

The Catholic Radical

—A Catholic Newspaper for a Divided Age—

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MAY DAY—1956

By Dorothy Day, Excerpts from *The Catholic Worker*, May 1956, 2.

Recognizing May Day as a workers' feast day, our Holy Father, Pope Pious XII, last year, designated May first as the feast of St. Joseph, the Workman, and for many reasons we are delighted to celebrate this feast from now on. We used to think of May Day as our old radical holiday; the anniversary of the first issue of the *Catholic Worker* to appear on the streets of New York in 1933; the beginning of Mary's month, when little children walked in procession dressed in white veils, laden with flowers, crowning our Lady, Queen of the May. [...] May is also Peter Maurin's month, not only because he is responsible for The Catholic Worker movement but also because he died on May 15. He fought the good fight and gave everything to God, body, soul and mind and he is in the company of our Lady, and St. Joseph and St. Therese and joyful doctrine of the communion of saints!

Peter Maurin was born in May and died on May 15th, 1949, and we hope many of our readers will remember him in their prayers. It is the best way for all of us to pay the enormous debt of gratitude we owe him for the work which he gave us to do. He set us on a particular path, outlined a particular program, built up a theory of revolution which will last us as a guide for the rest of our lives. Truly Peter was a man who walked with God, who practiced the presence of God, who prayed without ceasing, who never uttered an idle word, who never judged others, who lived a life of utter poverty on the Skid Rows of our country, who practiced the works of mercy at a personal sacrifice, and yet his whole stress was on the primacy of the spiritual. Poverty to him meant freedom, and he rejoiced in giving away his coat, his bed, his food because it left him freer for the spiritual work of mercy, enlightening the ignorant.

Strangely enough, our attempts to put into practice his teaching worked out quite differently for us. When we gave away clothes, furniture, food and lodging, when we made St. Joseph the household patron, he took care of things so that we were kept on that level. He sent us goods to distribute, property to administer, food and shelter for our brothers in Christ who came to us. There was not much room for pride of intellect in us when we are so busy running houses of hospitality and farms, and doing it so badly too. The work itself clarifies Peter's teaching. St. Joseph never fails. He always answers petitions. He finds homes from the Blessed Mother and Child, protected them in exile, worked for them with all the strength of young and vigorous manhood. He was a man, and a saint, and we who believe in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting, can go to him now today in thanksgiving and joy and ask

him for the same abundance of spiritual flavors that he has granted us materially. [...] We thank him, and thank God for giving him to us. D.D.+



WHAT IS GOOD WORK?

By Mark Blonderen

The *Catholic Worker* is so named because it arose in response to the plight of workers in the modern world, so often forced to degrading, meaningless, dangerous, soul-killing tasks. Factory work is the typical example, but there are dozens more. And, just looking around, it is clear that today we have not made very much progress since the great depression. We still have the assembly line, but we have added millions of hours of mindless button-pushing in the cubicles, and a majority of jobs serve faceless, placeless corporations whose goals, much less profits, the workers do not share, and tolerate only for the sake of a far-from living wage.

Upon even this much reflection, many are able to recognize that most work available is not particularly good work. But why? What are our criteria for judging work good or bad? This is one of those questions, fundamental to any social order but mostly overlooked, that Catholic social teaching has a message about.

Peter Maurin put this message in his own distinctive way by talking about cult, culture, and cultivation. Cult, today, is sometimes used to describe crazy sectarian groups, but the original meaning of the word, the way Peter used it, simply refers to an organized system of worship. By "cult" Peter was talking about the Mass, which leads to Christian culture, and then, to sustain the life of the culture, to

the cultivation of the land. Cult, culture, and cultivation. The goal was to build an entire world, an entire culture and social order, with the logic of the Mass at its center. This, then, is where we find our criteria of good work: how closely tied is it to the Mass? to sustaining the things, including the human bodies, necessary to worship? Ideally, all our lives, including our work, should be brought into the orbit of the best kind of work, the opus Dei, or the "work of God" which is the liturgy. In this way, one can imagine, like a village with a chapel at the center, gardens and houses and farms and small shops and tradesmen and animals, all of life, and work interlaced with it all, taking its basic rationale from the fact that it provides the means—like bread and wine, but also human bodies—for worship. The shorter the lines we can draw between our jobs and the Mass, the better the work we are engaged in.

Applying this to the present, while the evaluation will certainly be complex, and we certainly shouldn't expect perfection, it won't take us long to realize that, wherever we start, most of the work we do today doesn't show very well. Sitting on the computer all day with our heads in the virtual clouds, usually getting paid for helping others walk further down the path of disembodiment, distraction, and isolation, while ourselves producing all those things in no ob-

vious relation to the Mass other than the fact that the wage we earn indirectly supports our bodies, is, while understandable, definitely not ideal. Many other jobs fare just as poorly, as Dorothy and Peter often lamented. This being the case, coupled with the fact that the sustaining of our bodies and the growing of food for liturgy and feast are particularly intimate with the Mass, it is no wonder that Peter put such stress on the goodness of manual labor and farming in our age.

The Church has much more to say about work—we've only scratched the surface. We could go on and talk about how work is part of what it means to be human—it is not a product of the fall; it should engage human creativity and the intellect; it must be properly remunerated; it should support the family; it should not take parents away from their children; it is intimately related to procreation and marital fidelity; it is integral to healthy community and even simple friendship; it must support the common good. The Church has unpacked all of this at great length.

But if so many of our jobs, including perhaps the one that currently puts food on your table, fail to be good work, what can we do? The first thing that Dorothy and Peter always emphasized was that you can't blame the worker for taking the only job he can get—there can be no judgment, and just about all of us are deeply compromised.

At the same time, it is not a small first step to simply realize that work is part of what makes us human—that it was given to us in the Garden of Eden as part of our human vocation. As such, good work makes us more divine, and bad work really does make us worse people. So Dorothy and Peter always held out the radical call to simply give up bad work—"Fire the bosses," Peter said—and do something else. There is always, they pointed out, good work to be found, not only on the land, but performing the works of mercy in order to take care of those who have no work at all. Even those of us who don't take this radical step can be intentional about taking baby steps in that direction, not only by the daily practice of the works of mercy, but also creating work outside our jobs that does have those short lines to the Mass: gardening, raising chickens, cooking, or shoveling your neighbors' driveway. Of course, all this is even better if it's done in community.

In these and many other ways, Catholic social teaching can help us see, on this feast of the great saint of manual labor, that work is not just an "issue" of "social justice" somewhere "out there" that we can "be for", but that finding good and even holy work is an intimate vocation for anyone wanting to follow the Gospel. St. Joseph the Worker, pray for us.+

THE STAY-AT-HOME DAD

An Easy Essay by Tyler Hambley

1. Catholics like to hang a “breakdown” of family and society on when women left the home for careers out in the world. But the breakdown of the family occurred when men left the home for careers out in the world.
2. When men left the home, women were left with all the shadow work of arranging a household economy—one no longer *subsistent* on mutually-supportive work internal to life together but *dependent* on the external wage of the husband’s new employer.
3. When the external wages of the employer were no longer enough to afford all the things men were trained to desire, he pushed his wife and kids out of the home, too.
4. When women and kids left the home, women had to worry about equal pay with men and kids had to worry about self-actualizing themselves with the clothing, gizmos, and community-independent sexual desires marketed to them while at school.
5. But if men became stay-at-home dads again, then maybe things wouldn’t “breakdown” like that. Catholic Churches could foster farm-to-table enterprises, craft guilds, and homeschool co-ops. Networks of lay families could build subsistent local economies. Even men’s bathrooms could get a changing table for a change.

RESURRECTING WORK PARTIES

By Sean Domencic

Christ is Risen! Hopefully, this greeting of joy and exaltation is filling not only your home and parish, but also further out (in your workplace, perhaps, or among your neighbors on the street) and deeper in (that is, within your heart). We all remember these festive words of paschal celebration at the most sacred liturgy of the year, but too often by this time most of us have slouched into the spiritual posture of ordinary time. This is why it’s so important to remember that Eastertide lasts a full fifty days, signifying an even greater period of rejoicing than the forty days of Lenten penance, and building up to Pentecost, the outpouring of grace in which the Church was activated and enlivened in its Great Commission.

We all know that it is difficult, probably impossible, to party alone. And this is the problem with our rapidly fading Easter Week—Easter being a solemnity which is supposed to last a full eight days. We have lost the kind of society that is capable of an ongoing and communal celebration, because Catholics no longer share work that is in any way related to the Gospel. While we still retain the glory of our ancient liturgies, we drive to them, often a long distance, having lost all the rich social fabric of a society whose production is woven into the liturgical year. Few Catholics work for Catholic employers, and if they do, how many mark Easter Week with company parties, employee

bonuses, and time off to celebrate? What if we took small steps to produce, store, purchase, prepare, eat, and clean up after, our food together, perhaps while keeping the Liturgy of the Hours, or maintain a small private chapel in someone’s home? We could make a point of celebrating at these liturgical apexes of the year. This is the shared work that blossoms into a true spirit of gift-giving and Easter feasting, instead of reducing it all to eating out after Mass.

The feast of Saint Joseph the Worker, falling within this Eastertide, should call to our minds the dignity of our daily manual labor and recreations, whether in the workplace or the home. So on any occasion that you or I feel a pang of longing, discontent, or frustration that Christ’s victory seems so distant from our daily lives in bourgeois America, let us draw on the deep well of paschal hope which the Lord has won for us. Let us listen more attentively to the words of the Gospel: wherever our hearts are “burning within us” (Luke 24:32), we know that Christ is calling us to conversion and to triumph. Piecing back together such lives of shared work is not an idyllic dream, precisely because St. Joseph’s witness shows us that good work is part of the Gospel, and part of Christian community. And so such acts, however apparently trivial, draw out the power of the resurrection. Already, hell’s gates are shattered, already

heaven’s door is open, and already justice is rolling down like waters. We have all we need to proclaim the resurrection to every nation under heaven, and to every aspect of our lives—Christ is Risen, indeed! +

SELLERS OF LABOR

By Peter Maurin (1933)

1. The teachers of ethics tell us that labor is a gift, not a commodity.
2. And “capital,” says Karl Marx, “is accumulated labor,” not for the benefit of the laborers, but for the benefit of the accumulators.
3. And capitalists succeed in accumulating labor for their own benefit, by treating labor not as a gift, but as a commodity, buying it as any other commodity at the lowest possible price.
4. And organized labor plays into the hand of the capitalists, or accumulators of labor, by treating their own labor, not as a gift, but as a commodity, selling it as any other commodity at the highest possible price.
5. But the buyers of labor at the lowest possible price, and the sellers of labor at the highest possible price are nothing but commercializers of labor.

“THE WORK OF BEES AND YOUR SERVANTS’ HANDS”

By Tyler Hambley

Nothing sends chills down the spine quite like that moment during the Easter Vigil when the Priest sets the new candle in its stand, censens it, then sings the Exsultet. The repeated and soaring refrain, “This is the night...”, then traces the culmination of history to “when Christ broke the prison-bars of death and rose victorious from the underworld.” Yet the good news the Exsultet illumines for us is not that Christ’s action is merely a one-sided affair—as if we in the pews were merely passive spectators of the otherworldly powers of some Marvel superhero—but rather the way this “night of grace” charges even the most ordinary and mundane activities of creaturely existence with the redemptive power of the resurrection. *O truly blessed night, when things of heaven are wed to those of earth, and divine to the human.* For the Exsultet crescendos into the offering of the candle wax itself as an evening sacrifice of praise, a gift to God *from the Church*, “the work of bees and your servants hands.”

Bees? Hands? Servant work? Indeed, the power that raised Christ from the dead seeks co-operation in that same power at every level of creaturely activity. Like the bread-and-wine-turned-Body-and-Blood in the Mass, all of creation is invited to return to its true and original purpose as an instrument of praise and worship in concert with its divine Creator. With human hands as

the conductor—or, worship leader—of this orchestral performance, we are asked to bring even such work as that of the bees to its destiny as fuel for a flame fit to “mingle with the lights of heaven.”

But here it is all too easy to flatten out the Exsultet’s message into some generic call to “sanctify the workplace.” That is, it is easy to assume that what usually falls under our modern description, “work,” is consonant in simplicity and dignity with the work of bees and human hands in shaping wax into an Easter candle. Not so! In fact, much of what we call “work” today positively militates against such simple activity and too rarely have human hands produced beauty and goodness in concert with creation and Creator (here’s looking at you cookie-cutter, midrise apartment complexes).

Even so, I confess I do not immediately think *honeybee* when contemplating the resurrection. Still, these tiny, humble workers of the insect world are instructive. For not only do these creatures pollinate the crops that feed us and the trees that give us the very air we breathe, their honey is used as a symbol in the Old Testament, along with milk, of that which “flows” abundantly in the promised land. John the Baptist—a minimalist of the first order—fed on locusts and wild honey, trusting not in the scarcity of the tax collectors, but instead in God’s gratuitous abun-

dance: “He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise”, “Collect no more than is appointed you”, and “Rob no one by violence or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.” And what is it Christ Himself is given *after* his resurrection when he asks for something to eat? Broiled fish and a honeycomb. *I come to my garden, my sister, my bride, I gather my myrrh with my spice, I eat my honeycomb with my honey, I drink my wine with my milk. Eat, O friends, and drink deeply, O lovers!* (*Song of Solomon 5:1*).

It is no wonder, then, that beehives became not only a staple of later monastic life, but paradigmatic of monastic spirituality itself. Bees were central to the monks’ economy of subsistent work and worship—pollinating their gardens, providing wax for their candles, and making honey for the monks to either eat, sell at market, or turn to mead. Beehives themselves provided a model for life together. Each monk, like a bee, had his purpose to fulfill and a regular pattern of work and prayer to mark his day. Furthermore, the monastery’s role in society was to be as caretaker, illuminator, even pollinator of revealed wisdom to the culture. This of course, was not done as a top-down matter of public policy but as the delicate and sweet fragrance of an organic social process. “The bee collects honey from flowers in such

a way as to do the least damage or destruction to them, and he leaves them whole, undamaged and fresh, just as he found them,” says Saint Francis de Sales.

If Catholics wish to see the world around them illumined by the light of Christ, we are going to have to quit “work” that causes so much damage, stop justifying mind-numbing jobs under the scarcity rubric of “providing” for our families, rediscover life in interdependent Catholic communities, and start outdoor projects together that bring us—quite literally—close to our old, familiar friends buzzing in the breeze. Only then might we hear the divine concert of a fallen creation rising to the heights of heaven once again.+

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