

St Joseph the Worker - the dignity of human work in light of the Work of Redemption

By Fr Serafino M. Lanzetta

In the Year dedicated to St Joseph a reflection on the importance of human work as sanctified by Jesus and Mary, of which St Joseph is an outstanding model.

To counter the rise of a massive and anarchical labourers' protest, claiming civil rights for workers, but often with a materialistic approach, Pius XII established the Feast of St Joseph the Worker on 1st of May. This was declared with an address to a Catholic Association of Italian Workers in 1955. In the same speech, Pius XII wanted also to reassure all Catholics that Mother Church has always had a concern for workers, stressing the dignity of work and the need of justice that should always direct all human actions, condemning at the same time the exploitation of workers.

The Pope wanted to rebuke above all the vicious calumny, spread by Marxists and Socialists, according to which "the Church is an ally of Capitalism against the workers." In truth, the real problem that laid behind such a Marxist protest against religion, and the Catholic faith in particular, was the materialist vision of man and society. Work was seen as something demeaning the human condition. The exploitation of workers, that in fact existed, could only be cured by restraining the individual rights of people, such as private property that causes social inequality, so as to have the idealistic chance to transform the egoism of a few into the well-being of many - a communist society where all people would share their goods with no more social classes and differences among humans. But above all with no family (husband, wife and children - it would have been the very reason of division according to different roles) and no God, no Creator, no Redeemer. Man, who is essentially what he eats, drinks and produces with his hands, is conceived as someone made to work and not to work for being human and for seeking a higher good: to contribute to the Redemption of mankind. The very reason why man is alienated is not work and social economy, but God and religion.

Our Lady came to Fatima in 1917 and in her third apparition, on 13th July, She warned humanity through the feeble voice of three little children that if her call to consecrating Russia to Her Immaculate Heart - together with personal repentance and sacrifice - had not been heeded, Russia would spread her errors of materialism and Communism throughout the world. Does this ring any bells today? Can we say that Our Lady was wrong when we see around us a new empire governed only by the matter (man decides what he wants to be: if still human or transhuman or already post-human); where only economic crises and pandemics seem to concern the majority of people, including Church leaders; but above all when we see the total absence of God in the public sphere, replaced by green interests for the new goddess 'mother earth', with human pretensions that have taken God's place. We are the god we like.

However, the teaching of the Church is clear also in condemning the opposite error to Communism which is economic Liberalism. Here the individual is at the centre and all his necessities are set against the common good. Work too is a burden and man is called to break out of this burden by unbridled competition, laying it on the shoulders of those below, though he will get the benefits of their labour.

It might also happen, in the not so distant future, that both Socialism and Liberalism (two sides of the same coin) are likely to become one as they plan an Economic World Reset where men will be deprived of their private goods and property so that each one can contribute to the common cause of a new shared economy, controlled by financial benefactors of this new world, this 'new paradise' on earth. Another way to enslave man with the work of his own hands, in the name of man and of the current ideology. The problem lies in this: here work is not redeemed, because there is no Redemption, there is no God - the true keeper of man. In both cases, Socialism and Liberalism, work is a burden and not a sweet yoke transformed by the love of Christ. Man in this ideology is made for work and not rather work for man, for his human and spiritual growth.

Therefore, Pius XII with the feast of St Joseph the Worker wanted to tell all people that work has a dignity in itself because it is a participation in God's care for his creation and it has a special share in Christ's new creation - the making of all things anew in his Blood by His death on the Cross.

The Catechism teaches that *"human work proceeds directly from persons created in the image of God and called to prolong the work of creation by subduing the earth, both with and for one another. Hence work is a duty: "If any one will not work, let him not eat." Work honours the Creator's gifts and the talents received from him (2427)"*.

Any work is worthy of a person, as long as it is a participation in God's work of creation. Being an architect, a doctor, a workman, a farmer, a housewife, holds equal dignity before God insofar as one works for Him and with Him. The work of being a father and a mother especially, raising up children according to God's law and love, is deign of a man and woman - this is the most precious work needed today for making our society human again.

The fatigue and pain attached to work are an effect of original sin. However, when man works in union with Christ and transforms his labour into an offering of love, that work, redeemed in Christ, plays a very fundamental role for the salvation of mankind. We must be happy because our personal work, anything we do with love and for the sake of love is redeemed, that is rescued from being alienation of man, of usurpation of his dignity because in Christ we are no longer subject to sin. It is sin, egoism, greed, self-sufficiency, that enslaves a man, making him vulnerable, whether he is exploiting others or he is exploited by others.

St Joseph today stands out as the model of a worker. Chosen by God to be the father of His Son, it is he who introduced Jesus to work and taught Him how to work. The Son of God sanctified our human endeavour with the work of His own hands. Saint Joseph points to Jesus our Saviour.

The greatest work is the one by which we have been saved, the work of Redemption. In this work Our Lady played the unique role of Mother and Coredemptrix. From Her we ask the grace to be faithful to our work and to turn it into a means of sanctification and salvation for us and for many.