

A more human work environment also requires a constant and determined effort to love, trying to take a real interest in each person, in their real needs, because we are all poor and lacking, "not only in material terms, but also in spiritual, emotional and moral terms."²⁶ The personal experience of God's love, of family, of friends, makes this easier for us.

All of the above can be made a reality in countless specific ways: providing special help for a woman colleague who is expecting a child or someone who is looking after an elderly or dependent person; doing someone a favor without seeking anything in return; celebrating someone's birthdays; ignoring small disagreements; being loyal and not criticizing people.

Making the work environment more human also involves identifying problems, taking them on personally, trying to "drown evil in abundance of good," covering over other people's deficiencies, multiplying initiatives that develop or redirect the energies required to improve a situation.²⁷ Thus we will help overcome the individualistic and utilitarian outlook that work can be tainted by, and we will discover, with a look purified by charity, "remarkable convergences and possible solutions."²⁸

The effort required to make this vision a reality can seem daunting, but our hope is strengthened by the concluding words of the encyclical *Caritas in veritate*: "Development needs Christians with their arms raised towards God in prayer, Christians moved by the knowledge that truth-filled love, *caritas in veritate*, from which authentic development proceeds, is not produced

²³ Cf. Saint Josemaría, *Conversations*, no. 10: "We see in work, in men's noble creative toil not only one of the highest human values, an indispensable means to social progress and to greater justice in the relations between men, but also a sign of God's Love for his creatures, and of mankind's love for one another and for God: we see in work a means of perfection, a path to sanctity."

²⁴ Francis, *Christmas Greeting of the Holy Father to the Roman Curia*, 23 December 2021.

²⁵ Cf. Francis, Apost. Exhort. *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 226.

²⁶ Francis, *Christmas Greeting of the Holy Father to the Roman Curia*, 23 December 2021.

²⁷ Cf. Ana Marta González, "World and the Human Condition in Saint Josemaría Escrivá. Christian keys for a philosophy of the social sciences," in *Romana* n° 65, July-December 2017.

²⁸ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 32.

by us, but given to us. For this reason, even in the most difficult and complex times, besides recognizing what is happening, we must above all else turn to God's love. Development requires attention to the spiritual life, a serious consideration of the experiences of trust in God, spiritual fellowship in Christ, reliance upon God's providence and mercy, love and forgiveness, self-denial, acceptance of others, justice and peace. All this is essential if 'hearts of stone' are to be transformed into 'hearts of flesh' (*Ezek 36:26*), rendering life on earth more 'divine' and thus more worthy of humanity."²⁹

²⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 79.