

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Ahh... Labor Day weekend! A long weekend, to remember how we work by taking time off to barbeque! I'm just finishing up my vacation (actually, I'm writing this before I go on vacation... I definitely will NOT bring my computer with me to the beach!), and it's a great opportunity to look at the value of work.

A lot of times people look at the fact that we have to work as part of the Fall – the effects of Original Sin. God says to Adam after his sin:

Cursed is the ground because of you! In toil you shall eat its yield all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles it shall bear for you, and you shall eat the grass of the field. By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread, Until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; For you are dust, and to dust you shall return. (Genesis 3:17-19)

It sounds like Adam now had to work because he was ejected from the Garden of Eden. But that's not the case at all. He actually had to work before the Fall. Just after creating Adam

The LORD God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it. (Genesis 2:15)

You see, even from the beginning he had to work the ground. The Fall made things harder, true, but there was work from the beginning.

Add to this, when we look at the life of Jesus, most of His life He spent laboring with His hands – being a wood carver (or a carpenter). Remember that at that point in His earthly life, living in obscurity and working with His hands gave God more glory than if He was out doing miracles and preaching the Kingdom. If something else would have given God more glory, Jesus would have done that.

All this is to point to the fact that work has a dignity of its own, beyond simply “working to live.” By working well, we imitate God, who worked for six days creating the universe. Anyone who has been able to work a job s/he loves, knows the satisfaction of a good hard day's work, when important things are accomplished. There is glory and dignity in work, even if it's work we wouldn't choose.

Fr. Walter Ciszek, SJ, was an American priest who wanted to go to Russia to bring Jesus to the people there. During World War II, he was able to get into Russia, but the Communists arrested him within a very short time. After five years in solitary confinement, they sent him to the Gulag in Siberia – hard labor camps. During that time, they forced him to do heavy manual labor for the atheistic, communist regime. Despite this fact, he looked at the work he was doing – digging trenches, cutting trees, building, etc. – as helping *people* – the people in the cities they were building – and so he recognized God's will in it. For that reason, he worked hard, not trying to sabotage the work (as other prisoners did), or putting in the minimal effort needed to get food. He did his best so that God's will could be accomplished.

I am constantly amazed at this story (which you can read in his book *He Leadeth Me*), as I sometimes have a hard time keeping focused in front of the computer... he kept working hard day in and day out! Fr. Ciszek demonstrates the beauty of work, as it gives dignity to us. How many times have I met people struggling to get work after being laid off?! So often, they find that they have lost a certain purpose in life if they have no way to help provide for the family.

This all being said, work is not an end in and of itself. Work can give us dignity, but it can also rob us of our dignity. If we work for work's sake (the so called “work-a-holic” – seeking to find our meaning in life through work), or look to see only our contribution via work (this is Utilitarianism – which says that a person's worth and dignity is measured only by what they contribute to society), then we have lost sight of the purpose of work. You see, each of us has an inherent dignity because we were made and loved by God. This dignity remains no matter whether we can contribute or not, whether we “add anything to society” or not. God created and loves each person, and so we each have a purpose. Sometimes in our “work for work's sake” we overwork, not taking time to do the more important things, like build relationships – relationship with God and with others. This is why, even from the beginning, God commanded that we have a Sabbath Day – a day to rest, to worship, to build relationship with God and with family/friends.

On this Labor Day, I pray that you are able to rest with family and/or friends, and to reflect on the gift of work that God has given to us.