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**Toward a Post-pandemic Spirituality: Reimagining Work**

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The Covid-19 pandemic has made a major impact on American workers, providing an opportunity to reimagine our fundamental attitudes and approaches to work. Let us consider some concrete examples of individual workers who represent important trends and invite reflection on elements of Catholic Social Teaching (CST).

**Virtual Work**

Don is a 40-year-old happily married man with two young children. After earning a college degree in international relations, he dedicated himself to his job recruiting international students to enroll in American universities. His business grew rapidly, enabling him to hire over 100 employees. He traveled four months a year, visited 45 countries and had contacts in major cities around the world. With his wife and growing family, he lived abroad for a few years and then moved to Boston, where he continued his extensive travels.

In December of 2019, Don and his wife, who also could do her demanding job virtually from home, decided to move back to Toledo where they could raise their two boys in familiar surroundings close to their extended families, while he continued his international travels. Just months later, the Covid outbreak decimated much of his international business, forcing him to disband his whole team. Grateful that he himself still had a job, he does limited recruiting virtually from his home.

Don has made the most of his changed situation. It is clearer to him now that family has a proper priority over business. He now typically fixes breakfast for his sons, takes an afternoon walk with his wife and generally tries to be attentive to family needs. He also takes better care of his own health, exercising regularly, doing some gardening and relieving stress by turning off his phone for hours at a time. With a healthier attitude toward his job, Don is now looking for ways to do volunteer work to serve his local community.

Today, about 25% of the American workforce works remotely either entirely or part-time. Virtual workers enjoy the flexibility, think they are more productive at home and are happy to avoid time consuming commutes. Most employers are pleased with the way remote work has enabled them to operate during the pandemic and are open to continuing hybrid versions in the future, especially since this will help recruit and retain workers.

Catholic Social Teaching warns us against some dangerous temptations: identifying ourselves with our work; making an idol out of work; giving work priority over family; and becoming a workaholic. We are God’s handiwork, called to share in God’s ongoing creative activity. Work should help us develop our talents and gifts and become whole integrated persons. A healthy life should include both work and leisure that nourishes the soul and provides bodily rest. Through our work, we share in the mission of Christ, the carpenter turned preacher, to humanize the world. Work provides us with daily opportunities to grow in holiness. We can transform the toilsome, fatiguing and burdensome aspects of work by uniting with Christ who embraced the cross leading to a fuller glorified life.

**Underpaid Workers**

Bill is a 69-year-old man who worked hard for many years as a self-employed roofer and raised his three children by living frugally and carefully managing his limited income. In his early 60s, health problems forced him to give up his roofing business. Desperate for employment, he took a job with a company in Cleveland delivering caskets to major cities around the state of Ohio. On a typical day, he gets up at 3:00 a.m., drives 35 minutes to the factory, loads caskets on a truck, spends about 7 hours delivering them to funeral homes around the state, and arrives back home in the afternoon. For this, he is paid $12.00 an hour with no benefits or health insurance. It costs him almost one hundred dollars a month in gas and tolls just to get to work and back home. He does get two weeks paid vacation and uses his long hours in the truck listening to Christian radio stations. During the pandemic, he continued to work but had to take unpaid time off to care for his wife, a retired school teacher, who became seriously ill. Getting ever further behind financially and angry with the way his boss treats him, he looked at many other job openings caused by the pandemic, but at his age could not find anything better. Bill is trapped in a challenging situation with a job he cannot quit that still leaves him and his wife living below the government poverty line.

According to government statistics about 2.7% of Americans usually employed full time are classified as working poor. Among part-time workers, 9.8% are living below the poverty line. They are part of what is called the “precariate,” a social class of underpaid workers who live constantly in precarious circumstances.

For over a century, the American bishops have argued that fulltime workers have a right to a “just wage” that allows them to provide a “dignified livelihood” for their family. They have also supported universal health care, unemployment compensation and paid sick leave designed to enable workers and their families to lead a full and dignified life.

**Volunteer Work**

Anita, a financially comfortable widow in her 80s, has done volunteer work for almost two decades at Helping Hands, a social ministry on the east side of Toledo, originally established in 1982 by St. Louis Catholic parish under the leadership of Fr. Robert Armstrong. After a difficult time in her own life, Anita came to help less fortunate persons served by Helping Hands, which provides a soup kitchen, food pantry and clothing center. Attracted by the open, respectful, non-judgmental approach of Helping Hands, Anita started out by organizing piles of donated shoes so that those in need could more easily find a suitable pair. Next, she took on the task of organizing the many piles of clothing donated to the center. By 2011, she succeeded in establishing a clothing center in their now unused church building, where donated clothing was marked and hung on racks for easy, dignified shopping for the more than 500 individuals who come each month. Even with the diminishments of age and the Covid crisis, Anita, who is very modest about her achievements, has kept working at Helping Hands a couple days a week for about 5 hours a day, continuing to add to the over 10,000 volunteer hours she has already logged.

About 25% of Americans spend on average 50 hours a year doing volunteer work, which enables many faith-based non-profits to maintain their extensive charitable work. Some studies indicate the Covid pandemic has produced an increase in volunteer work, as good people around the world came together against a common threat.

In a 2016 address, Pope Francis praised volunteers as precious resources of the church who, “silently and unassumingly give shape and visibility to mercy.” Christian volunteerism is based on the dignity of every person, the solidarity of the whole human family and the call to serve the common good.

**Union Workers**

Sue is a married woman in her late 50s with adult children, a longtime employee of the John Deere company and a member of the United Auto Workers union. After long and unsuccessful negotiations, she voted with 99% of her 10,000-member union to go on strike October 14, 2021, for higher pay and better benefits. She wanted to be in solidarity with younger employees seeking to preserve a pension option and she believed a substantial pay increase was overdue, especially since Deere anticipated a record annual profit of over $5.7 billion. During the strike, Sue took her turn walking the picket line in increasingly cold weather, while trying to get by on the union’s $275 weekly strike pay and limited medical insurance. She was very grateful for the assistance provided by UAW locals around the country and by local businesses who provided free food and goods. When union and company negotiators reached an agreement on November 18, 2021, providing a 10% pay raise and other benefits, Sue felt the sacrifices she made were well worth it.

Labor unions in the United States have a long history of improving the wages and benefits of American workers. The American Federation of Labor founded in 1886 and led by Samuel Gompers until his death in 1924, played a major role in coordinating strikes to benefit workers. The Wagner Act, signed into law in 1935, established the legal right of most workers to organize and join unions, which could bargain collectively and initiate strikes. That same year, the two largest unions, the AFL and CIO, merged, representing about 35% of American workers. Since then, unions have lost membership, now representing only about 10% of the labor force. Some commentators think the current job situation created by the pandemic favors more aggressive action by unions as happened in the John Deere strike.

Ever since Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 groundbreaking encyclical *Rerum* *Novarum*, Catholic Social Teaching has consistently supported labor unions. Pope John Paul II, for example, asserted unions “are an indispensable element of social life, especially in modern industrial societies.” In their 1986 Pastoral Letter, “Economic Justice for All,” the American bishops taught that our changing economy “requires a strong role for labor unions,” to insure the rights of workers through “collective negotiation” (n303).

**Homemakers**

Jill, a committed Catholic, happily married woman in her 60s, mother of four with seven grandchildren, has devoted her life to the crucial work of homemaking, raising children and caring for her family. After earning a degree in education, she took a job teaching English in a local high school, which brought her great satisfaction and enough income to support herself. Three years into her teaching career, she fell in love, got married a year later, and formed a mutually enriching partnership that has lasted almost 40 years.

When Jill got pregnant, she and her husband made a mutual decision that she would quit the teaching job she loved and work full time attending to the home and children, while he maintained his rewarding job to support the family - - an agreement that has worked well for both of them. Jill has never regretted her decision or felt that something was missing in her life. On the contrary, she has found fulfillment in being a loving mother and caring grandmother. She has enjoyed the challenge of meeting each child’s distinctive needs, making holidays and birthdays memorable and maintaining peace and harmony in the family. With the cooperation of her husband, she has done her best to pass on her Catholic faith to her children, mostly by example, sometimes by words. She made sure they attended Sunday Mass regularly, prayed before meals, did Lenten penances and participated in family efforts to help the poor. She is disappointed that her oldest son no longer goes to Mass, but finds a measure of comfort knowing that he has solid values and is in the hands of a merciful God. For her adult children she remains a caring mother, ready to listen and help when needed. She thanks God for her grandchildren, who gladden her heart and keep her young in spirit.

In reimaging work, it is important not to equate work with a paying job. Work includes various kinds of purposeful, planned activities designed to promote personal growth, like studying, and the common good, like raising a family.

Catholic Social Teaching emphasizes the importance of healthy families in promoting personal development and the good of society. Families are the building blocks of society. In the give and take of family life, we learn that genuine love is patient, kind, ready to forgive and seeks reconciliation. A stable family allows children to develop fundamental trust and the ability to sacrifice for the good of others.

In a Mother’s Day address, Pope Francis called mothers “the strongest antidote to the spread of self-centered individualism” by giving witness to “tenderness, dedication and moral strength.” Maternal love helps children “grow in self-esteem, develop a “capacity for intimacy and empathy” and experience the world as “a good and welcoming place.” Mothers who work full time raising families are indeed a blessing and deserve gratitude.

These five examples can prompt a self-examination of our own attitudes toward work. Has my work helped me grow spiritually and helped make the world a better place? Have I been tempted to make an idol out of my work? Has my approach to work changed over time? Have I found a healthy balance between work and leisure? Do I appreciate the work done by homemakers? Have I been fairly compensated for my work? Have I encountered discrimination in the workplace? How have I managed the toilsome aspect of my work? Could I do more volunteer work? What is my opinion of labor unions? Am I interested in learning more about Catholic Social Teaching? Am I grateful for my opportunities to do meaningful work and do I remember to thank God for this blessing?