

Work in the Writings of Saint Francis

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We would like, in the following pages, to look at work with a fresh outlook.

Modern society seems to be so fragmented. There is little or no continuity running through the pieces, so that contemporary men and women often feel as though they are part of a gigantic jig-saw puzzle with the pieces all scattered. Sometimes a few pieces seem to fit together, and they mistakenly think that they have accomplished something. Often the whole focus is on the individual and his or her own accomplishments.

Humankind has many idols, many of which are unconsciously prized. Work, in its various forms and for its various purposes, can be one of them. Through the ages humankind has had to deal with the question of work, just as, in each era, people have had more basically to determine who or what all their other idols would be. In Daniel 14:5 we hear the same question raised by the king: "Why do you not adore Bel? Daniel replied, "Because I worship not idols made with hands, but only the living God who made heaven and earth and has dominion over all mankind."

We hope to show, in this article, that neither work itself, nor the products produced through it, need to take on this idolatrous character - that, on the contrary, Francis of Assisi has given us a quite different perspective - a wholesome perspective on labor which can be of substantive help to us today. Our plan is, first to examine the monastic concept of work and the influence it had on Saint Francis's outlook. Then we want to look carefully at Francis's life to determine whether it was consistent with his explicit statements concerning work. And finally, we intend to consider our modern concept of work.

Many who are caught up in the rat-race of modern society have made work simply a means to a very materialistic end. But there are also those today, just as there have been in every age, who truly see the sacramental facet of work and its real witness value. It is surely to be hoped that more of us will come to see work as fulfillment of the creativity and potentialities which have been given us by a very good God. And all gifts are to be returned to the Gift-Giver!

Manual labor has been an integral part of monastic life from earliest times. The Fathers of the Church insisted on the nobility of work, and its value was clearly seen through the example of men and women who fled the world, gave up all their possessions, and began to live lives of concentrated prayer, fasting, and hard work.

The early monks saw work in a theocentric perspective, in which it served to consecrate time and to direct human activity to divine praise. Work was valued as spiritual exercise and discipline, seen as a real penitential practice (particularly when the task was burdensome) that allayed concupiscence. Work was supposed to forestall temptation and promote humility and monastic equality.

Monastic work - especially agriculture, building, and copying - contributed much to the establishment of Christian culture. It could possibly even be said that monasticism saved the social order of the Western world from inner decadence through the order of prayer and work.

Medieval thought concerning the theology of work contributed to the development of the concept of earthly common good, the affirmation of order and purpose and it asserted that the spiritual was higher than the temporal and all thought and action is oriented to a supernatural final end. ¹

Anthony of Egypt was the first to represent monastic life as alternating prayer and manual labor (*ora et labora*). Prayer, Psalms, and work were the basic occupations of the monks. The rule stated that no one was dispensed from work, and that all were to meditate in silence as they worked.

The rule of Pachomius provided not only for manual labor, but also for the reading of Scripture. No one was permitted to stay in the monastery unless he learned to read so as to retain something of the Scriptures, particularly the New Testament and the Psalms. The period from the first to the third hour was to be used for prayer, whereas the third to the ninth hours were for work.

The monks were formed into work groups, each of which had a distinct job. They worked every type of craft as well as agriculture. The traditional monastic ideal was to use the fruits of their labor for purposes of charity. Consequently, with their surplus they provided for the needs of women's convents and the prisons, as well as helped the ever present poor and needy.

The Rule of Saint Basil was the sole rule recognized in the East. It insisted on the dangers of absolute solitude for humility and charity, the necessity of minute obedience, the abnegation of all personal property, and most of all the perpetual duty of labor. Fasting was not permitted to be an obstacle to work. Labor was considered to be of prime importance for three reasons: (1) work was required to support oneself, (2) work was required to assist others, and (3) work was required to practice virtue. It was thought to be degrading to accept charity if one was able to earn one's own living.

Benedict adopted the Rule of the East and adapted it to the needs of the West. Prayer, stability, and diligence were qualities that the Western world needed badly at that time. According to Benedict's Rule all work was to be done in humility and obedience. More importantly, all activity was directed to God - *opus Dei*. There was a well-balanced life of manual labor, intellectual exercise, and prayer.

The Benedictine concept of work is that it frees man from the evil of idleness and thus enables him to develop his faculties and powers in a Christian order of life directed to the worship of God. The monk christianizes human labor and the whole order of human existence.

In the case of arduous tasks, work is a fulfillment of the Christian vocation of expiation and sacrifice in the spirit of Christ and the Apostles. This expiation through work in the spirit of loving charity has a particular efficacy in the apostolate among the lowly.²

As has already been stated, the monk who worked not only supported himself, but he manifested proper love for himself and others. He gave of the fruits of his labor with generosity and compassion. In doing so, he was actually giving of himself. Therefore, he had a positive outlook on life, and he lived monastic poverty in a truly joyful manner. He needed community insofar as he worked entirely for others and never simply to support himself. Thus he was always aware of the mystical body of Christ - of how the members need and support one another. The idealism of the gospel was consistently before him.

Francis, too, had the ideals of the gospel constantly before him. He also enjoined work on his followers, and he himself performed many menial tasks. Within his Third Order were many people who lived in the world and submitted themselves to their daily duties in a spirit of prayer and devotion. This sanctification of daily life consisted largely in the sanctification of work.

Let us turn, now, to some of Francis's writings - primarily those addressed to the friars of his First Order - to attain a clearer conception of his attitude toward work.

The Order was founded not to undertake new external work in the Church, but to realize new life within it. In Francis's own mind, he had not even really founded an Order; it was a brotherhood. He thought more of a manner of life than of a Rule. This manner of life would foster a new inner attitude which would be the bond of unity for all the friars' external activities. Whoever was imbued with the new ideal and filled with the Spirit of the Lord would be able to do whatever was required to him for the building of the Kingdom. And all the needs of the Kingdom were then, as they are now, included in the apostolate.

The goal of all Franciscans should be of course to "follow in the footsteps of Christ." If we truly do this we shall find ourselves involved in all types of humble tasks; any activity is proper as long as it strengthens the lives of the faithful and leads them to the Father. The needs of the Church must always be met in a spirit proper to the Order, moreover:

the spirit of a *frater minor* - a lesser brother. The true Franciscan must act as loving follower of the God-man, imitating his earthly life, and as a brother or sister to all people - as one who is fully aware of our own nothingness. Our strength lies in a love that grows more perfect as one seeks to serve. Nothing reveals more clearly the real spirit of the Order than this ideal of complete subjection of self to the needs of others.

Celano says just this in the following words: "Since they despised all earthly things and did not love themselves with a selfish love, pouring out their whole affection on all the brothers, they strove to give themselves as the price of helping one another in their needs" (1 Celano, 39).

In the Rule of 1223 Francis himself states: "And they should have no hesitation in making known their needs to one another. For if a mother loves and cares for her child in the flesh, a friar should certainly love and care for his spiritual brother all the more tenderly" (2 Rule, 6:6) The brothers' only earthly security was to be in the certainty of their love for one another.

We have already looked at the monastic concept of labor and seen its recognition of the dignity and the ascetic value of work. By far, however, most of the Middle Ages thought of work as degrading. In the past slaves and the poor had done all the manual work (which was the only type in existence at that time).

Francis broke with the feudal scale of values and instead exalted diligent effort and honest toil. He did not work just for the sake of working or for a reward. Work for him was a holy task, an apostolic duty. It was an important aspect of the apostolate to give Christian witness to the world while living and working among humankind. The "grace of working" was, Francis said, a gift of God: "The friars to whom God has given the grace of working should work in a spirit of faith and devotion and avoid idleness, which is the enemy of the soul, without however extinguishing the spirit of prayer and devotion, to which every temporal consideration must be subordinate." (2 Rule 5:1-2) This spirit of faith and devotion was the non-verbal witness which was a real challenge to and incentive for the people among whom the friars worked.

In the Rule of Saint Clare we see practically the same words expressed to the Sisters: "The Sisters to whom the Lord has given the grace of working should labor faithfully and devoutly after the Hour of Tierce at work which pertains to honesty and the common good." (Rule, 8:1)

If we take a closer look at the citation given above from the Rule of 1223, we see that Francis also exhorted his brothers to avoid idleness. Clare again says the same: "...so that in banishing idleness, the enemy of the soul, they do not extinguish the spirit of prayer and devotion, which all other things must foster" (Rule, 8:2)

Bonaventure, in speaking of Francis, reiterates the same idea:

He taught the friars especially to avoid idleness, the root of all evil desires, and he set them an example by curbing his lower nature when it was given to revolt or laziness by practicing continual self-discipline or devoting himself to useful work (*Leg. Maj.*, 5:6)

Celano tells the story of the brother who never went out for alms and yet ate more than many of the others. Francis said to him, "Go your way, brother fly, for you want to eat the sweat of your brothers and to do nothing in God's work. You are like brother drone who wants to be first to eat the honey, though he does not do the work of the bees." (2 Celano, 75)

Since the Franciscan is to imitate the poor and humble Christ, we can penetrate all classes of society and show forth the spirit of the gospel. we should prefer the lower classes, however: the poor, the *anawim*. Our spirituality should incline us to labor among common people. Above all, we should go out to those whom society scorns. These are truly Christ's poor little ones. The secret of the seraphic spirit - the Spirit of the Lord - is to leave all things for love of Christ and become like the poorest and most despised.

The evangelical life is made actual through a life of highest poverty. It is an integral part of gospel loving. A life of common work and poverty is a clear witness to the fact that the Kingdom has come! Francis embraced this life of utter poverty with the fire and zeal of a lover. His joy was to immerse himself in the words and teachings of the God-

man, and he fashioned his own life on the model of Jesus's. The words of one of Francis's own admonitions clearly illustrate this: "Blessed is that religious who finds his whole delight and joy in the most holy words and works of the Lord and by them leads men in all gladness and joy of heart to the love of God." (Adm. 20:1-2)

I worked with my own hands and I am still determined to work, and with all my heart I want all the other friars to be busy with some kind of work that can be carried on without scandal. Those who do not know how to work should learn, not because they want to get something for their efforts, but to give good example and to avoid idleness. When we receive no recompense for our work, we can turn to God's table and beg alms from door to door. God revealed a form of greeting to me, telling me that we should say, "God give you peace" (Testament, 20-25).

Francis makes it very clear that he worked and that he desires all the brothers to work. Manual labor was an ideal and a value to him. Francis never seemed to expect of others that which he himself did not do. "Whoever is truly earnest about reform begins with self and not with others."³ Francis seemed open to any kind of work, moreover, as long as it did not give scandal and would therefore fit in with poverty and humility. Celano tells of the brothers:

During the day those who knew how labored with their hands, staying in the houses of lepers, or in other decent places, serving all humbly and devotedly. They did not wish to exercise any position from which scandal might arise, but always doing what is holy and just, honest and useful, they led all with whom they came in contact to follow their example of humility and patience. (1 Celano, 39)

Francis wished that all his friars would learn a trade. As he stated in the Rule of 1221: "Everyone should remain at the trade and in the position in which he was called," and moreover "they are allowed to have the tools which they need for their trade." (1 Rule, 7:3, 9).

The desire for money or a good salary is definitely not to be the motive for working. "As wages for their labor they may accept anything necessary for their temporal needs, for themselves or their brethren, except money in any form" (2 Rule, 5:3). Even more emphatically: "I strictly forbid all the friars to accept money in any form, either personally or through an intermediary" (2 Rule 4:1). He indicates that their motive for working should be to give good example and to avoid idleness.

Through work, a person participates in God's own creative act. As Esser puts it,

By working mankind administers the dominion of God in creation, and thus, in God's image and likeness, renders visible the hidden Creator.... Work as a participation in creation is the highest calling of mankind prior to original sin, and therefore idleness does not present a picture of God, but a caricature of God.⁴

The early friars were to claim no rights, not even the right of just pay. Francis tells us what to do if we "receive no recompense": "The friars are to appropriate nothing for themselves, neither a house, nor a place, nor anything else. As strangers and pilgrims in this world, who serve God in poverty and humility, they should beg alms trustingly" (2 Rule, 6:1- 2). Then follows immediately his beautiful discourse on true poverty:

And there is no reason why they should be ashamed because God made himself poor for us in this world. This is the pinnacle of the most exalted poverty, and it is this, my dearest brothers, that has made you heirs of heaven, poor in temporal things, but rich in virtue. This should be your portion, because it leads to the land of the living. And to this poverty, my beloved brothers, you must cling with all your heart, and wish never to have anything else under heaven for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ (Rule, 6:3-6).

The last line cited in the excerpt from Francis's Testament given above may have seemed to the reader out of place - perhaps it was, as introductory to a new train of thought, included inadvertently. No. In that line, Francis urged his brothers and all of us to greet people with the words, "The Lord give you peace." We are to be peacemakers in a world torn with strife and envy. But our example of working, is precisely one of the most fundamental and striking ways in which Francis intended us to touch men's hearts. Only we must be careful that we truly do bring the peace of the Lord Jesus, and not just *ourselves*, to others. To bring them His peace, we must first have it within ourselves and our communities, and thus will the peace of Christ convincingly permeate the Church of today.

Many people today still think of work as pure drudgery, or as an ascetic discipline. Work is sometimes thought of as an atonement for sin and a preventive for future faults. The Christocentric viewpoint of Francis, however, places Christ, the Priest and Worker, at the center of human labor and of the whole universe. This doctrine stresses the totality of the Lord's redemptive work, his death and resurrection with the grace-giving actions of his glorified humanity. There is an intimate relation between work and worship through union with the mystical body, a redeemed people of God worshipping in spirit and truth.

Work is a fully human experience. It belongs to each person as God's steward. It has a genuine sacramental character because through it mankind is able to develop its lay priesthood. Each person makes the world their own in order to offer it back to God. It is God's plan for humankind to share in perfecting the "unfinished" universe and to complete what is lacking.

Each person rises above the rest of the world of creation through work. We fulfill our being when we perfect things of creation through our labor. In bringing about this movement toward the universe's completion, the worker is brought to greater perfection. One's own creativity is fulfilled, and one's potentialities are more fully developed. Saint Augustine says that work is part of a person's growth to maturity.

As human beings we are the link between God and things. All things have come from God and are to return to Him. We, as religious workers, must realize that through our work we bring all things back to God. Inanimate objects may of themselves reflect God's splendor, but their mute testimony is given voice only when they are properly used by man to give praise to his Father in heaven.

Work takes on a new dimension if we have that attitude toward it. Even the most insignificant sort of work will assume a noble dignity. The boredom which often accompanies daily work can itself, in virtue of this attitude, contribute both to God's glory and to the Christian and human process of development.

Self-pity, frustration, fatigue are all results of looking at work too narrowly: seeing it simply as something to get through or to be done. We need to consider the full value of work, so as to broaden our own outlook. A sense of wonder toward labor is built only slowly, for it is difficult to grasp our part in Christ's redemptive plan to bring all things to God.

"In addition to the various apostolic work in which they are engaged, religious are constantly giving testimony by their being to the fullness of the Christian life to come and to its intensity and meaning here on earth."⁵ The Second Vatican Council stressed the importance of witness of religious life in chapter 6 of the Constitution on the Church:

The profession of the evangelical counsels appears as a sign that can and ought to attract all the members of the Church to an effective and prompt fulfillment of the duties of their Christian vocation. The People of God has no lasting city here below, but looks forward to one which is to come. This being so, the religious state by giving its members greater freedom from earthly cares more adequately manifests to all believers the presence of heavenly goods already possessed here below. Furthermore, it not only witnesses to the fact of a new and eternal life acquired by the redemption of Christ; it foretells the resurrected state and the glory of the heavenly kingdom ... The religious state reveals in a unique way that the kingdom of God and its overmastering necessities are superior to all earthly considerations. Finally, to all men it shows wonderfully of the force of Christ the King and the boundless power of the Holy Spirit.

Eschatological witness is especially needed now, when humankind so desperately tries to find happiness and fulfillment in earthly realities.

Living witness speaks loudly and more effectively than simple instruction and often encourages us to respond to God. Such response is not easy because it requires each person to die to themselves and to live for and in Christ. This is painful, and so religious need truly to live their vocation, to exert a real effort, constantly acknowledging their need for "the force of Christ the King and the boundless power of the Holy Spirit," if their lives - and their work in particular - are to be fruitful for the building up of the Kingdom.

Today our most distinctive task as Franciscans is to maintain that inner spirit about which Francis speaks. We need

to be true to our own inner self by representing the figure of Christ. Each of us is to be sister or brother (*frater*) to all men. We are to seek out especially those who have strayed from the Lord. We are to become the lesser (*minores*), or even the least, of all men so that we can draw all from every class and condition to the love of the Father. We, like Francis, must exemplify the emptying of Christ! Francis's own prayer captures all that has been said:

Almighty, eternal just and merciful God, grant us in our misery that we may do for your sake alone what we know you want us to do, and always want what pleases you; so that, cleansed and enlightened interiorly and fired with the ardor of the Holy Spirit, we may be able to follow in the footprints of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and so make our way to you, Most High, by your grace alone, you who live and reign in perfect Trinity and simple unity, and are glorified, God all-powerful, forever and ever. Amen (Letter to the General Chapter, 50-52).

Editor's note: slight modifications have been made to make this article inclusive

Footnotes

1. Edwin G. Kaiser, C.P.S., "Work, Theology of," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 14 (New York: McGraw Hill Book Co., 1967), p.1006
2. Idem, *Theology of Work* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1966), p.146
3. Cajetan Esser, O.F.M., *The Rule and Testament of St. Francis* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977), p. 138.
4. Ibid., p. 140.
5. William Hogan, C.S.C., *One and the Same Spirit* (Dayton: Pflaum Press, 1967), p.18.