

# Twentysecond Sunday of Ordinary Time

Do Good, Avoid Evil

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What to say about today's readings? Do good and avoid evil. And what makes for good or evil has less to do with following the rules and more to do with what it says about you. That the ultimate question to ask yourself when deliberating over a course of action is what kind of person you want to be. And if you want to be a companion of Jesus, a Jesuit with a small "j" you might say, then the question to ask is what would Jesus do, and how can I help?

Today is also Labor Day weekend. The unofficial end of summer fun. Time to put the nose back to the grindstone, or in the book. So today I thought I would reflect a bit on how the church has gone from seeing labor as a necessary evil to a good work, not simply something imposed upon us, as if we were slaves to an arbitrary master, but activity that ideally enables us to express who we are, that shapes who we become, such that in deliberating over what kind of job to pursue, here too, ideally, we should begin with the question of who do we want to be.

In 1981 Pope John Paul II, now Saint John Paul II, published an Encyclical on labor entitled "Laborens Excerrens". In it he said "through work one achieves fulfillment as a human being." "Indeed," he continues, "in a sense one becomes "more a human being" through one's labor."

American society shares this conviction. Welfare reform in 1994 was based on the belief that work builds character, indeed that without work of some kind, you cannot become a responsible, mature adult.

But as I alluded to above, being hard working was not always a virtue. On the contrary normally conservative JP II's praise of hard work is a actually a sharp departure from what the Church had taught up until the end of the nineteenth century. This older tradition is well illustrated by St Thomas Aquinas, the principal theologian of the medieval church. He said that labor is precisely a form of slavery; that those who labor participate in the sufferings of Christ. Like Christ's sufferings, labor in itself is evil. It can be redeemed though by being borne for the sake of others. Thus just as Christ bore his sufferings to

save us from our sins so too workers should bear their labors in order to provide for their families and for the material needs of society in general. In the medieval world, the laboring classes were supposed to free the aristocracy, literally, the “best people” from the need to work so that they could spend their time governing and training for battle on behalf of society. So too, the laboring classes were supposed to free the clergy from mundane work so that they might devote their time to prayer for the common welfare.

Now, Saint John Paul presents a very different spirituality of labor. He insists that labor itself can bring one closer to God; that far from being the mark of slavery, labor can be an expression of a free spirit. This is a view first proclaimed by the great reformers of the sixteenth century, Luther and Calvin—who preached that ordinary work even more than the activities of the best people and the prayers of the clergy can be a divine vocation, a calling from God.

Which view do we hold? Is the work we do a necessary evil, or a divine calling to my own best self? If we were to win the lottery today, would we retire tomorrow and never work again? Or when we retire, or for more and more of us, now that we are retired, and do not “have” to work to live, do we stop working? Or are we still drawn to work so as to live a better life, not materially, but spiritually? In other words, do we find our work a blessing or a curse?

I suspect that not all of us would answer this question in the same way. For some of us our work is fulfilling in much the way the Pope describes. It contributes to the meaningfulness and the happiness of our lives; we like who we are at work, in some sense it does express our “best” self. For others however, the medieval description fits better—we work for the paycheck, with an eye on the clock, eagerly awaiting “happy hour.”

Again Saint John Paul argues that what accounts for the difference is whether or not we can recognize ourselves in what we do. Are we able to express ourselves in our work or do we feel our work to have little to do with who we really are, that we can only really feel ourselves after work. To the extent that we do feel that we have no voice in how our work comes out, to the extent that we are merely following the orders of our boss, and there is no room for our own initiative or our own creativity, it's harder to see our labor as really

our own action--it feels more like slavery than freedom, more like a curse than a blessing.

Now the pope is saying that whether or not we find our work fulfilling is not a matter of spiritual or even moral indifference. Human labor should be fulfilling. If our work is not so, then we owe it to ourselves to try to find ways to make our work more an expression of who we are.. We ought to be able to take pride in our work, and the first step in doing so is to be able to feel that it is our work, not merely the orders of our boss; that the fact that it is done by us rather than by someone else makes a difference to the quality of the work itself.

St. John Paul's words are also addressed to those of us who are bosses. It is not a matter of indifference to God whether those who work for us find their work fulfilling or not. It is our responsibility as Christians to be always trying to make the jobs we create more personally rewarding ones, precisely by devising ways of involving workers in the decisions which affect their jobs and how they are to be carried out.

The character of labor has changed over the past centuries. It has changed from being a burden borne by the bulk of society in order to free a privileged minority for other, more rewarding activities, to becoming a principal resource for the development of character and the pursuit of a life of meaning and purpose. It has changed from being a necessary evil, to what John Paul proclaimed as a human right.

And so this weekend are actually celebrating labor. Tomorrow is a holiday, and also literally a holy day in our common American civil religion. And our own knights actually volunteer their labor, not for a paycheck but because of who they are and the kind of person they want to be, and the kind of community they want to live in.

May our work, both willing and necessary, be ever more blessing than curse. May we find God in our work, and in so doing also find ourselves.