



*Our Holiness  
and Mission  
in the  
Changing  
World of Work*

THE YEAR OF ST. JOSEPH



A Pastoral Letter  
Celebrating St. Joseph  
the Worker on Labor Day  
by Bishop John O. Barres

*September 6, 2021*

# St. Joseph the Worker

## AND THE YEAR OF ST. JOSEPH

### My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

**T**his Year of St. Joseph announced by Pope Francis on December 8, 2020, continues to be a time of grace and mission.

The Holy Father's Apostolic Letter *Patris Corde (With a Father's Heart)* has helped enliven devotion to St. Joseph and revealed his influence and intercession in the events of everyday life. My own pastoral letter *Go to Joseph!* tried to synthesize the impact of St. Joseph in Church and world history, as well as in the timeless teachings of popes and saints.

Both, I hope, are guides not only to live this holy year well but to respond to today's events, crises and challenges in a different way, roused by the virtues we see in the one whom God the Father chose to protect and provide for Jesus and Mary. Both, I hope, show how the Holy Family is a model for all families in the ongoing history of salvation.

### St. Joseph the Worker and Labor Day

Just as the **Solemnity of St. Joseph**, Spouse of the Virgin Mary, on March 19 gives us the opportunity to reflect on holiness and mission in marriage and the family, so the **Memorial of St. Joseph the Worker** on May 1 provides an annual opportunity to pray and reflect on the sanctification of daily work, especially in the context of a world of work radically changed since Pope Pius XII instituted the memorial in 1955.

As we celebrate Labor Day during this Year of St. Joseph, it is a particularly fitting occasion for us to

continue those latter reflections, examining what St. Joseph teaches us about the true nature of human labor in God's plans for our happiness.

Labor Day, which Americans have celebrated on the first Monday of September since the 1880s, was inaugurated for two reasons: to celebrate the irreplaceable role of hardworking Americans in making our country strong and prosperous and to provide everyone the necessary time to attend speeches and events where they might reflect on the spiritual and educational aspects of work.

By means of this pastoral letter, I hope to do both, extolling the role of hard work in building up families, businesses and our country, and to give some thoughts, inspired by St. Joseph's example, on how work forms our character and influences our relationship with God and neighbor.

Most of us will spend at least 25 percent of our week – from the time we enter school until we retire – doing some form of work. It is important that we draw close to St. Joseph the Worker. He is a great intercessory craftsman of the Christian interior life as well as an extraordinary teacher of how to make our work a pleasing offering to God through uniting work to prayer.

### The Catholic Theology and Spirituality of Work

When we look at the first chapters of the Bible, we see that God, as part of his original plan, gave us the "vocation to work" <sup>1</sup> so that we might cooperate with him in bringing his creative plan to perfection.

In the Book of Genesis, before sin entered the world, God specified three types of work (Gen 1:28).

One was to fill the earth and subdue it, meaning to bring out all the potential God had put into creation,





like eventually making computer chips and glass out of sand, medicines out of plants, and other achievements, which we continue to see with wonder and gratitude in the fields of science and technology. Created in God's image, we continue his work in the world he created from nothing (Gen. 1:27; 5:1; and 9:6).

Another was to share in God's own dominion over the birds, the fish, and all creatures, by naming, catching, raising, and domesticating the wondrously diverse animal kingdom, something so many continue to do through fishing, farming, animal breeding and other work (see Gen 2:19-20).

The third was to increase and multiply, collaborating with God in bringing into existence new children made in his image and likeness with the fruitfulness of family life.

In this three-fold work, we develop our vocation as stewards, not only of our common home but over ourselves and our brothers and sisters in that common home. We thereby participate in God's lordship over all creatures by exercising dominion over them as we seek to order all things to God's glory.

By this three-fold work, we also not only do *something*, but form ourselves, developing the inner potential God has inscribed in each one of us while serving God and neighbor.

St. Gregory of Nyssa, a great fourth-century doctor of the Church, once said that "in a certain way we are

our own parents" <sup>2</sup> because by our work we not only build up physical muscles, but also moral ones. We forge our character through work well done.

Pope Francis says that work is the setting for a "rich personal growth, where many aspects of life enter into play: creativity, planning for the future, developing our talents, living out our values, relating to others, giving glory to God." <sup>3</sup> Work also helps us build healthy relationships and provides the opportunity to exercise our shared responsibility for social life and the development of the world. <sup>4</sup>

But we are made not just for work. In the account of Creation, we also see that God similarly gives us a command to rest, in imitation of his own rest on the seventh day. Such rest allows us to rejoice with him in the work done and ensures that the interior building process that is taking place remains connected to our relationship with him — ensuring that the things of the world never are seen as ends in themselves but always lead us to God for whom we have been made. This time for rest "is another way of working, which forms part of our very essence [and] protects human action from becoming empty activism." <sup>5</sup>

Labor Day is like an annual secular Sabbath in which we rest from our work and contemplate its deeper meaning.

After the Fall and Original Sin, our vocation to work remained, but it was changed. "The harmony between the Creator, humanity and creation as a whole was disrupted," Pope Francis says, "by our presuming to take the place of God and refusing to acknowledge our creaturely limitations." <sup>6</sup> This in turn distorted our work, which became arduous. Tilling and subduing the earth turned toilsome, tiresome and sweaty. Dominion over other creatures grew contested and dangerous. Childbirth would occur through labor pains (see Gen 3:16-19). Because of sin, suffering remains a feature of human work.

When the Son of God entered the world, however, he changed the nature of human labor. The early saints taught that whatever Jesus did not assume he did not redeem, and Jesus assumed our human work in order that we might be able through our work to participate in the work of redemption. Having learned from St. Joseph the trade of a *tekton* or builder, Jesus and his paternal mentor revealed to us through their example the gospel of work," showing how work has become a key part of the redemption, since work done with love for God and others participates in the divine plan.

For this reason, following the example of St. Joseph and Jesus, Pope Francis says the question for us to ask with regard to living the gospel of work in our own circumstances is "How much love did I put into my work?" <sup>7</sup>

To use the images of the work mentioned in the Creation account, the love of a father toiling in the fields or raising cattle has become a means by which





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he expresses his capacity to lay down his life to provide for his wife and children. The love of a mother such that she would endure not only childbirth but dedicate herself to childrearing has likewise become part of her restoration in love.

Similar examples abound. The love with which a craftsman like St. Joseph strives to care for his customers and meet deadlines offers an opportunity to worship God through uniting his own sacrifices to Christ's love from the Cross. The same goes for the patient, kind and compassionate love of nurses, doctors, and therapists for their patients, of teachers for their students, of social workers for their clients, and of cooks, waitresses and waiters for their patrons.

Work well done has become, in short, a means not only of our cooperating with Jesus but of allowing his redeeming work to take root in us.

No wonder why Jesus so often referred to work in teaching us about his kingdom. He compared it to the work of fishermen, shepherds, farmers, sowers, stewards, merchants, bakers, vintners, financiers, laborers and scholars.

No wonder why divine providence planned for St. Joseph and Jesus to spend many years building houses, making tables, chairs, wheels and more.

Jesus' time in St. Joseph's woodshop was not a way to bide his time until the "saving work" of his public ministry began. It was, rather, a crucial component, albeit mostly hidden, in his overall rescue mission. "It is striking," Pope Francis wrote, that most of Jesus' life was dedicated

to simple work that "awakened no admiration at all: 'Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?' (Mk 6:3). In this way, he sanctified human labor and endowed it with a special significance for our development."<sup>8</sup>

The fact that Jesus spent the vast majority of his life on earth sharing in ordinary labor shows the importance of work not just in creation but in redemption.

Jesus instructed us to pray to the Lord of the Harvest not just for "people" but "laborers" in his vineyard (Mt 9:37-38). The completion of his mission - in us and in the world - involves our working hard and well. Like the foreman in another of his parables (Mt 20:1-7), Jesus constantly comes to call us to take up our role in his fields.

Sometimes we can think that to serve God fully and



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faithfully, we need to become priests, religious, deacons, catechists or Catholic schoolteachers. But in his day Jesus called relatively few people to leave their full-time work to proclaim the Gospel. The vast majority he called to proclaim the Gospel by living that good news where they were, in the work they were doing.

That is still what Jesus does today. Most of Jesus' followers are called to live out their discipleship and apostolate, their vocation and their mission, just as St. Joseph did, in the family and in the workplace. Their desk, keyboard, kitchen, classroom, sewing machine, operating room, supermarket register, pharmaceutical counter, taxi, boat, field or workbench is meant to become like an altar on which they can offer to God the fruits of their labor.



19th century industrial revolution employers treated their employees in dehumanizing and utilitarian ways, resulting in life-threatening and unsafe work conditions, terrible child labor practices and unjust wages – injustices addressed by Pope Leo XIII in his landmark encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) that gave birth to what we now call Catholic Social Teaching.

In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* (1843), for example, Ebenezer Scrooge voiced a deformed understanding of work when two men approached him for a donation to the poor on Christmas Eve. As they described the trials of the poor in London in an effort to persuade Scrooge to be generous, Scrooge asked: "Are there no prisons...and workhouses?"<sup>9</sup>

Scrooge's dismissive punch line to the persistent men – "If [the poor] would rather die, they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population"<sup>10</sup> – is an echo of the utilitarian philosopher Robert Malthus (1766-1834). Malthusian materialism has disturbing reverberations in the utilitarian philosophies that treat the so-called economically unproductive – due to age, disability or other reasons – as unworthy of life or that seek to reduce the population of developing nations in order to increase the "demographic dividend."

Another expression of a defective philosophy of work is 21st century consumerism. Pope Francis and F. Scott Fitzgerald, who contemplated frenetic Long Island North Shore consumerism in his 1925 novel *The Great Gatsby*, agree that when consumerism drives our approach to work it always distorts both our understanding of work and the work itself. The underlying premise that our self-worth and human dignity are defined by our net-worth ultimately results in tragedy and self-destruction.

Sadly, many today are tempted to value themselves, not according to the judgment of God and value of their immaterial soul, but according to their value in the employment market. Such a degradation of human dignity can easily lead to depression for the underemployed while those successfully employed can end up viewing their work as merely a means to a paycheck or to underwriting the few hours of freedom from work that they look forward to on the weekend.



## The Gospel of Work and the Challenge of Modern Times

The life-giving teaching of the Church on human work is meant to reach every dimension of the human person: soul, body, heart, mind, imagination, and ultimate destiny.

No other theology, philosophy or theory of work comes close to what the gospel of work proposes. Others not only fall short, but many have, in their truncated understanding of the human person and human work, caused much damage throughout history.

Indeed, many philosophies of work, when examined, are best seen as expressions of a culture of death. We can look at some examples.

The tragic and horrific history of slavery in the United States reflected deeply warped philosophies and ideas of the human person and the meaning of human labor, ideas that continue in the scourge of modern slavery through human sex and labor trafficking that binds more than 40 million people today, including here on Long Island.

We saw a similar mentality at work in the way some



Nazism expressed a view of work that destroyed souls and societies. The realization of its demonic premises was found in the concentration camps. The gates of Auschwitz underneath the arched expression sarcastically and sadistically proclaiming “*Arbeit Macht Frei*,” (“Work Makes Free”) underlined the lie about the human person and human work at the root of Nazi ideology.

Communism’s philosophy of work, while claiming to be radical and revolutionary and purporting to promote human dignity, ends up attacking and ultimately destroying it. Communism alienates the human person from the fruit of his or her own labor and strips love from work.

Unbridled capitalism, in which profit becomes the sole goal of an enterprise, and in which monopolies distort the market by driving out competition at the expense of consumers, instrumentalizes both the worker and the consumer when corporate financiers seek money and power for their own sake. Without a legal framework to promote and protect the common good and a foundation in virtue to foster respect for human dignity, capitalist forces distort the market economy, revealing a woefully inadequate approach that Pope Francis calls an “economy that kills.”<sup>11</sup>

The contemporary workaholic is living out a philosophy and theory of work that makes work a false god, a golden calf, an idol that can erode and destroy his or her marriage, family and faith life. As we see in the Genesis account, work and rest complement each other. It is possible to work too hard and too much, forgetting that work is by its nature relational, tied to the love and service of others.

On the other hand, some have the idea that work is just a necessary evil that we have to endure until we earn enough money or get to the age when we can retire and spend the rest of our life on the golf course or at the pool. Just as we can err on the side of workaholism, so we can err on the side of laziness, a vice Jesus himself warns us about in the gospel (Mt 25:26).

All of these flawed philosophies of work make our Labor Day reflections on St. Joseph the Worker far from a pious afterthought.

In the context of these competing ideas, the Church proclaims the splendor of truth about human work that is meant to lead us through our labor for God’s glory and the service of others to holiness on earth and ultimately to eternal life.

Christians’ holy and virtuous work is also by its nature missionary. It preaches the gospel of work that radiates light to the world and shines especially in those areas of darkness, like those mentioned above, where a culture of death reigns.

Venerable Pope Pius XII instituted the feast of St. Joseph the Worker very strategically in 1955. He chose May 1 as the date for the new memorial so that it would be a sign of contradiction to the “May Day” celebrations

in communist countries and among communist parties in Western Europe that sought to glorify Marxist ideology and communist principles with Soviet-style parades. Pope Pius XII lifted up St. Joseph the Worker as a model for workers everywhere and did so with a missionary spirit to proclaim the truth and Catholic vision of labor.

What was necessary in 1955 is still necessary today. Our times still hunger for this truth and vision. You and I are called to live and proclaim it.

## Nazareth: The School of the Dignity of Work

How do these theological truths about human work in the divine plan play out in daily life? The life and example of St. Joseph the Worker makes the theology practical.

He was not only a worker but was chosen by God the Father to be the mentor of Christ the Worker. Christ learned how to be a carpenter at St. Joseph's side and under his guidance. Christ's understanding of work reflected St. Joseph's patient mentorship in the craft of building.

St. Josemaria Escriva, the founder of Opus Dei, the charism of which emphasizes the sanctification of daily work in every context, describes the relationship between Jesus and St. Joseph in this way:

“Joseph loved Jesus as a father loves his son and showed his love by giving him the best he had. Joseph, caring for the child as he had been commanded, made Jesus a craftsman, transmitting his own professional skill to him. So, the neighbors of Nazareth will call Jesus both *faber* and *fabri filius*: the craftsman and the son of the craftsman (see Mk 6:3; Mt 13:55).

Jesus worked in Joseph's workshop and by Joseph's side. What must Joseph have been, how grace must

have worked through him, that he should be able to fulfill this task of the human upbringing of the Son of God! For Jesus must have resembled Joseph: in his way of working, in the features of his character, in his way of speaking. Jesus' realism, his eye for detail, the way he sat at table and broke bread, his preference for using everyday situations to give doctrine – all this reflects his childhood and the influence of Joseph.”<sup>12</sup>

Joseph mentored Jesus in all those ways. And Jesus was an attentive apprentice. The omniscient and omnipotent God-made-man learned from St. Joseph the human skills and techniques of craftsmanship. Like St. Joseph, Jesus lived his hidden life immersed in the working world. His thoughts and eventually his teachings were close to the everyday reality of people at work.

As mentioned earlier, Jesus constantly spoke of divine realities through the human analogy of the work of shepherds, farmers, sowers, cooks, servants, stewards, fishermen, merchants and laborers. Some of the most memorable people in the Gospels are described not by name but by the work they do, like the woman at the well drawing water (Jn 4:1-42) or the centurion beseeching him for a miracle (Lk 7:2-10). Jesus summoned several of his apostles directly from their work: he called Peter, Andrew, James and John from their bursting fishing nets (Mt 4:18-22) and Matthew, the unjust tax collector, from his tax ledgers (Mt 9:9).<sup>13</sup>

Our Lord's references to human work in the Gospels are very much connected to the work of married couples and families, which teach us a great deal about how to do our work with and for our families.

Pope Francis once said, “Families transform the world and history.”<sup>14</sup> One of the primary ways families do this is in their daily rhythm of work and family life, something that little by little transforms the human family, the



Church and the world.

For instance, when fathers and mothers in the communion of their sacramental marriage mentor their children to keep their room in order, to clean up after themselves, to maintain and repair their bicycles, to rake, mow, plant, weed, paint, vacuum, dust, set the table, prepare food, or wash and dry the dishes, St. Joseph the Worker, Our Lady the Worker and Christ the Worker are mysteriously present, interceding for their work, for the family members and for their unity in faith.

How many entrepreneurs begin in the family business or with lemonade stands spurred on by parents and grandparents? How many great scholars have been assisted by mothers and fathers and older brothers and sisters helping with homework? How many college and professional athletes developed their skills by the extraordinary coaching and encouragement given by their parents? Home is meant to be the first school of work, just like Nazareth was a such a school for Jesus.

That domestic “vocational, technical school” overflows the door of the home and prepares children for life. It gets young people ready, for example, for the jobs and extracurricular activities that they take on in high school and college, where, encouraged by their parents, they continue to develop a responsible, mature and relational work ethic, with the noble and at times heroic ambition to serve society.

We see this growth take place in the precise teamwork they learn in fast food and restaurant service, in the attention and care they acquire in lifeguarding, in the precision and love for beauty they develop in fine landscaping, and even in the yardage analysis, green-reading and etiquette involved in caddying.

We see it also in various other jobs and internships, which are far more than opportunities to make money to help pay for their education, afford a car or gas, or contribute to the care of the family. They are key means to form their character. Such work, therefore, is not just training, not just about a paycheck, but about serving others and making genuine contributions to the Church and the world.

We can think of Blessed Carlo Acutis (1991-2006), a teenage computer whiz who used his skills to make a world-class catechetical exhibition on the Eucharistic miracles that has spread throughout the world. From heaven Blessed Carlo continues to inspire and mentor young people to use their God-given gifts and opportunities to serve their peers and all of society, including by sharing with them the priceless treasure of the faith.

Setting a good example for the young and training them in the virtues of the workplace, like St. Joseph did for Jesus, is so important because young people are extraordinarily perceptive. They can spot ethical and exemplary workers who foster charitable and supportive workplace environments and experiences. They can also readily detect dishonest and shoddy workers who cut



corners and create toxic workplaces and experiences. Young people are repelled by cynicism and seek inspiring examples of high ideals that are worthy of a life-long commitment.

Like he did with the young Jesus, St. Joseph the Worker knows how to summon the best from young people and their work. He is also an important intercessor for them as they discern what God is calling them to do with the gift of their life and work, just as he is for people of all ages making high-stake decisions about their career or development.

St. Joseph’s virtue can help us to see why sometimes vocational or career discernment can go off course. An inordinate or disordered desire for wealth, prestige, influence and power can obscure and block the discernment of what gifts, talents, interests, drives and skills God has given us and how best to invest these gifts. Likewise excessive concern for the expectations of family members or peers can lead them to place their heart in treasures that will never ultimately satisfy (Mt 6:21).

Stephen Covey (1932-2012) once said that a person can climb the ladder of “success” for decades and find at some point in middle age that the ladder has been leaning against the wrong wall the entire time. St. Joseph’s eloquent example and powerful intercession helps the young to find meaning in the routine tasks needed to develop one’s talents through study, practice, apprenticeship, and in the constancy and perseverance needed for a successful and meaningful career. St. Joseph, by his prayers and intercession, can help us ensure that the ladder we climb will be the ladder of holiness set upon the firm wall of God’s will.

The Church and our globalized society are in desperate need today of teachers, manual laborers, technology professionals, doctors and health care professionals, civil



servants, lawyers, politicians, financiers, accountants, social workers, venture capitalists and homemakers who, like St. Joseph, have radically laid down their lives for Jesus Christ and who desire to work for the love of God and love of neighbor while earning a just wage to support themselves and their families.

From St. Joseph, we can all learn the virtues of maturity, reliability, responsibility, industriousness, integrity, initiative, self-sacrifice, self-mastery, teamwork, optimism, humility, contemplative concentration, and charity in our labor. He grounds us in the ethical compass of the Ten Commandments and the moral virtues of prudence, fortitude, justice and temperance.

He helps us develop a sense of poise, effectiveness, a sense of humor, and what Pope Francis calls “creative courage”<sup>15</sup> in handling crises and challenges so that we may turn those occasions into grace-filled opportunities. He teaches us how to pray our work through uniting our labor to our life with God and through helping us recognize that our work is indeed “spiritually meaningful” and a key source of “personal growth and sanctification.”<sup>16</sup>

We see reflections of the virtues of St. Joseph, for example, in the quiet but indispensable labors of so many immigrants. Just like St. Joseph had to migrate multiple times, taking his tools and talents with him as he left Nazareth for Bethlehem, Bethlehem for Egypt, and Egypt for Nazareth, so countless hardworking mothers, fathers and young adults have come to the Diocese of Rockville Centre with little beyond their faith, their skills and their desire through work to support their loved ones and make a contribution to society.

So many of them work in construction, just like St. Joseph centuries before, just like St. Oscar Romero did from the age of 12 until he entered the seminary at 14. Others work in landscaping, or putting food on

the table in restaurants, in providing hospitality in hotels, or in founding their own businesses, like St. Joseph the entrepreneur, to meet with courage and aptitude the needs they have identified.

We have also seen various examples of St. Joseph’s virtues in the changes many workers have had to make during the pandemic. Working from home introduced a little into the work-life flow that would have characterized the holy house and workshop of Nazareth.

Our work was more hidden. We needed greater interior accountability, integrity and honesty. Those of us working among family members were able more easily to see for whom we were working.

Those who were working home

alone were able to sense more profoundly, through the physical absence of coworkers and customers, the essential intersubjectivity and relationality of our labor that Zoom calls, however much a lifeline, can never replace. Those who were furloughed taught us all about the gift of our work and our jobs and how something no one would have been able to imagine at the beginning of 2020 left so many without a job.

## St. Joseph the Worker and the Paschal Rhythm of Human Labor

St. Joseph stands as a ready mentor. “A just man, hardworking and strong,”<sup>17</sup> this master craftsman knows well the art of patiently imparting his trade. He did so with the Lord Jesus, teaching him the skills of building and acquainting him with the intricacies and nuances of wood.

As he mentored Jesus, so St. Joseph desires to mentor us who are brothers and sisters of Jesus and therefore members of the Holy Family. He wants to train us in his virtues. He wants to instruct us how to live our spiritual fatherhood or motherhood to the full. We must simply “go to Joseph” to receive his wisdom.

St. Joseph’s lessons remained with Jesus throughout his life. Though St. Joseph is not mentioned in the Gospels as being present at Calvary — tradition and biblical inference suggest that he had died before Jesus’ public ministry — I believe



that he must have been present in Jesus' living memory.

As the executioners hammered long nails through his hands and feet to the wood, how could Jesus not realize what a contradiction that was to the **gospel of work** he and St. Joseph had lived in their familial woodshop?

Yet just as St. Joseph taught Jesus how to build and repair things, so on Calvary Jesus was rebuilding and repairing a fallen world. And as Jesus called upon God the Father from the Cross, seeking to do the Father's will and to commend his entire life to the Father, so, too, we hear a beautiful echo of St. Joseph's consecrated life and work and of Jesus' obedience for so many years to St. Joseph.

St. Joseph seeks to be with us in the difficulties of work just as he helped Jesus in his Nazarene workshop and just as his lessons remained with Jesus on Calvary. As Fr. Gaston Courtois writes:

"Confide to Joseph your worries and your pains, your distress, and your anxiety; he knows from experience what anxiety and insecurity are. But he knows the key to every problem, the solution of all difficulties. For him, surrender was an active form of the total gift of himself to my Father's plan of love. He will even solve material difficulties to your advantage, provided you appeal to his immense influence. Finally, when you are at the hour of your death, no one will be able to help you so well as he who died in [Jesus'] arms."<sup>18</sup>

Pope Francis has the custom, before he retires at night, of placing documents related to his most perplexing and seemingly unsolvable problems under a statue of the "sleeping" or "dreaming" St. Joseph, confident of his strong and wise intercession to find a path toward just and charitable solutions. He encourages us all toward similar trust. St. Joseph the Worker is still very much at work.

## St. Joseph the Worker and a Catholic Theology and Spirituality of Work

As we conclude this pastoral letter celebrating St. Joseph the Worker and focusing on the lessons he teaches us about holiness and mission in the changing world of work, I would like to make a few final points about the Catholic spirituality of work that we learn in his workshop.

**First**, a Catholic theology and spirituality of work is grounded in our baptismal call to holiness and mission within the communion of saints. We express and live out our baptismal call to be faithful disciples and ardent apostles through our work. The lives of so many saints, especially the patrons of different forms of human labor, are eloquent models of how the Catholic Church views work as a source of personal sanctification and the sanctification of others.

**Second**, a Catholic theology and spirituality of work

is an expression of the Paschal Mystery and involves a participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our work often requires a type of death to self, when we need to get up early for a long commute, deal with bosses or colleagues who try our patience, or have to endure the difficulties of layoffs or unemployment. But those can all be openings to the realization that the Risen Lord Jesus seeks to accompany us in our work, so that we can say, paraphrasing St. Paul, that "it is no longer I who [work] but Christ who [works] in me" (see Gal 2:20).

**Third**, a Catholic theology and spirituality of work is Eucharistic. At every Mass, during the preparation of the altar and gifts, we hear these words: "Blessed are you, Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you: fruit of the earth and work of human hands, it will become for us the bread of life."

Human hands shape and create that ordinary bread that is transformed into the Bread of Life. Human feet traditionally crushed the grapes that are transformed ultimately into the Blood of Christ. The central mystery of our Catholic life and liturgy – the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the Real Presence, the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ – presupposes and incorporates the human work that prepares the elements that will be consecrated.<sup>19</sup> Insofar as Christ works in me, my work is offered in, with, and through Christ on the altar of the Holy Eucharist.

Indeed, all noble work performed by Christians united to Christ by sanctifying grace is presented on the paten at Holy Mass and raised up to heaven and made holy in Christ. Pope St. John Paul II said that "the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the *altar of the world*. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all creation."<sup>20</sup> That beautiful and mysterious celebration of the Eucharist on the altar of the world includes our daily world of work.

**Fourth**, a Catholic theology and spirituality of work is grounded in the Ten Commandments and our Third Commandment duty to keep the Sabbath Day holy. This commandment not only emphasizes the importance of our fidelity to Sunday Mass but is an expression of a biblically-based life-work balance of labor and leisure. St. Joseph the Worker helps us to find that holy equilibrium that safeguards and enhances our families and our desire to work in a spirit of charity.

**Fifth**, a Catholic theology and spirituality of work is an expression of human and supernatural solidarity. The world of work, while constantly evolving and rapidly changing, has a human and supernatural co-responsibility and solidarity. All of us have our own specific callings and roles in the world of work and they are complementary, just as all of us have our own providential and interdependent destinies within what St. Paul calls the **mystical body of Christ**. This means that when we do our work well, it has visible and invisible



ripple effects throughout the **mystical body of Christ**.

**Sixth**, a Catholic theology and spirituality of work is grounded in the **gospel of life, Catholic social justice teaching** and Catholic teaching on **integral ecology**.<sup>21</sup> When we think about how we received the vocation to work “in the beginning,” created as we were in the image and likeness of God who himself works, it helps us to appreciate the importance of every person whom God has created with a particular work to do.

Each precious human being created in the divine image must be given the opportunity to develop his or her latent talents for the common good of the whole human family. Likewise, when we recognize how working is part of human dignity, we become sensitive to all types of injustice that happen in the workplace or in society that frustrate this dignity.

**Finally**, a Catholic theology and spirituality of work is by its nature missionary. If grace builds on nature,<sup>22</sup> then human work is called to be both exceptionally good at a natural level and holy on a supernatural level. In every work setting throughout the world, sanctified work glorifies God and attracts people by its splendor and virtue. We preach through the quality of our work, testifying not only to the importance of work well done but to the great work God accomplished at the beginning and is calling each of us to help bring to completion.

As we mark this Labor Day within the Year of St. Joseph, let us pray for each other and for the whole Church, that each of us may apprentice ourselves to St. Joseph and learn from him, as Jesus did, how to convert our daily labor, whatever form it takes, into opportunities to cooperate with God in the ongoing perfection of creation and the continued harvest of the redemption.

We pray for all of those who are out of work, both those who have lost their jobs and those, especially among the young, who are still searching. Unemployment is more than a pressing economic problem, but also a profoundly dehumanizing one that can deprive millions of a sense of

moral worth through making them feel useless. “There is no poverty worse,” Pope Francis says, “than that which takes away work and the dignity of work.”<sup>23</sup> We pray for all those out of work that, through St. Joseph’s intercession, they may find dignified jobs by which they can develop their gifts, serve others and provide for their and others’ needs.

We pray for all those who have retired, that they may use the extra time they now have to pour themselves into the various forms of unpaid volunteer work that can give them an opportunity to use their wisdom, like St. Joseph, to mentor others and strengthen our Church and society.

We pray for our young people, including the youngest of all in the womb, that through St. Joseph’s help and protection, they might come to use their gifts not just to increase our GDP but help form a more free, just and virtuous society with special concern for those most vulnerable.

We pray for all those who, because of illness or old age, cannot work as they aspire to or once did, that they may learn from St. Joseph’s hidden life how to collaborate interiorly in the work of redemption by uniting themselves to the extraordinary work Jesus did on Calvary when the hands that used to build were hammered to wood.

And we pray for our country, and particularly for our Diocese, that we may continue to be distinguished by the work ethic that historically has helped us to grow and thrive – while at the same time leavening that ethic by the **gospel of work** we find in St. Joseph, the Blessed Mother, and the “son of the carpenter.”

Jesus, with calloused and gloriously scarred hands, never ceases to say to us, “Follow me!” as he leads us as laborers into his fields ripe for harvest.

Mary, Queen of the Family, pray for us!

St. Joseph the Worker, pray for us!



Sincerely in Christ,

*+ John O. Barres*

**Most Reverend John O. Barres**  
**Bishop of Rockville Centre**

## REFERENCES:

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3. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 127.
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5. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 237.
6. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 66.
7. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 197.
8. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 98.
9. Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, Stave 1, p. 5.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Visit with the Community of Villa Nazareth, June 20, 2016.
12. St. Josemaria Escriva, March 19, 1963 homily for the Feast of St. Joseph "In Joseph's Workshop," *Christ is Passing By*, (New York: Scepter Publishers, 1973), 119-120.
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14. Pope Francis, Meeting with Bishops Taking Part in the World Meeting of Families, 27 September 2015.
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17. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 242.
18. Fr. Gaston Courtois, *Before His Face* (Volume III), (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), 54.
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20. Pope St. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 8.
21. See our Holy Father Pope Francis' Encyclical Letters *Laudato Si'* (2015) and *Fratelli Tutti* (2020).
22. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1,1,8 ad 2.
23. Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 162.

## PHOTOS AND ARTWORK CREDITS:

1. Joseph, Mary and Jesus are shown at work in a scene illustrated by a stained-glass window at St. Francis of Assisi Church, Greenlawn (CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz)
2. Painting of St. Joseph and Christ in the workshop by Pietro Annigoni. CNS photo by Nancy Wiechec.
3. A construction worker uses a grinder on a metal beam. CNS photo/Mike Blake/Reuters.
4. Pope Francis greets Vatican worker after celebrating Mass in chapel of residence. CNS photo/l'Ossevatore Romano
5. Getty Images/andresr
6. Getty Images/PeopleImages
7. Getty Images/Drazen Zigic
8. Teen works in Salesian run technical institute in San Salvador. CNS photo/Edgardo Ayala
9. Painting of Joseph the Carpenter by Georges de La Tour created circa 1642.
10. Pope Francis preaches about dignity of labor and justice for workers. CNS photo/Vatican Media.
11. [www.carloacutis.com/es./association](http://www.carloacutis.com/es./association)
12. Getty Images/RyanJLane
13. St. Joseph the Worker depicted in stained glass window in chapel of St. Joseph's College, Patchogue. CNS photo/Gregory A. Shemitz
14. Childhood of Christ painting by Gerard van Honthorst. Wikimedia commons.



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