

12th Week of Ordinary Time- Wednesday

Feast of St. Jose Maria Escriva

The Dignity of Work

Readings: Genesis 2:4b-9, 15; Romans 8:26-30; Luke 5:1-11

About 13 years ago, when waiting on a platform in Paris for my train to Rome, I encountered some commotion. Loud whistles, screaming and plenty of waving flags and banners. Inquiring as to what was going on, I was calmly informed that it was a protest against the government plan to raise the retirement age to 62. Thinking I had heard incorrectly, I said, “Did you say, “Raise the retirement age to 62?”” The individual knew in an instant that I was an American. When exactly, did work become a bad word, akin to a naughty word whispered on the playground?

Work is good. Too often, we have been falsely conditioned to see work as a necessary evil at best. The general disregard for the sound anthropology that is contained in the Book of Genesis is as stunning as it is unsurprising. The unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the ‘form’ of the body, as taught by medieval ecumenical Councils.¹

Though we are made of body and soul, the human person is a unity. We have been created in God’s image and likeness. This is a profound realization if we stop to consider its implications. Not just a creature of God but created in His image and likeness. What is the significance of the Garden? Is this simply a story or is something much deeper at play?

“Then he breathed into his nostrils a breath of life, and thus man became a living being.” This breath signifies the moment when everything changed...in an instant, in a moment, and yet timeless. We became what created us to be, whom God created us to be. We acquired a rational, intellectual soul, separating us from all other creatures in all of creation. Our full dignity became apparent in the Garden. We were placed there to live, to toil, to share in God’s creation.

¹ Cf. Council of Vienne (1312): DS 902, quoted in the CCC para # 234

Our human dignity became unveiled in the Garden because of the dominion that the Lord God assigned to man over all other creatures, plants and animals. That fundamental dignity cannot be taken away by anyone, not by any law or any government. Our intellect sets us apart.

Our Saint Jose Maria said: “How can you dare use that spark of the divine intelligence—your mind— in any way other than in giving glory to your Lord?”² Indeed, our minds are a reflection of God’s glory, a “spark of divine intelligence,” and to honor that gift requires of us that we use it.

Kids often ask silly questions, but I recall asking my parents why the speedometer on our Vistacruiser Station Wagon went up to 120 MPH when the speed limit was only 70 mph in those days. The paradox struck me as a bit peculiar. If we are made a certain way, it is frustrating to fail to realize one’s potential, much like the Porsche driver lumbering down Summit Ave. with its many potholes.

Something seems out of whack. The human mind, that divine spark, enables us to approach the heights of contemplation, and yet too often we remain in spiritual infancy. If we are truly to serve God, we must be ready to face indifference and misunderstanding whenever it may arise.

Our Catechism wisely teaches: The human person, created in the image of God, is a being at once corporeal and spiritual. The biblical account expresses this reality in symbolic language when it affirms that “then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.”³

It is entirely consistent to respect and care for God’s creation and His creatures, while at the same time keeping the clear distinction between human life and all other forms of life. Man was willed for himself and not for another.

² St. Jose Maria Escriva, *The Way*, # 782.

³ cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, para. #362, quoting Genesis 2:7, Cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 24 § 3

We honor saints because we desire to imitate their lives and their virtue. First century Roman citizens help us to recall the importance of imitating lives well-lived. Plutarch taught that virtuous deeds “implant in those who search them out a great and zealous eagerness which leads to imitation....The Good creates a stir of activity towards itself, and implants at once in the spectator an active impulse.”⁴

To utilize God’s gifts is not only a Christian duty, but in the very act of cooperating with God’s grace, our hearts are *stirred towards the good* and we seek it more readily and eagerly each day. Our Catholic faith calls us to be as Saint Jose Maria said, “contemplative souls in the midst of the world, who try to convert their work into prayer.”⁵

This begins by seeing the goodness of work in itself, and not merely as a means to an end. St. John Paul II taught us this in one of his early encyclicals, “On Human Work.”⁶: Work is a good thing for man—a good thing for his humanity—because through work man *not only transforms nature*, adapting it to his own needs, but he also *achieves fulfillment* as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes “more a human being.”

We may just become holy in this process. It is the universal call for all Christians. As St. Jose Maria wisely reminded us: “For the daily life we live, apparently so ordinary, can be a path to sanctity: it is not necessary to abandon one’s place in the world in order to search for God...because all the paths of the earth can be the occasion for an encounter with Christ.”⁷

May we celebrate this Mass with gratitude for the many ways this great saint helped to form generations of Catholics to seek sanctity in the midst of their daily lives. St. Jose Maria, pray for us.

⁴ Plutarch, *Life of Pericles* 1–4. (written 75 A.D.)

⁵ St. Jose Maria Escriva, *Furrow*, no. 497

⁶ John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (On Human Labor), no. 9, 1981.

⁷ (*Letter 24-III-1930*, no. 2).