

# Work

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*Summary: Reviews Dom Rembert Sorg's, O.S.B. pamphlet "Towards a Benedictine Theology of Manual Labor." Discusses the traditional views of labor from both a philosophical and theological outlook, particularly that of the Egyptian Monks. Also mentions other writers who have contributed to a philosophy of labor. (DDLW #165).*

We are apt to assume here in *The Catholic Worker* that our Ideals on work (manual labor in this case) are well-known. Peter Maurin made manual labor and voluntary poverty the foundation of his teaching and these are our techniques of action, he said. Always he quoted St. Benedict whose motto "Pray and Work" was his also. He and Father Virgil Michel the Benedictine, used to talk endlessly about work in relation to bodily and mental health and in his vision of the integrated life-a life in which man would be as happy as possible in his labors- he always talked of the necessity of our using our bodies as well as our minds. He pointed with scorn to the fact that men in factories were alluded to as "hands" and that field workers in our huge industrial system of farming are considered "hands" also. It is well known, of course, that Peter opposed the capitalist industrial system on the land as well as in the city. He well recognized the plight of the migrant workers who are necessary to keep such a system of agriculture going.

The thing he always kept pointing out was that we did not take into consideration the needs of man and since man is not made to live alone, when we talk about man, we think also of the family and its needs; of light, space and air, a home of one's own, a garden for the children, a place to work and to play, and tools for work, and is it too much to expect that our dear Lord who provides us with all things necessary for body and soul, did not intend that we should have these means with which to work and to pray.

## A Theology of Labor

There is very little written on the subject of work that is available to students; much is written about the worker these days but very little about work itself, so when a pamphlet entitled "**Towards A Benedictine Theology of Manual Labor**" came into the office last month I was delighted. It is by Dom Rembert Sorg, O.S.B. and it can be obtained from St. Procopius Abbey, Benedictine Orient, Lisle Illinois. It is duplicated there for private distribution. Father Rembert himself is known to all readers of *Orate Fratres* for his very splendid articles. His own address is Holy Cross Mission, Fifield, Wisconsin, where he is

living his philosophy of labor. In his introduction, he alludes to one of the publications of the Catholic Universality of America Press for 1945 by Rev. Arthur T. Geoghegan, **The Attitude Towards Labor In Early Christianity and Ancient Culture**. Unfortunately this thesis is out of print, but I had the opportunity to go through it and certainly feel that it is a book that should be made available to the layman. It reminded me of a volume entitled “The Ancient Lowly” which I picked up in a secondhand store some years ago by a Socialist who

wrote about the history of labor from the earliest times and whose thesis was that they were the exploited and the dispossessed and that his job was to contribute to their enlightenment and class-war consciousness.

In the whole study of labor and of work there is usually an acceptance of our capitalistic industrial system and the acceptance of the machine as the means to do away with human labor. A. J. Penty has well handled the subject of the machine and Eric Gill also, and the work of these two writers should be reviewed again and again in the study of a philosophy of labor. But here is a book by Father Song which is of exceptional interest to all in the lay apostolate which has more than a philosophy of labor; it has a theology of labor. It treats of the Benedictine monastic tradition and quotes extensively from the Fathers of the Church. He says In the Introduction “the crux of the question of manual labor in St. Benedict’s rule lies in that variously interpreted passage, ‘If, however, the needs of the place require them to labor in gathering the harvest, let them not grieve at that, for then they are truly monks when they live by the labor of their hands as our fathers and the apostle did. But let all things be done in moderation on account of the faint heart.’”

Peter Maurin’s idea for our farming communes was that there should be four hours of manual labor a day. If all the people did this conscientiously, putting in four solid hours a day, there would be time indeed for study and prayer, for the intellectual work of reading and study as well as for the clerical work which is a toilsome accompaniment to such work as ours.

Father Sorg’s treatise goes back to St. Anthony of Egypt who rejoiced in never having been troublesome to anyone else on account of labor of his hands. The great rules of St. Pachomius and St. Basil both called for manual labor. St. Jerome said that the monasteries of Egypt would accept no monks who would not do manual work and In St. Basil a rule the strict rule of manual labor is inculcated. His rule states: “When you taught us that manual labor is necessary, it remaineth that we be taught the kind that suits our profession.” He enumerates various suitable kinds, but selects agriculture as being the mod congenial and the motives laid down were self-support, alms giving and asceticism.

“The first purpose of the monks manual labor was, of course, self-support. What was Important in their spirit is that this self-support is the first step towards, and the lowliest attainment of charity. It is out of the question to speak of charity in a man that does not try to support himself, any more than to think of Christian faith in a father who even though he attempt some noble missionary enterprise In the Church, neglects to feed his own children. St. Paul would say of him that he hath denied the faith and is worse than an infidel.

## Own Burdens

With the usual paradox that we find over and over again in the New Testament, we are told to bear our own burdens in Gal. 6,5 and then later on, we are told to bear one another's burdens. So In addition to our working we are also to help others. Consistently throughout the New Testament we hear the injunction not to judge, if we do not wish to be judged, so that when we read these things, it is to take them to ourselves, to work ourselves, to feed our own bodies and souls, and with whatever we have left, feed others.

Perhaps Father Sorg is a bit harsh when he quotes from the Didache. For the one time that St. Paul says "if a man will not work, neither let him eat," the entire New Testament, the sayings of our Lord, incline us toward tender kindness towards our fellows and an aversion to judging. We have suffered much in the Catholic Worker movement from all the people who come and look at the men on our bread lines (and we are feeding 500 a day in both Detroit and New York right now) and say, "Are you not contributing to the delinquency of these men by feeding them?"

The problem of unemployment and alcoholism is so acute these days that both New York and Chicago newspapers have been running accounts of the skid roads and the men on them. The I.W.W. paper published in Chicago has a delightful satire on the series that ran in the Chicago News. Everyone likes to see the end of a story the writer said, and the reason for this fascinated interest on the part of the readers which boosted the circulation of the News to 20,000 is because this is the end of the story for them as well as the men on skid road. This is the logical conclusion of our present system. And the story goes on to tell of a little boy asking, Who are all these men? and the reply being given, they are hoboes, and he wanted to know if there were not any "Mama" hoboes. The story points out that there is a high death rate and no birth rate and yet the numbers keep increasing. The I.W.W. song that deals with this situation is that famous one "Halleluia, I'm a Bum" and one of the verses runs: "Why don't you work like other men do? How can I work when there's no work to do?"

On every side we see work that needs to be done; even to the sweeping of the streets and the cleaning up of lots, the repairing of old buildings to provide for the homeless. But If a man took a broom and started to sweep a street, he would soon find himself put on the psychopathic ward, and if a group darted to clean up a vacant lot for children to play in, not only would they be trespassing on another man's property but the neighbors themselves, made irresponsible by our denial (in effect) of private property, would soon clutter up the lot again by tossing garbage, tin cans and bottles out of the windows.

"The workers as a mass have lost a philosophy of labor," as Peter says and they have lost a philosophy of poverty. And it is good when a book like this comes along that will stimulate thought on man's work, his need for work, and his desire to work.

It breaks our hearts here at the **Catholic Worker** to see these lines of men who need work as much as they need bread and we do not have the work to give them.

We have farms, it is true, but you cannot cultivate the earth or build shelters for the workers without skills, tools and materials, and God has seen fit to keep us In such poverty that we are not able to provide these. The miracle of the loaves and fishes is repeated over and over again

so that we could almost say “We can do all things in Him who strengthens us.” Certainly by ourselves we could never have kept going with the cost of food going up 40%. We still put the same food on the table regardless of the numbers who come. Even with “rationing” we still had coffee—not that coffee is as necessary as soup but St. Joseph is tender and tempers the wind to the shorn lamb. Somehow or other just enough comes in, just enough to keep going, through the almsgiving of the faithful and through the fact that everyone works in the movement without salary and is pledged to voluntary poverty, to the greater or less degree that they can take it.

## **St. John Chrysostom**

Father Sorg’s book is utterly delightful and he has chosen a wealth of quotations from the early fathers. St. John Chrysostom writes: “The sun being risen, they depart, each one to their work, gathering thence the Lord’s supply for the needy.” In St. John Chrysostom’s Homilies, “almsgiving is the love of Christ. The manual labor of monks a sacred spiritual thing and a Holy Communion.”

“Nowhere have I seen love so in flower, nowhere such quick compassion or hospitality so eager,” says St. Rufinus. “So great is the love that is in them and by so strong affection are they bound towards one another and towards all brethren that they are an example and wonder to all . . . one gets the impression that the Holy Spirit abounded in that country like fire in a dry woods and that society in that region was pregnant with Christ and that you could almost live on love alone.”

“It was the custom, not only among these, but among almost all the Egyptian monks, to hire themselves out at harvest time as harvesters; and one among them would earn eighty measures of corn more or less, and offer the greater part of it to the poor so that not only the hungry folk of that countryside were fed, but ships were sent to Alexandria, laden with corn, to be divided among such as were prisoners in jails, or as were foreigners and in need, for there was not enough poverty in Egypt to consume the fruit of their compassion and their lavishness.”

The third purpose of the monks’ labor was ascetical. “In avoiding the sweat of the face, the drudgery of the thorns and the thistles, all of which are the punishment of sin, and which induce sloth and atrophy, the rich shirk work itself, which is not a punishment of sin, but a glorious, pleasurable exercise of human nature’s God-given faculties.”

Father Sorg holds that those who do not work at manual labor have more than ordinary trouble with the desires of the flesh. “Poverty coupled with manual labor is charity’s twin sister and inseparable companion,” and he even goes on to say that people who do intellectual labor and who go in for artificial physical exercise as a substitute for human nature’s ontological need for manual work have also a substitute chastity. “The inference is quite likely that a substitute manual labor induces some sort of substitute chastity and not the real virtue which, as St. Thomas teaches, consists principally in charity.

He goes in also for a deeper theology of manual labor in dealing with man as co-creator with God: taking the raw materials that God has provided, making things of use and of beauty

and thus bringing about in his life that synthesis of cult, culture and cultivation that Peter Maurin used to talk so much about.

I could write much more on this whole subject but I am sure that what I have written will induce our friends to write to Father Sorg and get this very inspiring booklet.