

MAKE ME AN INSTRUMENT OF YOUR PEACE

The dignity of work and the rights of workers

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Sixth in a series

The nature of work is often misunderstood. We think of work as a burden or, otherwise, as a way to amass wealth, or power. But work is a gift that allows us to make the world a better place and allows us to be co-creators with God as we support our families.

We often forget that, as St. John Paul II reminded us in his document "On Human Work" that Jesus "became like us in all things devoted most of the years of his life on earth to manual work at the carpenter's bench... The value of human work is not primarily the kind of work being done but the fact that the one who is doing it is a person. The sources of the dignity of work are to be sought primarily in the subjective dimension, not in the objective one." (On Human Work #6).

Another way of looking at it is that work exists for the person, not the person for work.

One thing that has always stayed with me was when I started my undergraduate degree in Architecture at Georgia Tech. During our orientation, the Dean of the College of Architecture spoke to us about the usual requirements and expectations. But then he called forward an older gentleman wearing overalls. The Dean introduced him as the lead

janitor of the Architecture Building and then explained to us that he was one of the senior janitors on campus who had CHOSEN to work in the Architecture building. This building was open 24 hours a day, and most janitors who had a choice rather worked in other buildings that were less difficult to keep clean.

We were told in no uncertain terms that we would treat him with respect because his work was important.

If the Dean was out a week, all that would happen was that paper would pile up on his desk. If the Janitor was out for a week, you

wouldn't be able to walk through the building because of all the paper and cardboard that would pile up on the floor.

All work is important and worthy of respect because the inherent dignity of the person who works.

Lord,
make me an instrument
of your peace;
where there is hatred,
let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness,
joy.
- St. Francis of Assisi

Because of the dignity of the person who works (and because work exists for the worker, not the other way around), the worker has certain rights that need to be protected such as the right to a just and livable wage, safe working conditions, and the right of the worker to benefit from his work. There is a right to leisure and retirement, and a right of the workers to unionize in solidarity with each other if they so choose in order to protect, bargain for and ensure these rights.

At the same time, those of us who work also have a responsibility to those who are unemployed, underemployed, or unable to work. We have a responsibility to care for them and work to help them back on their feet and find meaningful work.

In our globalized world, we also have to protect the rights of workers around the globe, not just those in our back yard. We have to think about and consider the work involved with those things we purchase and consume.

Think of something as simple as chocolate and the work that goes into making

that candy bar: the workers who harvest the cocoa beans, those who process the beans, those who load the ships and the shippers who send the beans to be processed into cocoa, and then ship the cocoa to the chocolate factory where workers combine the cocoa and sugar and other ingredients to make that candy-bar you might have given up for lent but you will be purchasing for your Easter baskets.

We have a responsibility, to think of the workers and purchase, where possible fair trade or those items that do not have unfair labor or slave labor in their manufacturing process. Every purchasing decision we make is a moral decision.

Some things to consider this week:

- How does your work allow you use your gifts to provide for your community and family?
- How does your work contribute to your wellbeing and happiness?
- How do you live in solidarity with workers in your community and around the globe?

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