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CATHOLIC THEOLOGY OF WORK AND WORSHIP

REV. JOHN A. PERRICONE*

In Frederick Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Zarathustra is asked about his happiness. He replies, "Do I then strive after *happiness*? I strive after my *work*."¹ In this phrase, Nietzsche correctly identified one of the extremes in which modernity conceives the nature of man: *Man is his work*.

The unfortunate result of this conception of man is that work does not furnish happiness. Happiness is the result of reposing in the possession of an end or purpose, which here is always being striven for, but never achieved. Since God alone is that which gives life purpose, absent God purposefulness vanishes. Modernity has exiled God from its world. Work is performed for its own sake and carries no gratification.

It will require the honesty of philosophers like John Paul Sartre, who proclaimed life's absurdity, to make finally explicit the full consequences of society bereft of God. In such a society interests are merely economic, and those interests alone rise to relevancy as moral considerations. All else are matters of personal taste, and per the ancient adage, "de gustibus non disputandum."²

The present state of affairs confirms this societal downfall. Scolding editorials are written by indignant pundits enraged that Americans would dare take issue with a philandering chief executive who, after all, is diligently performing his job, stretching the Dow Jones to a dizzying ten-thousand.

This kind of society works only for the sake of work and does little to examine how the work is achieved. Its work never sees anything beyond itself. It is self-referential and, therefore, self-

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¹ FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *THUS SPAKE ZARATHUSTRA* 364 (Thomas Common trans., 6th ed. 1967).

² "There ought to be no argument about tastes."

defeating. It fails to recognize that work is not the end for which man exists, for if it is, man exists without an end. Nietzsche understood this all too well and expressed the dilemma through the pathetic expression of Zarathustra, "Do I then strive after happiness? I strive after my work."³

The origin of modernity's febrile pursuit of work is either sloth or disillusion with the supernatural. When man begins to find God and theological things too demanding, he drowns out their summons by the empty activity of work with no purpose. This work acts as a din, forcing out the quiet voice of conscience that bids us to the adoration of the Creator, denying us our perception of God, and stifling our spirituality.

Where the Nietzschean pole posits all work and no happiness, the other extreme theory of work proposes no work and no happiness. This Statist vision generates an underclass permanently bound to indigence. It is the enlightened Twentieth Century liberal counterpart of slavery. Certain men are deemed irredeemably inferior by never being called to exercise either the same responsibilities or achievements, which constitute the dignity of man. Consequently, with purposefulness wrenched from their lives, this underclass lives with neither work nor happiness.

New enclaves are created for this new set of inferiors, as their cruel fate is perpetuated, sometimes for generation upon sad generation. They are tethered not to cotton mills but worse, to the heavy chains of Statist folly called the welfare system. Their liberal master surrounds them with a drone of propaganda, even in academe, convincing them that their victimhood wins them perpetual entitlement. Their only occupation becomes idleness, and their sole diversion becomes violence. This Statist redistributism should not be confused with the Church's call for the state's obligation to promote the common good. Rather, this is the slow strangulation of the common good.

Leo XIII captures the Christian vision of charity in *Rerum Novarum* issued on May 15, 1891. He teaches, "[t]hus by degrees came into existence the patrimony which the Church has guarded with jealous care as the inheritance of the poor. Nay, in order to spare them the shame of begging, the . . . [Church has

³ NIETZSCHE, *supra* note 1, at 364.

provided aid for] the needy.”⁴ The common mother of rich and poor has aroused everywhere the heroism of charity and has established congresses of religious and many other useful institutions for help and mercy. In this way, hardly any kind of suffering exists that is not afforded relief.

In the present day, many that are like the heathen of old seek to blame and condemn the Church for such eminent charity. In its place, they would substitute a system of relief organized by the state, but no human expedience will ever make up for the devotedness and self-sacrifice of charity. Charity is a virtue that pertains to the Church. For virtue it is not, unless it be drawn from the most sacred heart of Jesus Christ, and whosoever “turns his back on the Church cannot be near to Christ.”⁵

Between the extremes of Godless work and endless charity, we set the Catholic notion of work. As with any Catholic conception, revelation builds upon reason. Man enjoys his superiority over all other living things because of his faculties of intellect and will. Because he is able to not only know that things are according to the way that senses apprehend them, as do the animals, he also understands their nature: what it is that they are.

The faculty of his will, that which propels him toward the possession of the good, is the root of human action. It is in *action* where man cultivates his nature. In the broadest sense of the word, man is by nature designed to work for the fulfillment of his faculties.

Man’s dignity, however, is not in his work. It rests in his very being, his nature. Work manifests the dignity inherent in his nature, as well as elevating him to the heights of excellence that are his destiny.

Think carefully about this. Think about work not as dignity, but as the manifestation of dignity. Man ultimately is not made for work, but for leisure. Leisure is the time allotted for the enjoyment, or as the philosophers put it, the contemplation, of higher things: friendship, family, truth, knowledge, beauty, and, most importantly, God.

So central is this to the ancient wisdom that Aristotle overemphasizes the enjoyment of truth to the depreciation of work as

⁴ POPE LEO XIII, THE CONDITION OF LABOR (May 15, 1891), *reprinted in FIVE GREAT ENCYCLICALS* 1, 14 (1939) [hereinafter *CONDITION OF LABOR*].

⁵ *Id.* at 15.

labor. This is illustrated by Pericles in *Plutarch's Lives*. Plutarch remarks that no well-born young man would want to be Phidias.⁶ A gentleman enjoys the contemplation of the sculptor's masterpiece he says, but he would never himself use hammer and chisel and get covered with sweat and dust.⁷

Aristotle, as we say in philosophy, proves too much. While it is true that man's highest vocation is to enjoy the greatest goods, this does not supplant the goods that are achieved in their own order, albeit lower, through work.

Samuel Johnson hints at this metaphysical priority of the enjoyment of the higher things, when he remarks that the end of all activity is to be happy at home. In this properly understood schema, work is not man's end. Knowledge, virtue, and God are the things integral to man, and work is a means to those ends.

Man realizes his dignity through his work, just as the student does. The replacement of sentimentality in education with achievement does not create self-esteem but self-absorption. Man achieves self-esteem not through repeating it as a mantra or having it repeated to him as a Greek Chorus. Man achieves self-esteem through his action, his work. To evade this law of human nature is to leave authentic self-respect outside the reach of man.

When Aristotle teaches that knowledge makes a bloody entrance, he is implying that in that entrance, though burdensome, one experiences a transcendent satisfaction, and more importantly, a noble realization. Again, it is through work that man arrives at happiness. Work not only furnishes self-realization, but also self-oblation, and through it man weaves the bonds of unity with others. It is not only social, but it engenders sociability.

Yves Simon, in his work, *Work, Society and Culture*, avers, "Now to work together in order to build a house, dig a canal, or drain marshes, means to be engaged in collective external actions which do not have the same profundity of immanent acts of knowing, enjoying, or loving the same thing together."⁸ While

⁶ Phidias was the sculptor of the statue of Jupiter at Pisa and a friend of Pericles. His work was respected but, as Plutarch submits, appreciation of an artist's work does not translate into admiration for the artist, nor does it inspire imitation of the artist's life. See *PLUTARCH'S LIVES: THE LIVES OF THE NOBLE GRECIANS AND ROMANS* 183 (John Dryden trans., First Modern Library ed. 1932).

⁷ See *id.*

⁸ YVES R. SIMON, *WORK, SOCIETY & CULTURE* 78 (Vukan Kuic ed., 1971).

work, as a ground of sociability, does not have the same profundity it once did, it has something else. It occurs daily. It occupies far more space and time in human life than any other activity.

Simon brings the argument even further by placing work at the center of family cohesion:

Husband and wife, parents and children, can all depend here for their unity, that is, for not scattering, divorcing or running away, on something more than just sensuous attraction, or oath of fidelity, or marital, paternal or filial love. Working together, they all share also in the sociability of the worker. Their unity, in other words, is brought about by their common tasks which most naturally involve a division of labor.⁹

The Church perfects this secure foundation of reason with her teachings. Work is principally understood in the context of God's action *extra se* in the act of creation. Because no breach ever exists between faith and reason, God's work of creation manifests His being, as man's work reflects his.

It is important to note that God does not require creation for the splendor of His majesty; rather, the work of creation is a manifestation of God's splendor. As Saint Thomas teaches in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*, "the virtue of each thing is what makes its possessor and his work good."¹⁰

Not to be missed, however, is the fact that God rests from His work on the seventh day, demonstrating that rest is the end to which all things are ordered. Rest as contemplation or enjoyment, or more expressively, activity as satiety, is important.

Even Adam and Eve, in their pre-lapsarian state, are summoned to work. In Genesis, they are told to "[i]ncrease and multiply, and fill the earth, and subdue it."¹¹ This confirms the intrinsic value of work as the natural condition of man, which only ceases when he has achieved his beatific condition, when work will cease and beatific satiety commences. This rest is not a state of passivity, however, but one of intense activity, the activity of receiving the fullness of the Trinity and moving oneself in ecstatic fulfillment.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ SAINT THOMAS AQUINAS, *SUMMA CONTRA GENTILES*, pt. I, ch. 37, art. 2, at 151 (Anton C. Pegis, F.R.S.C. trans., 1975) (citation omitted).

¹¹ *Genesis* 1:28.

When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, their work was penalized by struggle. "And to Adam he said: Because thou hast hearkened to the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldst not eat, cursed is the earth in thy work; with labour and toil shalt thou eat . . ."¹² Here, work is not described as the punishment for sin, but working by the sweat of our brow is.

God uses work a second time in recreation. This second act of recreation is not accomplished from the vault of heaven as in Genesis, but from the gibbet of the Cross on Calvary. During those hours of agony, God works not through seven days but through seven words. After this most perfect work of restoring all things to the splendor of their original plan (executed through the splendor of Christ's perfect humanity hypostatically united to the Divinity), our Lord cries out "Consummatum est"—"It is finished."

Work still entails struggle because, after all, we still remain in a fallen state. It will only be rectified in the Beatific Vision, where work is no longer carried out for itself without attendant happiness. The work on Earth is a propaedeutic for Paradise. Its intrinsic value is unmistakable, but its value is unmistakably relative.

Josef Pieper reprises this profound theme in his work *Leisure: The Basis of Culture*. The philosophical act, the religious act, the aesthetic act, as well as the existential shocks of love and death, or any other way in which man's relation to the world is convulsed and shaken, are all fundamental ways of acting that belong naturally together by reason of the power which they have in common of enabling a man to break through and transcend the workday world.¹³

Leo XIII caps this theology of work in his masterpiece encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. Recall that the Pontiff is coming to the assistance of workers exploited by ideologically driven economic systems. He writes brilliantly of their rights, poising his remarks between the Scylla of unbridled capitalism and the Charybdis of socialist collectivism. As he unveils his timeless teach-

¹² *Genesis* 3:17.

¹³ JOSEF PIEPER, *LEISURE: THE BASIS OF CULTURE* 73 (1952).

ing, he places the issue in its proper Catholic context, a context, we might add, we have seen already, and I quote:

[T]he working man, too, has property and possessions in which he must be protected; and, first of all, there are his spiritual and mental interests. Life on earth, however good and desirable in itself, is not the final purpose for which man is created; it is only the way and the means to that attainment of truth, and that practice of goodness in which the full life of the soul consists. It is the soul which is made after the image and likeness of God; it is the soul that sovereignty resides, in virtue of which man is commanded to rule the creatures below him, and to use all the earth and ocean for his profit and advantage. "Fill the earth and subdue it; and rule over the fishes of the sea and fowls of the air, and all living creatures which move upon the earth." In this respect all men are equal . . .¹⁴

Here there is no difference between rich and poor, master and servant, ruled and ruler, for the same Lord is Lord over all. No man may with impunity outrage that human dignity which God Himself treats with great reverence. Nor can a man stand in the way of the higher life, which is the preparation of the external life of heaven. No man has, in this matter, power over himself to consent to any treatment that is calculated to defeat the end and purpose of his being. He cannot give up his soul to serve attitude. It is not man's own rights that are in question, but the rights of God, which are the most sacred and inviolable of all rights.

¹⁴ CONDITION OF LABOR, *supra* note 4, at 19.

