

HOME IS A PIECE OF THE WORLD REDEEMED

Conversations with the Families of St. John Paul II

2020-2021



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OF THE
WORLD REDEEMED**



NATIVITY

OF OUR LORD



FRATERNITY

of ST. CHARLES

November 2024

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Fr. Michael Carvill, F.S.C.B.
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FOREWORD

November 2024

The present work is the fruit of the Families of St. John Paul II ministry at Nativity of Our Lord Parish in Broomfield, Colorado. Each quarter, the Families of St. John Paul II gather for a “half-day together” at which they share a meal, sing, and play games together. The day ends with a teaching for the adults, given by the parish priests, sisters, or others invited for the occasion. The following compilation is a collection of the teachings given during these gatherings in 2020-21.

According to “The Rule” of the Families of St. John Paul II, “The [half-day] teaching is the bread of the soul; it gives us nutrients to grow in our faith and our vocation.”

In his apostolic exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, St. John Paul II describes the conjugal love of marriage as a symbol, a sign that points to the love between Christ and his Church, epitomized on the cross and brought to fulfillment in the resurrection:

Indeed, by means of baptism, man and woman are definitively placed within the new and eternal covenant, in the spousal covenant of Christ with the Church. ...

By virtue of the sacramentality of their marriage, spouses are bound to one another in the most profoundly indissoluble manner. Their belonging to each other is the real representation, by means of the sacramental sign, of the very relationship of Christ with the Church.

Spouses are therefore the permanent reminder to the Church of what happened on the Cross; they are for one another and for the children witnesses to the salvation in which the sacrament makes them sharers. ...

Like each of the seven sacraments, so also marriage is a real symbol of the event of salvation, but in its own way. “The spouses participate in it as spouses, together, as a couple, so that the first and immediate effect of marriage (*res et sacramentum*) is not supernatural grace itself, but the Christian conjugal bond, a typically Christian communion of two persons because it represents the mystery of Christ’s incarnation and the mystery of His covenant.”¹

This collection of teachings seeks to help couples live this conjugal love in a real and meaningful way. Since love is “the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being,” this collection’s content is relevant not only to spouses and families, but to anyone desiring to build a life with Christ at its center.² The topics address the real, daily struggles of living in communion with one another and with God, including difficulties with prayer, communication, and work.

St. John Paul II, pray for us.

1. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1981), §13.

2. *Ibid.*, §11.

PRAYER

Fr. Michael Carvill, F.S.C.B.

November 15, 2020

Throughout the following discourse, Fr. Michael makes reference to “The Rule,” which is the fundamental text that sets the structure and guidelines for the Families of St. John Paul II ministry at Nativity of Our Lord in Broomfield, Colorado. Written by the priests of Nativity, missionaries of the Fraternity of St. Charles Borromeo, “The Rule” intends to help couples in their marriage journey. Regarding prayer, “The Rule” presents ways for spouses to pray alone, as a couple, and with their families. This includes the suggestion to pray the Angelus three times daily, to spend fifteen minutes in silence each day, and to take an hour-long “mini-retreat” each week, all of which are referred to in the below text.

The Reason for a Rule

Today I want to speak to you about something that came up in one of the group meetings in which there was a question about prayer and “The Rule.” The group was a little intimidated by the word “rule.” Somebody said it was like being in a PhD program when you haven’t gotten your bachelor’s degree yet. So it seems worthwhile to spend our meeting today talking about prayer and “The Rule.”

The first thing I’d like to talk about is exactly how to understand “The Rule.” Suppose I want to run a half marathon. I won’t say a marathon because I’ll never do that! But if I want to run a half marathon, I will start a training program. If I don’t have a training program, I won’t be able to sustain the work of preparing for that half marathon. The training program makes sure I build up my performance in a good, proper, and healthy way so I can perform at my maximum when I actually do the race.

Now the thing I want to take from this analogy is this idea of sustaining a life. “The Rule” is made to sustain our lives because we are human beings, and, because of original sin, we don’t always keep our eye on the ball. We lose focus of what it is we want. And indeed, in some way we defeat ourselves because what we want is this relationship in unity with God, and we want to live out a response to God in our lives, but when it comes to living life we find ourselves and our attention being grasped and taken by many different things.

Something that can help keep our focus on what we really want is to have a simple rule of life, which isn’t there to condemn us but is there to sustain us.

Our rule references the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which begins with, “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God.”¹ It goes on to say our very nature is infinite desire or

Prayer is this action that allows us to fulfill our own nature.

need for God, whether we are aware of it or not. This is who we are and this is expressed in everything we do or think. Prayer is this action that allows us to fulfill our own nature.

We cannot have life without relationship with God. The Bible is the story of the human heart that yearns for, seeks, and wants to establish a relationship with God. In the sacrifices of Cain

and Abel we see the desire, the yearning in the human heart to be in relationship with God. It’s there from the very beginning. In his gospel, St. John the Evangelist contrasts the world with the life of union with God. We are completely immersed in and surrounded by the world, which has a deep and profound unawareness and even negation of our relationship

1. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), §27.

with God; this is contrasted with the ultimate necessity that we have as human beings to be in relationship with God.

The work of prayer is precisely the work of overcoming that deep immersion of ourselves in the world. It's like an opportunity to wake up and suddenly discover what the world really is.

Home is a Piece of the World Redeemed

What we desire in our homes is to be a piece of the world redeemed. It is in our homes, this piece of the world redeemed, that our kids can grow, see, and know what it is to belong to God. Belonging to God will make sense to them because they see it, experience it, and know it.

We need to pray so we can be truly alive and so our house, the place we live, can truly be a piece of the world redeemed, not a place in which the world outside comes in and dominates the relationships. When we come in the door of our home, there needs to be a sense of returning to a place that is healthy, a place that is radically and positively right for the accomplishment of that for which we are made.

Our friendship among families should allot an adequate time to affirm and live the ideal of breaking away from the mentality of the world. We must recognize that Christ is with us and that we are His beloved, the beloved of God. Then we can discover who we truly are and what this means; otherwise, who we are gets blown away in the winds of the world.

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I would like you to know what "The Rule" isn't.

"The Rule" isn't a bondage; it is instead an opportunity for life. After the conversation about the challenges of "The Rule," I thought about whether

we needed to simplify “The Rule.” Do we need to say five minutes of silence instead of fifteen minutes? Do we need to suggest a fifteen-minute weekly retreat instead of an hour? But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that if we do that, we betray the families, the families that are looking to us for God.

Let’s not reduce what it is we want to do. I sincerely believe that what we’ve included in “The Rule” is the minimum of what we need to do to sustain the thing we desire.

How do we Pray?

In another section of “The Rule,” it asks, “How do we pray?” There’s a very important answer to this question: “It doesn’t matter as long as we do it.”

We need to take the time to pray. If we say we’re going to try and give ourselves fifteen minutes every day to pray, then we need to do it. We’ll never discover the treasure that it is, and we’ll never discover the huge contribution it makes to our life, unless we do it. And as we do it we begin to discover something new, something truly and deeply valuable for our lives. This is the most important aspect of our prayer. We learn to pray as we do it; it is a school of prayer. The biggest step is jumping into the pool. In Ireland, where I’m from, the waters are always cool—jumping into the pool is always the hardest thing because you know you’re going to be frozen! But then you know also that after two minutes you’re going to be really happy swimming around in water that feels great. We need to jump into this life of prayer. It is a great gift, and I promise it will be powerfully helpful and useful for our lives.

What do we do when we pray? When we begin to pray we should begin with a prayer by which we ask God to help us learn to pray. The Our Father, the great school of prayer of the Christian tradition given to us by Christ himself, was given in answer to a prayer. It is a prayer said directly in response to the apostles asking Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.”

We can just begin with that: “Lord, teach me to pray.” We’ve got fifteen minutes here now, and, with that prayer, we’ve already begun an amazing thing. As the masters of the spiritual life say, we’ve put ourselves in the presence of God.

As we continue our prayer, we can use the prayers of the Church as a springboard toward an interior expression of our heart. Recognizing, acknowledging, and embracing the great presence of God, we can begin with “Our Father who art in heaven,” but immediately stop and begin to say, “Lord help me understand what it means to call God ‘Father.’”

We can in that way allow the great prayers of the Church’s tradition to be the school of prayer for us. There are the basics, the Hail Mary, Our Father, and Glory Be, which we use in the Rosary. They’re great and beautiful prayers. Then there’s the Memorare, the Hail Holy Queen, and a whole bunch of prayers. You’ll notice we put a compendium of prayers in “The Rule” as a starting point and school of this time of prayer.

Through prayer, our reality is illumined by the great presence of Christ. Our relationship with our husband, children, work, business, finances, and everything else becomes illumined and ultimately judged in the light of Christ. This word ‘judged’ is a little problematic because we learn that we shouldn’t judge, then all of a sudden we are told to judge everything! But in our tradition it’s speaking about something very simple: We’re not allowed to judge the standing of another person before God; instead, judging means we allow the presence of God, our belonging to God, our relationship with God to be the source by which we evaluate everything in our lives in order to determine its value. By this measure we discern what is truly important. In doing this we let the awareness of Christ overcome the mentality of the world, especially in our culture which is very confident of its own value, its own right, and its desire to be in the right.

How can we know reality and what is right and wrong except in relationship with God? God becomes the anchor point that allows us to be in a stable relationship with everything. The desert is always moving. Even

the Great Sand Dunes, here in Colorado. If you go there one year and again the next year, and you try to find the same place, it just isn't there! So for the nomads in the desert the most vital thing was to find a rock, a real rock that would be true and unchanging. This is God in our lives. Without Him as our anchor, we're just being dragged along in the current of history without any stable reference point.

The first element of our prayer is to open our horizon and recognize where we are. I sometimes encounter people who run into crises and feel unloved. I say to them, "You need to write a 'catechism' with answers to the questions: Who am I? Who loves me? What is my destiny? You need to learn the answers to these questions. And when you feel yourself all of a sudden completely overcome by the world, you need to go to your little catechism that you've learned and say: Who am I, who loves me, who made me, in whose world am I, and what is the purpose of my life?"

We want to give ourselves the time to drill down through all the distractions of the day and get to the point where, for a moment, we catch a beautiful glimpse of who we truly are and what our relationship with God is. This moment changes the day! It really does change the day.

Sometimes all the stars in our lives line up, with things going very well at work, in our relationships, in the home, etc. And for a moment it seems that life is good. But prayer gives us something much deeper and more profound than that. May God grant that the stars of our lives often line up—that's a beautiful thing—but it's not one of the things Christ promised us. Christ promised everything that was implied in his love for us. He didn't withhold from us anything that is good. What he promised was something more precious and valuable than all the stars in our lives lining up.

He set up reality in such a way that, in knowing it, we can be full of gladness. He loves us. He loves us, and He made it so we can know and discover his love, and we can live in the light of that love whether the stars are lining up or not. Sometimes the stars are misaligned and nothing seems right. Can we endure and thrive in that? Absolutely we can, if we live in the work of affirming, sustaining, and returning to our relationship with God.

Are the challenges of life going to confound us? Absolutely not, provided that we give ourselves the time to allow God's love revealed to us in Christ to illumine our lives. It must penetrate into the kitchen, the cubical, the traffic jam, and all the other places of our lives. It's only by allowing His light to penetrate into our lives in this way that we can truly discover all those things in a right light.

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We discover that his light can help us ponder suffering, for example. Saint John Paul II's beautiful letter on love and suffering describes how even suffering plays notes in the great symphony of God's love.² Prayer helps us understand this.

In the fifteen minutes of prayer every day, I would strongly recommend that the first thing is putting ourselves in the presence of God, an affirmation of the ultimate positivity of everything right. If that takes the whole fifteen minutes, that's fine, and if not, there are many ways to live our time of prayer.

Sometimes we may just think about the people we love and pray for them. We can also read the gospel of the mass of the coming Sunday or current weekday, or we can pray the rosary. There is also the great tradition of the liturgical prayer, the Liturgy of the Hours. Another source of prayer is the Psalms.

Another recommendation in "The Rule" is a weekly "mini-retreat"—an hour of silence. Our commitment is to spend more time in prayer. It may seem a little challenging to spend a whole hour in prayer, but an hour isn't a very long time. We all sit down and watch an episode of an hour-long TV

2. John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1984).

show without even giving it a second thought. Spending an hour in silence before God is another great opportunity to help us grow in the experience of prayer.

I would recommend starting the same way we, the priests, do in our chapel. We always start with fifteen minutes in front of the Blessed Sacrament on our knees because we want to begin with realizing where we are.

We can read from The Bible, part of the gospel, the lives of the saints, or the history of the Church. But when we only have one hour a week, it's important to choose one or two little things that can really be helpful. We should choose something that can provoke our heart and mind and soul and break through something that may be getting in our way.

Q&A: On the Angelus

Praying the Angelus is an ancient Christian tradition. When I was a kid in Ireland, the bells would ring three times a day and everyone would stop what they were doing and pray the Angelus. The Angelus brings us back to living in the world in a way that's illumined by the light of Christ. The Angelus is like a tiny one-act play in which the event of the incarnation—the event that gives us hope and life—is center stage. It's a gesture we do to be reminded of Christ, like telephone posts running along the road. Every fifty feet or so, a pole holds up the wire, then in another fifty feet, another pole holds up the wire. We can think of the Angelus, as those poles holding up and sustaining our awareness of who we are and what our life is about throughout the whole day.

As a conclusion, I would like to say that when one discovers the treasure of prayer, one seeks it more and more. There's nothing in our Rule that says you can't spend even more time in prayer. It's meant to be something that sustains us, and "The Rule" proposes an adequate minimum to sustain the life and memory of Christ. Our Rule proposes that the couple say a few prayers in the evening before going to bed. You can say a rosary or go for a walk together on the trail and pray. There are many ways to live that couple prayer.

And finally, there is prayer in the family, which helps us live out the fullness of our vocation in the light of Christ. We can use prayers in which the kids can easily participate, and the best way to do that is by using the prayers of the tradition of the Church. Our family is all together in this piece of the world redeemed, gathered together and acknowledging and recognizing God in the midst of the world around us.

Sources

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COMMUNICATING FAITH IN THE FAMILY

Fr. Matteo Invernizzi, F.S.C.B.

March 7, 2021

The title of the following discourse, “Communicating Faith in the Family,” shares a title with an essay by Luigi Giussani.¹ Fr. Matteo draws upon this essay as well as John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation Familiaris Consortio (The Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World), both of which discuss the importance of sharing the faith through the education of future generations.

What is Faith?

Faith is a vision of reality in which God is the beginning, end, and meaning of everything.

When we recite the Creed, we describe a reality in which everything fits: the origin of the world and of life, the redemption of it through Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit through the Church to bring everything to its fulfillment. Because faith is a complete interpretation of reality, it requires education. To educate means to introduce the child to the fullness of reality, showing him or her the connections between its elements. It means to show the beginning and end of everything, to set a framework in which freedom can find its own path to achieve the goal of life: the fullness of our humanity as sons and daughters of the Heavenly Father.

I was six when my grandfather Antonio died. He had just retired a year before, and he and my grandmother were finally enjoying their new life together. She was devastated by his death, and I remember her crying all

1. Luigi Giussani, “Communicating Faith in the Family,” 1991.

the time. The day of his funeral, I was by the casket, looking intensely at him, and my grandma asked me, “Why don’t you cry?” I didn’t answer the

question right away, but deep in my heart I knew that I wasn’t crying because I was certain that Grandpa was in heaven with Jesus. Even at an early age, a child can grasp the essential truth, the reality of the resurrection as the fundamental evidence in life.

Kids should see in their parents what love is like.

Something similar happened to me in eighth grade. I had a crush on a lovely girl, a classmate of mine. Eventually she showed me the same affection and we began to spend a lot of time together. But the closer we got, the more I became aware that this love was not enough. I longed for something greater. Thanks to her I discovered an urge for the infinite, a desire that nothing could fulfill except God. That was definitely a key moment for my future vocation.

Sowing the Faith

Both Giussani’s “Communicating the Faith in the Family” and St. John Paul II’s *Familiaris Consortio* insist on the importance of sowing the faith in new generations.

Parents’ love and example are their children’s first experience of God. Teaching the faith means teaching them the loving presence of the Father and introducing them to the Church. Kids should see in their parents what love is like, so they will always be able to return to this experience in order to discern what is true love and what is not.

Referencing the Vatican II document *Gravissimum Educationis*, John Paul II states in *Familiaris Consortio*:

The Second Vatican Council describes the content of Christian education as follows: “Such an education does not merely strive to foster maturity ... in the human person. Rather, its principal aims are these: that as baptized persons are gradually introduced into a knowledge of the mystery of salvation, they may daily grow more conscious of the gift of faith which they have received; that they may learn to adore God the Father in spirit and in truth (cf. Jn. 4:23), especially through liturgical worship; that they may be trained to conduct their personal life in true righteousness and holiness, according to their new nature (Eph. 4:22-24), and thus grow to maturity, to the stature of the fullness of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:13), and devote themselves to the upbuilding of the Mystical Body. Moreover, aware of their calling, they should grow accustomed to giving witness to the hope that is in them (cf. 1 Pt. 3:15), and to promoting the Christian transformation of the world.”²

Children need to see in their parents the certainty that is missing outside the home. A study revealed that when the father of a family attends mass regularly, it is more probable that the children will continue to attend mass than in families where only the mother goes to mass.

Defending the Faith

Both texts emphasize the necessity of defending the faith from a hostile world. We live less and less in a Christian world, so we have to face a reality where other values and visions shape the life of the people. The battle for religious freedom has always been the first concern for the Church. Fr. Luigi Giussani used to say, “Let us go around naked, but don’t take away from us the freedom to teach.”

Ideally, a school, a sports team, or an association will respect the fundamental right of the parents to educate their kids. It should be an educational alliance, where different subjects participate together, under the guidance of the parents, to facilitate the full development of their children.

2. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1981). Quoted text from Paul VI, *Gravissimum Educationis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965).

But we can find ourselves in a different situation. Section 40 of *Familiaris Consortio* is very clear about the situation in which an institution pretends to teach fundamental values, such as sexual education, without the parents' consent. This is a case where parents have the moral duty to stand up, try to correct the wrongdoing, and, eventually, if unsuccessful, to find a different school or to homeschool.

When I was about to begin elementary school, my parents, along with some other like-minded friends, joined together to create an elementary school for their children in order to opt out of the public school which was proposing a different moral and religious code from theirs. This small group of parents picked two good teachers who educated us in a local parish basement—quite a novel enterprise in Italian society at the time—and soon the school grew to the point that it became a large institute, with first through eighth grades and more than 800 students.

In the first years of education, kindergarten through eighth grade, you set the foundation for your children's beliefs. You give them the ideas and concepts that will accompany them throughout their life as a possible explanation of life.

During high school, those concepts will be put on trial. Their horizon widens, and they start acquiring more information by themselves, from friends, books, and the internet. A huge wave of new experiences threatens the world they have known so far, and it seems it will wipe away everything. This is not true. If they have received enough education, they may find themselves sitting on the shore after the wreckage amidst a lot of raw material that, eventually, they will have to use to re-build their new boat. In this situation the key figure is more likely a teacher, an older friend, or a mentor rather than mom or dad. This is not because the parents' role has ended (they will always offer the living testimony of what they have taught), but because it's time for the kids to expand their experience of fatherhood toward the great and unique fatherhood of God. Behind every father and every mother, God is always at work, and He provides, in every time of life,

someone who can accompany us on our journey. This is probably the most important discovery in life for your children: “If God is for us, who can be against us?”³

Healing the Faith

One of the greatest pains for parents is to see their kids falling away from the faith. This usually happens in the passage between high school and college, often linked to a significant change in their life—they change towns, they change houses, and their faith remains behind. As in the movie *Toy Story*, when Andy has to choose from among his toys which to bring with him to college... often faith remains in the chest drawer, with the toys of their childhood.

Why does this happen? What can we do to prevent this and help them in their transition?

First, looking at the spiritual or material goods a young person brings along with him, you can understand what his family considered valuable in his education. Even in the most rebellious kids, you will always find many values inherited from their parents.

I have three siblings, all on different paths at different times regarding their faith. My sister and I have been faithful to Catholicism throughout our lives. I chose the priesthood and she became a mother of five, eventually opening her home to foster children as well. My youngest brother seemed to completely fall away in his teenage years, but then he met his Argentinian wife and she brought him back to the faith.

My other sister also seemed to have completely slipped away from Catholicism. But during Covid, when my father was hospitalized for three months, in danger of his life, she surprised me by saying she was offering up her work to God for his healing. That showed me that the deep-seated knowledge of God she was raised with—although hidden for years—was still present within her and was there for her to draw upon in the time of

need. Her offering was a step in an awareness and acknowledgment of the presence of God in her life.

Each one of my siblings has a different relationship with God, but His existence, and His claim to rule the world underlies each one's journey. He's definitely the key figure for our understanding of reality.

Parents must sow the seed of a vision of reality as a place where God is real and present, and where the fullness of our humanity is possible in a strong relationship with him.

Second, keep the door open. The prodigal son needed a place to return to and a father who remained a father in his own house. If there are no places, or houses, where the Christian life is lived, they will never be able to see the

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difference between what they find outside and what they experienced at home. That was the function of the monasteries in the medieval period, and through their example they rebuilt a society. Our houses need to become monasteries, not because we have to get up in the middle of the night to pray, but because everything in our house has to speak

about God: the love between parents, the beauty of the garden and the care of the house, and the way we treat each other. God is always present in our house as the ultimate reason for everything.

Third, pray for them. Freedom is a powerful gift, which can bring us closer to or further from God. It implies a spiritual battle, where there are many players on both fields. Through our prayers we can actively participate in

the struggle our kids must endure to choose God and what is good for them.

Practical Suggestions

- Do it together. Pray together at the beginning of the day and on your way to school. Always say grace before meals. End the day with a prayer and help your children with a brief examination of conscience.
 - Participate in the sacraments. Go to confession often with your kids, maybe once a month. Receive communion with them.
 - Teach your children the history of Israel, of the Church, and of your family. Show them how God acted, with his providence and mercy, especially in difficult times.
 - Discuss with them the news and show them how to use your faith to make your own judgment about what's going on in the world.
 - Share with them readings, articles, or books which have helped your judgment.
 - Avoid complaints and criticism. Teach them how to find something positive in every situation, because God is always at work, and He saves the world through what is alive, pure, and beautiful.
 - Open the door of your house to your friends, so they can always see you as part of the Christian community. And welcome their friends too, to know them and share with them your family values.
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WORK

Fr. Emanuele Fadini, F.S.C.B.

May 2, 2021

*Fr. Emanuele offered the following presentation to the Families of John Paul II as a reflection on John Paul II's encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, (On Human Work). He refers to this text throughout as a guideline for understanding God's concept of work and how we can approach our own work—and rest—in a fruitful and fortifying way.*

And God looked upon all that He had made, and indeed, it was very good.

Genesis 1:31

Introduction

“Give success to the work of our hands, give success to the work of our hands.”¹ Once, while praying, I bumped into the conclusion of Psalm 90, in which the author repeats this plea to God. I don't remember exactly what I had to do that morning, but that plea became mine. I tend to be anxious and a perfectionist about the work I have to do, and this attitude can be very burdensome. But that day, I filled those words (“the work of our hands”) with the things I had to do. Instead of being overwhelmed by worries and dreaming of days off or vacation, I asked God through those words to “bring the work of my hands to success” for that day. But I immediately had to reflect on what type of success I was asking God to bring. “Ask anything you want,” Christ says, “and it will be given,” as long

1. Psalm 90:17

as it is good for me and for others. What type of success am I asking God to accomplish through my work? Is it an image I project to others? Is it human praise? Is it my own perception of what the goals I want to accomplish should be? Because if God doesn't respond, either I haven't asked, or it is bad for me or others, or if it's good, He wants to wait for me to grow and to open my heart to a deeper and broader fulfillment.

It's important to reflect in this way on what type of success we ask God to accomplish. In order to do that, we have to understand the idea of work He has in mind. What is God's concept of work? If I understand this, I can experience fulfillment in work because God has given me a task with the goal of fulfilling me, by sharing His experience with me. For this reason, the first question in front of this work is: How is what the Church teaches about work, particularly in John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens*, different from what the world teaches? If you want to experience fulfillment in anything, ask yourself honestly: What do you truly believe to be important? What do you honestly want to accomplish with this? What is it that you want? For what and for whom do you live?

Let's now retrace the steps of this marvelous encyclical of John Paul II on how God sees work and how therefore this "fundamental dimension" can be a fulfillment for us.²

Work is for Man

The first step I want to underline is the "original meaning of work," as revealed through the account of creation, before the Fall. This account can be read in Genesis 1-2:8.

"Transitive"/Objective Dimension of Work

From this account—revealed to man through mythical language in order to reveal a deeper truth about the nature of God, human beings, and all of creation—we see that God has been at work since the beginning. He is

2. John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1981), §4.

rational and powerful, patient and creative. He creates out of nothing, and anything and anyone that He creates is good. He creates human beings in His image and likeness, and He makes them capable of sharing in His love, in His freedom, in His goodness and truth, and in His power to manipulate creation with intelligence and will to order it toward its final good end. This is work. It is ordering reality toward a final good end. God shares this working experience with human beings, giving them the task to “subdue the earth”³ and “to cultivate and care for the garden” in which Adam has been placed.⁴ John Paul II calls this dimension of work “transitive.”⁵ It’s a transitive activity to say “an activity beginning in the human subject (the person) and directed towards an external object.” I add specifically that the action has the goal to order reality toward its end, which is the goal for which God, the original designer and maker, has intended for it. And this end is good, is rational, is not the cause of havoc. Many other myths of creation, even those contemporary with the times in which the tales of Genesis were revealed to the people of Israel, present the birth of creation as the result of a chaotic and violent fight among gods. In Genesis it is the opposite. God makes everything from nothing and orders it toward a harmonic good. The task of work assigned to man has the same quality, except man doesn’t create from nothing.

**This is work.
It is ordering
reality toward a
final good end.**

This objective value of human work contrasts with the worldly secularized concept of work. In the secular perspective, work is often seen as merely a means of using resources for self-advancement or personal affirmation. In light of this Christian mentality of work, it is instead clear that work is not

3. Genesis 1:28

4. Genesis 2:15

5. John Paul II, §4.

Work is the way in which God wants the human being to develop more and more his likeness to God.

only that which is remunerated. Cleaning the house and educating the children are clearly work because they are activities that order realities, inanimate or personal, directing them toward their proper good. This good can take various forms, whether it's ensuring the dishes are done, loving the children, teaching them how to walk, or introducing them to God.

The objective value of work should guide our discernment, prompting us to reflect on the value of our work by asking, "In my work, how do I participate in God's work of ordering reality

toward its ultimate good?" This perspective also provides objective criteria for us to refuse or object to, based on conscience, a job that involves formal or immediate material cooperation with evil. In such cases, our work cannot be considered cooperation with God's work, regardless of the goodness of our intentions. The Church, through her teaching and guidance, can help us in properly discerning the morality of a job when we have doubts or uncertainties.

Subjective Dimension of Work

The reason God entrusts the task of ordering reality and sharing in His work of creation to human beings lies in the fact that God created men and women in order to make them sharers of His own self, of His own life. When God works, He is Himself. And, strictly speaking, He doesn't need a collaborator. So, if He does seek cooperators, He must have a good reason. His good reason to cooperate with man is that man may be fulfilled and share more and more in the goodness and love that God has in store for him.

Therefore, work is meaningful not merely for the result that it “accomplishes” (the transitive/objective dimension of work). Work is meaningful first and foremost because it is performed by the human being, the creature made in the image and likeness of God. Work is the way in which God wants the human being to develop more and more his likeness to God. Work is good because it expresses man’s dignity and increases it. This is the milestone of the teaching of John Paul II, who brings to light this perspective on work that has always been there but never been disclosed so clearly. “Work is for man, and not man for work.”⁶

“The value of human work is not primarily the kind of work done but the fact that the one who is doing it is a person.”⁷ For John Paul II this “subjective dimension” of work is crucial and pre-eminent to the objective one. “It is always man who is the purpose of work” and not the opposite.⁸

Some of you have shared how this teaching enlightens your personal experience:

**The value of
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the kind of work
done but the fact
that the one who
is doing it is
a person.**

Laborem Exercens, §6

6. Ibid., §6.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

- “Work can bring me closer to God when I unite myself to Him... I grow in patience.”⁹ Isn’t it patience to have the self-certainty that the good I want will eventually prevail, even if now it seems to be obscured? Who, but God, is the most patient? He who waited for centuries and millennia to carry out his work of salvation and never lost His patience? Learning patience enhances the person’s likeness to God. The same likeness that has been deeply buried by original sin comes to light again and shines more brightly through a genuine experience of work.
- “God is generously including me in his work.”¹⁰ I like this word “generously” because it reveals that God didn’t need me, yet He decided to include me, out of an abundance of love, out of generous love, in order to make me part of Him. One of our missionary brothers, Fr. Luca Montini, recently wrote a letter in the February issue of a bulletin for F.S.C.B. He shared that while working in the local hospital in Africa he gave a few tasks to one of the kids affected with a mental disability. The kid was so proud that, when the time came for him to take some days off, he suffered for that and showed up at the clinic everyday asking to continue his work. The kid was so persistent that eventually Fr. Luca realized it was better to shorten the time off for him and welcome him back. This shows how being given a task is a sign of a deeper gift of love and a call to belonging. Was the kid originally needed for the work? No, they could have hired someone more skilled. Fr. Luca “created” the position for the kid’s personal growth, and the growth of the person occurred. And still, his work was not useless.

With regard to the subjective dimension of work, John Paul II adds that by involving the human being in his work, God proves to men that He is not his rival (opposite to Satan’s insinuation). Work is an expression of and formation to communion. Think about the bond it creates when you work

9. Shared by Louis B. at an event for the Families of St. John Paul II at Nativity of Our Lord, Broomfield, Colorado.

10. Ibid., shared by Rachel B.

constructively with someone. Work forms the person and enhances the dignity of man because it brings the person into communion with his creator and with other human beings. Since the essence of the person is relationship and communion, as God is, work makes the person more of a person.

Toil and Redemption of the Cross

This original meaning of work has been obscured by the human rejection of God. When Adam and Eve gave in to Satan's allurements to disobey God and attempt to dictate to God what is good, the life, order, and goodness of creation were obscured. Death, suffering, and concupiscence became part of creation. The order of creation was compromised. The rebellion of the human being against the paternity of God is reflected in creation. Creation seems to "reject" the authority and the dominion of the human being. Creation, not seeing in the human being the analogy of the authority of God, seems to say to the human being: Who are you? In the name of whom do you claim authority over me, you who rejected God, the provider of being and master of all things?

Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return.¹¹

We don't need a revelation to know that work entails pain and toil. It's an intrinsic and ordinary experience, in any type of work, from the more physical to at the desk. Work can be toilsome, and, more than that, we can experience the frustration of falling short in the attempt to order the object of our work toward its good end. One of you shared honestly how "work can become a drudgery."¹² We don't need Genesis to describe this reality, but we do need Genesis to tell us that at least this was not the original plan of God. God is not patronizing us; He is a good father. And knowing He is

11. Genesis 3:17-20

12. Shared by Louis B.

a good father helps. Yet, even knowing it's the fault of Satan and of the human race that we suffer when we work is not enough because it is beyond our abilities to overcome and compensate for this fault. God could have waived our fault, but that would have violated the same freedom and justice that are part of His being and doing. We know the key to this dilemma. God sent His Son to repair it. He sent His Son, true man and true God. True man, capable of true suffering and true death; true God, capable of victory over death. On our behalf, Christ went through the consequences of our fault in order to finally repair it, to destroy death from within. The cross was the bait swallowed by death, in order to capture it and destroy it. When we who are baptized die, in reality we pass from a mortal life to a life not liable to death anymore. The cross therefore has been redemptive, because it paid the ransom of our enslavement from death. We believers, baptized in Christ, have been set free from the chains of death.

But if this is so, why do we, who have been baptized, still suffer and die and fight against sin? Because Christ bets on our freedom to have faith in Him and obey Him through the challenges of this fallen creation in order to freely gain His victory. Suffering, death, and concupiscence are the way in which we carry the cross that Christ bore. Sharing the victory wouldn't be the same if we didn't share the fight. Think about what an accomplishment it is to build something for which you have toiled. Without Christ's final victory, our struggle would be useless and nominal. Nonetheless, Christ wants to make us sharers of His victorious fight and victorious obedience to the Father. That's why we are also granted the cross. Christ's pain was purifying for the human race, not for Himself who was sinless. We are also active sharers of the sins of the human race, and each one of us is purified by the struggle and suffering of the cross.

Back to "work." The original meaning of work, the one assigned to the human race before the Fall, is still present in the essence of work. However, with Christ's cross and resurrection, toil and pain related to work have not been depleted of their power, but have also become the way in which we can truly and more deeply than before cooperate in God's work of salvation. Let me explain. When I work, if I decide to freely obey the will of God even though I have to endure toil, my free obedience becomes an

act of offering, a pleasing sacrifice, that God uses for his work of the redemption and salvation of the world. One of you shared:

I was most struck by John Paul II's description of work as 'co-suffering' with Christ. In a fallen world, work is a struggle, but in a world redeemed by Christ, our struggle can be united to His sacrifice on the cross. It thereby becomes an efficacious and meaningful endeavor, even (and especially) when it is difficult, laborious, or seemingly unfruitful."¹³

He said it becomes "efficacious." Truly effective. In what sense? If his work is to calculate the orbits of a spacecraft, he can improve and serve the life of

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Shared by Nick B.

human beings here or simply discover more about the reality of creation as well as support his family. These are good objective goals. Therefore it cooperates in God's work, responding to God's command. All of this constitutes the objective dimension of work. Furthermore, this work fulfills the subjective dimension, as it contributes to his growth as a person. Finally, there is something more to it. When he works freely, obeying with love the task given to him now—even when he feels it's difficult or seemingly unfruitful—the fact that he is baptized in Christ means

his free "offering" will be used by God to accomplish greater results than just the orbit, the spacecraft, or providing for his family. It will be used by

13. Shared by Nick B.

God to build the kingdom of God, to save a soul in the middle of nowhere, to save us from a calamity, and so on and so forth.

We will see in heaven the whole concert of strings pulled by God to redeem the world through our willing acts of obedience that have been made fruitful by being incorporated into the one fruitful sacrifice of Christ on the cross. My work truly becomes part of the work of the salvation of Christ. And this is the main work that God does. “My Father is working still, and I am working.”¹⁴ This is what Jesus responds to the Pharisees right after he healed the paralytic at the pool of Bethesda. He had just performed a miracle, and had just freed a man from the consequences of original sin; this is the work the Father does and Christ does. And we are called to cooperate in that, in anything we do. Our desk or work bench or kitchen counter can become the “altar” for your pleasing offering to God.

How Can We be Formed to Absorb this New Mentality about Work?

- Continue to reflectively “judge your experience of work,” through the teaching of the Church, and the support of your brothers and sisters in faith.
- Participate in the liturgy. During Mass, at the offertory (after the prayers of the faithful), the priest presents and offers to God the Father the bread and the wine, while reciting 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.” This act is a paradigm of “work.” The bread has been produced by man, who mixed flour and water and baked the concoction and the result is bread. Three realities have been ordered by the rational ability of man and his free will (image of God) toward a better good, that was not present in the water and the flour and the heat. What has been accomplished is good. Each one of the faithful has indirectly done a portion of this work contributing part of

14. John 5:17.

their money to buy that bread. But then, what is God going to do with that good result? He is going to take it, work on it through the Holy Spirit and the human cooperation of the priest, and transform it into bread that grants eternal life, the Body of His Son. Bread is good; it gives life for a little while. The Bread of Heaven is more. His work does not dismiss nor reject our work (as long as it is aimed to do good and is not intrinsically evil), but He brings it to the true and deeper fulfillment of the human being.

- **Tithing.** When we tithe, we keep in mind that a few hours of our work materially and physically contribute to the work of the Father and of Christ, through his catholic and apostolic Church. Being faithful to this act, we learn that any particular action of work is called to be part of the work of God and finds its fulfillment if it becomes a pleasing offering to him.
- **Prayer,** done with frequency throughout the day, is crucial and essential to work in a fulfilling way. Last week, one of you shared with your group how it's been meaningful for you to say to God, "I offer you this." Another shared, "I surrender it all to Him." Surrendering is a powerful act because it underscores that if today there is an obstacle to my fulfillment, that obstacle is in me, not in my spouse or in the circumstance in which I live. It's my resistance that prevents me from receiving God's grace. So I have to acknowledge how I resist. And once I know it, I realize I am still powerless over it. But if I turn to God, he can remove it. He can remove my resistance to do his will, my resistance to experience fulfillment and joy in Him and His will. He can remove my inability to forgive and to ask for forgiveness, and He can overcome my inability to love.
- **Work.** Live out this Christian mentality of work anywhere. Make the family a school of work for the children, in which they learn to contribute to the good of the family. There, they experience the joy of cooperating in God's creation and in growing as men and women—as mom and dad are—and they learn to offer their work to God for the salvation of the world. Be faithful to the work given to us. As Mother Teresa has said, "To God, it doesn't matter that we are successful, but

that we are faithful.”¹⁵ It is liberating and not belittling of our dignity to be useless servants—“useless” in God who truly takes care, knows what we need, and gives true and real success to the work of our hands.

- Rest. God rested on the seventh day (and every evening before the new day), so he could contemplate what he did. One of you pointed out that a common question we ask each other is “What do you do?” There is a truth in knowing what a person does, because, as St. Thomas Aquinas says, “*Agere sequitur Esse*,” that is, “doing follows being.” It is philosophical criteria that points out the fact that I can infer and discover the essence of something if I observe how that thing acts. I infer the free rational nature of the human being from the fact that he does think and act freely. However, the distortion of this truth also lies in the first question, “What do you do?” because the doing is narrowed to career and profession, instead of a broader vision of work as cooperation with God’s work of ordering reality toward good, expressing the dignity of the person, and participating in Christ’s work of redemption. The distortion is that it tends to equate the action with the essence. The action instead expresses the essence, but the essence is more. Many of you acknowledged the powerful teaching of John Paul II that “a person is more precious for what he is than for what he has.”¹⁶
 - Because of this biased mentality, it is hard to separate, mentally and physically, work and family life. It can be hard “not to keep ruminating on leftover problems at the end of the day.”¹⁷ Separation is necessary, but make sure that this separation is not avoidance. Evasion of the problem that bothers you only creates physical separation but not mental separation, because you are still harassed by the problem at work. True rest can happen if I have the trust that whether or not the problem will be solved, in God the challenges related to it will not compromise my and the others’ ultimate fulfillment.

15. Mother Teresa, *The Joy in Loving: A Guide to Daily Living*, comp. Jaya Chaliha, Edward Le Joly (New York: Viking, 1997).

16. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), 35.

17. Shared by Nick B.

- In the seminary I had to learn through obedience to sacrifice my urge to fix and to complete any work I had started in order to rest on Sunday. I had to obey. And it started to change me and re-foster in me the original desire for good and sound rest. Completion of my work was defining me, and resting was like fasting from work. At first, I didn't know how to properly rest, because I was looking only for entertainment and emotional fulfillment. I had to re-learn true rest—reading a book, enjoying the beauty of creation and of sports, enjoying communion, experiencing beauty, spending time in personal prayer outside of the liturgy, having a good meal... You can rest when the heart is at rest. If you are not at rest, turn to God and surrender to Him what you are unable to fix or change, and He will respond. Trust and hope that He will bring the work to completion. How do we rest? What does it mean for us to rest? Is our house a place of rest? Is communion with our spouse a source of refreshing rest?
- Rest is contemplation and is the goal of work. We don't build just to build. We build in order to enjoy the house. Sunday is the fulfillment of the week, and we need to experience that God is our true fulfillment and our true rest. When we live in this way, our heart is at peace and we are able to face struggle and action rather than seeking to avoid it.

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HOME IS A PIECE OF THE WORLD

REDEEMED is a collection of presentations made by the priests of Nativity of Our Lord Parish in Broomfield, Colorado. The talks were given to the Families of St. John Paul II, a group of couples who share together the joys and struggles of building a family with Christ at its center.

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