



Labor in the Pulpit 2023

2023 Roman Catholic Labor Day Homily

Labor Day Preaching: Sunday, Sept. 3, 2023

Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle A Romans 12:1–2

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“I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship.” —Romans 12:1

In his **letter to the Romans**, St. Paul charges Christians to “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice.” The “body” references a full human life and not just physical flesh, skin and bones. It involves a complete offering of one’s entire existence. Therefore, it includes the offering of one’s daily work as well.

This daily work includes a job but encompasses all daily human activity: raising a family, caring for neighbors, socializing with friends and taking time for prayer and reflection. We offer our entire life for God to transform us into the image of the Risen Lord, Jesus Christ. This teaching offers an excellent opportunity to reflect on the connection of our Catholic faith and secular celebration of Labor Day.

Few Americans can offer good reasons for celebrating Labor Day as a national holiday. If the holiday is Thanksgiving Day, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, Presidents’ Day, Independence Day or Veterans Day, many Americans appreciate the reason for it and the historical events leading to its celebration. But not so much for Labor Day.

Instead, Labor Day is reduced to a holiday transitioning us from summer into the autumn months and routines. Vacations are likely over, and schools and universities ramp up their academic calendars and activities. Labor Day is the time to say goodbye to summer, and that’s about it.

But labor’s history in this country has its own dramatic and all-too-often-violent history of working men and women demanding adequate pay, safe working conditions and benefits and providing for a stable home and family life. Many national heroes and heroines come from the labor movement, as do several saints.

Few Catholics recognize the opportunity Labor Day presents to appreciate some of the Catholic Church’s spirituality of work or her teachings regarding the dignity of work and the necessity of workplace justice.

Often, we can pass over great mysteries of our faith and never begin to fathom the infinite depth of beauty each mystery gives us. Declaring something to be “a mystery of faith” should, instead of terminating a conversation, launch a dialogue that is endless.

Such is the mystery of the Incarnation, “the Word made flesh,” the divine person of Our Lord Jesus Christ, fully divine and fully human. We proclaim this mystery with the Nicene Creed in Mass: “He came down from heaven and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became man.” Catholic faith and human labor can be approached from many angles, but this homily will approach human work through the mystery of the Incarnation.



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This reflection of the Incarnation's unfathomable mystery begins with Jesus' childhood through his early adult years in Nazareth, a town completely undistinguished and with little economic and intellectual vitality. As Nathaniel asks in St. John's Gospel (1:46), "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

Then, why Nazareth? Why not Jerusalem or any town in Judea rather than Galilee? In Judea, Jesus would have been at the center of the religious, economic and cultural life of the Jewish people. But the **Catechism of the Catholic Church** hints that Nazareth is the point God wishes to make. "During the greater part of his life, Jesus shared the condition of the vast majority of human beings: a life spent without evident greatness, a life of manual labor" (paragraph 531).

Pope St. Paul VI, quoted in the **Catechism**, continues this theme: "Nazareth, home of the carpenter's son, in you I would choose to understand and proclaim the severe and redeeming law of human work....I want to greet all the workers of the world, holding up to them their great pattern, their brother, who is God" (paragraph 533).

Now the mystery becomes a bit clearer. God did not wish to simply observe the hard and difficult lives of the earth's population. Nor did God simply want to hear about these injustices in the people's prayer. Rather, God chose to witness life's agony by living among the masses of humanity and living the agony Himself. God chose not just to observe the desperate poverty, but also to live among the desperately poor and to live in poverty's destitution.

God chose not just to observe the people's backbreaking work to provide for their families, often in futility. No—rather, God chose to live among those desperate for an adequate wage to buy food, living life as a carpenter and personally experiencing the dignity of work and great indignities thrust upon the workplace.

Now we can understand that when the Lord Jesus began proclaiming the Kingdom of God, he used many examples of daily work he witnessed among the people of Galilee. For Jesus, the Kingdom of God is like a fisherman casting a net, a farmer scattering seed, a woman baking bread, a merchant searching for fine pearls, a shepherd protecting the flock, a vineyard owner leasing to tenant farmers and a vineyard owner recruiting daily laborers. Even the work of a dishonest steward can reveal the presence of the Kingdom among us.

Through the glory of the Risen Christ, God still experiences life among the destitute, the exploited worker and those cast to the margins. The Church carries within her the full presence and life of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ, including his 30 years of growing up and working daily in a rural, impoverished and insignificant village.

From this divine presence, advocacy for workplace justice flows naturally from the Church's inner life out and across the communities where she lives. The Church demands that the dignity of workers and employers be mutually respected and the workplace be known where humanity flourishes.

Continuing with the second reading, St. Paul tells the church "not to conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." We are to see things as they are and, with the Church magisterium, begin to work for the way God wants life to be for everyone.



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Over the past three centuries, papal teaching has strongly and consistently supported workers' rights to organize and to "good faith" collective bargaining. Popes have spoken continually for a just living wage, the right to adequate health care, protection of employers' property, protections from workplace harassment and discrimination and other issues. They have also strongly rejected both Marxism and unregulated capitalism. The "all-powerful state" of Marxism and "rugged individualism" of unregulated capitalism undermine human dignity and distort the face of God in society.

These issues are neither add-ons to Catholic teaching nor the latest fads or shallow attempts to be relevant. Nor are they just economic or political issues. They are very much core moral issues. These are moral issues directly affecting the workplace, family life and the vitality of neighborhoods and communities.

In our nation, these issues stand as significant sources of polarization affecting all of us. Millions of workers who have lost their jobs due to globalization found themselves, at a minimum, financially strained as well as lacking health insurance or unable to keep their homes.

Stretches of great economic prosperity have lifted up some Americans while leaving vast numbers of Americans locked in low-paying jobs with few benefits. This has led to feelings of national elites working the system for the few while discarding the many. The accuracy or inaccuracy of these narratives is hopelessly lost in the rage and anger fostered by the reality of having been abandoned or exploited after decades of hard work.

Opinion polls indicate the strongest support for labor unions in the past 50 years, but efforts to organize unions are met with well-financed opposition harassing and intimidating workers interested in being in a union. This is true across the country.

Catholic social teaching has a great deal to contribute to healing the wounds of our nation, establishing true justice in workplaces and allowing everyone to experience human flourishing through their work. Our Catholic faith gives us a deeper appreciation for Labor Day, for labor's history in our nation and the issues confronting all working people today.