March reflections for the Year of St. Joseph: Joseph the Worker—Dignity of Labor

St. Joseph: A true laborer and yet more than his job

At about age 9, I gained my first “real” job. On my dad’s days off from work, he would cut yards around town, and I was his lucky sidekick. I remember that first day well. I pushed the mower back and forth across the small lawn and, after wiping the sweat from my brow, looked back at the fruits of my labor. I had put in a full day’s work and felt proud of what I accomplished with my own hands. In short, I experienced the dignity of human work.

This is for good reason, as work is integral to who the human person is. Little did I know at the time, but man was established as a worker from the very beginning. Genesis 2:15 records that man was “settled” in the garden “to cultivate and care for it.” Though part of God’s creation, man was to be placed over it and responsible for it. Creation was gifted to man to be made his own, to exercise stewardship and dominion over the gift. This unique vocation of man was integral to God’s design—albeit, a design which precedes the fall from grace and the volatility and toil in human activity brought about by Original Sin. Man’s work, then, was valuable from the beginning. Thus, it is clear: man is a worker. However, this isn’t all he is, and it is Joseph who reveals this anew.

Indeed, “[St. Joseph] belongs to the working-class.” (Pius XI) Laboring tirelessly in his Galilean workshop with materials of the earth, he nevertheless remained detached from them. Joseph’s work transcended the material because it was done not for its own sake but in sincerity, humility and detachment in view of what God had asked of him. Thus, woodworks were not the only object of his labor; the Holy Family received the bounty of his service as well. It is not by mere exertion that Joseph’s work was profitable. Rather, “St. Joseph’s sanctification of work derives from his contemplative attitude.” (Marie-Dominique Philippe, The Mystery of Joseph, 51) After all, in order for work to truly be an offering to God, the end of our work must be God. Labor, intellectual or manual, that is fixated on sheer production for human glory remains merely on the human level.

Unfortunately, the human level became the end of all work in modern ideologies, thwarting Joseph’s witness. This is clear in the industrial revolutions of the 18th and 19th centuries and the 20th century’s exultation of work at the expense of the human person in communist regimes. Again, man is a worker, but that isn’t all he is. Devoid of any grounding in Christ, whose Incarnation elevates human work to be redemptive and sanctifying, human work remains merely human. Regrettably, we can fall into this error too. For example, in the recent quarantines of the COVID pandemic, it was common for people to feel lost, even void of identity, without their work.

Recognizing this tendency, Pope Pius XII instituted the feast of St. Joseph the Worker on the same day as the communist celebration of “May Day.” The Church raised Joseph, a man, through the dignity of his work in Christ, whereas the communist idealized work at the expense of man. We are people, made in the image of God, who work, not the other way around. It is Joseph who is our great model in this mystery, for Joseph worked with Christ and for Christ—both in the Galilean workshop and in the cosmic redemption of the world. Indeed, we are all invited to sanctify our work with and for Christ, exercising the mind and body as an “expression of man’s full humanity.” (Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, 265) May we then be fully human working not only for things of the earth but for the kingdom to come as well.

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‘He got up and went’

The events of the last year have brought many of us to places of uncertainty. We have seen viruses, hurricanes, violence and unrest impact our jobs, our families, our communities and even our worship. We have had to isolate ourselves and stretch ourselves. We might have Zoom fatigue or overtime exhaustion. We have had to be flexible with days at work and days online. Every day has brought its own challenges and, frankly, we are all exhausted. Work is synonymous with inevitable stress and necessary suffering to make ends meet and hold our lives together. This all seems to fit in with Adam’s curse that we would toil in our work for all the days of our lives. I believe that St. Joseph can understand our stress and toil. St. Joseph knows what it means to get up every day and perform tasks that might seem insignificant. He also knows what it means to be a worker and a provider in a time of uncertainty.

Matthew’s Gospel tells us that the angel appears to Joseph in a dream to warn him of Herod’s plan to slaughter the infants. In response, Joseph “got up and went” to Egypt with Mary and Jesus. Whenever Herod died, Joseph was again visited by the angel in a dream. This time it was to call the Holy Family out of Egypt and back to Nazareth. So, Joseph “got up and went.” This phrase “got up and went” can teach us something about how to approach work in times of uncertainty. St. Joseph had to be flexible and obedient to whatever the Lord was calling him to. He had to provide for his family with very little stability and many unknowns. St. Joseph was willing to get up and go and provide in whatever way he could because he knew that work is a part of the responsibility that God has given humanity.

In the Creation story, humans are given the command to care for the earth. Adam is set over the garden to till it and keep it. *Rerum Novarum* 10 states, “For the soil which is tilled and cultivated with toil and skill utterly changes its condition; it was wild before, now it is fruitful; was barren, but now brings forth in abundance.” Through toil, Joseph makes ends meet enough to give shelter and feed his family no matter where God called them. It is alongside Joseph’s silent toil that Jesus comes into the world to bring abundant life to us. Every hour of work put in by St. Joseph assisted the cultivation of the life of Mary and Jesus. We are given the command to care for creation. We have a responsibility to—in some way—provide for our families, friends, neighbors and communities. Let us ask St. Joseph to show us how our toil can cultivate something beautiful. Let us also ask for the grace to “get up and go” when we have to be flexible or when there is no stability.

**REFLECT AND PARTICIPATE**

As the Diocese of Lafayette celebrates the Year of St. Joseph, reflecting upon the virtues of adoration, obedience and service, several events have also been planned in which all are invited to actively participate. Events scheduled for March include:

- **March 6:** Opportunity to gain Year of St. Joseph Indulgence (any St. Joseph Church)

- **March 19 (Solemnity of St. Joseph):**
  - 5:30 p.m. Central Deanery Celebration (Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, Lafayette)
  - 6:00 p.m. Parish Mission (St. Joseph Church, Parks)

Additional information about the Year of St. Joseph may be found at dioiaf.org/stjoseph.