

# DISCUSSION LEADER’S SUPPLEMENT TO THE MYSTERY OF WORK

## HELPFUL REFLECTIONS TO GUIDE THE DISCUSSION LEADER FOR THE FIRST AND SUBSEQUENT GROUP MEETINGS

*“Let us love God, my friends, let us love God, but let it be through the work of our hands, let it be by the sweat of our brow.” -St. Vincent de Paul*

### THE PURPOSE OF THIS BOOK STUDY:

- To allow our work life to enrich our spiritual life
  - here and in the next life as well.
- To work out our salvation (and that of others) during the countless hours we spend laboring.
- To satisfy the first commandment:
  - *To love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind.*
  - That is, to make everything ordered to God.
- That’s how Jesus lived his human life.
  - *“My meat is to do the will of the Father.”*

### ABOUT THE BOOK

On the first night, the leader might convey such thoughts as

- Tonight we’re just opening this book.
- But it’s a book we don’t close.
- It’s the book that deals with a faith journey.
- Long after this book study ends, we’ll always profit by turning to one of its voices, reminding us how we are to relate to God in our work.

This book will take us into the “deep waters” of Catholic tradition,

This book is the fruit of meditation, a lifelong journey of faith,

- a compilation of ten years of spiritual reading,
- of passages taken from the works of spiritual writers and
  - of very holy saints, mystics, doctors of the Church,
- about the very real relationship of God to our work and to us
  - as we carry out our work each day.
- The book constitutes a kind of doctrine of work,
  - a theology of work, based on the premise that
  - God wants to be in a continuous relationship with us in all our acts.
- That He wishes us to be a collaborator with Him in all that we do!

- This book study is about the spiritual life, but with
  - a focus on acts
  - not on times of prayer.
- What it comes down to is connecting our spiritual life with our ordinary day-to-day life.
- And not just in the moral order, such as
  - obeying the commandments,
  - not lying, cheating,
  - dealing fairly with others,
- but also in those countless other acts we do each day that we normally think have nothing to do with God:
  - like shopping at the grocery store,
  - putting gas in the tank,
  - or answering the phone.
- Work not cut off from prayer life,
  - but forming a harmonious whole with it.
- If the Incarnation had happened in our day, these are the very things that Jesus would have done.
  - Jesus in his private life did very ordinary things.
  - Yet whatever He did, He did for the honor and glory of His Father.
- No act is too trivial that it cannot give honor and glory to God.
  - God sees that our life is made up of endless trivial acts.
- What else do we today have to give Him?

Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński, in his book *All You Who Labor*, wrote:

“In God’s plan, work is one of the means of interior sanctification.” (p. 59)

Yet—

- “Work is often considered an obstacle to the interior life, for work dissipates it, and diverts it from God.” (p. 59)
- The very fact that work takes up the larger portion of our life raises the following question:
- Would God arrange life in such a way that man has his back turned toward God for the better part of each day? (p. 60)

The Catholic philosopher Peter Kreeft writes in *Prayer for Beginners*:

- God put us into a material world and
- He put into our nature the need for many kinds of material actions,
  - such as eating, sleeping, begetting, and working.
- He could not possibly have designed these things
  - to be distractions and obstacles to our sanctification,
  - but only a means to it,
- for he designed everything to be a means to that end.

- Therefore we can pray even *in* working (not just *as* we work);
  - we can make our works prayers. (Kreeft p. 74)

God designed us to reach holiness through the little things, such as

- cleaning up a room,
- driving the children to soccer,
- balancing the checkbook, or
- peeling potatoes.
- These times are holy, too, and these times are his, too.

In case you might doubt that the ordinary means a lot to God, listen to what Jesus told a very holy Italian mystic about this:

- On May 17, 1938, Jesus said to Servant of God Luisa Piccarreta:  
*“If the creature had to give Us only what is spiritual, he could give Us very little. But in giving us also his little natural acts, he can keep giving them to Us always, and We are in a continuous relationship. The union between Us and the creature is never broken. All the more so, for the smallest things are always at one’s fingertips, within reach of the little and the great, the uneducated and the learned. . . . Breathing, moving, attending to one’s personal needs is proper to everyone, and these things never cease. If they are done to love Me, to let the life of the Divine Will be formed in them, this is Our triumph, Our victory and the purpose for which We created them” (Vol. 36: May 17, 1938)*

In the first, introductory meeting, the leader briefly introduces the Four Individuals who are described in the book and who exemplify the different ways of working. The passages in the main part of the book are tied in to one or another of these worker types.

- Participants are asked to read the book’s “Introduction” for the next meeting,
  - and to focus particularly on pages 4-13 where the four types of workers are described.
- Hereafter, each meeting will focus on one of these worker types
- Two of these individuals exemplify proper ways of working, two exemplify deficient ways of working.
- As participants read about them, they may recognize themselves in one of the categories,
  - but the truth is that each of us is all four of these individuals at some times, in some works, in some situations.

#### A NOTE ON THE PRIVATE REVELATIONS IN THIS BOOK

##### How do mystics receive their insights? How valid are they?

These are questions that are likely to occur. It might be well to provide the following explanation taken from a Jesuit priest H. Monier-Vinard, S. J. who was,

in fact, the spiritual director to a contemplative nun in France who received messages (locutions) from Jesus that were subsequently published with ecclesiastical approval. (These notes were taken from his Introduction to the mystical writings of this nun entitled *Cum Clamore Valido*.)

1. God speaks to the soul in multiple ways.
    - At times Our Lord appears visibly in human form and his words are heard by both the interior and exterior senses.
    - Such was probably the case when Our Lord showed His Heart exposed to Margaret Mary, saying to her: “Here is the Heart that has loved mankind so much.”
    - Or the Holy Virgin when she revealed herself to Bernadette and said, “I am the Immaculate Conception.”
  2. But generally God speaks by means of interior lights.
    - And sometimes, He infuses himself through a supernatural light
    - that dazzles the soul, transporting it outside of itself into an unknown world that the soul, when it returns to itself, can neither speak of nor recover.
    - Anything the soul says would seem a falsehood: “I blaspheme,” St. Angèle de Foligno wrote of herself when coming out of her ecstasies.
  3. Sometimes, with the help of ideas or images conformed to our intelligence,
    - but which He selects and which He himself infuses according to the need,
    - Our Lord speaks to the interior of our soul, and the soul then has the distinct impression that God is speaking to it, even that He sometimes is dictating to it.
    - Thus, as was often the case in the life of Margaret Mary, we are told of resolutions and consecrations as dictated by Our Lord.
  4. Most often God conveys what He wants understood through illumination,
    - and the soul then translates this into its own personal language.
    - Often, the soul is not even aware that it is translating.
    - It seems to the soul that it has but received the divine thought, that the soul itself has been purely passive.
    - Still—and here is a sign of the soul’s activity—if upon reflection a different formulation would seem to express better the intended understanding,
    - the soul does not hesitate to adopt it so as to conform more exactly to what it has received.
- Rev. Monier-Vinard states that every saint who receives a revelation or locution
- acts in more or less the same way,
  - always leaving his or her own mark such that
  - it is always possible to distinguish between what is uniquely divine and what is human and personal.

- As the Church judges such writings, the validity of a divine message is guaranteed by
  - its doctrinal unity and profundity,
  - its theological exactitude,
  - its supernatural robustness,
  - its transparent purity.
- One can't attribute equal authority to every little detail,
- but this priest states that one can very legitimately believe that
  - the message as a whole comes from God.

### SUGGESTED DISCUSSION TOPICS FOR THE FIRST MEETING

In the first meeting, the leader might read the quotations from Theophan The Recluse and Mark Mallett found on pages 1 and 2 of the *Study Guide*. Ask participants whether and why they are inclined to agree or disagree with the views put forth by these writers. Or, as may be very likely in some cases, do they not know enough about this topic to even address the question? Hopefully this will not be the case at the end of this study.

Other suggested discussion topics:

What's more important to God, the way we go about our work or what it is we've accomplished when we're finished?

- Catholic monks are “to seek God in all things and to maintain purity of intention so as not to act from selfishness or self-interest.”
- In a loosely analogous way, Zen masters, for example, urge their students to “Live in the present.” This brings about a kind of perfection of action because one is detached from the fruit of one's labor. (*Mystical Theology*, Johnston, p. 241)
- On a Hyderabad website there is a Hindu statement to the effect that “there is no failure.”
  - It seems that in the Eastern cultures there is an emphasis on the very doing of a task.
  - It is the doing that matters—and not the result; hence, no failure.
- When Ghandi was told that his nonviolence would not succeed, “he answered that he practiced nonviolence not because it would succeed but because it was the right thing to do.” (Johnston, p. 242)
- In Western culture, by contrast, everything is about results: success, reward, power, money, status, etc.
  - In other words, the end is everything and the process is unimportant. The ends justify the means.
- This is contrary to the thinking in this book study. . .

Why do we work?

- Economic reasons
  - To make a living: for self, for family
- Psychological
  - To express a gift we have
  - To enjoy the fruits of our labors
- Sociological
  - For the sake of others; doctors, nurses, police
  - To benefit others: teachers, caregivers
- Theological (spiritual)
  - To please God by doing his Will for us
  - To save souls / In reparation for sins (ours and others)
  - As a source of sanctification

Why does God want to be involved in the ordinary activities of our lives?

- Have you ever considered that God wants to be involved in all that you do?
- It may seem a new notion that God wants to be involved in our work,
  - but the writers in this book all claim this is so and often explain why God cares about these things.
- The Little Flower on p. 2 of the *Study Guide* says that she sensed God's presence in her life more when she was working than when at prayer.
- A famous spiritual director, Father de Caussade, in one of his popular works has written this question:
  - "Look at your life. What is it made up of? Of innumerable unimportant actions. It is just with these very things, so trifling in themselves, that God is pleased to be satisfied." (De Caussade)
- What does God have to do with these ordinary acts of ours?
  - Is He just watching us? Or is He involved in some way?

The following story about a Farmer and his Minister might answer that question

A modern farmer decided to buy a field and make it a productive farm.

- It was a formidable field filled with rocks and weeds and thorns, but he cleared it, doing backbreaking labor for a whole year and then plowing and planting it.
- When crops were beginning to show up in neat rows, he invited his minister to see and bless his new property.
- "You and the Lord have done a wonderful job here," the minister said.
- "Pastor," the farmer said, "you should have seen this field when the Lord had it all by Himself."
- Both the farmer and the minister are correct!
- We need God, but God needs us.

What Pope Pius XII wrote about this very issue in an encyclical:

- *“It is quite evident that the faithful absolutely need the help of the Divine Redeemer, since He himself said, “Without Me you can do nothing.” Still, it is necessary to state, astonishing as this may seem, our Lord needs the help of his members. This is not due though to any poverty or weakness on his part, but rather because He himself has disposed it thus for the greater honor of his Spotless Spouse.”*

*(From *Mystici Corporis Christi*, quoted in *Cum Clamore Valido*, p. iii)*

“Without me, you can do nothing.” is the repeated theme of this book, announced on its cover.

- Is any statement in the gospel more mysterious than that?
- As we perform our daily duties, don't we have the sense that we are alone in this world,
  - doing what we do in and of ourselves?
- Yet all the passages in this book,
- taken from saints, mystics, spiritual writers
- point to a different order.
  - That we do not work alone.
  - Neither does God want us to work alone.
  - Rather, He desires us to be at His side.
  - He desires to be at our side, and even more, within us.

Hopefully, someday we'll all arrive at the point described by the many voices in *The Mystery of Work*.

#### SOME ADDITIONAL TOPICS

The leader may profitably discuss at the first meeting (or some subsequent meeting) what the Church teaches about the following:

#### THE VERY FIRST WORKER: GOD THE CREATOR

Did you ever think of God the Creator as the “First Worker”?

In one of his encyclicals, Pope John Paul calls the Book of Genesis

- “the first gospel of work” because it shows God the Creator, as “working” for six days.
- Work, therefore, has inherent dignity, the Pope says, and man alone, of all God's creatures, has the capacity to do work.
- Man as worker imitates the creativity of God and finds his own dignity and fulfillment in work.
- The Book of Genesis further tells us:

- *Since on the seventh day God was finished with the work he had been doing, he rested on the seventh day from all the work he had undertaken. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it he rested from all the work he had done in creation. (Gen 2:2-3)*
- Since we are made in the image and likeness of God, the Pope says we “ought to imitate God both in working and also in resting.”

Do we know what God thought about His work?

- Genesis tells us that at the end of each day's work of creating,
  - God saw that each thing He had made that day “was good.”
- Five times Scripture repeats the phrase: “God saw how good it was.”
  - the dry land and the seas
  - vegetation
  - sun and moon
  - water creatures and winged birds
  - the animals
- And on the sixth day, after he created man and woman,
- “God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good.” (Gen 1:31)

In what ways can we derive satisfaction from our work?

We've all had the experience of having done a good job and taken satisfaction from it.

- Nothing pleases us more than for a colleague to tell us
  - “That's a good piece of work you did.”
- So, deriving satisfaction from work is a key part of working,
  - just as the Father derived satisfaction from His work.

We would like our work to have that quality of goodness.

- An artist stands back from his canvas and assesses what he's done. He thinks, “That's good!”
- The musical composer takes delight when the audience rises in a standing ovation.
- Actors swell with delight at the end of a performance while bowing to an audience shouting “Bravo!”
- A mother loves the looks of contentment on the faces of the family members as she carries in the dessert she has made.

So work can bring us satisfaction and delight.

- But there's another aspect to work—very different than taking satisfaction.
  - It's when work becomes toil.
- The Book of Genesis tells us, that after Adam and Eve's fall,



- work becomes a curse on the human race.
- Book of Genesis: The Fall of Adam
  - *“To the man he said: Because you listened to your wife and ate from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat, Cursed be the ground because of you! In toil shall you eat its yield all the days of your life. Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you, as you eat of the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat. . . .”*

(Gen 3:17 -19)

What are the negative aspects of work in the modern world?

- What are the negative aspects of work in the modern world?
- The negative aspect of work!
  - The daily traffic jams try our patience.
  - We do a terrific job and no one tells us so.
  - We're told to do it over again because it's not correct.
  - Or, no one thanks us for the extra effort.
  - The dishes we took out of the dishwasher this morning have to be put back in again tonight.
  - The clothes we washed last week need washing again this week.
- Work as toil involves weariness, fatigue, boredom, anxiety.
  
- What does the Pope say about this toilsome aspect of work in the Introduction to *The Mystery of Work*
  - Even here, work has no less value for man.
  - Even though work may be a cross, a form of sacrifice, the Pope says “work as ‘toil’ and suffering is able to participate in the salvific work of the Cross.”
- We can take the drudgery out of work by offering up all our day's work
  - in union with the suffering of Jesus' to God the Father
  - every day in the Morning Offering (See Appendix A of the *Study Guide*).
- The Pope says our work “unfolds the Creator's work.”
- In other words, God has not stopped working,
  - but now His work continues through us.
- As Father Robert Barron says, God has written a great drama,
  - a “Theo-Drama” which He continues to write through us.
- In John 5:17, Jesus says:
  - *“My father is working still, and I am working.”*

Lumen Gentium (Vatican II document) says specifically (re the laity):

- *For all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their hardships of life, if*

*patiently borne—all these become “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ”. . . . Thus, as those everywhere who adore in holy activity, the laity consecrate the world itself to God.*

## JESUS AS WORKER

How did Jesus in his humanity view work?

In his parables, Jesus constantly refers to human work

- that of the shepherd, the farmer, the doctor, the sower, the householder, the servant, the steward, the judge, the merchant, the laborer.
- He compares the apostolate to the manual work of harvesters and fishermen.
- “Pray that God will send laborers into his field . . .”
- “From now on you will become fishers of men.”
- The Pope says that Jesus proclaimed a kind of “gospel of work” because He was Himself a man of work, a craftsman like Joseph of Nazareth.
- Jesus spent 30 of 33 years doing ordinary work, humble work.
- We might change our minds about the insignificance of things we do all day long if we consider the fact that the Son of God spent 30 of his 33 years on earth doing the same kind of ordinary things that we do all day long!
- Jesus the young boy worked at his father’s side in the carpenter’s shop, with a daily routine of
  - sorting out planks of wood,
  - driving nails into boards,
  - delivering a finished item to a neighbor’s house,
  - sweeping up the floor at end of day.

That’s how much ordinary work means to God!

God put us into a world full of “little things,”

- so we must conclude that they are the road He designed
  - for us to find Him
  - and He to find us
- and therefore they are big things.
- “He who is faithful in a very little is faithful also in much. . . .” (Luke 16:10)
- In his humanity, Jesus was faithful in little things, we can be sure.
- Mark tells us that the people who observed Him said:
  - “He has done all things well.” (Mk 7:37)

Our Blessed Mother describes to a modern mystic, Consuelo, how Jesus made of his work a perfect prayer:

“The divine Savior was moderate in everything, mortified and austere. He maintained a holy reserve. He prayed constantly and even when He was working He made of his work a perfect prayer.”

[Mary to Consuelo about Jesus working, VI, 31, p. 226]

- “*Amen, amen I say to you, the Son cannot do anything on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing, for what he does, the Son will do also.*” (John 5:19)
- “*My Father is at work until now, so I am at work.*” (John 5:17)
- “*My meat is to do the will of my Father.*”

Charles de Foucauld, a desert pilgrim, wrote journal entries in which he imagines how Jesus might explain his ordinary life for the 30 years before his public life.

- “[At Nazareth] I spent the years of my childhood and youth, till I was thirty years of age. Once again, it was for your sake I went there, for love of you. What was the meaning of that part of my life? I led it for your instruction. I instructed you continually for thirty years, not in words, but by my silence and example. What was it I was teaching you? I was teaching you primarily that it is possible to do good to men—great good, infinite good, divine good—without using words, without preaching, without fuss, but by silence and by giving them a good example. What kind of example? The example of devotion of duty toward God lovingly fulfilled, and goodness toward all men, loving kindness to those about one, and domestic duties fulfilled in holiness. The example of poverty, lowliness, recollection, withdrawal; the obscurity of a life hidden in God, a life of prayer, penance, and withdrawal, completely lost in God, buried deep in him. I was teaching you to live by the labor of your own hands, so as to be a burden to no one and to have something to give to the poor. And I was giving this way of life an incomparable beauty—the beauty of being a copy of mine.” (Quoted by James Martin, S. J. in his *My Life with the Saints*, p. 305)

How do we turn our work into prayer?

- Not by changing our work
  - (unless our work is sinful or shoddy or dishonest or lazy),
- but by changing our motive.
- Instead of peeling potatoes merely because we want to eat them,
  - we peel them as a way of loving God,
  - the God who loves us and wants us to peel potatoes right now so that we can enjoy them.

## MARY AS MODEL IN WORKING

As we attempt to see the deeper meaning of work, let's look at what Mary, the mother of Jesus, teaches us about the purpose of work.

What was Mary's work?

Mary of Agreda describes how Our Lady

- never asked or expected God's miraculous assistance
  - for anything which She could attain by greater diligence and additional labor on her own part.
- In view of their great poverty, she did needlework
  - which was so perfect that her reputation grew and she was never in want of employment.
- She extended her hours of manual labor in order to work.
- She united prayer with her labors, in order to obtain the necessities of life like other men.

(Mary at needlework in Egypt, IV, 4, p. 146 of the book)

## ST. JOSEPH AS WORKER

And what can we learn about work from St. Joseph, the Patron of Workers?

- In a talk in 1989, Pope John Paul II tells us: "At the work bench where he plied his trade together with Jesus, Joseph brought human work closer to the mystery of the Redemption." (John Paul II, quoted in *The Mystery of Work*, VI, 34, p. 228.)
- In another message to the mystic Consuelo, the Blessed Mother praises St. Joseph and admonishes us to follow his example.
  - Read in full Mary's teaching to Consuelo: IV, 103, p 192 of the book.
- In this piece, Mary not only praises St. Joseph as a model for workers, but she also explains how God sees work:
  - A source of sanctification
  - A source of spiritual richness and grace
  - A form of praise to God, rising up to God like fragrant incense offered

## WORK IN THE TRADITION OF THE CHURCH

What might there be in Catholic doctrine and tradition that teaches us about work?

- A form of reparation for sin. The catechism states:
  - *It [work] can also be redemptive. By enduring the hardship of work in union with Jesus, the carpenter of Nazareth and the one crucified on Calvary, man collaborates in a certain fashion with the Son of God in his redemptive work. He shows himself to be a disciple of Christ by carrying the cross, daily, in the work he is called to accomplish. CCC 2427*
- God gave us our talents, gifts
- He gives us the inspiration
  - (consider Einstein, Edison, Marconi)
- He has placed physics, technology, in place in nature for us to discover and transform for our use

### Work and Prayer: A Catholic Tradition

Read and discuss Tony Hendra (IV, 56, p. 170 of the book): “Laborare est orare.”

A final question: How do we work?

- How do we go about it?

Peter Kreeft tells a story that exemplifies something about the spirit with which we may work. It's a story of two men hauling stones through a muddy medieval street. One was cursing and the other was singing. A traveler asked them what they were doing. The curser replied, “I'm trying to get this damned rock to roll through this damned mud!” The singer replied, “I'm building a cathedral.” (Kreeft, p. 71)

Read the

Scriptural passage about Vine and the Branches (see book's frontispiece or p. 297)

- This passage is the heart of this book study.
- This is not about work,
  - but about what God has to do with our work,
  - and according to Jesus, He has everything to do with our work.

Read the passage over and over in preparation for the next four meetings.

If we only accomplish one thing over these weeks,

- we can get a better understanding of what Jesus meant by
  - “Without Me, you can do nothing.”
- we'll have done something very important for our spiritual life.

- Jesus really wants us to understand that
  - He has everything to do
  - with everything we do,
  - most especially our work!

If there's any doubt about the importance He attaches to work—

- and to our work—
- think again about how much time He spent on this earth as a Man Who did things with His hands.

