



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Working for Dignity
(*Work*, pp. 19-25)

Suggested Article:

📖 Working in Fields of
Sunshine
(*Work*, pp. 42-43)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Working for Dignity

A job's goodness is not measured by salary, benefits, and 'intellectual' rather than manual labor, but by how well it preserves the dignity of workers and contributes to their fulfillment. This standard lends value to some jobs, particularly involving manual labor, that many people in our culture disdain.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Ecclesiastes 2:22-23 and 1 Corinthians 15:58

Meditation†

If work's primary aim is humanization instead of economic output or gain, then we have a new moral plumb line for evaluating work practices and systems. The abiding question is this: Does work promote or thwart human flourishing? ... In this analysis, ... it is not the content of the work that is important but its impact on the worker's humanity.

Darby Kathleen Ray

Reflection

The encyclical *Laborem Exercens / On Human Work* (1981) from Pope John Paul II is a landmark of Christian reflection on the positive meaning of work as well as the grave injustices that threaten working people today. It famously defines good work as not only useful and enjoyable, but "worthy" because it "corresponds to [and] expresses [human] dignity and increases it" (§9).

Dignity, of course, is a divine gift: it results from being created in God's image, and we don't work for it or earn it. So how can work "increase" our dignity? Joel Schwartz finds an answer in Karol Wojtyla's writings before he became Pope John Paul II in 1978. "He often wrote about the dignity of the human person," Schwartz observes. "He believed human dignity is not simply a static reality (just a property or status that the person possesses), but also a teleological calling on the individual (a goal for the person to understand, embrace, and grow toward)." To respect human dignity is not to let people do whatever they want, but to encourage and assist them to develop into the fullness of their humanity, even when they fail to grasp this for themselves. "On this view it makes sense for an activity to 'dignify' persons by enabling them to become more fully human."

Schwartz explains, "Jobs that diminish rather than dignify workers are not limited to those that treat people in (what is typically agreed to be) sub-human ways, but include those that prevent, distract, or disorient people...from recognizing, embracing, and pursuing their *telos* of becoming fully human." Thus, a job will fail to dignify workers when:

- ▶ *it objectifies workers* by valuing them only as a means of production, a replaceable 'cog in the machine.' "Manual labor is especially exploitable in this way," Schwartz notes, when it requires little specialized education. But other jobs can be equally exploitive. "Some white-collar workers exploit themselves, offering themselves as a commodity for sale, willing to do whatever the job requires for the right price."
- ▶ *workers mistakenly think they are dignified by their work*. Perhaps they have a bad job (it is undercompensated, unnecessarily risky,



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demeaning the workers or clients, etc.), but for some reason (laziness, or really needing the salary or benefits) they make the best of it, and even come to enjoy it. "What started as a conscious strategy to cope," Schwartz says, "may evolve into a genuine, but mistaken belief that their job is dignifying." They may be responsible for this, but, of course, "their employers are more at fault for creating or allowing a work environment that is contrary to the dignity of the workers."

- ▶ *workers do not realize their work is dignifying.* They may internalize society's disdain for hard physical labor, and wrongly think their job is unworthy and beneath them. "They do not appreciate how their work contributes to their own well-being as persons and to their society's survival and flourishing." Schwartz generalizes from Pope John Paul II's example of farm labor: when "society fails to recognize the value of a profession, the treatment of workers in that field can become dehumanizing [and] this can inadvertently encourage workers to leave the profession, undermine the work done within the profession, and thereby hurt not just those workers but all the people who depend on the work they do."

Study Questions

1. What does it mean for workers to be objectified, and why is that a bad thing? Consider some ways that employers objectify workers, and that workers objectify themselves.
2. Identify some cases in which workers mistakenly believe their work is dignifying. To what extent are they to blame for this? Can you think of excusing circumstances?
3. In order for a job to dignify workers, why is it important that not only is the job dignifying, but also the workers realize and take some measure of joy in this?
4. According to Joel Schwartz, what steps can we take to make work more dignifying? How can your congregation help members seek and value dignifying work?
5. Consider how Vincent van Gogh's *The Red Vineyard* (on the cover) reveals the dignity of manual labor.

Departing Hymn: "Forth in Your Name, O Lord, We Go" (vv. 1-3)

Forth in your name, O Lord, we go
our daily labor to pursue,
determined only you to know
in all we think or speak or do.

Oh, let us cheerfully fulfill
the task your wisdom has assigned
and do your good and perfect will—
in all our work your presence find!

May we find you at our right hand;
your eyes see truly what we do.
We labor on at your command
and offer all our work to you.

Charles Wesley (1749), alt.
Tune: CANONBURY

† Darby Kathleen Ray, *Working* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 95-96.

Working for Dignity

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 3 and 4	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand how human dignity involves acknowledging, embracing, and pursuing the *telos*, or goal, of true human fulfillment.
2. To consider ways in which a job can contribute to or diminish workers' human dignity.
3. To discuss how your congregation can encourage members to seek and value dignifying work.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Work (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "Forth in Your Name, O Lord, We Go," locate the familiar tune CANONBURY in your church's hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ (www.hymntime.com/tch/) or Hymnary.org (www.hymnary.org).

Begin with a Story

"When my students discuss the goals of their college education, they often say they are preparing for a 'good job,'" Joel Schwartz reports. "For many of them, the goodness of the job depends almost entirely on a high salary, generous benefits, and how much of it involves 'intellectual' rather than manual labor. But do such things as compensation and type of work really make a job 'good,' or is there more to consider?"

How would you define a good job? Perhaps you can think of cases where the better job does not pay as much as another one. So how do you make this judgment? "Another way of evaluating the goodness of work is to ask how well it preserves the dignity of the worker," Schwartz continues. "This shifts the focus to the person doing the job and to how performing the work fulfills the worker as a person."

In this study we'll explore the implications of evaluating jobs on how they either dignify or diminish workers.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to bless members with work that promotes their flourishing as human beings.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Ecclesiastes 2:22-23 and 1 Corinthians 15:58 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

The previous study, "Consumer Culture and the Deformation of Work," explained how human beings are created in the image of God to be workers who foster order and beauty in the creation and care for its creatures. Doing good (rather than vain) work *expresses* our dignity as creatures made in the image of God. It also *fosters* this dignity by helping us to understand, embrace, and live into our humanness; it does this by teaching us to

work well – that is, for the glory of God and in service to God’s creation. This study explains how some jobs fail to dignify workers, either due to features of the work or due to workers’ misapprehending the dignifying (or demeaning) nature of their work. Since the topic is necessarily at a somewhat high and abstract level, be sure to provide clear examples to focus the group’s discussion.

Study Questions

1. Workers are “objectified” when they are primarily valued as a means of production, rather than as persons. This implies that how the work affects them as persons with dignity is relatively unimportant; their productivity is most important, and in this regard they are replaceable. Objectification is bad because it does not value and develop workers for what they are in themselves, and may teach them not to value or develop themselves this way.
Employers may objectify workers by underpaying them, overworking them, not giving their safety and development due consideration in the workplace, laying them off too aggressively, firing them without cause, neglecting to honor their service to the company, pressuring them to mistreat coworkers or clients, and so on. But workers can also objectify themselves by treating themselves as commodities: they may be willing to do anything for a higher salary, to sacrifice friendships and family for a promotion and title, and so on.
2. “Examples of this situation range all the way from the ‘happy’ slave to those abused office workers, demeaned sex workers, and endangered laborers who have convinced themselves they are happy,” Joel Schwartz suggests. Members may think of more ordinary examples: salespersons who must employ deceptive practices on their clients, workers who must harm the environment and endanger others, workers who must cut corners and provide shoddy or dangerous products and services, and so on.
Ignorance might be an excuse, for instance, if society highly values the job (because it pays well or brings fame, or the true dangers or worthlessness of its product or services are not widely known or generally accepted) and this confuses the workers. But workers should examine their own work with due diligence, and be prepared to resist society’s pressures and see through its misperceptions of their work.
3. One answer is this: if one could grow in dignity but not know about it, one’s pleasure would be incomplete. Another answer is based on the nature of a person as “a subjective being capable of acting in a planned and rational way, capable of deciding about himself, and with a tendency to self-realization” (*Laborem Exercens*, § 6). Development in human dignity, or human fulfillment, is not something that other people can do *to* or *for* a person, because the person must participate in the process; this requires, at least, that the person recognize and welcome her growth as a steward and coworker with God.
4. Making jobs more dignifying for workers requires action at the levels of society, employers, and employees. First, “society should properly value the goods that various forms of work bring about for the society and for the workers,” and express this appreciation through “an attitude of respect, better working conditions, and greater compensation for those workers.” Second, “Employers should remember that work is for the worker, not the worker for work, and then treat themselves (for they are workers, too) and their employees by this standard.” Finally, “Workers can help themselves by fully appreciating the goods for society, their employers, and themselves that they are accomplishing through work. Most importantly, they can attend to how their work is helping to bring about the fulfillment of their humanity.” In your congregation are employers and employees who can effect change in their workplaces, and the congregation’s witness can influence societal attitudes and policies as well.
5. Van Gogh does not reveal the peasants’ faces (as his inspiration, Jean-Francois Millet, did). There are signs of difficult manual labor in *The Red Vineyard*: the workers bend low to the vines and work to the end of daylight. However, they work in harmony with one another and with the beautiful vineyard, fields, and stream bathed in warm light of the setting sun.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.