

Work

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"In the beginning God created heaven and earth." (Genesis 1:1)

The very first line of the very first book of the Bible describes an act of work. Certainly an act of supernatural work, but work nonetheless. In fact, the first two chapters of Genesis are pretty much devoted to the work God did in crafting and shaping the world God created. It is only with the appearance of man that work begins to take on some negative shading. "By the sweat of your brow will you earn your food." An angry God told Adam to till the soil from which he had been taken. God then expelled him from the Garden of Eden.

Modern humanity's conflicted, love/hate relationship with work reflects this transition from a supernatural act of love to a grim lifetime punishment in two short chapters! It is not an original observation that most of us will spend 1/3 of our lifetimes on earth in work. In 21st. century America there is no dearth of evidence that for most of us that is a conservative figure.

Benedict considers work an essential part of the community life. He refers to it repeatedly throughout the rule, and in particular in chapters 48, 57, and 68. The challenge for oblates is to incorporate a sense of the sacred into the workplace. If one of the reasons for becoming an oblate is to intensify our spiritual life, we will be engaged in a feeble effort towards that end if we exclude 1/3 of our daily activity. However, any attempt to make the workplace a place of prayer is fraught with difficulty. More than one oblate has been struck with the thought as they leave the monastery after a three-day retreat, "Now comes the hard part." Our workplaces are driven by an ethos of competition and "survival of the quickest." Our economic system is uncompromising and unforgiving, and in this regard in complete contradiction to a Christian belief in acceptance and forgiveness. We live in a society that, rhetoric to the contrary, is not just non-Christian, but probably non-religious.

Consider just one way in which Benedictine values conflict with those of the world. Benedict advises his follower to be "content with the lowest and most menial treatment and (to) regard himself as a poor and worthless workman in whatever task he is given" (RB 7.49). How long would that attitude hold up in the modern office, farm or factory? Who would want to employ someone who sees his own work as "poor and worthless?"

Ora et Labora, Work and Pray. How do we live this motto? At the time Benedict was writing his rule and for centuries thereafter, most work was physical work. It was also in large measure thoughtless work, physically demanding but asking little in the way of emotional or intellectual resources. Very few of us today are fortunate enough to have that type of work as our livelihood. In just the last generation or so, especially in our country, there has been a decided shift from physical pursuits to intellectual pursuits as the manner in which most people earn their living. Thomas a Kempis referred to the fact that the holy fathers ". . . labored all day and in the night they gave themselves to prayer, even whilst they were at work, they ceased not from mental prayer." One could pray and work if the work was tilling a field, building a wall, or even copying manuscripts. I challenge anyone, however to pray while conducting a meeting, partaking in a

conference call or making a presentation. One may very well pray before making that presentation but once you are producing the work product, i.e. the presentation, you are pretty much pre-empted from praying.

Our workplace demands a total commitment of our energies. We work more hours on average now than we ever have. The technological demands of recent years do not save work, they create the opportunity to do more work. Cell phones, laptops, PDA's and pagers leave no opportunity for you not to work.

Is there no hope then, for an Oblate to include prayer in work? It is not easy but it can be done.

1. Remember the "Morning Offering?" For those post Vatican II oblates, who are rapidly becoming a majority, this was a simple prayer with which many started their day. Before leaving the house the prayer was said: " Oh my God I offer to you this day all my prayers, works, joys and sufferings . . ." When those "sufferings" include an insufferable boss or co-worker, recite again the prayer and offer your patience as a gift to God.
2. Keep about you, in the workplace some sacred symbols. These need not be obtrusive. I have a small pewter statue of St. Benedict, which to my co-workers is nothing more than a cute paperweight. To me, though, it is a reminder that I have a calling beyond that of my profession. A scriptural passage in your date book or a holy card can serve as well. If you work in a particularly oppressive environment something taped to the inside of a drawer or file will do.
3. Turn the negative aspects of work into a chance to practice Christian values. Difficult people are an opportunity to practice love and tolerance. Difficult projects are an opportunity to call for the help of the Holy Spirit. Negative outcomes can lead us toward an acceptance of God's will and the recognition that we cannot always control the direction of things.
4. Recognize that there are limitations. We work to provide our families (and others) with the necessities of life. Work should not become so all-consuming that it keeps us from our families, friends, prayer, and hobbies. If our wants our excessive, we will have to work excessively.
5. Don't forget "good works." Creation of wealth or earning money is not an essential element of work. Volunteer work and charitable work are excellent opportunities to combine work, prayer and Christian love.