

Making an Altar of One's Work: Thoughts from Venerable Tomás Morales on Labor Day. By: John M. Grondelski

Work is a prominent theme in the writings of [Jesuit Father Tomás Morales](#) (1908-1994), who lived and worked in Venezuela and Spain. The Vatican confirmed the Servant of God's heroic virtues by decree of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints Nov. 9, 2017.

Work is a prominent theme in Father Morales' writings. Like his better-known but slightly older contemporary, St. Josemaría Escrivá, the founder of Opus Dei, both emphasize the importance of work in the life of the contemporary Christian. Both priests developed a theology and spirituality of work; after all, work is one of the main places where most Christians work out their salvation.

"Holiness is divinized daily life, disappearing into Nazareth": Anticipating Vatican II and, in keeping with the best insights of Catholic theology, Father Morales insists that sanctity is not the preserve of some but the vocation of all. But his emphasis on "disappearing into Nazareth" reminds us that, for most of his life, Jesus' work was work: the labors of a carpenter's son. "Work, in the hands of Jesus — work similar to what millions of others around the world do — is changed into something divine, a redemptive labor," the priest wrote.

While we are sometimes tempted toward a certain schizophrenia that reduces work to an economic necessity, something that has to be done to put money in the bank, Father Morales wants us to avoid that thinking. Being Christian is a full-time, 24/7 job. The Christian lives that life in church on Sunday and in the workplace Monday through Friday. Getting that clear in our heads is what Father Morales (and the Church) wants to stress.

"Work is a means of bringing you closer to God, not an obstacle that impedes your access to Him," the Jesuit emphasized. Work is an opportunity to exercise virtue: responsibility, honesty, a desire to do one's best, etc. And, because work provides the occasion to practice those virtues, it does not just *make things* — products — but it *makes people*.

“The supreme reward of work is not what it allows you to gain but what it lets you to become,” the priest explained.

St. John Paul II reminded us of that dimension of doing in his great book, *The Person and Act*. Yes, acts get things done in the world: Because of what we do, things happen, and products are made. But our acts also do things in us. This “self-reflective” aspect of doing means that what we do expresses who we are, which is why conscience enters the picture — and why what we do involves rights of conscience. It’s not enough to say, “I’m only making a cake” or “I’m only following orders,” when what I do expresses, or contradicts, my deepest convictions or the most basic moral values. “Our times have lost a sense of the sacred dignity of work,” wrote Father Morales.

St. John Paul II reminded us of that sacred dignity in *Laborem Exercens*, his 1981 encyclical on work. In it, he reiterated a central principle of Catholic social thought: the priority of labor over capital. Money is a thing that exists for persons; persons do not exist for things. Yes, labor costs. But the working man is not just “another cost factor,” like steel, aluminum, nails or transport costs.

The Pope is not saying not to reckon with costs, but the recent history of American labor also shows us the “costs” we all bear when whole towns, cities and even regions are abandoned because a *laissez-faire* approach to work treats workers like nails. Even abandoned “nails” still need to eat.

“The Christian’s role is to proclaim that the purpose of work is not principally money but the exercise of virtue,” said Father Morales. That proclamation applies both to him who makes his money by labor as well as he who makes his money because of labor: Each one’s work entails not just economic but also moral values.

That said, Father Morales expected the Christian to demonstrate that dignity in his work. “Every Christian should make an altar of his work, on which he sacrifices himself in and with Christ.”

“What counts is to work well, to work while keeping one’s sight fixed on God, who has given man the honor of collaborating with Him in the perfection of the world,” he said.

“Do you want to remain faithful to your vocation? Then keep straight the furrows you plough each day, opening them by responsible work.”

Like St. Thérèse of Lisieux (who influenced Father Morales’ thought), doing one’s best work — even if it’s sweeping the floor — is an act of love of God.

But Father Morales did not want people to think of work as just a yoke or a burden. Happiness and joy are key points in his spirituality. (It’s not by accident that most of his pictures show a broad smile.) “Responsibility at work floods one with creative joy” — no surprise, since work is co-creation with God, and, in Genesis, God smiled at every day as “good.”

“Work with happiness. Show everybody that, if done with love, work is not a burden but a rest, not a chain but freedom, not a right but a duty,” he wrote.

“To work with love and out of love is to be fulfilled.”