

# Woodstock Business Conference/Seton Hall Chapter

**February 27, 2008: The Catholic Understanding of Work**

*IN MEMORIAM DEACON WILLIAM J. TOTH, Ph.D. 1940-2008*

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## **AGENDA**

- Welcome and self introductions
- Opening Prayer
- WBC Mission Statement
- Silent Examen
- Scripture: John 5: 5-16.
- Sharing of insights on Scripture: Father John Haughey SJ
- Topic : The Catholic Understanding of Work by Deacon William J. Toth, Ph.D.
- Discussion and Reflection
- Closing Prayer

## **MISSION STATEMENT**

The mission of the Woodstock Business Conference is to establish and lead a network of business leaders to explore their respective religious traditions in order to ask the individual executives:

- To integrate faith, family, and professional life,
- To develop a corporate culture that is reflective of their religious faith and values,
- To exercise a beneficial influence upon society at large.

The Conference, grounded in Roman Catholic tradition, welcomes believers who are open to and respectful of one another's religious traditions. It is committed to the conviction that ethics and values grow out of one's religious heritage.

## **SILENT EXAMEN**

From its beginning, the Woodstock Business Conference has made a time of reflection an integral part of our monthly meetings. Often this five minute time of quiet is the only part of our day, even our work week, that we are able to rest and be at peace. Lately, since we have come together in the Micah retreats we have used the Examen of St. Ignatius to focus and help center out thoughts:

1. Pause quietly and be mindful of God's presence
2. Reflect on where God has been in your day
3. Pray for light to understand what he is calling you to do.
4. Evaluate how well you have recognized Him or ignored His call.
5. Pray for grace to heed His call.

## **SCRIPTURE**

John 5: 5-16.

There was a man who had been sick for thirty-eight years. Jesus, who knew he had been sick a long time, said when he saw him lying there, "Do you want to be healed?" "Sir," the sick man answered, "I do not have anyone to plunge me into the pool once the water has been stirred up. By the time I get there someone else has gone in ahead of me."

Jesus said to him, "Stand up! Pick up your mat and walk!" The man was immediately cured: he picked up his mat and began to walk.

The day was the Sabbath. Consequently, some of the Jews began telling the man who had been cured, "It is the Sabbath and you are not allowed to carry that mat around." He explained, "It was that man who cured me who told me, 'Pick up your mat and walk.'" "This person who told you to pick it up and walk," they asked, "Who is he?" The man went and informed the Jews that it was Jesus who had cured him.

It was because Jesus did such things on the Sabbath that they began to persecute him. But he had an answer for them.

"My Father is at work until now, and I am at work as well."

### **The Catholic Understanding of Work**

Work in Catholic tradition is defined as "any human activity, whether manual or intellectual, whatever its nature or circumstances." (Pope John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens*, Preface). It is performed to realize values that serve the fulfillment of the worker, society and the glory of God. The universal scope of this definition excludes any reduction of work to paid employment. Thus, work in the Catholic sense, is rightfully attributed to the productive activity of mothers in the home, grandparents and relatives who care for related children, and those who volunteer their services for the benefit of the community. As a conscious activity, work is proper to the human person. Animals do not work. Because it is proper to human beings, work has an innate dignity. Its value is not gauged on the basis of the market value of what is produced but from the fact that the one who works is a human person, a being of transcendent dignity.

The Book of Genesis illuminates many of the meanings assigned by Christianity to work. God invites the first human beings to "cultivate and care" for the world (Gen 2:5-6) and entrusts them with stewardship and dominion over the earth (Gen 1:28). These proto-typical passages indicate that work in its most immediate sense is a human imaging of a God who works. As such it is a fundamental dimension of human existence. Work is a reality in the "the state of original innocence" and exists as an intrinsic component of God's plan for the human race. It constitutes a collaborative continuation of God's creation and redemption of the world. St. Ambrose acknowledged this understanding when he affirmed: "Every worker is that hand of Christ that continues to create and to do good."

Through the first sin of Adam and Eve, sin enters all human realities including those of work. Yet, it is clear from the Book of Genesis that work is not a curse or a punishment. After the fall, the fruits of the earth are yielded only with great toil because Adam's sin has brought about an alienation of the earth's soil from humanity. This alienation is one of many produced by sin. Nevertheless, the plan of God and the essential position of human work in that plan is not defeated by Adam's sin.

For Christians, work is not the ultimate definitive meaning of life. In the Old Testament *Shabat*, the sacred rest commanded by the Lord, is the very first human reality that is called *kadosh* ("holy"). For the Israelites, this sacred time provided the entire nation with respite from the rigors of work. More importantly, it offered each Israelite an opportunity to reflect on his or her work, and to assess whether it truly glorified Yahweh, served one's family, neighbors and the *anayim* - the poor who acknowledged their dependence upon the favor of God. According to Abraham Heschel, *shabat* was a sacred time for Israelites to replenish their trust in God and to set aside the embezzlement of their lives caused by a lust for possessions and power. Later in Jewish history, Shabat served to open the prospect of more radical human liberations in an eternal Shabat.

In the New Testament, Jesus is a "man of work." He devoted the greater portion of his mature years to manual labor; he describes his own mission as "working" (Jn 5: 17) and his disciples as "workers in the harvest" of the Lord. He insists that the Sabbath is made for man. Concern for our condition before God is more important than our work. He admonishes us not to be enslaved to our work nor to view our work as a source of anxiety. Work, worship and leisure offer a rhythmic balance to human existence. Roman Catholicism values leisure as a time when human

beings can develop the totality of their personality, become inwardly rich by appropriating moral and spiritual values often overlooked and neglected in their work-life. Leisure can also be used to awaken an inner sense of wonder and gratitude at the beauty of our natural environment. It can call forth from us a desire to invest our environment with even more beauty through our work and hobbies.

Over the course of centuries insightful and holy Christian men and women have contributed to the Christian understanding of work. Obviously, work is a necessity to the extent that without work, self-preservation, the preservation of the species, the family, society, and the development of culture life are not possible. The sacredness of work was acknowledged by St. Benedict who urged his monks to take care of the monastery farm implements with the same reverence given to the altar vessels and ornaments. Several commentators on the Benedictine spirituality have noted that the bells in the Benedictine monastery do not so much demarcate times for worship, manual labor, study, and recreation as they serve to call the monks to different forms of worship expressed by these activities.

### **The Catholic Social Tradition and Work**

John Paul II introduced into the Catholic social tradition a key distinction between the *subjective* dimension of work which embraces the entire range of experiences by which we self-realize in and through our work, and its objective dimension, the material *objective* realities we use, transform, and produce through our work. For the Pope, the subjective dimension of work takes precedence over the objective dimension.

The value of the subjective dimension of work is that through one's work "one achieves fulfillment as a human being," and "becomes more of a human being" (*Laborem Exercens* n. 9). The human person weaves his or her history through work. Put differently, in the process of working in the world, the human person brings form out of chaos and inserts meaning into void, but these transformations as significant as they may be are not as profound as the transformation of the worker who in his or her work becomes a clearer image of God, and ultimately, more configured to Christ, the perfect image of God the Father. Ultimately, work is for the person and not solely for material production. This assessment of work counters the current ideological threat to work operative in both capitalist and socialist economies, namely, the "commodification" of work.

In *Laborem Exercens*, Pope John Paul II also noted the foundational role of work in social ethics: "work is the key to the social question." This statement is verified when one begins to appreciate the extensive array of social justice issues that center around work issues: 1) Who gets work in our society and who are marginalized from productive work?; 2) How well trained is the current generation to assume productive work?; 3) Is the process of work respectful of human dignity?; 4) Are workers given a voice in determining what will be produced, how it will be produced, for whom, for what price and at what rate of remuneration to the worker? Perhaps the most revolutionary insight of Pope John Paul II is his insistence that capital is congealed labor. Therefore, labor and capital cannot be placed in opposition to each other. Moreover, the active current labor of men and women has a moral claim superior to any claims grounded in the possession of capital. In economies governed by capital, this principle, the priority of labor over capital, is potentially the most challenging maxim of Catholic social teaching.

With regard to the wage system, Catholic social teaching insists that the system per se cannot be designated as immoral and contrary to human dignity. However, justice is not necessarily served when the employer has paid an agreed wage. Above and beyond every wage agreement stands the natural law that the wage must cover those things which are needed to sustain life. If, driven by necessity, a worker agrees to a starvation wage, he is only yielding to force, and the agreement itself is unjust. In order to promote their rights, wage earners have the right to organize into unions that will truly represent the workers and contribute to the proper arrangement of economic life. Strikes can be undertaken as a last resort to defend the rights of workers. The state also has a duty as "indirect employer" to insure that a social safety net exists for those workers who are underpaid or at risk of unemployment.

### **Toward a Spirituality of Work**

One of the major accomplishments of Vatican II was to set forth a theology of the world which in turn precipitated distinctly new forms of work spirituality. In *Lumen Gentium* the Church clearly distinguishes the vocation of the laity from the vocation of the ordained and the consecrated religious man or woman. In the first place, the laity encounters the Lord in a distinctive venue - the *secular world*- which is not simply an external environmental framework but a reality sanctified by the dynamic presence of Jesus Christ and destined to find in Jesus Christ the fullness of its meaning and to glorify God the Father in Christ. Second, in commenting on this passage from *Lumen Gentium*, Pope John Paul II in his *Apostolic Exhortation on the Dignity and Vocation of the Laity (Christifidelis Laid)* insisted that the secular world is not only the place but "the means for the laity to fulfill their Christian vocation." (emphasis added, CL 15). The quest for holiness "materializes" most significantly in our everyday work whereby the Christian laity sanctifies their work and is in turn sanctified by their work.

From this basic perspective, several contemporary spiritual writers have pointed to rich and creative ways in which our work can be a source of sanctity. For example, work that is arduous, even work that involves sacrifice, failure and heart-break can be a means of penance. By enduring the toil and disappointments of work in union with Christ crucified, we can partner with the Son of God in the redemption of humanity. The celebration of the Eucharist offers each Catholic the opportunity to place his work with its triumphs and failures on the paten and offer it to God. Because the Eucharist is a pledge of future glory, the Christian is empowered in his work to hear the groaning of creation and know that at the return of the Lord, creation including our work will be freed from its slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God (Rom 8:21-22) Salvation, which the Lord Jesus obtained "at a price" permeates the reality of work.

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