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Work Is A Form of Prayer: The Thought of Cardinal Wyszyński

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Wyszyński, Stefan Cardinal, *All You Who Labor: Work and the Sanctification of Daily Life* (Sophia Institute Press, 1st American ed. 1995).

All You Who Labor (the title of the original is *The Spirit of Human Work*) is a meditation on work by Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński (1901–1981), published in 1946. The core argument is that work is an indispensable part of our lives because it is an instrument not just of material well being but also of salvation. Work is an essential feature of humanity, therefore, and, if properly understood and pursued, it is a form of prayer that sanctifies us. *Ora et labora*, the Benedictine saying, does not put the two actions—working and praying—in opposition to each other, as two realms with little in common between them. Rather, as Wyszyński observes, work should be done in the shadow of prayer and, even more, work, undertaken as prayer, brings us closer to God.

Wyszyński wrote this book in the immediate aftermath of World War II, when his country, Poland, was slowly beginning to rebuild itself from the devastation of Nazi and Soviet occupation. All people wanted, he wrote in a short prefatory paragraph of the Polish edition, was to go back to “calm, lasting, fruitful, blessed work.” The problem was that by 1945 the Nazi occupation was replaced by a Soviet one, both equally brutal and destructive. For the Communist overlords, work was an activity that would be transcended by eliminating private ownership and by automating production. Human labor, in other words, was a burden, a form of oppression that ultimately had to be eliminated. While marching toward that earthly

workers' paradise, the Communist system planned in a "scientific" way how everything ought to be produced, assembled, and grown. The individual worker had to accept the plan, abandon his individual desires, and labor as small cog in an increasingly automated machine. The path toward the abolition of work began with the elimination of its individual purpose for each person.

Without mentioning the war or Communism, Wyszyński rejected the view of work as an activity to be avoided or abolished. Work was not a punishment imposed upon us by a wrathful God or by an unjust economic structure. Man had to work even before the Fall, instilling order in the world. In fact, the necessity of work is a tangible sign of God's trust in us because it allows us to cooperate with Him. We do not create through work, but we engage with the created world, participating in God's plan for it.

Wyszyński thus clearly rejects the Communist view of work as historically transient. But the temptation to consider work as a form of oppression and a burden to be jettisoned is not limited to the particular experience of 1946, the year of this book. The author's observations are applicable to our times, too. For instance, he writes: "How different a city looks in the early morning, when the crowds of rested, happy people are going to work, from the evening, when the worn-out, drooping figures return, weighed down with the burden of the whole day" (85). The commuters in the late afternoon appear devoid of joy, crushed by the physical fatigue of the day but even more so by the purposeless monotony of their job. A description of slavery or life under a Communist regime, certainly; but also a description of people for whom work is only a temporary means to a material end.

Wyszyński exhorts the reader to approach work as a means to spiritual betterment. "The result of all human work should be not merely the perfecting of the thing produced, but also the perfecting of the worker; not merely external order in work, but also inner order in man" (151). Work, he writes, "by its difficulty, redeems, liberates, ennobles, and sanctifies" (98).

How can we turn work into more than a way of providing for our families and ourselves? How can our work bring us closer to God? Wyszyński offers a few suggestions. First, work cannot be a replacement for prayer: the saying is not *ora aut labora!* On the contrary, prayer, and the development of one's interior life, is the foundation for good work. Work is an aid in that struggle to be close to God, but it cannot replace prayer. Wyszyński notes succinctly that "[t]here is no shortage of religious workers who feel Martha's anxiety about the fate of God in the world, but who forget about the fate of God in their own souls" (105).

Second, there are necessary limits to work. Even God rested on the seventh day, giving us a clear example of the necessity of repose. Rest should not be the playground for the satisfaction of our pleasures or a time to indulge in laziness, but an occasion to "tear ourselves away from matter, to free ourselves from its powerful influence, to realize that it is not creation that governs man but man creation, to remember the service of God" (178).

Third, work should be done in "the great silence" (another reference to the Rule of Saint Benedict—Chapter 42). This does not mean that we should seek jobs in the desert, or far from the hustle and bustle of cities, or refuse to speak to our coworkers in the next cubicle (however, Wyszyński does note that those who work outside, in nature, in the midst of God's creation, tend to be more capable of listening to God). It only suggests that any type of work should be pursued

with the purpose of seeking God, and silence—that is, interior recollection—is necessary to listen to God. Again, pray and work; listen to God and work.

Whenever we forget these simple realities, work ceases to be a means to participate in God's plan, a way of bringing us back to Him—and becomes purposeless drudgery. It is also likely that the state or the culture in which we live deny us the possibility of seeking God through work. Wyszyński saw this firsthand under the most brutal political regimes of the 20th century; we may see it in less bloody circumstances as faith is relegated to the confines of our private lives through cultural and even legal pressures. Such a schizophrenic life, in which God is absent from 9 to 5, is a recipe for unhappiness, as well as a decaying society. As Wyszyński observes,

the violation of the human right to look for God is reflected in the increased sense of the burden of work, in disillusionment with life, in the disappearance of interest, in indifference to all other human duties, in depression, in an increasing sense of social degradation, in the growing sense of the hopelessness of existence, and in the spirit of opposition and revolt. There is no time for God, or for one's own children; there is only continuous work. (179)

In 1953, a few years after the publication of this book, the Communist regime in Warsaw tried to force a decree that would have given full authority to the state to appoint and remove bishops in Poland, making the Church a subsidiary of the state. The bishops, led by Wyszyński, replied with a firm statement that ended with this: "We are not allowed to place God's things on Caesar's altar. *Non possumus*." We cannot. This *non possumus* applies equally to work: work is not a realm under the control of Caesar, pursued for Caesar and allowed by Caesar. Work is a gift that allows us to cooperate with God and thus to be near Him. If we are prevented from seeking God through our daily work, we should be ready to reply: *non possumus*.

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