

Labor Day Reflection: On the dignity of work; more than a way to make a living

Journey toward
HOLINESS



By Sr. Mary Garascia, Ph.D.

I still remember where he sat, a popular football tackle in the high school where I taught U.S. History decades ago. One day I was berating him about his poor grades. He said with a disarming grin, “Aw Sister, look at it this way: without me, you wouldn’t have a curve!” We both laughed. It was a refreshing response. In this college prep school, he had found his path to social acceptance and personal acceptance. He understood that he was not a rocket scientist. He did not think his future value would lie in achieving great things for a Fortune 500 company, discovering a cure for cancer, writing a great book, or doing any of the other things David Brooks calls “resume virtues,” in his book “The Road to Character.”

COVID has made us conscious of “essential workers,” not only the highly skilled people in hospitals and research labs, but the multitude of other essential workers: agricultural workers, home health aides, building cleaning crews, stock clerks, dry cleaning and laundry service workers, maintenance people, people running little shops like gas stations, clerks and wait persons...in short, the multitude of people who do the many jobs we rely on to keep our world going.

This led me to thinking about Labor Day and work. Do we have good Catholic language about work, about labor--words that inspire people who have low status (but essential) jobs? For example, our US Catholic Catechism (p. 423) talks about work as “more than a way to make a living; it is a form of continuing participation in God’s creation.” How do these words fit a person who cleans bathrooms all day at a busy airport? The universal Catechism of the Catholic Church says that work honors the Creator’s gifts and talents received from him. Talents are not evenly distributed, however, as my football player knew. And society places artificial values on work, so that cleaning toilets is not rewarded but managing a stock portfolio is. The Catechism also speaks of work as a duty, and as suffering-- “carrying the cross, daily, in the work he is called to accomplish.” Well, duty and suffering is not something that attracts, and the idea of being “called” to a work, while lovely language, may best fit those who can pursue higher education and secure important positions in Church and society. Are there other ways to speak of work that better honor the dignity of all kinds of work?

David Brooks’ book suggests we should emphasize how we work, instead of what we work at or achieve. He says we should stress character virtues instead of resume virtues. Character virtues are kindness, compassion, love, humility, wisdom, courage, and integri-

ty to name a few—or we might think of the kindness, goodness and courage that Congressman John Lewis constantly stressed. No matter what the workplace is, it is the setting for practicing virtues; and practicing them develops and deepens our individual human characters, makes the workplace holy, and leads to a life well lived.

God also works. God’s activity or work is to create, to save, and to sustain us by a faithful, ongoing relationship of presence. This work is ours also. Our labor is to create a more humane world. We engage in this holy work when we help create joy and possibility, when we help with reconciliation, when we speak up and support others who speak up against injustices, fraud, bullying, character assassination, and other destructive workplace behaviors, when we commit ourselves to others in long term, loving friendship. These are job skills we all need to have.

Jesus gave us the spirituality of work as service through his words and actions. Service is an idea that embraces the hidden work of essential workers, and also the generative work of teachers, parents, grandparents. But labor serves not only those close to us or our employers. Our service is to the purpose of God for the universe itself. Louis Savory in his book, “Teilhard de Chardin on Morality; Living in an Evolving World,” says this: “Transforming the planet with creativity, compassion, love, and a consciousness that embraces all things is our real job during our time on earth, not just getting through life and gaining heaven.” And “in an evolving world, this is your new moral obligation—to help build the Body of Christ. There are no clear rules on how to do it. Your contribution is up to you to discover.” That puts all of us in proper perspective! We each have a limited and humble piece of this great work which we will pass on to those who come after us in the eons to come.

I’ve often wondered what my football player ended up doing. Whatever it was, I hope he ended up with the unshakeable dignity of the waitress interviewed by Studs Terkel for his 1974 landmark bestseller, “Working.” If someone asked her, “how come you’re just a waitress,” she would answer: “Don’t you think you deserved to be served by me?”

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