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Working Conscientiously

We offer the third in a series of articles on how to sanctify our daily work in light of the teachings of St. Josemaria.

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"If we really want to sanctify our work, we have inescapably to fulfil the first condition: that of working, and working well, with human and supernatural seriousness."[1]

We have seen, in **a previous article**, that working for a supernatural

reason is the "soul" of the sanctification of work.[2] Now we will look at the "body" it animates: work well done. If our reason for working is truly love for God and neighbor, this necessarily entails that the job be done as well as possible.

We should especially keep in mind that, as St. Josemaria taught, sanctifying our ordinary work requires doing the work itself well, aiming to do it as perfectly as possible, and fulfilling all our professional and social obligations. It requires working conscientiously, responsibly, lovingly and perseveringly, without negligence or sloppiness.

To profit from this teaching of Opus Dei's founder, we should bear in mind that when we speak about working well we are referring above all to the *activity* involved, and not to its *outcome*.

It can happen that, in spite of our best efforts, the end product is defective, either through some unintentional mistake or through factors outside our control. In these cases, which are not uncommon, we see clearly the difference between working with a Christian outlook and being successful in a merely human sense. In the first case, it is the act of working itself which is esteemed, and although the desired object hasn't been achieved, it was done as well as possible for love of God and the desire to co-redeem with Christ, and so nothing has been wasted. Thus we don't get upset when confronted with setbacks but try to overcome them, seeing them as an opportunity to be more united to Christ's Cross. But if one is seeking primarily success, then when things don't work out well everything is regarded as a failure. Clearly someone with this perspective will

never understand what it means to sanctify professional work.

Working conscientiously means trying to do things as perfectly as possible humanly speaking, for supernatural reasons. It doesn't mean working well and afterwards adding a supernatural motive. It is much deeper than that. What leads a Christian to do things perfectly is love for God, because "it is no good offering to God something that is less perfect than our poor human limitations permit. The work that we offer must be without blemish and it must be done as carefully as possible, even in its smallest details, for God will not accept shoddy workmanship. 'You shall not offer anything that is faulty,' Holy Scripture warns us, 'because it would not be worthy of him' (Lev 22:20)."[3]

When a person tries to do things well, he is usually successful and

produces a good result. Moreover, striving to sanctify one's work generally leads to professional prestige, since love for God leads one "to excel oneself gladly in duty and in sacrifice." [4] But we should never forget something that bears emphasising: that at times God allows setbacks and failures precisely so that we purify our intention and share in Christ's Cross. And this doesn't mean that we haven't worked well and sanctified our work.

Human virtues in work

Work well done brings into play the human virtues informed by charity. "A complete range of virtues is called into play when we set about our work with the purpose of sanctifying it: 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...And all this, I emphasise, is for the sake of Love."[5]

We need all the human virtues in our work, because they form a fabric in which the threads mutually reinforce one another. But an order exists among them: some threads have to be inserted before others, as when weaving a tapestry.

Since the first requirement is to work, and work well, one understands why our Founder highlights "two human virtues, industriousness and diligence, which merge into one, for they both help us

in our efforts to make good use of the talents we have each received from God."[6]

As in the Gospel parable, our Lord has endowed us with talents to fulfil the mission of placing him at the summit of earthly activities by sanctifying our profession. We cannot behave like the *wicked and slothful servant*,[7] who buried the talent he had received. God wants the gifts he has given us to be productive. And so we have to work hard, diligently, exactingly, to a high standard, doing the best we can.

Industriousness and diligence lead one to undertake the job that has to be done, not what we feel like doing, and to do it as and when we ought. "A hardworking person makes good use of time, for time is not only money, it is glory, God's glory! He does as he ought and concentrates on what he is doing, not out of routine

nor to while away the passing hours, but as the result of attentive and pondered reflection. This is what makes a man diligent. Our everyday usage of this word 'diligent' already gives us some idea of its Latin origin. "Diligent" comes from the verb '*diligo*,' which means to love, to appreciate, to choose something after careful consideration and attention. The diligent man does not rush into things. He does his work thoughtfully and lovingly." [8]

We have to fight against laziness, one of the seven deadly sins and "mother of all vices." [9] One of its forms is indolence in the fulfilment of duty: [10] putting off what we find difficult and giving priority to other things we like more or which take less effort. "Don't put off your work until tomorrow," [11] St. Josemaría urges us. At times, "relying on flimsy excuses, we become too easygoing and forget about the marvellous

responsibility that rests upon our shoulders. We are content with doing just enough to get by. We let ourselves get carried away by false rationalisations and waste our time, whereas Satan and his allies never take a holiday." [12] We don't serve God faithfully "if we can be called careless, unreliable, frivolous, disorganised, lazy or useless." [13]

Professional work is a field for the exercise of all the human virtues, following the example of Jesus' years in Nazareth. Order, serenity, cheerfulness, optimism, fortitude, constancy, fidelity, humility, meekness, magnanimity, and all the other human virtues, turn professional work into a fruitful terrain that flowers under the rain of grace.

Without the daily effort to practise these virtues it is easy to commit the same mistake as those who consider

themselves "practising" Catholics because they go to Mass and say some prayers, but whose professional life is not governed by Christian moral principles, and more or less openly coexists with faults against justice, truthfulness, or uprightness.

Work of this sort is not pleasing to God, and it cannot be described as well done, or sanctified, even though the end product may be humanly outstanding for its "technical" perfection in some aspects. St. Josemaría always taught the need to put one's faith into practice, to "incarnate" it, in one's professional work, in a unity of life. And this is done through human virtues informed by charity.

Without charity, a person is unable to sanctify his work, because charity (supernatural love for God and for souls) is the essence of holiness. A

Catholic who is a conscientious worker does not sanctify his work if he is lacking in charity. In reality neither can he be said to work very well, because charity dwells *within* the virtues, and if it is absent they all sooner or later degenerate into injustice, hatred, anger, envy....

Love for God is not a mere sentiment. It is the action of the theological virtue of charity which, together with faith and hope, ought to govern the daily lives of the children of God through the exercise of the human virtues. Only thus can we identify ourselves with Christ, perfect God and perfect Man.

Little things

The Christian virtues are normally expressed and developed in professional activity through little things. Industriousness itself, which in a certain sense underlies the other virtues in a person's work, does not

consist in just working a lot, because one shouldn't forget that "by neglecting small details you could work on and on without rest and yet live the life of a perfect idler." [14]

The virtue of industriousness can lose its true value if we are inattentive to small points of order we find difficult, or we fail to begin and finish things punctually, or we neglect family duties or apostolic tasks with the excuse that work absorbs almost all our energies. Paying attention to little things helps protect against this danger, for it safeguards one's right intention, since many small details are noticed only by God.

Holiness does not consist in doing more difficult things every day, said St. Josemaría, but in doing them every day with greater love. The secret of working better each day lies in little things—small aspects a child

of God pays attention to in order to finish a job as perfectly as possible.

Another thing altogether is being a perfectionist, the defect of seeking perfection in the external product of the work as the end in itself. This attitude represents a distortion of the human virtues, a sign that one has lost the big picture, the prudence that leads one to say at times: "the best is the enemy of the good." This striving after perfection can cause one to neglect other qualities of good work, like finishing it on time.

Perfectionism is a surrogate for perfection; it is a sign of self-love and vanity, and has to be overcome with the realism of Christian humility which recognises one's limitations and trusts in God.

God created everything out of love, and his works are perfect: *Dei perfecta sunt opera*.^[15] Our work is a participation in the work of creation,

[16] and it too has to be perfect, insofar as our abilities permit, with God's grace.

Attention to detail marks the "divine way" of working of a child of God, because it expresses the perfection of love. And it is fundamental to becoming contemplatives in our work, because just as God created the world and *saw that it was good*, [17] contemplating the reflection of his Love and Truth in what he had created, analogously, with the infinite distance that analogy here implies, our work will be "good" and a means of contemplation if it is not only finished down to the last detail, but carried out in a morally upright fashion.. Thus it will be prayer, contemplative prayer, because work carried out as perfectly as possible, putting love into the small things, allows us to discover "that 'divine something' which is hidden in small details." [18] And so, our Father

concludes, "when a Christian carries out with love the most insignificant everyday action, that action overflows with the transcendence of God." [19]

Learning to work well

The marvelous panorama that the teaching of St. Josemaría opens to us has to be put into practice in daily life. "It's not enough to want to do good; we must know how to do it." [20] To serve God and others through our work requires preparation—competence not only in the technical aspects but also in the moral, human and Christian ones.

"To be useful, serve," are words St. Josemaría wanted to engrave on our hearts so we would never forget that, in order to be a good doctor or a good housewife, it's not enough to have good will: we also require skill and virtues. "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 his care."[21]

Professional formation to enable us to sanctify our work does not consist only in study and knowledge. As has been said above, it takes much more than that—human virtues informed by charity. This is the principal reason why professional formation lasts all of one's life, and is improved day by day when we strive to grow in Christian virtues. "It is not sufficient merely to want to have these virtues. We have to learn how to practise them. *Discite benefacere*—learn to do good (*Is* 1:17). We need to make a habit of exercising each virtue, by actually being sincere, truthful, balanced, calm and patient... For love is proved by deeds and we cannot love God only by word, but 'with deeds and in truth' (*Jn* 3:18)."[22]

A wonderful channel for this formation is to be found in spiritual direction. If we open our hearts wide, we will receive sound advice—at times relating to ethical or moral duties—because the Holy Spirit will grant us his light and grace. We also have to be ready to receive this formation in the workplace itself, by paying attention to our colleagues' observations. This requires humility, a readiness to recognise our own limitations and to allow ourselves to be helped, overcoming self-sufficiency, presumption and vanity.

Professional ambition

Professional ambition is a strong incentive to learn how to work well. But it is important to understand it from a Christian point of view, and not see it simply as a natural inclination. Rightly understood, it is the desire to serve God and others through our work, to give a Christian

meaning to human progress and thereby imbue society with the spirit of Christ. This is the core of a child of God's professional ambition, which spurs our human interest in the task at hand and nourishes it with supernatural hope, leading us to strive to turn "the prose of each day into heroic verse." [23]

The most humdrum activities are no longer a monotonous chain of repetitive actions, just as they weren't such for Jesus, Mary and Joseph in Nazareth. We discover in our tasks a new dimension, the joy of God's presence, who accepts the offering of work that is well done.

For a child of God, professional ambition is not a selfish whim. It is the ambition to carry out the work God wants, so that we sanctify it and make it fruitful. Therefore our professional vocation is an important part of our divine vocation. But God's

will in this regard is discovered not only in our natural interests and aptitudes (though these are certainly an important factor) but also in the circumstances divine Providence places us in, and specifically through the duties we have to fulfil and the services we can offer.

The confluence of all these factors configures our professional vocation, which is called a "vocation" because it really does represent a call from God to choose, in accord with our circumstances, the professional activity best suited to our sanctification and apostolate.

In this context we see clearly the difference between professional ambition and its pathological expression, "professionalitis" The former is love for work as a means of sanctification and apostolate; the latter is enslavement to an idol that has become an end in itself. And this

can happen without our expressly intending it, if we fail to rectify our intention and work in practice for earthly goals and human success.

St. Josemaría warns us of this danger: "you should put your professional interests in their place: they are only means to an end; they can never be regarded—in any way—as if they were the basic thing. These attacks of 'professionalitis' stop you from being united with God!"[24] Learning to work well also means learning to keep work in its place, a place which is so important that it is the hinge of sanctification in ordinary life, but always only a means.

Good professionals are recognised by the quality of their work. Everybody knew St. Joseph as *the carpenter*;^[25] and Jesus was *the carpenter's son*, '*fabri filius*,' a carpenter himself.^[26] They haven't left us any of the

products of their work, the articles they made—and well made they were, within the limitations of the tools at their disposal, working with effort, order and cheerfulness, while Mary looked after the household chores with the same spirit. What they *have* left us, though, is Jesus' redemptive love in his daily work, and that of Mary and Joseph united to him with one heart. This is the core of the sanctification of work.

1. *The Forge*, 698
2. Cf. *The Way*, 359
3. *Friends of God*, 55
4. *Furrow*, 527
5. *Friends of God*, 72
6. *Ibid.* 81
7. Mt 25:26
8. *Friends of God*, 81

9. *Furrow* 505. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1866
10. Cf. St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q.54, a.2, ad 1
11. *The Way*, 15
12. *Friends of God*, 62
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Furrow*, 494
15. Deut 32:4 (Vg)
16. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2427
17. Gen 1:10 ff
18. *Conversations*, 116
19. *Ibid.*
20. *Christ is Passing By*, 50
21. *Ibid.*

22. *Friends of God*, 91

23. *Christ is Passing By*, 50

24. *Furrow*, 502

25. Mt 13:55

26. Cf. Mk 6:3

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