

“ORA ET LABORA ET LABORA ET...”: IN PRAISE OF MANUAL LABOR

The invite was too good pass up. I brought my mother up to my oldest brother’s cabin for a few days of R & R, some card games, etc. As an added bonus, the fall colors in northern Wisconsin were at peak. The maple trees and **sumac** were especially stunning. Of course, there are always chores to do, part and parcel of lake living! Happy to help. One morning, we retrieved the pontoon boat after its fall servicing in a neighboring town 28 miles away. But before tucking it away in the garage for the winter, we needed to “vacuum the pontoon” and “wipe down the seats with 409”. **Vacuum** and **wipe down**, huh? You’d be amazed at how dog hair embeds itself over the course of a summer, especially with a playful Red Lab who loves to go for rides. **Two and a half hours** later, we finished! The next day, we repeated the exercise, this time with the speedboat. After swabbing the deck, I watched my brother deftly maneuver the boat trailer 90° backwards into the garage, nailing it on the first try!

All teasing aside, I jumped at the opportunity to vacuum, as that has always been my **favorite chore**. Wait a second—my “favorite” chore? That’s right. First, you **plot out** your route to be both efficient and precise. Second, you **see your progress** with every pass as well as where you need to double back. Vacuuming a pontoon is slightly more complicated than a bedroom. There are plenty of nooks and crannies, seemingly unreachable even on one’s hands and knees. Thank goodness for vacuuming attachments. I enjoy this work because (a) it is something **completely different** from my usual routine; (b) it brings with it a palpable sense of **accomplishment**; (c) such **work is** invigorating. Enjoying picture perfect fall weather while prayerfully marveling at **God’s creation** was icing on the cake.

St. Benedict of Nursia (†480) was clearly onto something by including **manual labor** as a **fundamental component** of the monk’s day. Then as now, work is viewed as a response to our loving Father who himself “worked” in the act of creation, resting on the seventh day to admire his handiwork. In **Chapter 48** of his famed **Rule**, Benedict begins: “Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the brothers should have specified periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading.” He adds, “From Easter to the first of October, they will spend their mornings after Prime till about the fourth hour (i.e.10:00 a.m.) at whatever work needs to be done.” Since my brother is no monastic scholar, we labored straight until the “sixth hour” (Noon), only breaking when called for a delicious lunch prepared by mom! Having missed my mid-morning coffee break, I hope I wasn’t too cranky as a result!

Far from merely being a **menial task**, St. Benedict intuited that manual labor was **good for the soul**. He wrote, “then they are truly monks when they live by the labor of their hands as did our fathers and the Apostles.” Perhaps he had in mind the admonition from St. Paul: “In fact, when we were with you, we instructed you that if anyone was unwilling to work, neither should that one eat.” (2 Thess. 3:10) The **monastic ideal** was truly achieved in part through the work of our hands. Such work brings about awareness and mindfulness, **key components** of the spiritual life. The monks could pray while they worked, sanctifying even the most menial task with the praise of God. Pray and Work—**Ora et labora**—the Benedictine motto. I’ve coined a new phrase—*Ora et aspira pulverem*—Pray and vacuum!

At the dawn of my first year in the college seminary, St. John Paul II issued his third encyclical. Entitled “*Laborem Exercens*” (On Human Work 14 Sept. 1981). Slated for release on the 90th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII’s May 1891 social encyclical, it had been delayed due to the **assassination attempt** on the pope’s life. The announcement of that horrific news over the loudspeaker while in class is seared into the memory of my final month of high school. He focused on the dignity of work, noting that the **ancient world** introduced a differentiation of work, assigning **lower value** to manual labor. Seeing it as unworthy of free men, it was assigned to slaves. They looked down upon manual labor. Pope John Paul II wrote that from a Christian perspective, “*the primary basis of the value of work is man himself*, who is its subject.” (LE #6) This was early in the pontificate of a man who hailed from a Communist country, where workers were valued only in relation to what they contributed to the state.

The Pope forcefully countered that ideology: “however true it may be that man is destined for work and called

to it, in the first place work is ‘for man’ and not man ‘for work.’” We are **subject** of work, not its **object**. And the family is the locus for teaching about work: “In fact, the family is simultaneously a *community made possible by work* and the first *school of work*, within the home, for every person.” (LE 10) Habits form early. It is incumbent upon parents to teach their young children the value of work, that they may **actively contribute** to family life. Conversely, if a negative attitude towards work develops, it will be hard to alter that initial trajectory. Work is **neither** a necessary evil nor a mere means to an end. It has value all its own. That said– if you are toying with inviting me to vacuum your rugs– sorry, but I think I’m booked that day. ☺

- *Brutta figura!* Recent revelations about financial impropriety in the Vatican are most troubling. Sardinian-born **Cardinal Angelo Becciu** has been relieved of his duties as well as “his rights connected to the cardinalate.” Complicated financial transactions and the failure to use accepted accounting procedures triggered suspicion, about which I have previously written. Unquestionably, it’s a very **bad look**, especially as it is alleged that some of the invested funds came from the Peter’s Pence collection.
- Awkward timing... due to Covid-19, the Pontifical **Peter’s Pence** Collection was postponed from late June until this weekend. Those wishing to contribute will find envelopes on the tables by the piers. You may place them in one of the four drop boxes.
- Pope Francis signed his **third encyclical** letter, “*Fratelli Tutti*” on Saturday in Assisi. Translated “Brothers (and sisters) All,” the title emanates from the words of St. Francis of Assisi himself. It treats such topics as human fraternity, the dignity of all persons, the preferential option for the poor and the obligation of solidarity.
- From RBG to ACB? With the death of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, President Trump nominated former Notre Dame Law professor and mother of seven **Amy Coney Barrett** for the Supreme Court. Several members of the Senate Judiciary Committee will not even meet with her– think they’ve made up their mind? Since 1789, 126 of the 163 high court nominees have been confirmed, many by an **overwhelming majority** or even voice vote as recently as 1965. It didn’t matter whether a (D) or (R) followed the nominating president’s name. Evidently, those days are long gone.
- While it can be awkward fumbling for your face covering, please step aside to **consume the Sacred Host immediately** upon receiving it, before heading back to the pew for a thanksgiving prayer.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector



Ruby, the lovable “pontoon carpet culprit”