Labor as Part of God's Plan

When we read about the creation of humanity, one of the interesting things in Genesis is that even before Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden as a consequence of sin is that work does not result as a punishment for sin; indeed Adam is given care of the garden and works in it.

Work though can of course have a negative connotation. As Shel Silverstein the writer, cartoonist and poet put it in "Hurk" "What's hurk? I don't know but it must be better than work!" Well, perhaps. Most of us look forward to leisure; as kids we like getting the homework done so we can get to the important things like being outside. But as we celebrate Labor Day this weekend, we also shouldn't lose sight of the positive things of with respect to work.

For one, work is an expression of love. Saint John Paul II, in his encyclical on Saint Joseph called "Guardian of the Redeemer" wrote: how work was the daily expression of love in the life of the Family of Nazareth.

The Gospel specifies the kind of work Joseph did in order to support his family: he was a carpenter. This simple word sums up Joseph's entire life. For Jesus, these were hidden years, the years to which Luke refers after recounting the episode that occurred in the Temple: "And he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them" (Lk 2:51). This "submission" or obedience of Jesus in the house of Nazareth should be understood as a sharing in the work of Joseph. (22)

Jesus is of course God himself; if you think about it he could have snapped his fingers to complete tasks if He had that Divine power, but instead he joined in Joseph in working for the family.

Recently I saw a quote from Cam Ward, the Titans Quarterback on the work of football which includes getting up at 5 a.m. for workouts and training; his reply was if my dad can get up at 4:30 a.m. for a job he doesn't like, why should I complain about getting up at 5 a.m. for a job I love? Many of us have the same thoughts about our parents growing up; I know both of my parents would work hard for the family, but also do a lot of work around the house turning it into a home, and also do work for their own parents as they aged, which I'd partake in too as I got older. Work can be a form of evangelization and teach others, especially kids.

It's also important *how* we work. As kids head back to school, many parents will encourage their kids to work hard, and not just rush through homework but to put some effort into it. The same is true with how we do our work. To paraphrase Saint Therese of Lisieux, we do simple things with great love. The little things we do like cleaning a room or doing chores for the family, or spending time helping kids with a school project really are teaching tools.

Work though also must not be the center of our lives. Again, this is God. It's why we need to spend time with God, to make sure we go to Mass, and to pray. But leisure is also important too. Pope Leo XIII recently took a vacation, and remarked:

"During the summer, we have more free time in which to gather our thoughts and reflect, and also to travel and spend time with each other. Let us make good use of this, by leaving behind the whirlwind of commitments and worries in order to savor a few moments of peace, of reflection, taking time as well to visit other places and share in the joy of seeing others." To the Holy Father's comments I'd just suggest that it of course need not just be summer for these opportunities. Balance is an important part of our lives. I sometimes worry kids these days are way too overextended - a 6th grader shouldn't be worried about college yet. But so are mom and dad often overextended too. Do simple things like a family meal, or a family game night. Go outside for a bike ride as a family or to the park. Find time for a family movie night. Sometimes we feel the need to "go go go" but need to just rest more, especially as a family. And in our own personal lives, make sure you have time too for things like exercise, or leisure activities you enjoy - it helps us to live out our vocations better.

Have a great Labor Day weekend, and remember our work matters so much. It's why Saint Joseph gets his own special feast day not just celebrating his life on March 19th, but also on May 1st to celebrate the true meaning of work which glorifies God and makes this world a better place. No matter what you do, never forget it matters to so many people and makes a difference.

Have a blessed week!

Fr. Paul