

This Labor Day, celebrate God's work

Work is good not just because it helps us pay the bills, but because it helps us to be the selves that God intended.

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Americans have always struggled with work: seeking just wages, securing equal rights, and balancing time for family with the necessary demands of supporting one.

In the early 20th century Americans campaigned for more humane working hours in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. In the mid-20th century, Americans struggled with adding extra hours to their week in order to increase the capacity to pay for their increased access higher education.

On Labor Day of 1988, as the United States celebrated the 50th anniversary of the 40-hour work week, Americans were concerned that full-time employees were, in fact, working the most they had since mid-century, with a simultaneous decrease in reported leisure activity.

Now, in 2018, any internet search for “work hours” reveals concerns that Americans face rising work hours and increased health risks due to work-related stress.

The Catholic Church has a long history of trying restore a sense of justice and balance to American work life, particularly among industrial and agricultural laborers who have faced disparities of power, access, and education. Yet Catholic social thought has spent less time focusing on how a Catholic understanding of work applies to seemingly privileged laborers: those who have access to job-related education, opportunities for promotion, and access to benefits such as health care or retirement funds.

These people (myself included) are, by all standards, poised for a good quality of life. Yet I am concerned that we are not achieving it. In my own experience, I know a married couple who has lived apart, literally at opposite ends of our country, so that both could pursue a career. Other friends have suffered serious health complications after devoting too much of their lives to their jobs. Still others talk about seeing their children only briefly at bedtime each day.

One of reasons that a troubled work life is, indeed, so troubling is that labor is a gift from God. It is important to say that again: Labor is a gift.

In Genesis 1:28, we are told that “God blessed [men and women], and God said to them, ‘Be fertile and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the

sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.” To be in God’s glorious image is to be able to labor upon creation, just as God does.

No other creature has these graced capacities for work and innovation. Yes, labor can be full of toil and certainly unjust, but these unfortunate attributes are the result of human sin, not God’s plan. “Hard” work only enters the world in Genesis 3: 17–19: Adam will labor among thorns not because work is bad, but because, when he rejected the laws of Eden, he lost the right to work there. When we reject God’s laws in our workplaces, we, too, feel the sting of thorns. Labor is always a gift; thorns get in the way of seeing what work should be.

For St. John Paul II, not only is work is a gift, but it is also a gift to be a worker. In his encyclical, [*Laborem Exercens*](#) (On Human Work), John Paul II affirms that “independently of their objective content, these [work-related] actions must all serve to realize his humanity, to fulfil the calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity.”

Human beings discover their worth through the creative, social, and intellectual process that meaningful work affords. Contrary to so much of human history, work is not how we damage human dignity, but how we realize dignity through work.

Work is good, then, not just because it helps us pay the bills, but because it helps us to be ourselves, the selves that God intended. And when we are what God wants to be, we are able to do God’s work.

Pope Francis affirmed this [in a 2017 letter](#), written to mark the conclusion of a labor conference: “We collaborate with the creative work of God when, through our work, we cultivate and preserve creation; we participate, in the Spirit of Jesus, in his redemptive mission, when by our activity we give sustenance to our families and respond to the needs of our neighbor.”

So the question is not whether work is a gift from God, because it is. The question is whether *our work* aligns itself with God’s work by helping us to care for God’s earth and for one another.

Pressures toward exhaustive work hours and constant attachment to work-related media call into question which god we serve: The God of Genesis or what Pope Francis calls “the money god.” Such all-in attachment to the workplace—even a church-based workplace—often leads toward imbalance of one’s relationships, the earth, or even the church.

Firstly, even if we hold meaningful jobs, over-commitment to the workplace can lead to under-commitment to what should be our primary relationships. Too often have I heard of situations where people are excellent on the job yet become more distant from their children, estranged from spouses, and without a robust community. Job commitment can even

displace worship and Christian fellowship, with weekend work increasingly becoming the norm.

Secondly, Pope Francis' letter further notes that, beyond damaging people and families, unjust work structures can also damage "mother earth." Whenever work becomes all-consuming, it is bound to ask us to sacrifice genuine goods for the needs of our job. We all know the pressure of having to perform well, secure raises, and achieve promotions, yet when these become the chief goods that we pursue it is easy to forget that our work environment might be damaging our real environment. Does our commute unduly harm the air we breathe? Do we work so hard that we find ourselves ill and a health hazard for those around us? Does our commitment to one industry cause us to ignore its reliance on ethically questionable investments, harmful emissions, or carcinogenic materials?

This second set of environmental concerns also brings us right back to relationships. In the process of being committed to *our jobs*, do we know about the labor conditions of those whose labor enables our own? Do our industries use fair wages? Provide safe worker conditions? Give access to healthcare? As the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops warns us in their 1986 Pastoral Letter, [*Economic Justice for All*](#), "Our faith calls us to measure this economy not only by what it produces, but also by how it touches human life and whether it protects or undermines the dignity of the human person."

Lastly, when we cultivate the tendency to see our work as our primary commitment, we not only lose sight of our primary call to care for persons and the earth, but we may even forget that our primary membership is not in a work organization but rather in God's church. We know something is amiss when we work so much that worship becomes a burden, when corporate interests are so important that Jesus' moral teachings are inconvenient, and when we realize that our work productivity consumes us more than our holiness.

At the end of the day, having a loyalty to our work is not the problem. Working hard is not the problem. Working often is not even the problem.

The problem is when our understanding of work is so connected to our specific job that we forget about God's vision for all of work. We are created to work, and our labor is supposed to transform us into the kind of people who live in love with others and with our community. When we lose too much of our lives to our work week, we risk losing our God-given health as well as our chance to enjoy the God-given creative process.

Like our first parents, we are so tempted to become devoted to only one tree and to forget everyone and everything else that makes God's garden beautiful and life-giving. As stewards of God's creation made in the divine image, our work is meant to forge a balance among us, our neighbors, and our environment. All godly labor is about cultivation-in-balance.

So, when we are tempted to put in an extra five to 10 hours, when the next promotion calls to us a bit too strongly, and when the stress of performance causes us to overlook the joys of our health, our community, and our environment, I think God is asking us to take a step back. With a larger perspective, we can see which parts of our jobs are God's work and which parts of our jobs would benefit from re-prioritization in light of God's call. As Pope Francis explains, work "is more than a mere doing; it is, above all, a mission."