

Winding her way through the office cubicles, an office manager spotted one of her employees playing a video game on the computer. "Why aren't you working?" the office manager asked. The employee had an excellent excuse "I didn't see you coming." Happy Labor Day!

Most people have mixed feelings about work. When speaking of their jobs, it's not uncommon for them to grouse about "the rat race" and "the grind." Yet many people -- often, the very same ones -- also take great satisfaction from their work. Both of those things, satisfaction and frustration, are linked to a fundamental fact. For better or worse, most of us draw much of our self-identity from work.

Notice how often new acquaintances, introducing themselves, start by naming their jobs: "I'm a computer programmer," "... an accountant," "... a teacher," "... a housewife." In many cases, it seems, identity equals work. Which is why, incidentally, the high unemployment rate of recent years, along with hurting people in the pocketbook, has for many been a blow to their self-image.

Less obvious perhaps, but no less important, work also occupies an important place in our spiritual lives.

Ora et labora -- "pray and work" -- is a famous monastic motto. It's a beautiful thought, of course, but also somewhat questionable to the extent it's taken as suggesting a sharp distinction, a split, between prayer and work. In the life of virtue, the two things go together and merge into one, so that work itself is a kind of prayer. In a broad sense, everyone has work to do.

"Work" isn't just paid employment, a job. It includes volunteer work, housework, schoolwork, baby-sitting for family and friends, helping out around the parish -- the 1,001 useful things that people do to be of service, build a better world and give glory to God. A number of individual good habits -- virtues, that is -- are obviously relevant and important in regard to work. Those that come immediately to mind include honesty, punctuality and perseverance.

Underlying them are basic beliefs and attitudes pertaining to work and forming a kind of model within which the virtues can take hold and operate.

Rob and Tom apply for the same job. They take a written test. "You both got the same number of questions wrong," the HR person tells them, "but Rob gets the job." Tom asks indignantly: "If we both got the same number of questions wrong, how come Rob gets the job?" "Well," says the HR person, "one of his incorrect answers was better

than yours." "Whoa, how can that be?" "For problem No. 46, Rob wrote 'I don't know.' You wrote, 'Me neither.' "

Suppose Question #46 for each one of us was this: "What does the Catholic Church say about labor, about work?" Historically the Catholic Church, for the most part, has managed to take a practical, down-to-earth approach to the question of work. The approach of affirming work and workers was reflected in Pope Leo XIII's landmark 1891 social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* ("On the Condition of Workers"). Here the Church can be seen confronting the consequences of the Industrial Revolution by setting out a body of social teaching in response to the challenges of modern times. Since then, many other encyclicals and teaching documents have been published with the same aim in view by later pontiffs, including Popes Pius XI, Pius XII, St. John XXIII, St. Paul VI, St. John Paul II, and Benedict XVI.

In that regard, it's helpful to be aware not only that Jesus worked but that His work had the same two purposes at its core: We work to live, not live to work; and we identify ourselves more by who we are than by what we do.

During His public life, He worked as a kind of rabbi or traveling teacher. But before beginning His public life, He worked as a carpenter. And it wasn't just the work that He did during the public life, climaxed as it was by his death and Resurrection -- that had creative and redemptive value. Those meanings were present in His work throughout His life, including during the years spent working at the carpenter's trade in Nazareth. The Daily Grind was a part of his life, too.

Most Reverend Paul S. Coakley Archbishop of Oklahoma City Chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development United States Conference of Catholic Bishops wrote this year's Labor Day message. Here is some of what he says:

"Behold, I make all things new" (Rev. 21:5) Rebuilding a Dignified Post-COVID World. This Labor Day is a somber one. The COVID-19 pandemic goes on. Economic circumstances for so many families are stressful or even dire. Anxiety is high. Millions are out of work and wondering how they will pay the bills.

And for workers deemed "essential" who continue to work outside the home, there is the heightened danger of exposure to the virus. Yet, as Pope Francis points out in a set of beautiful and challenging reflections on the pandemic, "In this wasteland, the Lord is committed to the regeneration of beauty and rebirth of hope: 'Behold, I am doing something new: right now it is sprouting, don't you see it?' (Is 43:19).

God never abandons his people, he is always close to them, especially when pain becomes more present.” As God declares to John in Revelation: “Behold, I make all things new” (Rev. 21:5). God knows the challenges we face and the loss and grief we feel. The question to us is this: will we pray for and willingly participate in God’s work healing the hurt, loss, and injustice that this pandemic has caused and exposed? Will we offer all we can to the Lord to “make all things new?”

As public reports show, the virus has spread widely among essential workers such as meat packers, agricultural workers, healthcare providers, janitors, transit workers, emergency responders, and others. As a result, low wage workers, migrant workers, and workers of color, have borne a disproportionate share of the costs of the pandemic. Before the pandemic, a significant number of Americans were trapped in low wage jobs, with insecurity around food, housing, and health care, and with little opportunity for savings or advancing in their career. Those same workers have been hit particularly hard, and, it is devastating to say, many have paid with their life. As one New York subway worker put it, “We are not essential. We are sacrificial.”

What was wrong before the pandemic has been accelerated now. What may have been hidden to some is now revealed. Against this backdrop, the murders in our cities was like lighting a match in a gas-filled room. Pope Francis writes of the pandemic: “We are all frail, all equal, all precious. May we be profoundly shaken by what is happening all around us: the time has come to eliminate inequalities, to heal the injustice that is undermining the health of the entire human family!” The Holy Father is now using his weekly general audience as an occasion for catechesis on Church teaching on inequalities that have been aggravated by the pandemic. The dignity of the human person, made in the image and likeness of God, is not at the center of our society in the way it should be. In some workplaces, this has meant an emphasis on profits over safety. That is unjust.

Consumerism and individualism fuel pressures on employers and policy makers that lead to these outcomes. The Good News is that injustice does not need to have the last word. The Lord came to free us from sin, including the sins by which we diminish workers and ourselves. “This is the favorable time of the Lord, who is asking us not to conform or content ourselves, let alone justify ourselves with substitutive or palliative logic, which prevents us from sustaining the impact and serious consequences of what we are living.”

Beginning with our own decisions, we might ask when we buy goods from stores or online: do we know where they came from? Do we know whether the people who made them were treated with dignity and respect? Was the workplace made safe during the pandemic, and did workers receive a just wage? If not, what can we do to remedy this?

I conclude with this Prayer for Work, from *Being Neighbor: The Catechism and Social Justice*, USCCB, April 1998:

Creator God, thank you for providing us with the gift to share our talents.
Provide our community, our nation, our world the fortitude to provide work
for all which is decent and fair.

Make us faithful stewards of your creation to enhance the human dignity
of our global family.

We ask this in the name of Jesus, the Lord. Amen.