

The Worth of Work (Wall Street Journal: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB904879411222849000>)

By Arne Panula

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At first glance, there seems to be an irony in the way we celebrate Labor Day. To honor the dignity of work, we take a day off. But there is no contradiction involved here. A day of leisure helps us to put things in the proper perspective. So traditionally, Labor Day is the time when Americans reflect on the importance of honest work.

Why do we honor workers? True, their honest labor is a service to their employers and a contribution to our society's economic growth; their taxes support the government and their wages support their families. These are all good things, but something critical is still missing from that list. Workers, by their labor, also serve God.

According to the Book of Genesis, the first words ever spoken by God to man were the mandate to "fill the earth and subdue it" -- in other words, to work. (And notice, this order was given *before* Adam ate the fateful apple, and was banished from the Garden of Eden.) In his encyclical letter "On Human Work," Pope John Paul II wrote: "The human person is the image of God partly through the mandate received from the creator to subdue, to dominate the earth." So important is work, that through it each person "achieves fulfillment" and "becomes more a human being."

Through our efforts each one of us can participate with God in the work of creation. Everyone -- stockbroker or plumber, lawyer or housewife, doctor or farmer -- can produce a product or service that benefits other people and builds up human society. As we do so, we carry out God's design.

The creator depicted in the Bible did not make a static universe and then leave it as a sort of obstacle course for humans to negotiate. God continues his work of creation every day, acting through his creatures. So we are his instruments; we do God's work as well as our own.

Indeed, we human beings are not finished products. Through our labor we refine our own characters, our own souls. Even Jesus worked, tradition tells us, presumably as an assistant in Joseph's carpentry shop. Christ, by his example, underlined the dignity of human labor; his followers cannot mistake that message.

The truth about labor is sometimes clouded by popular misconceptions about how our economy works -- specifically, by the erroneous belief that the marketplace flourishes when everyone is guided by his own personal interests. We have all heard the dictum of Adam Smith: "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest."

But as Smith himself understood, the unbridled pursuit of narrow self-interest leads to exploitation, to deceit, to crime: forces that will ultimately destroy any economic system. And if our only motive is to acquire material goods, then we become consumers rather than producers. Alexis de Tocqueville, perceptive as always, wrote: "If men were ever to content themselves with material objects, it is probable that they would lose by degrees the art of producing them; and they would enjoy them in the end, like the brutes, without discernment and without improvement."

Thus as Max Weber wrote in his classic "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism," "Unlimited greed for gain is not in the least identical with capitalism and is still less its spirit." The entrepreneurs who build and sustain a growing economy are motivated by something more profound and more durable than selfishness. They are willing to work even without any promise of short-term gain; they run risks, and make sacrifices, in order to produce. Genuine entrepreneurs are impelled by a deep-seated urge to create something of value.

And who implanted that urge, that creative spark, in the human personality? Is it unreasonable to suggest that this is a gift from God -- that the drive to create is an echo of God's command?

Too often we Christians think of saints as remote individuals who perform dramatic feats: feeding the hungry, preaching the gospel, even performing miracles. It is easy to acknowledge the sanctity of Mother Teresa, for example, because so few of *us* will ever be called to serve in the slums of Calcutta. But every one of us *is* called by God to some form of service. For the vast majority, the moral challenge of each day is to do the ordinary things with extraordinary love, so that everyday labor becomes the path to heaven.

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