



## *Three Practical Points for Developing a Spirituality of Work*

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My friends, it is great to be here! Thanks for your kind welcome!

I've been asked to speak a few words about work and holiness, and about how we can sanctify our daily work.

That's a topic that's always close to my heart. The sanctification of work is the key to the mission of lay people in the world. Promoting that mission has been an important priority in my pastoral ministry for many years, back to the days when I was a priest.

So I'm happy to talk about that with you this evening.

I want to start by saying something about the beatification of Pope John Paul II a few days ago, on Mercy Sunday.

I know that Pope John Paul had a big influence on some of your lives. You are not alone. He was very important to me, also. I still feel a strong spiritual connection with him.

When he was named Pope in 1978, I had been ordained a priest only for three months. So I feel like my pastoral ministry has continued to unfold under his care as my spiritual father.

I believe his beatification will be a beautiful grace for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, for California, and for all the nations of the Americas and the rest of the world.

And Blessed John Paul is relevant to what we're talking about tonight.

Because he was "the Pope of work," he talked a lot about the dignity of work. He even wrote an encyclical letter on the subject, called "On Human Labor."

Blessed John Paul believed that the Gospel of Jesus Christ included a “Gospel of work.” In fact, he said one of the pressing needs in the world today is to understand the relationship of our work to the Gospel. He said we need to live out in our lives a true “Christian spirituality of work.”<sup>i</sup>

What a lot of people forget is that Blessed John Paul’s teaching grew out of his first-hand experience with hard manual labor.

When the Nazis invaded and set up their occupation regime in Poland in 1939 and 1940, he was forced to go to work in the stone quarry of a chemical company.

This company made bicarbonate soda that was used for explosives. The work was hard and dangerous. The limestone had to be blasted out of the walls with dynamite. Then the rock had to be broken up and shoveled into small railway cars and hauled out of the quarry.

The young John Paul worked for a time breaking the rock and shoveling it. Later he was moved into the factory. There he worked the night shift, hauling heavy wooden pails of whitewash from the limestone calcinating furnaces.<sup>ii</sup>

For the rest of his life, Blessed John Paul always said that his experience taught him to see human labor in a new way — in light of the cross and the Gospel.

He wrote a poem about his experience called “The Quarry.” Let me quote two lines from it.

The first is this: “The greatness of work is inside man.”

This is the second: “Man matures through work which inspires him to difficult good.”<sup>iii</sup>

Those are two good lines to start our conversation tonight. They are the outlines for a truly Catholic understanding of work.

We have to admit, my friends: that’s not how our culture thinks about work. For us as Catholics, work must always be more than a means to an end. Work must always be more than what we do to get things done. More than a way we make the money we need to buy things.

In the Catholic vision, work is part of the duty we have as children of God. Through our work, we take the bounty of God’s creation and we use and transform it so that it serves the good of our neighbors and the betterment of our world.

Our professional work is the “crossroads” where we meet God and serve him. It is one of the arenas in which we are called to play out God’s call to holiness.

We are called to be saints, my friends, holy men and holy women. We are called to be people who live for the love of God and the loving service of our neighbors.

And as lay people, you are called to become saints — not in a monastery or rectory or chancery — but in the middle of the world. We are called to become saints through our ordinary work.

That's not easy. You know that better than I do. There are a lot of pressures and competing values that you have to contend with.

So I want to offer you this evening three practical points of advice for developing what Blessed John Paul called a “spirituality of work.”

My first point is this: *Remember that you are always in the presence of God.*

God is with you all the time my friends — whether you're waking or sleeping, working or playing. No matter where we are or what we're doing, God is not far from us.

That means that you can talk to God all day long. You can make your work into a prayer. Everything you do can be part of an ongoing, daily conversation with God.

St. Benedict had a rule for his monks. In Latin it was *ora et labora*. It means “work and pray.”

That's a good way for you to think about your day. As a dialogue of love with God in which you are “offering up” to him all the little things you do during the day.

My second piece of advice is this: *Remember that your work is a “divine commission.”*

God has put you here for a reason. Your professional work is part of God's plan for your life.

Jesus Christ calls each one of us. He doesn't only call priests or religious. He calls each of us by name. He knew you by name before you were born. He had a plan for your life. And your professional work, your state of life in the world, is a part of that plan.

Each of us can say what Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman said: “God has committed some work to me which has not been committed to another. I have my mission — I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told of it in the next.”<sup>iv</sup>

Each of us is here to play a part in God's plan that only we can play. We are here to be “co-creators” with God. We share in his work of redeeming this world in Christ and growing the Kingdom of God.

And as lay people you fulfill your role, in large part, through your professional work.

So keep this in mind all the time during the day, my friends: Your job, your work, is part of a mission that God has entrusted to you.

There is not a one-size-fits-all style for Christian holiness.

In an advanced industrial and technological society like ours, we need good Christians everywhere: in boardrooms and in factories; in quarries and in laboratories; in corporate management, non-profits, in government.

Blessed John Paul used to say: “The ways of holiness are many, according to the vocation of each individual.”<sup>v</sup>

The mission *you* are called to do is different from the mission that the person sitting next to you is called to. But you all share a common purpose: To grow in holiness and love through your work. And, also through your work, to help others grow in holiness and love, too.

This brings me to my third point: *Make everything you do in your work something beautiful you do for God.*

St. Paul said: “Whatever your task, work heartily, as serving the Lord not men.”<sup>vi</sup>

All our work can be offered to God as a kind of worship, an offering of love, a way we give him thanks and praise.

Any honorable task you do during the day can be offered to God. Even the littlest things. Everything you do can be sanctified.

“Whatever you do,” St. Paul used to say, “do all for the glory of God.”<sup>vii</sup>

You have to look for these opportunities in the course of the day. You have to get in the habit of beginning every new task with a prayer of offering to God.

Blessed Mother Teresa used to say: “Offer to God every word you say and every movement you make.”

She taught us that everything we do can be “something beautiful for God.”<sup>viii</sup>  
My friends, if you keep these three basic points in mind, you will begin to notice a difference in your lives and in your work. Your work will start to become a labor of love. You will find yourself developing your own personal spirituality of work.

Practice the presence of God. Treat your work as a calling from God. And make everything you do something beautiful for God.

One final point: Stay close to Christ and his Church and sacraments. Join your work in the world to the “work” of the sacred liturgy.

The Eucharist should be the pattern for everything you do. The Eucharist gives us a true spirituality of work. In the Eucharist we take the fruits of the earth and the work of human hands and we offer them to God in a sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise.

We need to bring everything that we do to the altar. We need to offer all the works of our hands along with the bread and wine. We need to make our lives — and everything we do with our lives — a sacrifice that is pleasing and acceptable to the Lord.

We need to see our work — and our lives — “Eucharistically.” Everything can be your Eucharist. Every little thing you do during your day. Make it a prayer to God! Do it beautifully for Jesus!

Thank you for your invitation to speak with you tonight.

I ask the prayers of the new Blessed John Paul for you and your families. May he help you learn to see your work as the means through which you grow in holiness and virtue. Through your work, may you help others achieve the holiness and virtue for which each of us is made.

I also ask Our Lady of Guadalupe to intercede for you and your families. May she help you to follow her Son more faithfully — that through your work you might give honor to God and help to sanctify yourselves, and your brothers and sisters.

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<sup>i</sup> *Laborem Exercens* (1981), 24–27.

<sup>ii</sup> Weigel, *Witness to Hope* (HarperCollins, 1999), 53–58; Szulc, *Pope John Paul II* (Scribner, 1995), 115–117; Pope John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery* (Doubleday, 1996), 20–22.

<sup>iii</sup> In Wojtyla, *Collected Poems* (Random House, 1982), 61–71.

<sup>iv</sup> “Meditations on Christian Doctrine” (1848).

<sup>v</sup> *Novo Millenio Ineunte*, 31

<sup>vi</sup> Col. 3:23–24.

<sup>vii</sup> 1 Cor. 10:31.

<sup>viii</sup> Scott, *A Revolution of Love: The Meaning of Mother Teresa* (Loyola, 2005), 52.