

# THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF WORK\*

By V. REV. JOHN CANON McCARTHY, D.C.L., D.D.

IN the world of today attempts are being made, consciously and unconsciously, to departmentalize human life, to cordon it off into separate areas, and to prevent or disclaim communication between these areas. In particular, it is frequently suggested today that the religious life of man is a sphere apart, that it is confined to times of prayer, to Churches and to Sundays, that it is a sort of trimming on the general fabric of human living. This is not the true or Christian concept of life which considers the total man with all his aspirations and hopes, in all his activities external and internal, in all his relations and combinations within the social structures. Christianity is not a doctrinaire thing. Nor is it a mere partial or part-time philosophy of living. It is a practical way of life impinging upon and directing every area of human activity, individual and collective. A basic tenet of Christianity is that man's ultimate destiny is the face to face vision of God in heaven, and that his earthly life, with all its diversities of function, with all its strains and stresses, is a period of preparation for, and merit of, that vision splendid. We have not here a lasting city. We seek for one that is to come. We seek that city, we reach out to it, we merit it, by knowing, loving and serving God here below.

This intelligent loving service is not restricted to any sphere of activity, to any particular time or to any special place. It must enter into the daily ways of life, into the recesses of the heart, into our homes, into the fields, the highways and the market place, into the shops, the offices and the councils. This, in brief, is the comprehensive vision and design of life and of its purposes which Christianity presents to us: there is no area of human living to which its doctrines and ideals do not apply.

In view of this all pervading ambit of Christianity there must obviously be a specifically Christian attitude to, a Christian philosophy of, work - and my task this evening is to set it out in the presence of this distinguished audience. May I say that our theme "The Christian Doctrine of Work" is of great importance inasmuch as it has an impact on, and bears a message for all. And yet very many are unaware of its implications and many too are disinclined to relate their daily occupations and activities to religion, to Christianity, to Christ. It is my privilege and high duty to try to pinpoint that relation and, in my endeavour to do so, I shall put before you the Christian concept of work and its place in human life under three main headings: as a service of God, as a service of the individual, and as a service of society - a service ennobled, at every level, and in every form, by the living and vivifying example of Christ. We cannot think of Christianity apart from Christ: it is Christo-centric. It centres round Christ in every sphere and at every level. I should recall that I am not concerned just now with the problem of the relations between workers and employees, with the question of wages or even with work as a merely technical or sentimental problem but as a philosophical and religious problem which reaches down to the roots of man's nature and to the great fundamental purposes appointed for it by God.

In the divine design the purpose of all creation, rational and irrational, animate and inanimate, was to manifest externally the greatness and glory of the Creator. Irrational creation achieves this purpose by its very existence. *Coeli enarrant gloriam Dei - sang the Psalmist. ('The heavens proclaim the glory of God.')*

*"The signs and wonders of the elements*

*Utter forth God and fill the earth with praise".*

It is given to man, endowed with a rational soul, consciously and freely to serve God and to show forth His wondrous glory. In man, the peak-point of God's creative activities was reached. "You have made him a little less than the angels, You have crowned him with glory and honour and have set him over all the works of Your hands. You have subjected all things under his feet, all sheep and oxen, the beasts also of the fields, the birds of the air and the fishes of the sea" (Ps. 8). Man's service of the Creator was primarily to be by way of labour. He was created and directed to work upon the natural

(\* This booklet is the text of a lecture given to the 1954 Congress of the Catholic Truth Society of Ireland.)

resources of the earth placed at his disposal, to cultivate and tend them, to subdue, develop, and fashion them. "Through regard for man's dignity and his unique position, God left some things unfinished that man might have the privilege of completing them. Even in the humblest and most menial task we can feel that we are playing our part in developing and perfecting God's work and in fulfilling His designs" (Cardinal D'Alton, Lenten Pastoral, 1953).

Labour is a law of human life. Man is born to labour as is the bird to fly. Even if Adam had remained faithful, labour would still have been a duty of mankind. It is the will of God that nature should be fertile and should provide food and support not only for man but by man's efforts. It is true that as a result of Adam's sin the discharge of this duty of labour became more onerous, that thenceforth work would have the additional purpose and effect of bending the will and heart and body of man under the curse and yoke that came upon the world through that sin. In the Book of Genesis we read God's sentence upon Adam: "Cursed is the earth in your work ; with labour and toil shall you eat thereof all the days of your life. In the sweat of your face shall you eat bread till you return to the earth out of which you were taken " (Gen 3; 17, 19). But work itself is natural to man and is not a punishment for sin - but only the blood and sweat and toil that accompany it since the Fall.

First of all then, work, in its various forms, must be looked upon as the general vocation of all men, as the fundamental human service of God which flows, as of obligation, from creation, as man's primal way of co-operating in the creative activity of God. This dignity of work is further and incalculably enriched by the example of the life of Christ. In His own person Christ is the living dynamic exemplar of perfect service of God. He came down on earth to do a great sublime work: to redeem mankind and to reveal more clearly the ways of God with man and the way of man to God. St. Leo the Great explained the divine economy which culminated in the Incarnation in these words: "God, whom we would follow, cannot be seen. Man, who could be seen, we could not follow. Hence in order that God might be seen by man and be followed by man, God became man". (Sermon on the Nativity). At the end of His earthly sojourn Christ could say to His heavenly Father, 'I have finished the work which You gave me to do' (John, 17; 4). As a preparation for the final achievement of His sublime purpose Christ lived the greater part of His earthly life in the humble ways of the craftsman's shop at Nazareth, as the carpenter, the Son of Mary, and thus He sanctified and ennobled and set the seal of dignity upon the lowly task of manual labour. All this He did that He might leave us an example, that He might light for us the true way of service of God and men in the ordinary daily tasks of life. For He is the way, the truth, the life and the light.

Human labour which is man's fundamental service of the Creator and which, as such, has been so enriched by the example of Christ is also the means appointed by God whereby we must serve our own needs. In his great Encyclical *Rerum Novarum* Pope Leo XIII wrote: "To labour is to exert oneself for the sake of procuring what is necessary for the various purposes of life, and chief of all for self-preservation". Pope Leo goes on to point out that human labour has two essential characteristics: it is personal; it is necessary.

It is personal. Man, the worker, is the whole man, the whole human person. He is not a mere "hand" or cog in the mechanism of production but a being, composed of a body and a spiritual soul, with purposes, hungers and aspirations which transcend the material sphere, which reach out to the things of the spirit, to God. Man is made for God and he can never rest until he rests in God. Man's capacity for work is bound up with his personality. In work he finds the fulfilment of himself, a means of self-expression, of personal development, of body, of mind, of soul, of powers that otherwise would lie fallow, a sense of achievement, of self-reliance and sturdy independence, a sense of value. Work endows human life with a meaning and a nobility and a joy linking it up, as has been noted, with the creative activity of God. The tragedy today is that many men have lost contact with God in their work. Hence they seek to escape work as far as possible, to neglect it. Yet this work can, and must, be the means of bringing men to the feet of God and to the eternal destiny of heaven, to the final fulfilment of their personality and purpose - for men are not, and cannot be, saved in isolation from their way of life, but by a Christlike fidelity to the duties of their state, by the faithful discharge of the work, whatever it may be, that they have been given to do. Here again we have the vivifying example of Christ who, in the simple ways and in the humble tasks of life in Nazareth, "advanced in wisdom and age and grace with God and men" (St. Luke 2; 5).

Human labour is necessary. Without the fruits of labour man cannot survive, and self-preservation is a first law and instinct of nature. Man is bound to take the ordinary means of conserving his life and the lives of those immediately dependent upon him. These means will be won by human labour. There is no place for the human parasite. In his second letter to the Thessalonians St. Paul wrote: "Neither did we eat any man's bread for nothing, but in labour and toil we worked night and day, lest we should be chargeable to any of you . . . if any man will not work neither let him eat" (II Thess. 3; 8, 10). The provision of his daily needs by personal effort, in accordance with his capacity and opportunities, is then, a bounden duty for man. And when we speak here of daily needs we are thinking not merely of material things but also of the things of the spirit, of the things that are necessary for a fully human life, for we know that man does not live on bread alone. Once again let me recall the example of Christ and the life of Nazareth and the contribution of His daily toil in the work-shop and in the home.

Work is also intended by God to be the means whereby the individual contributes to the welfare of the community and society to which he belongs. And here we naturally think, first of all, of the family - the fundamental unit of social organization. It is surely obvious that the head of the family is bound by every law to use all reasonable efforts to provide for the support and welfare of the other members dependent upon him. But it should be added that they too are expected to help, in their own way, as Christ did in the household of Nazareth. Pope Pius XI wrote: "It is right indeed that the rest of the family contribute according to their powers towards the common maintenance as in the rural home or in the families of many artisans and small shopkeepers". (Quadragesimo Anno). We must also think of the larger communities and societies of which man is a member. It has been said earlier that man the worker is the whole man, the whole human person. And it is necessary to remember that the human person, despite the inviolable individual rights and dignities which are vested in him, does not and cannot live as an isolated unit.

Man is a social animal. He has from God, the author of his nature, the desire, the capacity and the need for society, for uniting and combining with other men in order to obtain common purposes. Man has to live and work out his salvation as a member of the community and society to which he belongs. Additionally, then, to his rights, and duties as an individual, he has rights and duties as a member of society. He is bound to contribute to the welfare of society. This is fundamental social teaching, but it is frequently unrecognized or ignored in the selfish processes of modern life. In fact much of the social disorder and unrest stems from a failure to recognize and honour the twofold aspect, the social and individual aspects, of human life, of human institutions and of human effort. In our sociological teaching we emphasize the social necessity and value of human labour. But, of course, we must not over-exaggerate these aspects. To do so would be to fall into the totalitarian error and to ignore or depreciate the individual personal values of work. In all this context the true teaching strikes a middle way between extreme or selfish individualism and a juggernaut collectivism. The individual and social values of human labour are complementary not contradictory or conflicting.

By his labour a man can not merely develop his own personality and make provision for his needs, but he can also make a contribution to the total welfare - to the welfare of society and mankind. This he is bound to do. He is meshed into the social structure. He is under obligation to play his part, to be a useful member within that structure. Society needs men who are conscious of their social duties and are prepared to honour them. It needs workers, not drones. It needs, for its survival, the honest work, the loyal service of good citizens - of men and women who are willing and determined to contribute to, as well as to share in, the common welfare.

In the light of the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, this social aspect of work is vested with a higher dignity and is safeguarded by a greater sanction. The doctrine of the Mystical Body implies the brotherhood of men under the Fatherhood of God. It means that there is between the individual members of the Church and Christ and between the members themselves, an intimate and vital union and solidarity wrought by the Holy Ghost ; that Christ and His members form one single body with a common source of life, common interests and a common purpose. There is plurality and diversity of members in the Mystical Body. Each member has a part to play, a contribution to make, to the welfare of the whole Body. "As in one body we have many members but all the members have not the same office; so we, being many are one body in Christ and every one members one of another", wrote St. Paul to the Romans (12; 4, 5).

This outline of the doctrine of the Mystical Body eloquently emphasizes the social necessity and value of work - which is presented as a means whereby men can co-operate with Christ and with one another in the furtherance of the purposes of the Incarnation and Redemption. The various members of the Mystical Body are meant to work together, to help one another and all mankind towards the attainment of the common supernatural destiny of mankind. According to this Christian teaching we are our brothers' keepers, our brothers' helpers. We are bound to bear one another's burdens. Unless we do this, St. Paul warns us, we do not fulfil the law of Christ. We are bound by the great commandment of love - love of God and love of the neighbour. We can best and most effectively fulfil this great commandment by a true appreciation of the necessity, potentiality and value, in the social order, of the work that is ours to do and by directing that work not merely to our individual benefit but to the welfare of our fellow-men and especially to the help and succour of those in temporal or in spiritual need. It is obvious, then, that the doctrine of the Mystical Body leaves no place in any true philosophy of life or work for selfish individualism. The doctrine demands that all in the community or society of the faithful shall, in the common interest, pull their weight and competently discharge their allotted task - whatever it may be. And this is demanded not merely on the grounds of the natural solidarity of the social organizations and societies but in virtue of the supernatural solidarity of the members of the Mystical Body of Christ.

I have put before you what I conceive to be the Christian philosophy of work as a service of God, as a service of the individual, as a service of society. It is hardly necessary to say that these aspects cannot be kept completely distinct or isolated. They are rather facets of the full picture of the activities of man - of total man, the citizen of time and of eternity. May I now refer to some of the practical conclusions which should emerge from a consideration of this Christian teaching on work. Reference has already been made in passing, to the value of human labour as a form of co-operation in the divine activities of Creation and Redemption, as a means of personal development and the achievement of the final purpose of life, as a contribution to the welfare of society. These values, too, are knit together. All along I have been speaking of work in general. I cannot particularize. Nor is it necessary. Work can take almost an infinite variety of forms. The worker's lines will be laid in a whole host of different circumstances. But honest work, of every type and in every circumstance, if properly motivated and directed, can achieve the purposes and values I have mentioned. In the pagan philosophies manual occupations and work for wages were regarded as things to be ashamed of - but according to Christian teaching, as Pope Leo XIII emphasizes, they are honourable and creditable ways of life. Within the unity of the Mystical Body -as in the physical body - there are many members all with different functions, some of less importance than others but all making a contribution, a necessary contribution, to the welfare of the whole body.

It is perhaps difficult for those of us who are engaged in the humdrum ways of apparently lowly and menial occupations to realize that in the faithful discharge of our daily tasks we are fulfilling a divine vocation and purpose. Yet this is irrefutably true. We have the proof in many ways. We have it particularly in the example of Christ the carpenter, of Mary the housewife, of Peter the fisherman, of Paul the tentmaker and of the countless other Saints whose lives were spent and sanctified in the discharge of humble and so-called insignificant tasks.

It is supremely important that workers of every class and condition should have a clear vision of life, that they be able to see, in their occupations a divine vocation and that they have a correct attitude towards, and a right motive in, their work. The consequences of all this will be of incalculable worth, for time and for eternity. If workers keep in contact with God in their various occupations, if their daily tasks are related and orientated to God, the dull and drab monotony will be transmuted into a joy of service. The tasks, however lowly and dreary, will be invested with a new interest and dignity. This is a result of great psychological importance. The blood and sweat and toil, associated, in consequence of Adam's sin, with so much of human labour can be linked up with the great offering of Christ and will thus assume a sacrificial value. All these considerations will immeasurably help and inspire workers to take a legitimate pride in work well done, to aim at perfecting their methods, technique and products, to render an honest return to their employers - not because of any merely material or earthly sanction but because they want to present to God the best service of which they are capable.

In these days of mechanism or machinism the human and personal aspects of labour may easily be submerged and forgotten. And the tragedy is that this is often so. With the onset of the industrial era and the factory system, with the

herding together of vast groups of workers, automatically operating machines in the mass production of commodities, the individual worker came, in many places, to be regarded as a mere “hand”, a mere cog in the total equipment and organization. The factories and furnaces were like monuments casting their long shadows over society, telling of man’s enslavement and of the sullen rhythm of human lives. That this happened was, to a large extent the fault of the controllers of the industrial system. I cannot speak of that here save to recall the indictment of Pope Leo that “it is shameful and inhuman to treat men like chattels to make money by or to look upon them as so much muscle or physical strength”. The workers themselves are not without blame in allowing the dehumanization and depersonalization of their labour. No outside control, no system can dictate their attitude of mind and heart. The workers can, in spite of mechanization, repetition and monotony, direct their activities to the higher levels, towards the development of their personality, towards the service of God and man.

It is particularly necessary in this age of easy material socialisms and state paternalisms that workers should understand the importance of attaining and maintaining, by their own efforts, a competence and sturdy independence. This, indeed, is the price of their ultimate freedom. There is nothing more stultifying and demoralizing, both in the social and individual sphere, than that citizens should voluntarily come to depend for the necessities of life on State or public subvention. God has given man energies and powers of work which he must use and provide for his needs. He is less than a man, he is entirely false to his divinely given birthright, who, though he can by reasonable effort make this provision, fails to do so and is content to be a burden on the public purse. This way lies an open road to the servile state in its most virulent form, the road to complete enslavement, for, - make no mistake about it, - the measure of State support will soon become the measure of State control. The primary function of the State, in this context, is to provide the conditions and opportunities in which citizens can by their own initiative and effort, by working according to their capacities attain a reasonable competence and measure of prosperity. It is no function of the State to supplant or render unnecessary individual effort. It is no function of the State to maintain those who are able but unwilling to seek and to use the available opportunities of working to support themselves. Indeed, if the State were to exercise these functions it would be guilty of a grave social crime. To do so would involve unjust expenditure of public moneys, would be destructive of the moral fibre of the people, would exploit the hardworking honest citizen and would set a premium on idleness, laziness and improvidence.

Before I conclude I must point out that Christian teaching which emphasizes so much the necessity and values of work, is far from excluding leisure from life. There is, there must be, a place and time for leisure, not, however, as taking the place of work, nor as implying emancipation from the basic duty of work, but as complementary to work, as completing and giving dimension and vision to human life. “We work in order that we may have leisure,” wrote Aristotle. There is, indeed, a twofold necessity for leisure. Firstly, it is necessary in order that the worker may maintain or regain his physical strength and may be able to function efficiently in his particular task. Secondly, and even more importantly, leisure is necessary for the rational and spiritual welfare of the worker, in order that he may live his life more fully as a human person. Here again we return to the concept of the worker as the total man, the complete human personality. Man is not a mere machine. His activities as a worker, no matter what his work may be, must be of a higher order than the merely mechanical.

It is a cruel paradox that modern life, with its vast apparatus of mechanization which should provide more abundant opportunities for true leisure and fuller human development, should rather have tended to dehumanize and depersonalize man’s labour. If the worker is to really live a human life he must rise above and reach out beyond the merely material and the secular. He does not live by bread alone, on rations or on secular programmes. He needs the things of the spirit. He really lives by religion and faith and hope and love. He should be able to see life as a whole, to look beyond the narrow confines of his limited tasks, to have the wider and the clearer vision. For all this, leisure is necessary. In brief, leisure is necessary in order that the worker continue to be a man in the true and full sense of the word. Pope Leo XIII had this in mind when he wrote: “As a general principle it may be laid down that the workman ought to have leisure and rest proportionate to the wear and tear of his strength; for waste of strength must be repaired by cessation from hard work. In all agreements between employers and employees there is always the condition expressed or understood that there should

be allowed proper rest for soul and body. To agree in any other sense would be against what is right and just; for it can never be just or right to require on one side or to promise on the other, the giving up of these duties which a man owes to God and to himself" (Rerum Novarum).

The Holy Father in an address to a labour group from Turin on 31<sup>st</sup> October, 1948, sums up the Christian attitude to the worker and to work in the following words: "Neither work alone, nor its most efficient organization and most potent tools suffice to mould and guarantee the dignity of the labourer - but rather religion and all that religion ennobles and makes holy. Man is the image of the Triune God and is therefore, himself a person, brother of the Man-God, Jesus Christ and with Him and through Him heir to life eternal: that is where his true dignity lies . . . . If the Church insists always, in her social doctrine, on the respect due to the inherent dignity of man, if she asks a just salary for the workman in his labour-contract, if she demands that his material and spiritual needs be met by effective assistance, what prompts this teaching if not the fact that the labourer is a human person, that his productive capacity may not be regarded and treated as so much merchandise, that his labour represents always a personal service . . . . Only this religious ideal of man can lead to a unified conception of the standard of living he should maintain. Where God is not the beginning and end, where the order that reigns in His creation is not a guide and measure of the freedom and activity of everyone, unity of men cannot be achieved".

Let me return to my starting point. Christianity is a complete philosophy of life. It gives a meaning and a value to human life and its activities at every level and in every sphere, in the highways and in the byways. Christianity means following Christ, imitating Him, working for Him. With Christ the tremendous jigsaw puzzle of human life, with all its inequalities, apparent shapelessness and jaggedness, finds its pattern, its meaning, and falls into place. Without Christ and His teaching what have we but a welter of contradictions and confusions, unintelligible and uncontrollable tensions, the philosophies of frustration, disillusionment and despair. The honest worker in every sphere, but especially in the humble occupations, is very dear to the heart of Christ. He is the God-Man. He knows. He understands. He has lived and walked in the lowly ways of this earth. If the day-to-day tasks are linked with His life, if they are done for Him, they will surely win compensations and rewards which are durable from the daily dust of earth. And may I say in conclusion that a life of honest work, however lowly, if dedicated to Christ, is the best insurance against disillusion, doubt and fear in the evening of life.

\*\*\*\*\*