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Catholic thought on labor: looking back ... and forward

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JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS

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LABOR DAY was last weekend. I was reading an old (July) TIME magazine as the Labor Day holiday approached. In it was an article about labor.

It was pretty dire.

Because of technology, the article said, many jobs have disappeared, and even more will cease to exist in the next several decades. Perhaps only half the jobs we have now will still be there in 50 years.

Robots are already doing even medical operations!

Of course, the decline of the opportunity to work is a big problem for society. But it also will mean an adjustment in our Catholic spirituality because for us, work is a central concept connected with becoming holy.

How does Catholic spirituality connect work and holiness? There are at least three ways, I believe. First, we speak of ourselves as images of God, and our God works! The creation account in Genesis pictures God as working hard for six days, and resting on the seventh. This imaginative account has more analytical legs in our theology about the “economic Trinity” — the three-fold work of our triune God who is expressing divine love through ongoing work of creating, redeeming and healing, and sustaining us and our universe. The great St. Thomas Aquinas talked of action rather than work; being and action belonged together and defined the person. Because the way they work says who they are — “action follows being” — we expect workers to take pride in their work, to work with integrity.

Secondly, as the industrial age dawned, our Popes led us to consider the rights of laborers; the rights of owners were already well established! Catholic advocacy for the dignity and safety of workers helped found labor unions, obtain employee benefits, and end child labor and labor discrimination. For our Church, labor bestows dignity on the person and just as importantly, it supports family life. We become our true selves — our holy selves — through the labor we do.

Third, Vatican II (1964) taught a renewed appreciation of the world. In some earlier periods of Catholic spirituality, the world was presented as something evil, at least to an extent. Therefore a person who wanted to be holy would flee from the world or try to have as little

immersion in it as possible. That is one reason why Priestly and Religious Life used to be seen as more holy than the lay state. Vatican II affirmed the biblical insight that the world is where the kingdom is coming to be. It lifted up the lay vocation by speaking of the essential kingdom role of the laity — to help make the world holy. Lay people do this through their work in the world and also through their work of the procreation and formation of children. This Vatican II perspective has been a rich insight, inspiring U.S. Catholics to participate more fully in many kinds of work where they were formerly under-represented — work like politics, science, and financial occupations.

Clearly, a somewhat different understanding of how we become holy will be needed as we begin to work less, and as fewer people work. In Scripture there is that brief image of the kingdom as “like a householder who brings out of his storehouse old things and new.” We have some good “old stuff” in our spiritual storehouse. We have some good insights into leisure — not recreation but leisure that embraces values and relationships. In the future we will have a lot of leisure. How can leisure lead us to holiness? We have a deep history of appreciating beauty, and an appreciation of how beauty leads to contemplation of the Divine. We are all called to contemplation, said Aquinas, and later Karl Rahner. Perhaps we can help our U.S. culture provide easier access to places and occasions where we can encounter the gift of beauty and be drawn into contemplation. We have deep tradition about the richness and joy of living simply, and we may all need that skill to lead holy lives in the next decades! And perhaps most valuable of all, we have deep spirituality and teaching about relationships and how they lead us to holiness.

In the future, work will still be, for many, a main context for leading a holy life. But human dignity rests on more than what we do in the go-go world of labor and professions. We need to learn how to draw a sense of dignity and worth, and draw spiritual nourishment for our holy selves, from these other occasions and paths — like leisure, beauty, simplicity, and relationships. Helping people to learn this might be the special call or holy labor of grandparents and retirees!

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