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Thomas J. Scirghi S.J.

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In Work We find Our Dignity

By Thomas J. Scirghi, S.J.

In the beginning man and woman worked. From the moment Adam emerged from that lump of clay imbued with God's breath, they picked up tools and went to work, tilling the soil. The story of creation strikes me strange sometimes. Here we have almighty God creating the universe, with the planets, the stars, the flora and fauna. And then God designs a garden of paradise, places two people there, and sends them off *to work*, charging them to 'take dominion of the planet.' Why not simply seat them on thrones, place them on a palace balcony where they could view the garden and watch over it? Instead, they must work it. It appears that human labour is important to God.

In the Scripture, many people are introduced by the work they do. We hear of shepherds, fishermen, midwives, women drawing water, priests and soldiers. We learn that Paul was a tentmaker, Lydia traded in purple goods, Matthew and Zacchaeus were tax collectors, and Jesus was a carpenter. Also, Pope Francis mentions that in the Bible many people meet God while at work: Moses heard God's voice while tending Jethro's flocks, and Jesus called the disciples while they were fishing. Even God worked. It took six days for creation to unfold, and then God rested. I suppose that being made in the image and likeness of God means that we too must work, as well as rest.

The sacredness of work is expressed well in the prayer 'For the Sanctification of Human Labour.' (This prayer is found in the Roman Missal under the heading 'Masses and Prayers for Various Needs and Occasions,' n. 26). Here we read, 'O God, who through human labour never cease to perfect and govern the vast work of creation, listen to the supplications of your people and grant that all men and women may find work that befits their dignity, joins them more closely to one another and enables them to serve their neighbours.'

Our liturgy, too, is work. Its root word, *leitourgia*, means 'the work of the people.' We are always working. And it is through our work that we find our dignity and we are joined with one another. The Church regards human labour rather highly. Look back to Pope Leo XIII in *Rerum Novarum*: 'The Church should not be so preoccupied with the spiritual concerns of her children as to neglect their temporal and earthly interests.' The teaching of *Rerum Novarum*, published in 1891, provides a landmark for the Church. This is why later popes have commemorated its anniversary: Pius XI for the 40th anniversary, Paul VI for the 80th, John Paul II for the 90th and the centenary. Also, John Paul II coined the term, the 'Gospel of Work.' He says that the value of work is determined by, not so much the kind of work being done, but by the person who is doing the work.

Our work should enable us to flourish in three significant areas. First, work enables us to support ourselves and our families. Second, by working we can make a contribution to the greater community through the goods and services we produce and the money we earn. Third, our work should provide us with a source of creativity. In sum, human labour should support human dignity.

Having said that, I admit that there are times when temptation creeps in and my work doesn't seem so dignified. The evil spirit sounds off, telling me that my work is meaningless: there is so much effort for so little profit. The evil spirit spooks me with a hissing voice: 'You are trying to teach, but do you really think that your students will remember all you've taught them . . . after the test?! Do you think that it will have a lasting effect on them, that it will move them, or really change them?! You're casting your pearls before swine.' Some days, I admit, I don't *feel* the dignity from my work. But then the Holy Spirit grabs me and drags me out to the desert . . . to the scene where a mob of five thousand people are following Jesus, hoping for healing and to satisfy their hungers. The disciples worry: how can we feed so many with so little? It's not enough! But I remember how he took five loaves of bread and two fish, multiplied them miraculously, and fed all those people.

And then I can hear the Lord say, 'Give me what you have! Don't tell me it's not enough. Don't count; don't measure. Give me the little you have and I will multiply it. Give me your teaching and your study, your prayer, your preaching, and all your preparation. Give me your cooking and cleaning, along with your care for your kids and your elders. Give me your service and your creativity. Give me your success and your failure. Give me your work and I will multiply it. I will feed them and they will eat so much they'll be stuffed, and they'll carry home doggie bags to continue the feast.'

It's like what we do whenever we celebrate the Eucharist. We present the Lord with a few hosts of bread and a small cup of wine, 'the fruit of the earth and the vine, and the work of human hands,' and we ask the Lord to bless it so it becomes 'the Bread of Life and our spiritual drink.'

It's in our work that we come to know ourselves, standing before God and with one another.

May God bless our work. Amen.