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# Of Work and Home...and God's Glory

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As I write this, I sit at my desk “at work”—a phrase meant, I suppose, both spatially and actively. By being here, I am not “at home,” however much I “feel at home” in my place of “gainful employment.” But the dilemma, or at least division, is clear: to be here, I cannot be present at home; to be present in our home and to our children, my wife cannot be “at work.”

I have been asked to write on the theme of “work and the home,” and in light of the situation described above (common enough, I imagine), the most striking aspect of the theme assigned to me is perhaps the short word “and,” a conjunction in the place one might, on the basis of common experience, expect a disjunctive. Isn't one's work the place where one is occupied with “doing,” whereas one's home is where he goes to “be” when work has finished? This is not to deny that at home there is always much to be “done,” while ideally one's work is also “satisfying,” a way in which one expresses oneself. I am merely pointing to the fact that, in the pairing of “work and the home,” there seems a clear priority and a clear direction: work is done for the sake of the home; home is the end at which work aims. I am also pointing out that this manner of pairing the two is a problem. The “means-end” directionality, apparently obtaining with a kind of obviousness, either seems to instrumentalize work, such that it may not even matter what sort of work one does for a living; or, for those for whom their particular work is their means of self-expression or creativity, work can threaten to exist in *competition* with the home, precisely because of the personal importance of the activity itself.

I would like to argue here, however, for a different view, based upon what I'd consider to be a more accurate theology of the created order and of human activity. According to this view, work in its deepest sense is not simply a means to the end of securing a home and other material goods, nor is it simply one among many of the “hats” I wear in competition with others, such as “husband,” or “father,” or “friend,” or “gardener of only moderate success.” Rather, the realities of work and home, of activity and rest, deeply interpenetrate one another. Genuine work cannot be done except in a place that is already home and that becomes more deeply home through work; to call a place home is the condition that makes the activity of work possible. In this way, through my work I give myself and commit myself to a place that thereby becomes “mine.” Without this sense of belonging, without knowing a place and giving one's life to it, activity done within that place becomes a kind of “violence,” a force imposed from the outside. Only committing oneself to a given place makes one's activity there be a creative participation in the abundance and fruitfulness that is, yes, inherent in all of creation, but is nevertheless particular to each place.

Citing the Second Vatican Council, St. John Paul the Great affirmed that the human person, made in the image of God, was consequently given the “mandate” to work, to “subdue” the earth and “to relate himself and the totality of things to Him Who was to be acknowledged as the Lord and Creator of all” (*Laborem exercens*, 25). Though we should not forget that Joseph Ratzinger cautions against making work the “content” (*Inhalt*) of the doctrine of the *imago Dei*, rather than the “consequence” (*Folge*), John Paul nevertheless connects the mandate to work with likeness to God quite closely: work is a “sharing”

in the activity of Creation—a sharing that, however limited, nonetheless still “develops” and even “perfects” God’s creative activity (LE, 25). We are here reminded of Josef Pieper’s assertion that being created by God isn’t “enough,” that we must be confirmed in our existence by the love of another (*Faith, Hope, Love*, 174). The goodness of the created order is marked by its capacity to be “deepened” in its goodness; and the humility of almighty God in creating the world is evidenced by His generosity in allowing us to work to deepen that goodness of creation.

The “ownership” of the fruits of one’s labor has been grounded by John Paul in this same “sharing” in divine creativity through work: through labor man transforms the created order in such a way that he “in a sense humanizes” it (LE, 12). Let us say in this vein that ownership is a kind of “communion” between myself and particular elements of the created order, into whose orderedness I imprint a new, personalized ordering. This ordering obeys the given, natural, created order, and participates in it; but work deepens that order—or takes *me* into that order, and takes that order into me. This is the basis of ownership: that in work, I have imparted myself to the things I own, have become a part of those things. They become an extension of me, a reflection of me, a communication of me, and they do this because, through my work, I have entered into communion with them. Precisely for this reason it matters very much what sort of work I do; precisely for this reason, work can never be reduced to a simple means to the end of securing my bodily existence. Work is inseparable from what it means to be a personal, free creature who exists in *act*, and whose existence is through work bound up with and at the service of the ever-“deeper” existence of non-personal beings.

What do I deepen in these elements that I transform through work, if not the fact that the world is a gift for humanity and made for the glorification of God? Human work, therefore, draws out the possibility of the created order to be that gift of God whereby I provide for my needs, and in this sense, is clearly the “means” for doing so. By “personalizing” the world through work, we place its goodness at the disposal of human needs and joys and of worship of the divine.

How, then, does this lead us to a union between work and the home? If work makes it possible for things to “belong” to me and, conversely, if work makes *me* “belong” within a place and to its elements, then, in a certain sense, my place of work always becomes my “home,” regardless of whether I also sleep and eat dinner and spend time with my family there—which one almost never does. If what we have said about the bond between labor and “being” is correct, then one inevitably makes his place of work a kind of “home” where his being unfolds. In this sense I am not arguing that we need to force work and home back together; I am pointing out that they cannot really be separated, and that much of the crisis of the family today stems from uprooting the home by a work that is abstracted from it.

Naturally, I am not arguing that everyone may only morally work “from home.” In the first place, part of the problem is that the “home” is no longer situated in the context of a genuine “neighborhood” or “community” that is worthy of those terms, and so one is already in the social poverty of the atomic home as soon as one exits his SUV and walks through his front door. But more fundamentally, I am simply indicating in broad terms some of the bases of the alienation so many experience today: contemporary cities are built so that work and home are divorced; the term “hometown” is becoming obsolete in a world in which everyone is mobile and towns are dismissed as being those places where “nothing happens”; fewer and fewer children play with friends on their own streets because they are busy online with “friends” from elsewhere. But the human person is not made to commute for hours a day, to recreate on “social media,” and to have all of the “take home” fruit of his labor be in the form of the abstraction of money, which is itself further abstracted by being paid to him by the automated changing of information across computers. We are made to transform our patch of the world through our work, to “humanize” it—which is to say, to deepen its natural order into one that is personal, more

and more able to be given over in worship to the God in Whose image the human person is created.

When one expresses the problem in the manner above, the scope of the difficulties facing a recovery of genuinely human work is overwhelming, and any proposed solutions will understandably be dismissed as “unrealistic” or even “reactionary.” But how could a solution be otherwise? To fix the situation we must challenge what is “realistic”; and everything must be reconfigured.

Let us dare to give ourselves to work that is more human; let us dare to give ourselves homes and neighborhoods and communities that are more and more the fruit of our own labor and so which bear the imprints of our personalities. Let us overturn society for work that is worthy of the gift of our lives; let us, through our work, make the world worthy of God.

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