

Poverty and Work

“You shall eat the fruit of your handiwork; happy shall you be and favored” (Ps 128:2). “The poor shall eat their fill” (Ps 22:27). Work means any activity by man, whether manual or intellectual, whatever its nature or circumstances; it means any human activity that can and must be recognized as work, in the midst of all the many activities of which man is capable and to which he is predisposed by his very nature, by virtue of humanity itself. Man is made to be in the visible universe an image and likeness of God himself, and he is placed in it in order to subdue the earth. From the beginning therefore he is called to work. Work is one that distinguishes man from the rest of creatures. Only man is capable of work, and only man works, at the same time by work occupying his existence on earth (cf. John Paul II.: *Laborem exercens*).

In May, we honor St. Joseph, the Worker. With this liturgical memorial the Church emphasizes both the dignity of St. Joseph and the dignity of labor as personified of St. Joseph (cf. Chorpenning, J.F.: *Just Man, Husband of Mary, Guardian of Christ*, p. 157). According to the custom of the time, every Israelite was to work to earn a living. We know that Jesus Christ was a carpenter, Sts. Peter, Andrew, James and John were fishermen, and St. Paul was a tent maker. Psalm 128 expresses it aptly: you shall eat of the labor of your hands. Overall, this psalm expresses the family life of the Israelites. According to the patriarchal model of the family, the center and head of the family was a pious and just man; thus St. Matthew describes St. Joseph. An Israelite man, happy with his way of life, worked to support his family. His wife stood by his

side, and full of the joy of life, she was a blessing to her husband. The source of a blessed life was and is God, who is the only real source of life and blessing. Work was and is a means to obtain God's blessings.

We know from the Gospels that Joseph was carpenter. Today, under the word carpenter, we would imagine a man working with wood. Joseph, however, while working, used not only wood but also iron and stones. Pope John Paul II says that work was the daily expression of love in the life of the Family of Nazareth. Joseph was a carpenter. This simple word sums up Joseph's entire life. Jesus, obedient to His "parents", shared in the work of Joseph. Having learned the work of His presumed father, He was known as "the carpenter's son." Jesus' work at the side of Joseph the carpenter is an example and model for human families, in the order of salvation and holiness. Human work, and especially manual labor, receive special prominence in the Gospel. Along with the humanity of the Son of God, work too has been taken up in the mystery of the Incarnation, and has also been redeemed in a special way. At the workbench where he plied his trade together with Jesus, Joseph brought human work closer to the mystery of the Redemption (cf. John Paul II: *Redemptoris custos*, 22).

We also know from the Gospels that the Holy Family was poor, yet endowed with the greatest glory. Although Joseph's house was poor and small, the King of heaven and earth and the Queen of the angels dwelt therein, and thus the promise, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:3), was fulfilled in Joseph already here on earth. The Blessed Virgin told St. Bridget in her revelations that the Family of Nazareth lived in poverty. The surplus from their

household, apart from the necessary for a plain meal, they distributed to the poor. Joseph served her with such devotion that she never heard him speak an angry word, nor any vanity nor complaint. He was most patient in the midst of their extreme poverty, diligent in his work so that he could support them (cf. Chorpenning, J.F.: *Just Man, Husband of Mary, Guardian of Christ*, p. 180). A person who is poor does not have superfluous possessions. A person who is poorer had no desire to possess anything. A person who is much poorer gives what he has to the poor. The person who is poorest has nothing, but sweats, labors and toils, and spends himself to support the poor. Joseph was the poorest of the poor – in silence and in the sweat of his face, he supported two good people: Mary and Jesus. The poverty of the Holy Family was most visible in Bethlehem – in a poor, cold stall. However, Joseph was able to turn this stall into a cozy place thanks to his quiet and hard work. His stay in Egypt also made him worry about how to support his family. Perhaps he had only the necessary tools to work and thus provide for his family. Even this challenge Joseph was able to turn to blessings thanks to his quiet union with God’s plans. Even traveling, whether to Bethlehem or to Egypt, or from Egypt to Judea and then to Galilee, brought financial difficulties and a challenge to face them. Here Joseph is “the model of those humble ones that Christianity raises up to great destinies. He is the proof that in order to be a good and genuine follower of Christ, there is no need of great things. It is enough to have the common, simple and human virtues, but they need to be true and authentic” (John Paul II: *Redemptoris custos*, 24). Pope Francis says that poverty has various forms. The first is to leave riches, not to have ones heart attached to

riches. The second is to accept humbly persecution and to tolerate persecution. St. Joseph is an example of this poverty. He accepted humbly and silently the poverty he lived in and also persecution and offenses toward the Holy Family.

In the Biography of Alphonse Marie is written that it was an unwritten law among the Eppingers: No poor person may be sent away hungry. The parents of Alphonse Marie were poor, yet diligent; and they also raised their children to do so. Alphonse Marie's first Communion day was the beginning of her life as an adult. It was the difficult life of the small farmer, and she had to get accustomed to the heavy work of the field. However, she did not shrink this type of work. Truly, this work was very strenuous for her delicate body. When the work was very difficult, she would nevertheless perseveringly continue with it. Perspiration covered her face. The thorn-crowned Savior with drops of blood running down His face was always before her spiritual eyes. She was happy to be a little like Him, who was bruised for our offenses. She wanted to give souls to the Savior, although she knew that she was poor, uneducated and sickly. Although a dark night enveloped her soul, she endured it silently, praying often and persistently, and did not neglect her work. On the contrary, she worked feverishly, at times performing the work that was reckoned for two people. Often she worked very hard all morning. Although she was dead tired from the hard work on the fields or in the barns, she was always very happy to decorate the altar of Our Lady on the vigil of her feasts. While she was doing it, hours and hours passed and night came on, but she hardly noticed it. In every work, whether domestic or in the fields, her heart remained

with the Lord. In 1841, she formed a small group of girls whose goal was, under the guidance of their pastor, to nurse the sick of the parish. Thus, God was preparing His work. Alphonse Marie, the helper of the poor, the sick and the forsaken was getting practice for her future work. Professors Fritsch and Schirlin call Alphonse Marie a “poor virgin”. Yet this poor peasant virgin exchanged hard work in the field for a demanding nursing service, watching the sick day and night, bringing them not only food and linen, but also consolation and God’s blessings. Moved by the situation of sick workers she writes in the Introduction to the first draft of the Rule of the Order, “Very often the poor sick person must remain alone all day, since the other members of the family are at their places of work. The sick person’s concern for the other family members only increased the patient’s own pains and so there is little recovery. Often the bed-ridden patient is deprived of all care, no one is concerned about the necessary cleanliness. Seldom does a doctor come to the hovels of the poor; they would not be able to buy the expensive medicines anyway. Through such neglect, some illness become life threatening, where with a little help at its onset, this could have been prevented” (PERRIN, J. M.: *The Life of Mother Alphonse-Marie*, p. 44).

A Congregation, which received from the rich, in order to be able to give to the poor, helped to bring peace, reconciliation and mutual love to mankind. But Alphonse Marie, where did she stand in her efforts to alleviate the misery of her time? She had only two powerful helpers: An unconquerable trust in God and a strong will, tired and tested in long years of self conquest. God who desired this work, gave His devoted servant, day by day, the strength she needed for fulfilling her

difficult duties of establishing and leading of the new Order. After the foundation of the Congregation the common life of the community began. As once in the little house of Nazareth, so here too, the Lord lived in the midst of poverty. The rooms had only the few pieces of furniture that was given to them. Already on the evening of the first day, Alphonse Marie had to acknowledge to her cousin that she had nothing to give her sisters for the evening meal.

On April 6, 1851, Bishop Räss received the following report: “Mother Alphonse Marie is suffering intensely in body and soul... In spite of the violent pains she is undergoing, she has not changed. In the depths of her soul she is always united with her Divine Savior. Nothing changes in her exterior behavior: the same gentleness, the same goodness toward the sisters, the same concern and care for the well being of the missions and the Motherhouse, the same vigilance over persons and things, and the same zeal for the religious spirit. At times she is visibly threatened and tormented by the devil. To all this are added the numerous hostilities and contradictions from outside. From all sides, voices are raised against Niederbronn, but despite all this, the work goes on and grows” (*ibid*, p. 68).

Alphonse Marie also worked with great zeal on the formation of her sisters saying, “In the Sisters of the Divine Redeemer should be particularly evident poverty, ... silence and fraternal charity which accompanies them in their work for the needy. Now is the time of battle for us, of work, and of sacrifice” (*ibid*, p. 74, 79). The Rule of the Congregation of the Divine Redeemer says that the sisters should do all the work of the Lord’s servant, whether in the community or with the sick and the poor. They should always be ready to serve above all the

poorest, seeing in every person Jesus Christ Himself. The sisters were expected to take care of their clothing, out of respect for the Lord whom they serve, but also in view of the virtue of poverty. “What you save in this way is to the benefit of the needy”, she said. The houses were allowed to keep for themselves only what was absolutely necessary. Everything else was to be used to support poor communities or be distributed to those in need. Alphonse Marie was always concerned that poverty be observed in her Order and she was diligently vigilant in this matter. For her, poverty was the framework of a real religious life, the wall of defense against threatening dangers. She always remembered the Savior’s answer when she had anxiously asked how long the Congregation would endure. “My daughter, until the end of time, if poverty is respected in the community” (*ibid*, p. 75).

During epidemics the government thought of Mother Alphonse Marie, the helper of the sick and the neglected. An urgent appeal went out to her daughters, a cry for help in the greatest need. Mother Alphonse Marie had worked tirelessly in planting the spirit of self-sacrifice and love in the hearts of her daughters. The extent to which this spirit had taken root in their hearts would now become visible. She encouraged them, “Do not be afraid, beloved Daughters if, because of your fatigue and exhaustion you experience aridity and coldness in your prayer and meditation... Perform all the spiritual and corporal works of mercy with a pure intention and leave all the rest to the Lord... Do not forget the words that I have often called to your attention: Suffer, pray, be silent!” (*Ibid*, p. 108) The sisters did it quietly, as though it were quite the natural things to do, a privilege to practice Christian charity. Alphonse Marie

practiced what she advised her sisters. Her work was very exhausting, but she endured it silently. She entrusted her material difficulties to St. Joseph. When the new Chapel was already under cover, the Superior Reichard wrote to Abbé Busson, “You will be amazed at this building. Everyone considers it really great, which of course should be no surprise, since St. Joseph himself was the building supervisor” (*Ibid*, p. 73). With unshakable confidence in Providence and her “treasurer”, St. Joseph, Alphonse Marie continued with full commitment to doing good.

A work refines human being. Poverty frees the burden of earthly things and lifts the spirit to heavenly things. Sharing with material goods makes both the donor and the recipient happy.