

THE EARLY CHURCH FATHERS ON WORK

Excerpts prepared by Ann Devine, SFO

St. Clement of Rome (? - 102 A.D.)

Commentary on First Letter to the Corinthians 33:1-7 What, then shall we do brothers? Shall we slacken from doing good and abandon charity? May the Lord never allow this to happen to us, but let us be diligent to accomplish every good work with earnestness and zeal For the Creator and Lord of the universe Himself takes joy in His works. For in His overwhelming might He has set up the heavens, and by His unsearchable wisdom He has put them in order. He has separated the earth from the surrounding water and placed it on the solid foundation of His own will; and He has called into existence the animals that move in it by his own arrangement. Having prepared the seas and the living creatures that are in it, He enclosed them by his own power. Over all, with His holy and pure hands He formed man, the most excellent and greatest in intelligence, with the stamp of His own image. For God spoke thus: "Let us make man according to our image and likeness; and God made man, male and female He made them." Having finished all these things, he praised and blessed them and said: "Increase and multiply." Let us consider that all the saints have been adorned with good works; and the Lord Himself, adorning Himself with good works, rejoiced. Holding to this pattern, then, let us follow out His will without hesitation; let us do the work of justice with all our strength.

Commentary on 1st Letter to the Corinthians 34:1-2 The good laborer receives the bread of his labor with confidence; the lazy and careless one does not look his employer in the face. We must, therefore, be zealous in doing good; for all things are from Him (God).

Ignatius of Antioch (? - 102? A.D.)

Letter to Polycarp, 6 Toil and train together, run and suffer together, rest and rise at the same time, as God's stewards, assistants and servants.

Didache (before 120 A.D.) (authorship unknown)

Didache 12:3-5 But, if he wishes to settle among you and is a craftsman, let him work and eat. But if he has no trade, provide according to your conscience, so that no Christian shall live among you idle. But if he does not agree to do this, he is trading on the name of Christ; beware of such men.

Epistle of Barnabas (100-120 A.D?)

Epistle of Barnabas LL 10 Remember the day of Judgment day and night, and seek each day the company of the saints, either laboring by speech, and going out to exhort, and striving to save souls by the word or working with your hands for the ransom for your sins.

Clement of Alexandria (c.125 A.D.)

(A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, ed., *The Ante Nicene Fathers: Translation of the Writings of the Fathers Down to 325* Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 1977)

The Instructor (Paedagogus) 3:10 It is respectable for a man to draw water himself, and to cut billets of wood which he is to use himself.

The Salvation of the Rich Man or Who is the Rich Man that Shall be Saved, 16

(The Pure soul -- or truly rich man) is ever laboring at some good work and divine work; even though he be necessarily sometime or other deprived of them (possessions) is able with cheerful mind to bear their removal equally with their abundance.

Shepherd of Hemas (Ca. 150 A.D.)

Second Mandate, 4 Do good, and from the fruit of your labors, God's gift, give to all those in need, without distinction, not debating to whom you will and to whom you will not give. Since it is God's will that we give to all from His bounties, give to all.

Saint Justin Martyr (Ca. 165 A.D.)

Apologia 10:2 We have been taught, are convinced, and do believe that He (God) approves only of those who imitate His inherent virtues, namely temperance, justice, love of man, and any other virtue proper to God who is called by no given name. We have also been instructed that God, in the beginning, created in His goodness everything out of shapeless matter for the sake of men. And if men by their actions prove themselves worthy of His plan, they shall, we are told, be found worthy to make their abode with Him and to reign with Him, free of all corruption and pain.

Ongen (185 - 254 A.D.)

De Princ:piis III, 1:6 (A. Cleveland Coxe, DD, ed., *Fathers of the Third Centwy: Tertullian, part Four; Nincius Felix; Commodian; Origen parts First and Second*. NY: The Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885, 305.)

Now, that our business is to live virtuously, and that God asks this of us, as not being dependent on Him, nor on any other, nor as some think, upon fate, but as being our own doing, the prophet Micah will prove when he says: "If it has been announced to thee, O man, what is good, or what does the Lord require of thee, except to do justice and to love mercy."(Micah 6:6) Moses also "I have placed before thy face the way of life, and the way of death: choose what is good, and walk in it." (Deut. 3:15)

Saint Basil the Great (329-379 A.D.)

The Long Rule 37:2 It is, therefore, immediately obvious that we must toil with diligence and not think that our goal of piety offers an escape from work or a pretext for idleness, but occasion for struggle, for ever greater endeavor, and for patience in tribulation, so that we may be able to say: "In labor and painfulness, in much watching, in hunger and thirst." Not only is such exertion beneficial for bringing the body into subjection, but also for showing charity to our neighbor in order that through us God may grant sufficiency to the weak among our brethren, according to the example given by the Apostle in the Acts when he says: "I have shown you all things, how that so laboring you ought to support the weak," and again: "that you may have something to give to him that suffereth need." Thus we may be accounted worthy to hear the words: "Come ye blessed of my Father, possess you the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me to drink."

Thus, in the midst of our work can we flulfill the duty of prayer, giving thanks to him who has granted strength to our hands for performing our tasks and cleverness to our minds for acquiring knowledge, and for having provided the materials, for that which is in the instruments we use and that which forms the matters of the art in which we may be engaged, praying that the work of our hands may be directed toward its goal, the good pleasure of God.

Thus we acquire a recollected spirit -- when in every action we beg God the success of our labors and satisfy our debt of gratitude to Him who gave us the power to do the work, and when, as has been said, we keep before our minds the aim of pleasing Him.

Saint John Chrysostom (344-407 AD.)

Commentary on St. John the Apostle & Evangelist, Homily 3 A servant performs all he does for the pleasure of his master and seeks for nothing more than his approving glance; he does not draw the eyes of others to his work, even if these others are great, but regards one thing only; how the master regards his work. Is it not strange, then, that we who have such a Master, seek for another audience, who by their gazing can give us no aid, but instead, harm us and rob of merit all our toil?

On First Corinthians, Homily 20

(Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, X) Whosoever then thou seest one driving nails, smiting with a hammer, covered with soot, do not therefore hold him cheap, but rather for that reason admire him. Since even Peter girded himself and handled the drag-net, and went fishing after the Resurrection of the Lord.

Augustine (354-430 A.D.)

The Work of Monks Chapter 13 This much I know, that he was neither a thief nor a robber, neither a charioteer nor a hunter, neither an actor nor a gambler, but that innocently and honorably he performed such labors as are suitable for human occupation, such as the work of carpenters, builders, shoemakers, farmers and similar trades..... Respectability does not belittle what is scorned by those who desire to be called honorable but do not wish to be so. Hence the Apostle (Paul) would not refuse to perform any rustic labor or to engage in any workman's craft.

The Work of Monks, Chapter 13 Whatever work men perform without guilt and trickery is good.

The Work of Monks, Chapter 17 What, therefore, hinders the servant of God from meditating on the law of God and from singing to the name of the Lord most high while he performs manual labor, provided that he have time set aside for learning the psalms he is late to sing from memory? For this purpose, those good works of the faithful ought not to be found deficient in furnishing the necessities of life, so that at the time when the mind is free for study and when, as a result, corporal works cannot be performed, the monks may not be hampered by need. Moreover, do not those who say they refrain from work for the purpose of reading find in that reading what the Apostle directs? What kind of perversity is it, then,

to be unwilling to obey the works one wishes to be a leisure to read, and in order that what is good be read for a longer period, not wish to do what is read? For, who does not know that, when one reads good books, he advances more quickly in proportion as he puts into practice what he reads?

Simeon the New Theologian (949-1002 AD.)

The Discourses (Carecheses), X 3 But since the mind is something that is in constant motion and incapable of total inactivity, it is necessary that it should be concerned with and eager to practice the commandments of God. So the whole life of men is filled with care and concern and cannot be wholly at leisure, even if many have striven to achieve it, though it is beyond their ability and power. but in the beginning man was created with such a nature, for in paradise Adam was enjoined to till the ground and care for it [Gen. 2:15] and there is in us a natural bent for work, the movement toward the good. Those who yield themselves to idleness and apathy, even though they may be spiritual and holy, hurl themselves into unnatural subjection to passions.