



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

Elgin, Moray, Scotland IV30 8UA

DBH Series No 22, October 2002

"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

"Idleness is the enemy of the soul. The brethren therefore should be occupied at stated hours in manual labour, and again at other hours in sacred reading... If the circumstances of the place or their poverty require them to gather the harvest themselves, let them not be discontented; for then are they truly monks when they live by the labour of their hands, like our fathers and the apostles. Yet let all things be done in moderation on account of the faint-hearted... On Sundays, if anyone is so careless and slothful that he will not or cannot study or read, let him be given some work to perform, so that he may not be idle. Sick or delicate brethren should be assigned a task or craft of such a kind that on the one hand they be not idle, and on the other be not overborne by excessive toil or driven away from the monastery. The Abbot should have consideration for their weakness" (from HR ch 48: On the Daily Manual Labour).

Monastic Voices

"When the holy Abba Anthony lived in the desert he was beset by accidie, and attacked by many sinful thoughts. He said to God, 'Lord, I want to be saved, but these thoughts do not leave me alone. What shall I do in my affliction? How can I be saved?' Shortly afterwards he got up and went outside, and saw someone like himself sitting and working. He watched this person get up from his work to pray; then sit down again to weave some more rope; then again get up to pray. It was an angel of the Lord, who had been sent to correct Anthony and to reassure him. Then he heard the angel saying: 'Do this, and you will be saved.' At this, Anthony was filled with joy and confidence. He did just that, and he was saved."

(From the Sayings of the Desert Fathers: Anthony the Great, the first monk, c. 251-356).

"Question: Is work to be neglected for the sake of prayer and psalmody? Answer: Our Lord Jesus Christ does not say that everyone deserves his food, but 'the labourer is worthy of his hire' (Lk 10:7). The Apostle Paul also orders us to work and to do good with our own hands, so that we may have something to give to those in need (e.g. 2 Thess 3:6-12). It therefore follows clearly that we ought to work diligently. Piety will not serve as an excuse for laziness or as a way of escaping hard work; rather it incites us to strive and exert ourselves more earnestly, and to practise patience in tribulation. And therefore, not only in order to chastise the body, but also for the sake of charity to our neighbour, this rule of life is to be observed, so that God may supply through us what is necessary to our infirm brothers. While our hands are occupied, we can with our tongue praise God with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, when this is possible or useful for the edification of believers; but if not, we can at least in our heart thank God who has endowed our hands with the capacity to work, bestowed on our minds the ability to acquire skills, and given us the matter from which our tools are shaped. Finally we shall ask God that the work of our hands may be guided towards their object, in order that they may be acceptable to God."

(From The Longer Rules of St. Basil the Great, c. 330-379, Question 37)

"Benedictines live together, not for the sake of doing any particular work, but that they may carry out as far as possible the full teaching of Christ on the perfection of human life. St. Benedict's purpose was only to provide a Rule by which anyone might follow the Gospel Counsels, and live, and work, and pray,...' and so set forth the glory of God. No better summary of our Method can be found than in these words. The practical expression of our Purpose lies in the two great essentials of man's progress, in Prayer and in Work. Every Community ever founded is said to possess a 'spirit' of its own which is peculiar to it, and which sets its stamp upon the face and bearing of its members. The 'spirit' which we are trying to cultivate is that of assiduous Work for our daily bread, and the spirit of Prayer in the solemn recitation of the Divine Office by day and by night. Work for the support of the community: Prayer for the glory of God, the needs of the Church, and the sorrows of the world. All our own work is therefore done by the brethren. With regard to spiritual work, we take that as it comes to us: outside the monastery we do not seek it. There are active Orders in the Church which preach and teach. We feel that it is for us to remain at home to pray and work."

(From Our Purpose and Method, 1905-6, by Abbot Aelred Carlyle, 1874-1955)

Dear Oblates and friends

"Ora et labora" - "Pray and work": the phrase is regarded as a Benedictine motto, so neatly does it summarise St. Benedict's teaching. Prayer itself for St. Benedict is the supreme work - the Opus Dei - to which nothing is preferred (HR 43:3). On the other hand, with SS. Anthony and Basil, he regards ordinary human work as an essential component in any life of prayer. Given the proper attitude, such work can become itself an excellent means of prayer. I want in this letter, then, to consider the place and value of work in our lives.

The theme was suggested to me particularly by the recent canonisation of St. Josémaría Escrivá. This event was a cause of joy for countless multitudes. I have to count myself among their number, since several of the sons of the new Saint helped me very much in the years before I entered Pluscarden. They taught and inspired me to be a better Christian and Catholic, and strongly encouraged my monastic vocation. I continue to pray in gratitude for the fruitfulness of their apostolate.

St. Josémaría (1902-1975) was a modern apostle of the laity. His whole message was that all the baptised are called to the fullness of holiness in Christ: there is no such thing as first and second class citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven. Some people at the time found this doctrine rather shocking, but it was to become one of the central ideas of Vatican II (see especially *Lumen gentium* ch V). It explains also, of course, why people choose to become lay oblates of St. Benedict, looking to his Rule as their guide, in union with a particular monastic community, while continuing to live in the world, according to their own secular vocation. In line with the teaching of St. Benedict, St. Josémaría strongly emphasised the importance of work in our quest for holiness. We have to find union with God not in spite of, but precisely through our daily tasks and occupations.

According to the book of Genesis (2:15), even as God established Adam in the garden of Eden, He commissioned him to work. So work was from the beginning a gift and a blessing, only becoming a penance and curse after the Fall (Gn 3:17-19). But Jesus Christ worked. In principle then He gave a new dignity and value to work, since whatever of ours God has assumed in Christ, He has also healed. Following this example, the Apostles also worked for their living. St. Paul the tent maker (cf. Acts 18:3) especially took great pride in this aspect of his life, and insisted that his converts imitate him in it (cf. 1 Cor 4:12; 1 Thess 2:9, 4:11 etc.)

St. Benedict likes to refer to the monk, or the Christian, simply as a "workman". The first call is to enter gainful employment in the service of Christ (Prologue 14); the monastery is a "workshop" where he can toil faithfully at his spiritual craft (ch 4:78). So long as he remains humble, regarding himself as a poor and unworthy workman (ch 7:49; cf. Lk 17:10), the Holy Spirit will be able to use him, "a workman now cleansed from vices and sins", leading him to the perfect love of God, good habit and delight in virtue (ch 7:70).

Clearly, then, St. Benedict regards work as a good. But typically, he doesn't explain in detail what he simply assumes. So to understand his mind on the subject, we have to pick up hints dropped here and there throughout the Rule, and also be aware of the monastic literature and tradition of which it is a part.

The great discovery of St. Antony, the first monk, was that work corresponds to a basic human need. As Aelred Carlyle wrote in *Our Purpose and Method*, "the human body is a machine made for work, and for hard work."

Many people, of course, cannot work, through sickness or age or for other good cause. But in principle we all need work in some form in order to remain healthy. Healthy in body, through satisfying exercise; but even more, healthy in mind. When beset by distractions or temptations, or by sorrow, or anxiety or distress, there is nothing like arduous work to blow away the cobwebs, and help restore peace and tranquillity, and a sense of proportion. On the other hand, the devil notoriously suggests work for idle hands. St. Benedict must have had plenty of experience of this. He is quite fiercely intolerant of idleness in his monastery.

In chapter 66 of the Rule, on the Porter of the monastery, we find stated the ideal of monastic self-sufficiency. "If possible, the monastery should be so constructed that within it all necessities, such as water, mill and garden are contained, and the various crafts are practised." Even apart from considerations of enclosure, this ideal ensures that the brethren work for the immediate and daily support of the community. Benedictine monks are not to enjoy any exemption from the lot of poor men, who have to work in order to eat. St. Basil puts great emphasis on the monastery's need also to have a surplus in order to be able to give to the poor. There is without doubt a penitential aspect to such work. We do it, not because we particularly feel like it, or enjoy doing it, but because it needs to be done. But such work should not be thought of as merely penitential. There is a wholesome satisfaction, and a dignity, involved in providing for oneself and others through one's labour. "Then are they truly monks, when they live by the labour of their hands" (HR 48:8).

So work is a good. But it is not an absolute good. You sometimes see the motto "Laborare est orare": "To work is to pray". This seems to me to be simply untrue. Lots of people work without praying. Work can be dishonest, or degrading; or pursued for evil ends. Sometimes work is only a form of slavery: a dehumanising drudgery which of itself certainly gives no glory to God.

The anonymous "Master", whose contemporary Rule St. Benedict knew and in part respected, wanted his monastery to be run like a work camp. Suspecting everyone's motives, he assumes that monks will always avoid work unless closely watched; that anyone reporting sick will most likely be malingering, and that guests at best will be spongers after a free holiday. So he treats everyone equally harshly. Reacting strongly against all that, St. Benedict seems almost obsessively concerned for the worker, rather than the task. He steadfastly refuses to allow economic concerns to dominate. They are important, but people are even more important, and should not be sacrificed to them. So, again and again: let the brothers do what they have to do without justifiable murmuring (41:5); let all things be done in moderation (48:9); let the Abbot consider the infirmities of the sick and the weak (48:25); let additional help be available when needed (53:18); if one becomes puffed up by his skill, let him be removed from practising his craft (57:2); let the evil of avarice never creep in (57:7); when the signal goes for the hour of prayer, let them all put aside their work (48:12).

And this is the key to St. Benedict's wisdom. Work can become prayer only when it is properly ordered. In his monastery work is carefully regulated by Rule and Abbot (cf. ch 1:2). It is integrated into a balanced life, where there is a sane rhythm of prayer, reading, work and rest. Prayer comes first: prime time is also given to spiritual reading; then work fills what time remains.

The current Pluscarden horarium allows about 4½ hours of work per day. We are extremely fortunate in that we are able to manage without employing any regular staff. But there is a lot to do in not much time. Before starting to earn money, there is all the work of hospitality, sacristy, novitiate formation and studies, liturgy preparation, library, laundry, accounts, infirmary, upkeep of grounds, buildings and plant. Then we prepare and cook all our own food, much of which is grown in our garden. We manufacture and repair our own clothes, and do our own housework. On top of that, we do what we can to earn money. It is a blessing for us that our community's tradition of small arts and crafts remains viable. There is never a problem finding markets for our products: the only problem is finding sufficient time to devote to them. They are not enough in themselves, therefore, to cover all expenses. The generosity of our friends and guests makes up the shortfall.

Our Customary vigorously defends the time we spend not working each day. "Lectio divina" it says, "is a grave spiritual need. Excessive work, whether pastoral, intellectual or manual, dries up the spirit. It is only when combined with prayer that work acquires the spiritually formative value it ought to have in the life of a monk." In order to allow prayer in as much as possible, it is also the monk's privilege to work in silence.

What has all this to say to the oblate who has to live and work entirely outside the confines of a monastery? Perhaps, negatively, the standard of the Holy Rule will show up something of the madness of modern working conditions. Economic forces seem to demand that many people must remain unemployed or severely under-

employed, while others are forced into a stressful state of over-employment, relentlessly driven to achieve more and more, or be counted a failure. The human factor in all this seems to have been entirely set aside. So also does the proper setting for human work, which is a living community, knowing and looking after its own: allowing each to contribute in some meaningful way towards the general welfare.

More positively, the Rule insists that our work be compatible with Christian morality. It should also be so ordered that other duties - familial, social and recreational - not be neglected. Above all, it insists that work be carried out consciously and deliberately in service of God. According to chapter 50, monks unable to attend the community prayer because of their work "should perform the work of God where they are, kneeling down out of reverence for God". Doubtless few oblates will feel able to emulate Muslim custom in this respect, with a public prostration at set times of prayer during the day. But all ought somehow not only to consecrate their work to the Lord, but also to remember His presence and praise Him, if only at odd moments now and then. In order to achieve this consecration of work, the habit of making some time for God alone, in prayer and reading, every single day, remains essential. Perhaps this is the place to insist also again on the fundamental importance of Sunday. The virtual abolition of Sunday as a universal weekly day of rest seems to me a tragedy for our society even in purely secular terms. But more insidiously it strikes at the heart of our religion. On Sunday we celebrate the resurrection of Christ. It is the Church's anticipation of the eternal rest of heaven. It is really important that we not work on Sundays, except for the gravest of reasons.

For St. Josémaría, the Christian worker has to sanctify not only himself, but also others, and the whole world, through his work. Work can be our way, however humble, of making the world a better place: our opportunity to spread the Gospel among those with whom we work; our chance to Christianise the world from within. I don't think St. Benedict would have disagreed with any of that. Nor would St. Josémaría disagree at all with St. Benedict's statement of the ultimate aim of all we do, which is not financial gain, or personal satisfaction, but God's glory. "...that in all things God might be glorified" - "ut in omnibus glorificetur Deus" (HR 57:9; 1 Pt 4:11).