

St. Joseph the Worker
Anniversary of the Dedication of St. Joseph's Basilica
[*Genesis* 1:26-2:3; *Colossians* 3:14-15, 17, 23-24; *Matthew* 13:54-58]

Throughout the coronavirus pandemic in which we find ourselves, we have gained a new and perhaps deeper appreciation of very important elements of the mystery of life, aspects that maybe we had been taking for granted: the value of life itself, the dignity of the human person, the preciousness of good health, our common responsibility for one another and so on. From among all the wonderful things that we are learning to appreciate anew, our celebration today draws our attention to the importance of work. We honour today St. Joseph the Worker. How he exercised his labour sheds light on how we are to employ our own talents and skills.

COVID-19 and its repercussions have placed the import of work in high relief. On the one hand, battling the virus has called for increased labour on the part of those employed on the front lines, such as healthcare workers and first responders. On the other, our weakened global economy has caused hundreds of thousands of people to lose their jobs, a terrible situation that leaves them and their families anxious about the future. From either perspective, the significance of human work is clear: it gives expression to the dignity of the individual and makes a decisive and necessary contribution to communal flourishing.

When we turn to the Sacred Scriptures proclaimed this morning, our grasp of the magnitude of work's value expands. There we learn that work not only fulfils human designs but also serves divine purposes. St. Joseph will illustrate this for us, but first let's ponder God's own work.

The work of God is that of creation and redemption. The first reading from *Genesis* is taken from the biblical masterpiece which is the first account of God's creative labour. God created the world and all that is in it. The pinnacle of the divine artisanship is the human being, created male and female and fashioned in the image and likeness of God. When humanity fell through sin, God worked to bring us back to Himself in that labour we call redemption, centered upon the gift, and the work, of His Son. Yet, in the mystery of God's providence, He willed that the outcome of His work would somehow mysteriously hinge upon that of human beings. We see this on display in the labour of St. Joseph, by whose paternal care Jesus was protected and nourished, and beneath whose watchful gaze he grew and matured.

In the dedication of St. Joseph to his efforts, we see anticipated and exemplified the exhortation that St. Paul would make years later to the Christians at Colossae: "Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord..." (*Col.* 3: 23). Through his particular labour as a carpenter, St. Joseph provided for his family. At the center of this family was Jesus, entrusted by God to the guardianship of this just man of old. In St. Joseph, then, we see human labour wondrously united to the divine purpose, and thus the ultimate place and supreme value of human work marvellously revealed.

Now the unity of work to a higher cause is not new to our experience. In fact, it is yet another lesson we are living and learning in our response to COVID. Extraordinary is the coming together of humanity the world over in a common undertaking. We can each see how our labour, and even the sacrificial loss of employment, contributes to a goal that transcends our individual

selves: stopping the virus and protecting the human family from its harm. In St. Joseph, we see that human labour is summoned to unite in service of an even greater purpose: the salvation of the human race. The work we do can be of no greater consequence than this.

The means by which our unity of effort comes about to fight the virus is acquiescence to medical directives. Human labour unites with and serves the divine by the obedience of faith. This is underscored by the positive example of St. Joseph himself, as well as by the negative reaction of his fellow citizens in Nazareth to the work and preaching of Jesus.

St. Joseph showed that faith is the conduit by which God's saving grace flows into and is active in the believer. By faith, Joseph responded to the call of God to take Mary as his wife and to raise and protect the child to be born of her. Through this profound act of trust and obedience on the part of Joseph, God united all that this humble carpenter would do to His own saving work. The people of Nazareth, on the other hand, demonstrated how unbelief can be an obstacle to the divine purpose. St. Matthew tells us pointedly that Jesus "did not do many deeds of power there, because of their unbelief (*Matthew* 13 58)." Whatever might have been the particular occupations of those Nazoreans, they remained separated from the saving purpose of God, and the full, wondrous potential of their human labour was in consequence not achieved.

What does all this say to us right now? Well, at a time when we continually repeat the refrain, "We are all in this together," uniting our efforts toward a common goal, the faith of St. Joseph the Worker encourages us to develop and maintain by our belief a yet deeper unity of endeavour with the work of God Himself, in service of that infinitely higher divine objective, which is the world's salvation. As we now awaken by dint of our present difficult circumstances to the importance of work, St. Joseph shows us that human labour has a value, dignity and purpose far greater than we could ever have imagined. So now, in the work of God that we call the Eucharist, let us ask our Lord to give us the faith by which He unites our labour to His, for the life and salvation of the world.

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith
St. Joseph's Basilica (livestreamed)
May 1, 2020