



Chapter VI

The Dignity and Vocation of Work

UNDERSTANDING

(for your preparation as a leader)

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DISCUSSION

(to use with your group)

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Main Thing: Work is a *sacred* thing. Neither the lazy man nor the workaholic glorifies God. If we are to live in dignity, then we must participate in God's act of creation by glorifying God in our work. This chapter will look closely at the following points:

- By virtue of being created in the image and likeness of God, people are called to participate in God's creative activity. They do so by working.
- As Christians we are called to imitate Christ in our work. This means uniting our work to the redemptive act of the cross. It also means heeding Saint Paul's exhortation to the Thessalonians to work in a good and holy way, in *quietness*, and not as a busy body.
- The sin of acedia produces both workaholics and lazy people. Acedia is a kind of interior sloth, resignation, or despondency which plagues the contemporary world.

First Section: Work in Eden

Work has a bad reputation. Everyone does it, but most people hate it. This is just as true for the average slacker as it is for the average workaholic. For the slackers of the world, work is something to be avoided at all costs. Why? Because work is oppressive. It is hard, mind-numbing, and, at least for the slacker, it should be avoided at all costs. Workaholics are different...but the same. While a workaholic might not avoid work, he often views his work in a similarly oppressive way. For the workaholic, a job is like a drug. It may be oppressive, but it provides him with an escape. Work sucks for both the lazy man and the workaholic. They just approach it differently.

This raises the question: does work have to suck? The answer, as you may have guessed, is “No.” Make no mistake, work will always involve suffering, but just because something involves suffering does not mean that it should be avoided. The Catholic Church has some interesting things to say about work. While many may think that work is a result of sin, the Church actually maintains that work existed in paradise! For the Church, work is not a product of the fall.¹ It is not something to be avoided, and (at least at its core) it is not oppressive. For the Church, work does not suck! Let’s take a look at Genesis for a deeper understanding of Church’s teaching:

This is the story of the heavens and the earth at their creation. When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens—there was no field shrub on earth and no grass of the field had sprouted, for the LORD God had sent no rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the ground...²

¹ “Work is part of the original state of man and precedes his fall; it is therefore not a punishment or curse.” *Compendium. Pp 256*

² Genesis Chapter 2: 4-5

By this point you have heard this story a thousand times, but have you ever stopped to think what the creation stories might have to say about work? Think about these two verses. The passage points out the *lack* of life on the earth prior to the creation of man: “there was no field shrub...and no grass of the field,” because “there was no man to till the ground.” These passages seem to draw out a connection between human work and a healthy planet.³ It’s almost like scripture is saying that God intended to involve humanity in the creation of the world. He started creating the universe, but He waited until man was created to help finish the job. And here in lies the key truth to the Catholic Church’s key teaching on human work: to work is to participate in God’s creative act! This is nowhere clearer than when the Lord places man in the Garden of Eden:

The LORD God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it.⁴

The Church teaches that work “represents a fundamental dimension of human existence as **participation**...in the act of creation.” The word “participation” is key. God placed Adam in the garden of Eden to continue the act of protecting and cultivating the garden. Without Adam, the Garden of Eden would fall into disrepair. Adam’s work is crucial for the completion of creation. In this way Adam actually becomes a part of God’s creative action by cooperating with and carrying forward God’s creative design. By allowing Adam to cultivate the Garden, God has created Adam to act like Him. We have all heard about the *imago dei*, or the Church’s teaching that human beings are created in God’s image and likeness. These scripture passages show us that the *imago dei* has implications for every facet of human existence. That is, the *imago dei* has implications not only for human

³ Draw this out more but keep it short.

⁴ Genesis 2:15

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nature but also for human *activity*. Human beings are not only called to *be* like God. They are also called to act with God. Though they have no power save that given them by God, human beings are called to create with God, and, as we shall see at a later point in this study, they are called to rest with God.

Second Section: Work Redeemed

If work existed in Eden and Eden did not involve any suffering, what happened to work? Clearly today's work involves suffering, so what is the difference between then and now? The answer is original sin. Recall that after Adam and Eve sinned, certain things changed:

The LORD God then asked the woman: What is this you have done? The woman answered, "The snake tricked me, so I ate it."⁵

To the man he said: Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, you shall not eat from it, cursed is the ground because of you! In toil you shall eat its yield all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles, it shall bear for you, and you shall eat the grass of the field. By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread, until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.⁶

Adam and Eve sinned, and this sin changed their experience of work. It's not that work changed; rather, it is our experience that changed. Before original sin work did not involve suffering. Now, after sin, human work and indeed all human activity involves a certain amount

⁵ Genesis 3:13

⁶ Genesis 3:17-19

of suffering. Work is no longer what it used to be, but there are pros and cons to the new situation. On the one hand, work is hard. It is now more difficult to participate in God's act of creation. On the other hand, the fact that work is hard gives us an opportunity: we can unite our work to the cross! Before sin our work was a participation in God's creative act. Now, after sin, our work is not only a participation in God's act of creation, it is also a participation in God's act of redemption! Just like Jesus, we can bring about great good by virtue of our suffering! The imago dei now has another layer: the imitation of Christ!

As a Christian you likely know that you are created in God's image and likeness. But do you also know that you are called to *work* in God's image and likeness? After all, we are called to imitate Christ. The life of Christ gives us a great example of holy, Christian work. For this reason, holy work has always been a part of Christian spirituality. In fact, Saint Paul spoke about work in his letter to the Thessalonians:

For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: If anyone will not work, let him not eat. For we hear that some of you are walking in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any such work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living. Brethren, do not be weary in well-doing.⁷

Strong words! Were it not for the fact that these words come from scripture, one might be tempted to think that they're un-Christian! Now, while these words need to be taken in context and balanced against Christ's clear directives to serve the poor, we must take Saint Paul's words to heart! For now, I would like to draw out three parts of Saint Paul's words:

⁷ 2 Thessalonians 3:10

workaholism you will find, once again, a desire for distraction. Thus, in both cases (the lazy man and the workaholic) one finds a common root: acedia. It is acedia that lies at the root of the problem. And it is acedia that needs to be confronted in our own hearts.

7. Do you struggle to deeply engage in your work? If so, what might this say about you?

Response: Discuss. This may indicate the sin of laziness.

8. Do you struggle to engage in leisure? If so, what might this say about you?

Response: Discuss. If someone cannot bring themselves to engage in ordinary leisure, then they probably struggle with being a workaholic.

9. How do you think you can give greater glory to God in your work?

Response: Discuss.

5. What is this “worldly grief” that Saint Paul mentions?

Response: Saint Paul talks about “ungodly grief” which “produces death.” What does he mean? Well, Saint Thomas Aquinas used this same passage from Corinthians to explain the sin of “acedia.” Another word for acedia is “spiritual sorrow,” and it isn’t good. Acedia is a kind of mistaken or misplaced sorrow, different from the good sorrow discussed above. It’s being sorrowful about something which should actually cause joy.. Instead, it brings despair. It often coincides with people who think of themselves, their lives, or their work as fundamentally bad. Acedia causes a sort of neurosis or rotting of the soul, and people struggling with acedia are sort of stuck in a rut. They have difficulty seeing any value in their own identity, life, and/or profession.

6. Do you struggle with acedia? How would you know?

Response: Perhaps the most common characteristic of someone struggling with acedia is a desire for distraction. Acedia causes sorrow: not good sorrow, but bad sorrow. Sorrow which resembles a dead end and which leads to despair. The last thing these people want is stillness. Instead, they want distraction. Paradoxically, this desire for distraction produces two, seemingly opposite things: laziness and workaholism. On the one hand, some people find distraction in endless entertainment. You might think, for example, of the college student who consumes exorbitant hours of frivolous entertainment (social media, video games, and TV shows). We call these people lazy. And at the heart of their laziness you’ll often find a desire to be distracted from sorrow. On the other hand, some people find distraction in constant work. You might think, for example, of the business executive who finds an ever-increasing number of ways to busy himself (emails, meetings, and text messages). At the heart of his

1. *The Busy Body:* Saint Paul explicitly critiques not only those who don’t work, but also those who put on the appearance of doing work but actually accomplish nothing. The word used in this translation is “busy body.” What is a busy body? We all know them, and some of us might be them. A busy body is who appears to work but often just ends up buzzing around, meddling in other people’s business and accomplishing very little. They’re usually distracted and distracting, and they generally keep other people from getting work done.
2. *The Quiet Worker:* Saint Paul explicitly compliments people who work in “quiet.” What could this mean? Well, some people’s professions require them to speak a lot (ex: salespeople, college professors, business managers), and Saint Paul is not condemning these professions. Given the context, it is more likely that Saint Paul is drawing a contrast between the “busy body” and the productive worker. Saint Paul is probably highlighting the person who does quality work in a humble manner.
3. *The Weary Worker:* Saint Paul warns Christians against weariness in work. It is very easy for people to grow tired, allowing a negative attitude to dampen their spirits. Saint Paul encourages Christians not to grow weary. Instead, Christians should be cheerful in their work.

As Christians we are called to take Saint Paul’s words to heart. We should not be busy bodies, wasting our time in frenzied self-indulgence. Nor are we called to be sullen and weary. Instead, we are called to take a deeply mystical attitude towards our work, humbly uniting our efforts to the cross.

Third Section – Acedia: The Lazy Man and the Workaholic

Excellence in work is a virtue, but just like any virtue it has both an excess and a deficiency. What does this mean? Well, if you're not familiar with virtue theory, Aristotle said that it's often the case that human beings over-do things (excess) and under-do things (deficiency). To be virtuous is to do things just right. When it comes to work, it is possible to over-do and under-do things. Sometimes we work too hard and sometimes we don't work hard enough. Some people are workaholics and others are lazy. Here it is interesting to note that, paradoxically, both laziness and workaholism have a common root: acedia. Have you ever heard this word before? It's a word that is very important for our times. We'll begin our explanation of acedia with a verse from Saint Paul on grief:

As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting: for you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death.⁸

Here Saint Paul distinguishes between two kinds of grief. The first kind (godly grief) leads to repentance. It is a holy state experienced by all healthy people. It allows for repentance and/or conversion in the face of difficulty. Godly grief (or good sorrow) allows people to turn away from bad habits. It also allows people to process tragedy in a healthy way. It allows them to process bad situations, recognize the good in them, and treat them as a means to come closer to Jesus. But there is a different kind of sorrow, and that's what we would like to talk about today. It is this kind of sorrow which produces both laziness and workaholism.

⁸ 2 Corinthians 7:9-10.

Third Section - Acedia: The Lazy Man and the Workaholic

1. Have you ever heard of the sin of "acedia"?

Response: Discuss. Talk about the lazy man and the workaholic and set the stage saying that both have a common root: acedia.

2. In order to understand this sin further, let's discuss Saint Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians on grief. Read 2 Corinthians 7:9-10:

As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting: for you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death.³

3. What sticks out to you about this passage?

Response: Discuss.

4. What might Saint Paul mean by "godly grief"?

Response: Here Saint Paul distinguishes between two kinds of grief. The first kind (godly grief) leads to repentance. It is a holy state experienced by all healthy people. It allows for repentance and/or conversion in the face of a difficult situation. Godly grief (or good sorrow) allows people to turn away from bad habits and/or process the loss of a loved one. Good sorrow is the emotion experienced by the saints when they, for example, cry at funerals. It allows them to process bad situations, recognize the good in them, and treat them as a means to come closer to Jesus. But there is a different kind of sorrow, and that's what we would like to talk about today.

³ 2 Corinthians 7:9-10.

5. I would like to point out three aspects of Saint Paul's letter on work. Let's take a moment here to dwell and discuss the following three points:

- *Busy Bodies: Saint Paul explicitly critiques not only those who don't work, but also those who put on the appearance of doing work but in actuality accomplish nothing. The word used in this translation is "busy body." What is a busy body? We all know them, and some of us might be them? A busy body is who appears to work but often just ends up buzzing around, meddling in other people's business and accomplishing very little. They're usually distracted and distracting, and they generally keep people from getting work done. Do you think of yourself as a busy body when you "work"?*
- *Quietness: Saint Paul explicitly compliments people who work in "quiet." What could this mean? Well, some people's professions require them to speak a lot (ex: salespeople, college professors, business managers), and Saint Paul is not condemning these professions. Given the context, it is more likely that Saint Paul is drawing a contrast between the "busy body" and the productive worker. It's human nature, most people are prone to distraction and distracting others. And most people would do better to be a little quieter, a virtue which generally assists with genuine work. Are you able to glorify God in quiet work?*
- *Weariness: Saint Paul warns Christians against weariness in work. It is very easy for people to grow tired, allowing a negative attitude to dampen their spirits. Saint Paul encourages Christians not to grow weary. Instead, Christians should be cheerful in their work. Are you weary at work or are you cheerful?*

Saint Paul talks about "ungodly grief" which "produces death." What does he mean? Well, Saint Thomas Aquinas used this same passage from Corinthians to explain the sin of "acedia." Another word for acedia is "spiritual sorrow." It isn't good. Acedia is a kind of mistaken or misplaced sorrow, different from the good sorrow discussed above. It is being sorrowful about something which should actually cause joy, but, for the person with acedia, it actually brings despair. It often coincides with people who think of themselves, their lives, or their work as fundamentally bad. It is also common in people who feel hopelessness or meaninglessness. Acedia causes a sort of neurosis or rotting of the soul, and people struggling with acedia are sort of stuck in a rut. They have difficulty seeing any value in their own identity, life, and/or profession.

Perhaps the most common characteristic of someone struggling with acedia is a desire for *distraction*. Acedia causes sorrow: not good sorrow, but bad sorrow. Sorrow which resembles a dead end. Acedia is very common in atheists, or anyone who thinks that this life, which ends in death, is all that exists. For the atheist, reality itself is depressing. Stillness is uncomfortable. Busy-bodied distraction is better. But it is not just atheists who struggle with acedia. Acedia besets anyone who has resigned themselves to interior despondency. If you find this inside your own soul, it's time to confront it, even though you may prefer to be distracted.

Paradoxically, this desire for distraction produces two, seemingly opposite things: laziness and workaholism. On the one hand, some people find distraction in endless entertainment. You might think, for example, of the college student who consumes exorbitant hours of frivolous entertainment (social media, video games, and TV shows). We call these people lazy. And at the heart of their laziness is a desire for distraction from sorrow. On the other hand, some people find

distraction in constant work. You might think, for example, of the business executive who finds an ever-increasing number of ways to busy himself (emails, meetings, and text messages). At the heart of his workaholicism you will find, once again, a desire for distraction. Thus, in both cases (the lazy man and the workaholic) one finds a common root: acedia. It is acedia that lies at the root of the problem. And it is acedia that needs to be confronted in our own hearts.

Do you struggle with acedia? One way to answer this question is ask whether you fall into either of the two categories mentioned above: Are you lazy? Are you a workaholic? Sometimes these qualities are difficult to spot in ourselves. For laziness, it might be helpful to look at habits like how much time you spend in front of a screen each week? For workaholicism, it might be helpful to ask how capable you are of legitimate leisure and recreation?

The ultimate question when it comes to acedia takes us right back to where we started. Are you living your life in such a way that befits your dignity as a person created in God's image? Work is deeply good thing. After all, God worked! And many of the Catholic saints were among the most productive people in human history! Some people are called to work very hard! So work, and work hard, but don't work out of a desire to distract yourself. Work with the passion of a child of God! And remember, God did not work all the time. God rested, and He calls all of us to do the same! No matter what our vocation or profession, we are all called to two, seemingly contradictory things: work and rest. But the one fulfills the other. And, as usual, it is only in the paradox of their combination that we come to realize our true nature.

sin, human work and indeed all human activity involves a certain amount of suffering. Work is no longer what it used to be, but there are pros and cons to the new situation. On the one hand, work is hard. It is now more difficult to participate in God's act of creation. On the other hand, the fact that work is hard gives us an opportunity: we can unite our work to the sufferings of the cross! Before sin our work was a participation in God's creative act. Now, after sin, our work is not only a participation in God's act of creation, it is also a participation in God's act of redemption! Just like Jesus, we can bring about great good by virtue of our suffering! The imago dei now has another layer: the imitation of Christ!

3. Working in imitation of Christ has been a part of Christian spirituality since the beginning. Let's read a passage from Saint Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians 3:10-11:

For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: If any one will not work, let him not eat. For we hear that some of you are walking in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any such work. Now such persons we command and exhort in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work in quietness and to earn their own living. Brethren, do not be weary in well-doing.

4. What sticks out to you about this passage?

Response: Strong words! Were it not for the fact that these words come from scripture, one might be tempted to think that they're un-Christian! Now, while these words need to be taken in context and balanced against Christ's clear directives to serve the poor, we must take Saint Paul's words to heart!

Human beings are not only called to be like God. They are also called to act with God. Though they have no power save that given them by God, human beings are called to create with God, and, as we shall see at a later point in this study, they are called to rest with God.

Second Section: Work Redeemed

1. Work existed in Eden, but it seems like we experienced it differently in Eden than it does now. What happened? Let's take a look at Genesis to see. Read Genesis 3: 13, 17-19:

*The LORD God then asked the woman: What is this you have done?
The woman answered, "The snake tricked me, so I ate it."¹*

To the man he said: Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, you shall not eat from it, cursed is the ground because of you! In toil you shall eat its yield all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles, it shall bear for you, and you shall eat the grass of the field. By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread, until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.²

2. Work is no longer what it used to be. Now, we suffer when we work. This is a result of original sin. But is there anything good about work now? Can we possibly make things an “oh happy fault”?

Response: Adam and Eve sinned, and this sin changed their experience of work. It's not that work changed; rather, it is our experience that changed. Before original sin work did not involve suffering. Now, after

¹ Genesis 3:13

² Genesis 3:17-19

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DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

First Section: Work in Eden

1. Work has a bad reputation. Most people view it as something that you just have to do in order to pay the bills. When you guys hear the word “work” what comes to mind?

Response: Discuss.

2. The Catholic Church has another view of work. To begin understanding it, let’s take a look at Genesis. Read Genesis 2: 4-5:

“This is the story of the heavens and the earth at their creation. When the LORD God made the earth and the heavens—there was no field shrub on earth and no grass of the field had sprouted, for the LORD God had sent no rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the ground.”

3. What stands out to you about this verse?

Response: Discuss. Draw out the fact that God wanted to incorporate humanity into his act of creation. In this passage we see this made concrete. The earth was, in a sense, incomplete until God made

humanity. After all, “there was no man to till the ground.”

4. Now let’s take a look at another verse. With the earth still incomplete, the Lord created man to help continue the project of creation. Read Genesis 2:15.
5. What can we learn from this verse?

*Response: The Church teaches that work “represents a fundamental dimension of human existence as **participation**...in the act of creation.” The word “participation” is key. God placed Adam in the garden of Eden to continue the act of protecting and cultivating the garden. Without Adam, the Garden of Eden would fall into disrepair. Adam’s work is crucial for the completion of creation.*

6. What does it mean to be created in God’s image and likeness?

Response: Discuss. We are created as persons, just like the Divine Persons. We all have an intellect and a will. We image God as male and female etc.

7. All of the qualities discussed thus far have to do with human nature but being created in the Imago Dei also has importance for human action. Thus, we image God when we WORK. Does this make sense?

Response: Adam to cultivate the Garden, God has created Adam to act like Him. We have all heard about the imago dei, or the Church’s teaching that human beings are created in God’s image and likeness. These scripture passages show us that the imago dei has implications for every facet of human existence. That is, the imago dei has implications not only for human nature but also for human activity.