

A Philosophical Proposal for the Sanctification of Work

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The reality of the universal call to holiness through a Christian's professional work in the middle of the world is a truth that today is ever more widely accepted and lived. Unlike the twentieth century, the twenty-first begins with a clear perception of the responsibility of the lay faithful to help redeem human realities. The magisterium of John Paul II corroborated this message, explicitly present in the Second Vatican Council and announced in a special way by St. Josemaría Escrivá.

In one of his foundational writings, in early 1934, St. Josemaría showed his awareness of how new this message was: "Uniting professional work with ascetical struggle and contemplation—something which may seem impossible, but which is necessary to help reconcile the world with God—and converting ordinary work into an instrument of personal sanctification and apostolate. Isn't this a great and noble ideal worth dedicating one's life to?"¹ St. Josemaría foresaw the obstacles he would encounter in explaining this path of sanctity that God was asking him to make known. But his "tactic" was not to try to convince others through a theoretical body of truths. Life—the ascetical, pastoral reality—was to come first. And he dedicated his own life to this "noble ideal," to spreading this message among people of all social and cultural backgrounds, so that eventually this apparent "impossibility," confirmed by experience, would open up a pathway in the life of the Church and the world.

Although the newness of this message has already been the object of a number of insightful studies, it is worthwhile considering once again the cultural parameters that made it hard for people to grasp the unity between work, virtue and contemplation during the early decades of the twentieth century.

A first answer comes from the history of Catholic spiritual theology. It is here that the separation (and at times the opposition) between the contemplative and active life presented a strong impediment to accepting this innovation. At the same time, it is also true that the topic of work had already found an echo in the concern of the Church's magisterium for social questions. Nevertheless,

1. Instruction, March 19, 1934, no. 33.

although the timeliness of the topic of work was clear, the cultural parameters also included philosophical, economic and social outlooks that impeded a positive approach to work and an adequate anthropological grounding.²

This study will endeavor to bring to light the main philosophical prejudices involved, many of them still present in our culture today. In addition, I will also try to offer an adequate anthropological framework for overcoming these prejudices.

Work from an Aristotelian perspective

In regard to how philosophy views work, one can point to three main traditions or currents of thought: the Aristotelian, the Protestant, and the Marxist traditions. I call these “traditions” because even though they are outlooks on work that arose at specific times and places, all three reappeared in the twentieth century and exercised great influence on the contemporary philosophical debate. They are, therefore, living traditions that try to provide a rationale for the activity of work and that undoubtedly give interpretive keys for understanding the historical and sociological development of the modern world. Here I will consider only the Aristotelian tradition, both for reasons of space and because of the position I am defending.³

First of all, it is worthwhile recalling that in classical philosophy in general, and in Aristotle in particular, work clearly occupies a secondary position. In his *Politics*, despite correcting Platonic positions in order to stress the important themes of freedom and equality in the polis, Aristotle respects the separation between the liberal and servile arts.⁴ This corresponds closely to another distinction that is of great importance here: that between the political man (that is, one who forms part of the polis or city) and the non-political person (women and slaves, who belonged to the sphere of the *oikia* or the household, and who dedicated themselves to manual work and did not fully possess human nature).⁵ To be a citizen implies being able to attain the good life, that is, a life that is per-

2. John Paul II's encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, published in 1981, is an important source of recent reflection on work. There the Polish Pontiff develops the distinction between objective and subjective work that was already found in Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński's book *All You Who Labor*, originally published in the 1950s, which confronts Marxist ideology on this topic.

3. I deal more extensively with this topic in a study entitled *Labor, The Basis of Culture*, which began at the University of Notre Dame Center for Ethics and Culture, under the direction of Prof. Alasdair MacIntyre.

4. *Politica*, Centro de Estudios Constitucionales, Madrid 1970, 1337 b 5-10.

5. I realize that this statement could be controversial. In the Nichomachean Ethics (1161 b 1-10), Aristotle says that friendship with a slave is possible inasmuch as he is a man; in addition, the lack of an adequate notion of the human person, and the rigid structure of society in the ancient world, make it difficult to give a definitive interpretation of what the Stagyrite says in different works. Nevertheless, precisely on this point of work and slavery, the Aristotelian position tends to separate the human, rational and free dimension in the city, where all men are equal, from the worker or animate instrument in the household, where inequality reigns and the menial tasks “deprive the mind of leisure and degrade it” (*Politics*, 1337 b 12-14). Moreover, the fact that the dominant culture did not permit a deeper investigation into the notion of human nature, corroborates the position that I hold about the Aristotelian error, which like many of his theses can be overcome with other affirmations of his own.

fect, rational, free, virtuous and self-sufficient in the polis.⁶ Those who participate in the polis, however, require assistance in their bodily and daily needs, which frees them from tasks that could dull or diminish their rational capacity.⁷

It is in the *oikia*, however, that all these tasks required for daily life and for sustaining the “good life” of the citizens are carried out. There is no equality among the *oikia*'s members, who submit to the “government of a single person,”⁸ a “despot”⁹ or head of the family, who unites and represents all who form part of the household. Within this setting, the activity par excellence is manual work, while its subject par excellence is the slave or animate instrument. We find here the sphere of the “economy,” in its earliest sense: the realm of the household, the site of production and reproduction, with neither freedom, nor contemplation of the truth, nor properly human virtues.

The discussion of reason in the Nichomachean Ethics completes this first philosophical explanation of work.¹⁰ In the human soul one can find three types of “reasons” or “uses of reason,”¹¹ each with its own object: the theoretical, which is directed towards universal and necessary objects that reason grasps immanently and intentionally; *praxis*, which morally perfects the subject through actions and which gives rise to virtuous or vicious habits (the Greek term *praxis* is usually translated into Latin by *agere, actio*); and *poiesis*, which signifies the action of doing or producing, principally manual and material production (in Latin: *facere* or *factio*), by which one acquires the habit of *téchne*.¹² “Action is not production, nor is production action,” says the Stagyrte.¹³ The activity of poiesis, which is imperfect and transitive, ceases to exist as soon as the product has been made. In contrast to the theoretical use of reason and ethical praxis, *téchne* does not perfect the subject as a person. The artifact produced measures the activity of the producer; it is its truth and its good and therefore the paradigm of work.

The person, in contrast, dedicates himself to contemplation and to virtue, according to the activity the Greeks called *scholé* and the Romans *otium*, in contrast to the *a-scholé* and the *nec-otium*, which are the terms for work. We find

6. Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, 1280 b 35.

7. Cf. *Ibid.*, 1337 b 5-20.

8. Aristotle, *L'amministrazione della casa*, C. Natali (ed.), Laterza, Bari 1995, 1343 a 1-5. I thank Prof. Iñaki Yarza for having pointed out this work to me.

9. For a correct translation of this word in the context of ancient Greek culture, cf. Émile Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society*, (translated by Elizabeth Palmer), Faber and Faber Ltd., London, 1973, pp. 73ff.

10. Cf. Book VI, chapters 1-4.

11. Here I am following Enrico Berti, who says that rather than “forms” of reason, it is better to speak of “uses” in this context. Cf. *Le ragioni di Aristotele*, Laterza, Bari 1989, p. viii. An extensive study of Aristotle's practical reason is found in Iñaki Yarza, *La razionalità dell'Etica di Aristotele: Uno studio su Etica Nicomachea I*, Armando Editore, Rome 2001.

12. The Greek term *téchne* is translated by *ars* in Latin. The distinction between technique and art is relatively recent. It appears in modern times when reason comes to be seen as an instrument to dominate nature through the invention of machines. It is at this moment that art refuses to follow the new use of reason and begins to understand itself exclusively as an activity that creates beauty.

13. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140 a 5-6.

here a vision of aristocratic humanism. Only a person who fully possesses human nature is capable of the “good life,” of developing theoretical reason and the ethical praxis of the polis. And precisely for this reason he does not need to work.

Aristotle's discussion of work has been developed by contemporary thinkers as diverse as Hannah Arendt, Dominique Méda, and Joseph Pieper. This neo-Aristotelian interest in the topic of work, absent in Greek philosophy, appeared when work began to occupy a preeminent place in culture. More than an interest in ancient philosophy, these authors shared a concern to evaluate a labor-centric civilization that required confronting the negative side of the omnipresence of work. Specifically in the case of Pieper, his defense of leisure clearly stems from an anti-Marxist and anti-Weberian reaction, seeking to restore to the spiritual and intellectual activities of men and women the dignity lost through the devastation of dialectical materialism and the exaltation of work as bureaucracy.

Hannah Arendt and the distinction between labor and work

Among the authors mentioned, perhaps the best known and most influential position is that set forth by Hannah Arendt in her book *The Human Condition*.¹⁴ There she distinguishes three types of human activities: labor, work, and action. To summarize the thesis that she developed at the end of the 1950s, our daily existence entails ordinary actions, which are metabolic and inexorably repetitive, and which end up producing products that are immediately consumed. This is “the labor of our body,” the life basically of an animal, the *animal laborans*. By labor we satisfy the daily needs of our bodies, which has little or nothing to do with heroic action or culture. In contrast work, “the work of our hands” proper to the *homo faber*, contributes directly to creating an artificial world of things and shows the freedom of the worker who is the author of a civilization, because he is capable of inventing machines, constructing buildings, helping the *animal laborans* with instruments or “mute robots,”¹⁵ etc. The ideals of the *homo faber* are stability and durability, in contrast to the consumerism and hedonism of the *animal laborans*, in which the body and its needs command and enslave human beings.

Labor does not require special skills; its value is measured by the quantity produced. This product, according to Arendt, is consumed to meet the needs of the body and does not leave any trace behind in culture. In contrast, work demands skills, and therefore it differs qualitatively from labor. It shows that we are free and intelligent beings, capable of transforming the world. Nevertheless, it is only in action (the third type of human activity) that the human condition

14. Cf. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1958. The whole book is dedicated to defending this thesis.

15. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 130.

is truly perfected. It enables us to dedicate ourselves to discourse and to virtue through heroic actions, which should characterize public life and which make history possible. Here once again we find an exaltation of the extraordinary in an aristocratic humanism, with clear Aristotelian roots.

Certainly, Arendt formulates an important accusation. We live in a society that has emancipated the slaves of the classical epoch, freeing them in the public sphere. But their identity has been maintained. The *animal laborans* and its consumerism has converted the domestic economy into a public economy of squandering and abundance, which makes happiness a function of pleasure. At the same time, our society has lost the notion of virtue and freedom, subordinating them to strictly material productivity, which previously had been restricted to the private sphere.

Drawing inspiration from this denunciation, at the end of the 90's the French sociologist Dominique Méda seconded Arendt's distinction and proposed a "disenchantment" of labor.¹⁶ The omnipresence of labor in the contemporary world brings with it a materialistic or economic view of man, exalting repetitive and strictly physical activities. Méda advocates bringing back the human values of autonomy and free time, which enable men and women to carry out virtuous and heroic actions, and thus once again to lead a life of *otium*, of leisure.¹⁷

Independently of Arendt's debatable distinction between labor and work,¹⁸ it is evident that her definitions of labor and work are closely related to production. In the case of labor, the object produced is perishable; it is consumed and disappears. In work, the object remains in existence and thus takes on cultural value. But the definitions of both these activities are developed within the "paradigm of a product," already present in Aristotle. In addition, both are placed in watertight compartments, as is also the case with Arendt's third category, "action." Only action is capable of opening up towards virtue and leisure, and thus it alone can bring happiness to human beings.

Work and anthropology

In classical thought, work and labor stand in contrast first of all to *otium* and to the liberal arts. Later, with the appearance of the monastic life understood as a separation from the world, the contemplative and active lives also are seen as reflecting a certain intrinsic opposition.¹⁹ Work has an inherent difficulty in

16. Cf. *Società senza lavoro. Per una filosofia dell'occupazione*, Feltrinelli, Milan 1997, ch. 10. Méda cites and explicitly follows Arendt in her negative focus on labor and, above all, in exalting leisure as the properly human domain: cf., for example, pp. 117, 136-137, 185-186.

17. Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 232-233.

18. It is not my intention here to formulate an in-depth criticism of Arendt's position. See my more extensive treatment of this question in *Claves para una antropología del trabajo*, EUNSA, Pamplona 2006, ch. IV.

19. Various interpretations have been given regarding the motto *ora et labora*. Although work takes on here a more positive meaning (as a virtuous disposition to combat laziness), it is contemplation that plays a dominant role in this new paradigm of Christian life.

being defined in these outlooks, since it is viewed primarily in respect to the activity it is opposed to, and to which it is often subordinated. Moreover, within that opposition, work is not situated on the side of human excellence or perfection. In Greek philosophy, the one who works is the slave, incapable of attaining the happiness of the “good life.” In the Christian monastic tradition, the contemplation of the monk leads to the ideal of the perfect life that is identified, at least implicitly, with this contemplative attitude. This is “the better portion” that belongs to Mary and not to Martha (cf. *Lk* 10:42). And in the modern world, even though with the development of technology the active life and work have attained a certain pre-eminence, manual work has been replaced more and more by machinery, and the work that is truly human has come to be seen as intellectual work. This is what I have called elsewhere the “oscillating notion” of work: work, and particularly its first manifestation, manual work, is defined in relation to “what it is opposed to,” or “what it is subordinated to.” Thus it stands in contrast to human perfection and happiness, to the full development of human reason.

With work and human excellence thus seen as opposed, what ideal of man or woman are we presented with? Obviously there is no anthropological theory common to these “oscillating notions” of work. In the twentieth century, the “Aristotelian” tradition continued to view intellectual work as superior. As Joseph Pieper wrote: “It is essential to transcend the limits of the human and aspire to the realm of the angels, of the pure spirits.”²⁰ Work as fatigue, work as a mechanical and productive activity with “a five-year plan” (as in Marxism) or as a merely bureaucratic activity (as in Max Weber), does not permit contemplation, or virtue, or therefore human happiness. Thus Pieper defends intellectual leisure as the foundation of the liberal arts, as the origin of culture, as an activity valuable for its lack of utility, and places leisure on a higher level, accepting only reluctantly and with many clarifications the term “work of the spirit.”²¹

Nevertheless, both in this neo-Aristotelian current (which coincides with the best elements of the Platonic tradition), and in the other theories of work, one can find a tacit and almost dogmatic anthropological assumption: the insignificance of the body, of what is material, and therefore of the vulnerable and dependent human being and of the actions that constitute daily life. As progress makes manual work unnecessary, it should be replaced gradually by machines.

Throughout the history of philosophy (that is, for the last twenty-five centuries), the lack of interest in the topic of work (and in the modern world, specifically of manual work) has gone hand in hand with an exaltation of man (and more recently of woman) in their dimension of hero, of *nous* or intellect, of scientific and pure reason, of autonomous freedom: of superman or superwoman. Such an anthropology is inherently damaged, since it fails to grasp the importance of the human body.

20. *El ocio y la vida intelectual*, Rialp, Madrid 1962, p. 22.

21. This is the thesis of the whole book and also follows John Henry Newman: cf. *ibid.*, pp. 34-39.

The few contemporary voices denouncing this situation are found mostly in the Anglo-Saxon world and specifically in the United States.²² These voices criticize the failure to sufficiently value the body and its basic necessities, especially in extreme moments of sickness. These authors also show new interest in manual work, especially work related to daily actions that hold no apparent importance in the public sphere. They seek to recover the rich cultural traditions related to food, dress and housing, seeing these as essential elements for a fully human life lived in a highly technological and ever more dehumanized society.

Some solutions from philosophy: work and virtue

In light of all this, a first criticism might be the following. If one defines work from the point of view of the product, then attention is centered on goods external to the work itself: its economic value, its so-called artistic or cultural value, its social recognition, etc. Accepting this premise (in which work is defined within the "paradigm of the product") inevitably means seeing some work as of greater or lesser importance, and thus it is very difficult to establish a relationship between work, especially manual work, and the true perfection or happiness of the human person. In addition, defining work according to its product necessarily brings with it an "economic" view of the person. This is seen both in the Calvinist ethics of success, which is one of the foundations of capitalism,²³ and in Marxism. The latter views work or "*praxis*" as the source of alienation in the human condition, since the worth of the worker becomes the value of the product of his work.

But if work is not defined principally by its product, then what is the alternative? Is it possible to situate work within a sound anthropological framework? The solution, in my opinion, consists in understanding any work as a channel of internal goods for those who carry it out.²⁴ That is, work, any work, can be defined as a human activity that is carried out under the guidance of practical rea-

22. The essays of Wendell Berry are especially relevant here: *The Art of the Commonplace: The Agrarian Essays of Wendell Berry*, Shoemaker and Hoard, Washington D.C. 2002; *Home Economics: Fourteen Essays* by Wendell Berry, North Point Press, San Francisco 1987; and *The Unsettling of America: Culture & Agriculture*, Sierra Book Editor, San Francisco 1986. In philosophy, the author who has been at the forefront here is Alasdair MacIntyre, especially in his latest publications: *Dependent Rational Animals*, Chicago, Open Court, 1999; *Edith Stein: a Philosophical Prologue*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc. London 2006, and his recent essay on the body published in *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, pp. 86-103. Also of interest is the work by Leon Kass, *The Hungry Soul*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1999, and the widely-read article by Matthew Crawford, "Shop Class as Soulcraft," in *The New Atlantis*, Summer, no. 13 (2006). In the area of feminism, cf. Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care*, Oxford University, Oxford 2005; and Michael Slote, *The Ethics of Care and Empathy*, Routledge, New York, 2007.

23. Cf. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Scribner Publishers, New York, 1958. For a survey of the reactions this book evoked, cf. Juan Manuel Burgos, "Weber e lo spirito del capitalismo. Storia di un problema e nuove prospettive," in *Acta Philosophica*, vol. 5 (1996), pp. 197-220.

24. My explanation here owes a lot to the theory of Alasdair MacIntyre on "practices," which he develops principally in his best known work *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Ind. 1984, 2nd ed. In the study that I carried out under his direction (cf. note no. 3 above), I discuss MacIntyre's suggestion here at length.

son and that requires effort, concentration and practice. As MacIntyre has argued,²⁵ all work, including intellectual work, is based on theoretical and practical cognitive advances, with errors, rectifications, and achievements, which contribute to creating an enriching cultural tradition.

This enrichment is not an individual good that belongs to one person, as is often the case with a product that is produced, but rather a common good, a social good. It is the whole community of workers, and hence society as a whole, which benefits from carrying out the task in question. This social dimension reflects another important characteristic: work is learned within a community and requires obedience to norms and traditions.

Work viewed in this way confronts the worker with reality because one's task begins with and ends in the concrete world. It requires admitting errors in one's work in order to correct them, and recognizing the accomplishments of others with whom one shares the same work. This confrontation with reality makes it difficult to excuse or justify errors committed in work. Some authors even go so far as to say that manual work can be a good way to begin combating the reigning cultural relativism.²⁶ It is not the same thing to possess a technique or not to possess it, to work correctly or to be slipshod. This outlook is incompatible with an attitude that accepts everything as good or everything as true. In addition, this way of working encourages commitment and fidelity on the part of the worker, because the spirit of the true artisan is to improve one's work and seek the goods intrinsic to one's task, without giving up in the face of difficulties.²⁷ Work understood in this way shows us our dependent way of being: dependence on our bodily condition which is the cause of the effort that all work entails; dependence on the reality to which work is directed, which we cannot invent or arbitrarily interpret, and which demands respect, learning, trial and error, and dependence on others, with whom we are related and whom we serve.

Last but not least, work is an activity intrinsically open to a moral dimension. Work is the most common way contemporary men and women can attain specific virtues and through them the moral perfection that leads to happiness. Aristotle insisted that it is a mistake to identify work and morality.²⁸ He restricted the worker to the ambit of life in the *oikia* and viewed virtue only within the context of the "good life" of the polis. By doing so he committed an anthropological error. Today we can no longer defend that separation, and we see clearly the relationship between work and morality, including the possibility that work can lead to moral corruption.

25. This thesis is found in a number of his works: cf. for example, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry: Encyclopaedia, Genealogy and Tradition*, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN 1990, pp. 61-66.

26. Cf. Crawford., "Shop Class as Soulcraft," pp. 9-10.

27. Richard Sennett refers to this idea in *The Culture of the New Capitalism*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2006, pp. 195-196.

28. Cf. *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1139 b 38-1140 a 5-7.

The dependent human condition: vulnerability and care

Contemporary philosophers of great stature—for example, Paul Ricoeur and Robert Spaemann—have had important things to say about the interdependence of human persons. Nevertheless, one fails to find in them a more explicit reference to the bodily dimension of our life, which since rationalism and the Cartesian *res extensa* has been understood above all according to abstract and mechanistic coordinates.²⁹ In his recent book, *Dependent Rational Animals*, Alasdair MacIntyre presents a possible solution to this problem. Despite the modern tradition that understands man from the point of view of autonomous reason, and despite some interpretations of Aristotle's definition of the human being as a rational animal that set aside our obvious animality, we have to admit that we are not totally "autarchic" beings: we are neither angels nor pure reason, but limited and dependent men and women.

To speak of dependence and fragility as a positive human condition³⁰ implies abandoning the idea that corporal needs are exclusively signs of our animality or an irrational part of the human being. Obviously if we did not have a body we would have no need for food, clothing, or a place to live. But our need for these things and the way we attain them is not simply a question of material instincts. Attaining these needs is not, as Aristotle claimed, merely a question of "living," in the sense of "surviving." Eating and drinking, dressing and dwelling in a specific place are, or can be, actions that are open, innovative, creators of culture, rational and free. But precisely for this reason, they can also be degrading and monstrous. Here again we do not find neutrality: they are not purely natural or biological acts but are marked with a cultural dimension by which they cease to be exclusively animal because they are human.³¹

Alasdair MacIntyre, following St. Thomas Aquinas, highlights the importance of mercy, a Christian virtue absent in Aristotle's philosophy, in which solidarity in the face of basic bodily needs is especially shown.³² Through mercy, in the face of urgent and extreme situations—proper to our vulnerable condition—the question of who is in need is not the key factor. At times of sickness and suffering, mercy becomes a work of solidarity that seeks to alleviate the most basic human needs.

In this context, Daniel Bell has pointed to what he calls the "cultural con-

29. Cf. my article, "Ens per accidens: una perspectiva metafísica para la cotidianidad," *Acta Philosophica*, II, vol. 13, 2004, pp. 277-292.

30. Some people have seen here a danger of downgrading the value of human independence and personal freedom. This is not the place to confront this objection, although it is interesting to take note of it and to add that both the philosophical and theological developments point towards an understanding of human existence as essentially relational, that is to say, as dependent, without this adjective being understood as something that contradicts our condition as free beings: it simply limits it.

31. This is also a basic thesis in the work by Leon Kass, *The Hungry Soul*.

32. Cf. *Dependent Rational Animals*, ch. 10. Also in this context, cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 2-2, qq. 30 and 31.

traditions of capitalism.”³³ When all of one's efforts go towards advancing technology and progress, towards fostering material well-being, the result is that many people have great difficulty in confronting suffering and death. Or to put it another way: the more material resources we dispose of, the less philosophical, ethical and even religious resources there are to accept the inevitable human condition in its vulnerability and dependence. In addition, the more rational and streamlined the world of work becomes, the less sensitivity there is to valuing work that could respond professionally to the daily vulnerability and dependence of the human person.

Manual and domestic work

Here we are confronted with the great paradox of the “welfare state,” which, in the words of Alejandro Llano, has “ignored the principal source of authentic human well-being: the home, which is where one feels most at ease, the family as the primary sources of personalized services.”³⁴ The challenge today, especially in the first world, is to confront the malaise hidden behind widespread material well-being, a malaise that it is difficult even to give a name to: the loneliness of one who has no home, although apparently possessing a house and family; the sickness and suffering people seek to avoid at all costs, because it is seen as a burden on the others and lacking in meaning; the individualism that refuses to recognize one's dependence on others and which ends up in a self-centeredness that prefers death to asking others for help.

Dependence on others is a human dimension, including the bodily dependence that requires the care found in a family environment. “The home,” says Wendell Berry, “is the most basic bond of marriage, which grows with it and gives it its substantial being in the world.”³⁵ Every home is the fruit of specific work, based on certain specific abilities, predominantly manual; every home is based as well on a combination of traditions and scientific knowledge that transcend the material realm and transmit permanent and positive values.

Therefore, the “good life” is not exclusively a public life, but begins in the environment of the home. Pierpaolo Donati describes the undeniable relationship between the family and the polis as the point of contact between private life and public life.³⁶ Alejandro Llano refers to the whole ensemble of family relationships and the tasks they entail as “primary solidarity,”³⁷ that is, the indispensable help provided in the sphere of everyday life for the humanization of the person. In the home, thanks to the relationships established there, one learns the

33. Cf. Daniel Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1996.

34. *El diablo es conservador*, EUNSA, Pamplona 2001, p. 124.

35. *The Art of the Commonplace*, p. 126.

36. “Famiglia” in *Nuovo lessico familiare* (ed. by Eugenia Scabini and Pierpaolo Donati), Vita e Pensiero, Milan 1995, p. 29.

37. This expression appears in Alejandro Llano's book, *La nueva sensibilidad*, Espasa-Calpe, Madrid 1988 and later is taken up again in *El Diablo es conservador*, ch. 7: “La familia ante la nueva sensibilidad.”

“virtues of acknowledged dependency,” which MacIntyre describes as the *conditio sine qua non* for the virtues required by the public life of the citizen.³⁸

In short, household tasks entail certain benefits both for the person who carries them out and for the one who receives them. These tasks create a culture and traditions that foster the acquirement of the virtues needed to carry out the adult's function in society. A person who works in the home has to acquire manual dexterity and techniques, as well as virtues such as a spirit of service, generosity and humility, and, above all, a special capacity for observation to discover the needs of each person, which is given the name of empathy.

Thus we could even come to view these household tasks as the paradigm for all work, including intellectual work. Their value does not depend principally on the product that is produced. They perfect the person who carries them out, they perfect the persons to whom they are directed, and they perfect the culture and society as a whole. In other words, the attempt by a technological society to replace these tasks by machinery and/or to negate their human, rational and free dimension, leads inevitably to the distorted view of work one finds today. Matthew Crawford, in “Shop Class as Soulcraft,” complains that young people are being steered towards “types of work that are ever more phantasmagoric,” with both “service sector” work and “white-collar jobs” being devalued. In contrast, Crawford proposes giving “public honor to those who acquire the real manual skills on which we all depend every day.”³⁹

Philosophical and theological contemplation

In viewing work as a skill to be acquired, and more specifically in household tasks, one comes upon the notion of empathy. Empathy in philosophical language refers to a less abstract way of perceiving reality that also captures feelings, emotions, etc. An analysis of this way of knowing was carried out by Edith Stein. By knowing through the body—or better, in it—I attain the personal center of another person. I have a personal experience of their actions and feelings. I can put myself in their place and recognize what they are feeling. Through a single bodily expression—a gesture, a look, a smile—I can experience the nucleus of a person and his or her needs, and try to solve them.⁴⁰ It is a “connatural” way of knowing, which is not too far removed from the knowledge involved in tasks directed to caring for bodily needs.

In a recent study, Simon Baron-Cohen, director of the Autism Research Centre at the University of Cambridge, offers the following explanation. This empathetic knowledge is found principally (although not exclusively) in women;

38. Cf. *Dependent Rational Animals*, ch. 10. MacIntyre also speaks of other domains where one learns these virtues: the school, the neighborhood, etc.

39. “Shop Class as Soulcraft,” pp. 9, 18 and 22. The New York Times called this essay one of the three best essays of 2006.

40. Cf. Edith Stein, *Zum Problem der Einfühlung*, (reprint) Kaffke, Munich 1980.

specifically in persons who possess the neurological conditions needed for an empathetic grasp of reality, in contrast to a systemic one (more common in males). His thesis is based on a rigorous examination of the physiological conditions of the human brain. Baron-Cohen himself comes to the conclusion that empathy is closely related to the natural desire to care for others, and therefore its proper exercise requires specific abilities to understand human relations. Good communicators are the ones who are especially able to rapidly perceive the needs of others and respond to them effectively.⁴¹ Obviously empathic capacity is not an exclusively biological question, but is also affected by cultural and educational factors.

Can we call this capacity for knowing reality “contemplation”? Philosophy has usually understood contemplation in light of the Greek model. A person attains maximum happiness through theoretical or contemplative acts of the *nous*, which make us like the gods. The properly human, for Aristotle and the neo-Aristotelians, was extolled in *otium*, in leisure. In modern times, this attitude underwent a change. Although in the Cartesian *cogito* the human understanding intuitively grasps clear and distinct ideas, the *nous* or intellectus has lost its proper activity. More than *nous*, understanding is seen as a matter of *ratio*, which no longer contemplates but works. Here we see an application of the technical domination and transformation of matter. What reason discovers has to be applied to assure progress. Knowledge is power, proclaimed Francis Bacon even before Descartes. And nevertheless, in both cases—in that of classical and contemplative reason, and in modern and technical reason—there is a univocal explanation of knowing. This is reason of a theoretical or scientific kind, present and extolled in today's world in the “elites” who devote themselves to advanced technology, to finance, to the abstract and exact sciences.

A primary criticism of this approach is provided once again by Matthew Crawford: “to navigate in the abstract is not necessarily the same as to think.”⁴² That is, grasping the quid of reality is not something exclusive to theoretical reason or to intellectual, scientific, analytic, systematic knowledge.⁴³ On the contrary, contemplation can also take place through practical and emphatic knowledge, and specifically through work characterized by an attitude of caring for others. Paraphrasing Aristotle, we might affirm that “*theorein pollaxos legetai*,” contemplation can be said in many ways. It is not enough, then, for men and

41. Cf. *The Essential Difference: The Truth about the Male and Female Brain*, Basic Books, New York, 2003, pp. 126-127. All these theses are scientifically grounded in this work. The author explains that he had to postpone the publication of his research at the suggestion of some feminists who advised him that he would meet with opposition. Years later, once extreme positions in this regard had dissipated, Baron-Cohen decided that his study should see the light of day. The reception of the book has been positive.

42. “Shop Class as Soulcraft,” p. 22.

43. Here I follow the Thomistic definition of contemplation, which is more of a cognitive nature: *simplex intuitus veritatis*. Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 2-2, q. 180, a. 3 ad 1. In any case, I am not trying to exclude here a loving dimension, which I have tried to include in mentioning mercy, so proper to Christian ethics.

women to know theoretically what human beings are; they have to attain this knowledge also in practice. Only thus, practically—only if they become “experts in humanity”⁴⁴—can they restore a human face to all the persons, institutions, cultures, etc., that have lost it.

People who work with their hands know what it is to care for material reality, even when it is living and corporeal: such a person does not waste, or maltreat, or destroy, because their art includes respect for nature.⁴⁵ “A person who has developed a skill possesses a kind of empathy with the reality upon which he works, such that he is able to distinguish immediately between the essential and the accidental and grasp quickly what ‘the point’ of the matter is.”⁴⁶

This capacity for discernment is a kind of wisdom which discovers the real in all its profundity.⁴⁷ Therefore a correct anthropology that pays attention to the bodily dimension and has room for dependence and vulnerability, opens the door to another meaning of contemplation: that which connects us to the mystery of suffering. This is an essential human path for discovering, as the then Cardinal Ratzinger suggested, our condition as creatures and our dependence on the Creator.⁴⁸ As Benedict XVI stated in his recent Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, “the true measure of humanity is essentially determined in relationship to suffering and to the sufferer.”⁴⁹

Up to now we have referred to contemplation in its theoretical or speculative sense and in its natural or empathetic meaning. Now we need to turn to a new meaning which departs from philosophy but which is in continuity with it: the Christian meaning of contemplation. Jose Luis Illanes, professor at the University of Navarra, has pointed out that the reference to the contemplative life present in the history of Christian spirituality does not possess Biblical roots, that is, it stems directly from Greek philosophy. But Christian tradition has contributed to reinterpreting and enriching it. The God of Judaism was totally transcendent to the person, ineffable and invisible. For Christianity, this same God became man in Jesus Christ, and we have become children of God in his Son. Clement of Alexandria and Origen were principally responsible for a new use of the term “contemplation” closely linked to the practice of prayer. Christians are called to attain a personal relationship with the three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity.⁵⁰

44. Pope Paul VI used this expression when addressing the United Nations on October 4, 1965, in New York. John Paul II took it up again in his address during the Symposium of the Council of the European Bishops Conferences, on October 11, 1985. In both cases the Popes used it in the sense of the Christian practice of mercy, a virtue which appears in all its newness and richness in Christianity.

45. Cf. Berry, *The Art of the Commonplace*, pp. 46-471

46. Llano, *El diablo es conservador*, p. 198.

47. St. Thomas Aquinas, in one of the questions of the Summa dedicated to defining the human being, even says that *inter ipsos homines qui sunt melioris tactus, sunt melioris intellectus* (among men, those who have the best sense of touch have the highest intelligence). *Summa Theologiae*, I, q. 76, a. 5, c. Cf. Also Albert Zimmermann, *Thomas lesen*, Legenda 2, Frankfurt 2001, p. 194.

48. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Iglesia, ecumenismo y política: Nuevos ensayos de eclesiología*, Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, Madrid 1987, p. 167.

49. Encyclical *Spe Salvi*, November 30, 2007, no. 38.

50. Cf. “La contemplazione di Dio nella tradizione cristiana visione sintetica,” in *La contem-*

Within the Christian tradition, the message of Opus Dei is of considerable importance here. In the past, contemplation has been understood principally—if not exclusively—as proper to a life lived separately from the world, to the religious and consecrated life. St. Josemaría expands this vision by insisting that union with God is also possible through the active life proper to professional work in the world. The prerequisite for human life being raised to the supernatural order is the virtue of charity, which informs the entire life of the baptized person and therefore all of his or her actions, including work.⁵¹

Human work and sanctification through work

The aim of this study is not to attribute to the Founder of Opus Dei the philosophical ideas expressed here. Rather it is an attempt to show how his teaching on the sanctification of ordinary life and professional work has helped foster a sound anthropological conception of the human person.

First of all, his teaching defends the compatibility between leisure and work, between the contemplative and the active life, in the double meaning of contemplation, that is, in its cognitive dimension, but, above all, as a relationship to God attained through faith and love. As we have already seen, he realized right from the start that this would be difficult for many people to accept, but he never wavered in presenting it as the core of his message.⁵²

A second point is the centrality of work for the acquisition of virtue and for the attainment of sanctity, and therefore a view of work as a positive human endeavor, as opposed to Aristotelianism and modern rationalism, and the Marxist view of work as alienation.

Third, we find in his teaching the reevaluation of ordinary life as a path to sanctity, since no work is of greater or lesser importance. This entails a definition of work that is not centered on the so called “paradigm of profit,” but on the internal goods that are acquired, thus avoiding the danger of considering some activities as intrinsically more important than others. St. Josemaría wrote: “In God’s service, there is no job of little importance. They’re all of great importance. The value of the work depends on the personal conditions of the one carrying it out, on the human seriousness with which it is done, on the love for God that is put into it.”⁵³

plazione cristiana: esperienza e dottrina, Atti del IX Simposio della Facoltà di Teologia, Pontificia Università della santa Croce, edited by Laurent Touze, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2007, pp. 9-43.

51. Cf. Manuel Belda, “La contemplazione in mezzo al mondo secondo San Josemaría Escrivá”, in *La contemplazione cristiana: esperienza e dottrina*, op. cit., pp. 151-176.

52. Cf. “Working for God,” in *Friends of God*, no. 65 and “In Joseph’s Workshop,” in *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 48.

53. Cf. Letter October 15, 1948, no. 5, in Andrés Vázquez de Prada, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, Vol. III, Scepter, New York, 2005, p. 71.

Referring to the “corporate works of apostolate” to which Opus Dei provides pastoral assistance, he wrote: “The real success or failure of our activities depends on whether, in addition to being humanly well run, they help those who carry them out and those who make use of their services to love God, to feel their brotherhood with their fellow men, and to manifest these sentiments in a disinterested service of humanity.”⁵⁴

The touchstone of all of his teaching here is the special relevance St. Josemaría attributes to manual and domestic tasks. Speaking about “Women in Social Life and in the Life of the Church,” he stresses the “great human and Christian role”⁵⁵ of these tasks in our life, their great dignity and social importance.⁵⁶ These tasks require professional preparation and create and sustain a home, which “is a particularly suitable place for the growth of a woman's personality.”⁵⁷

Writing to the women in Opus Dei who dedicate themselves to domestic work, he began a letter with these words: “I have no need to tell you, my daughters, what our Lord told Martha (cf. *Lk* 10:40-42). For in all your activities, also when immersed in domestic tasks, without any anxiousness or human outlook, you are always very aware that only one thing is necessary. And like Mary, you too have chosen the better part, which will never be taken away from you. For you have the vocation of contemplative souls in the midst of the tasks of the world.”⁵⁸

St. Josemaría's message about the call to holiness truly merits the adjective “universal,” not only because it is addressed to all men and women, but also and especially because it makes all work—including manual, everyday tasks—the hinge for acquiring virtues and attaining contemplation. Thus the opposition philosophy has always seen between human activity and contemplation is overcome.

In a posthumous article, Fernando Inciarte, professor of philosophy at the University of Münster, pointed out the rupture that this message implied in respect to the anthropologies offered up to this time: “For him [for Escrivá], each specific and proper work, including manual work—and in a way that was, if you like, totally non-classical, totally non-Aristotelian—brings with it not only the perfection of the task but also and above all of the person who is acting.”⁵⁹

With the authority of the Church's magisterium, John Paul II, on the day of

54. “Why Opus Dei?” in *Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá*, Scepter, New York, 1974, no. 31.

55. “Women in Social Life and in the Life of the Church,” in *Conversations with Msgr. Escrivá*, Scepter, New York, 1974, no. 87.

56. Cf. *Ibid.*, no. 89.

57. *Ibid.*, no. 87. He finds his guiding principles above all in the hidden life of the Family at Nazareth: cf. “In Joseph's Workshop,” in *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 22.

58. Letter of July 29, 1965, no. 1.

59. “Christentum für die Masse”, in *Josemaría Escrivá: Profile einer Gründergestalt*, César Ortiz (ed.), Adamas, Köln 2002, p. 89.

St. Josemaría Escrivá's canonization, declared that the founder of Opus Dei attained to an heroic degree the union mentioned at the beginning of this study: "uniting professional work with ascetical struggle and contemplation—something which may seem impossible, but which is necessary to help reconcile the world with God."⁶⁰ Thus, the Pope said, St. Josemaría is "the saint of ordinary life."⁶¹

60. Instruction, March 19, 1934, no. 33

61. John Paul II, Address following the Mass of Thanksgiving for the Canonization of St. Josemaría, October 7, 2002.