STRENGTHEN THE WORK OF OUR HANDS

Following Labour Day I would like to meditate with you on the beautiful mission of the work. Of course there are not only positive aspects to work, one has but to consider the long hours on the assembly line or work carried out in practically inhuman conditions. And what about the thousands of unemployed and who must work at two or three "joblets" in order to eke out some kind of living? I want to pay tribute to all the men and women who doggedly and with persistent effort on their part have transformed and still transform their milieu.

BREAD OF MISERY OR OF LIFE

How often have we heard the Bible's injunction « By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread.» And St. Paul in his turn writes to his people, « Now we command you, beloved, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to keep away from believers who are living in idleness and not according to the tradition that they received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labor we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you... For even when we were with you we gave you this command: Anyone unwilling to work should not eat. » This directive was took to heart down the centuries and it is still very much alive today. Let us look in our respective milieus at the workers who day in day out - and even in the night - spare no efforts to earn their living honourably and thus respond to their family's needs. All who came before us worked hard to cultivate and settle the land we inhabit. Mothers and fathers of families laboured endless hours in order to furnish the necessities of life to their children. They really worked by the sweat of their brows... Even today there are those who spare no expense to work honourably.

SOURCE OF JOY AND PAIN

For most of us as for most of our forebears, work really was and still is a source of joy. Their lives were totally directed by the work ethic, they would not and could not have been happy without a regular daily job. It is as if this were part of our very nature. We can then understand the distress, depression, and humiliation of the unemployed. I know of no one who refuse to work out of idleness or laziness. Other factors can enter into play that prevent them from being employed. It is a sad thing to see that difficulties met by new graduates in trying to find a first job: the number of resumes sent out, and the long and numbing plodding from place to place. Problems caused by prolonged unemployment, especially economic dependence on social welfare, risk causing a loss of personal dignity for many of our young people and adults.

DIFFICULT SITUATIONS

The actual economic situation continues to strongly affect our workplaces. Financial constraints have had and still impact on production, work sharing, managements, and profit sharing. Those at the bottom of the pay scale, those especially in the services area, are among the most affected by work shortage. In periods of high unemployment, while it would be normal that everyone have the chance to work, we could easily be tempted to view employment as some kind of privilege. We could also have difficulty identifying with those who strive

for greater social justice. And we could deplore the absence of impartial social analysis which would allow us to better understand the connection between the lived experience of workers and the major currents affecting the labour structure, such as technological change and the international restructuring of the trade sector.

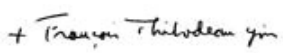
THE KEY TO THE SOCIAL QUESTION

Some fifteen years have passed since Pope John Paul II, in his famous encyclical on labour, defined work as the essential key to the social question as a whole. He recalled the first « gospel of work » that is found in the first chapter of Genesis. He pointed out that Jesus proclaimed and practised the gospel he had been given: « It was truly the gospel of work because the one proclaiming it was a worker himself, a carpenter like Joseph of Nazareth. »

PARTNERS WITH GOD

One of the key elements of this gospel of work is that in his or her work every worker enters into partnership with God in the construction of our world. God has entrusted it to us: we are to be its stewards. We are the stewards of creation and are called to work at making it a more just and kindly world. The farmer has a noble mission, that of improving the land and producing wonderful harvests. The construction worker works at building up the city of humankind for everyone. The secretary develops ways of communicating, while the cook prepares dishes with foods given us in abundance by the earth. With help from Jesus the Good Shepherd, the pastor builds up the Christian community through his or her labour. And so, it is good to make ours the words of the Psalm, « Strengthen, O Lord, the work of our hands, strengthen the work of our hands. » It is good to work, because we are partners with God.

Have a good week!



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