

The Heresy of Efficiency **Part 2: The Idolatry of Work** **Brian Pizzalato**

In the previous issue of *The Sower* (April 2009) we began to look at the writings of Dietrich von Hildebrand, and at his reflections on contemporary culture. His essay 'Efficiency and Holiness' speaks about the 'heresy' of efficiency. He argued that this involved a certain idolatry of *work*, especially of professional work.

What did he mean? He saw this heresy present in the estimation that is often given to the realm of work, almost considering that it is here that we find the highest pinnacle of human life. Von Hildebrand does not mean in any way to demean the high dignity of work in man's life, but rather sees the problem as one of shifting our understanding of man's center of gravity away from the primary vocation to be a person, to that of our work and achievements.

Where work is placed at the centre, the alternative we seek tends to be, not God, but amusement. And because this is not our true centre, other things become distorted as well. 'Recreation' and 'relaxation' become the label for all that is worth seeking apart from work. Von Hildebrand argued that we begin to approach the question of the good life simply in terms of amusement, so that any understanding of life's real depth and dignity is frustrated. We neglect the spiritual, neglect the need for recollection. We let ourselves be distracted.

The idolatry of work manifested

How is this manifested in the realm of faith and catechesis?

Von Hildebrand states, 'Deeply characteristic of this perversion of our times is the fact that the holy day of Sunday, the day of contemplation and recollection, the first day of the week, the day which gives to the entire week its form and meaning, has been replaced by the weekend, meant only for amusement and relaxation.' John Paul II recognized this problem which occasioned the writing of his apostolic letter *Dies Domini*, 'On the Lord's Day'.

Von Hildebrand goes on to say that in modern times new virtues related to efficiency have replaced more traditional virtues: reliability, politeness and punctuality have largely replaced humility, purity, charity, justice and the rest. Morality itself is seen in the light of efficiency. 'The substitution of efficiency for virtue manifests itself particularly in the fact that morality is no longer comprised of the moral obligations concerning the human part of our professional life but is, instead, reduced to the virtues presupposed for the fulfillment of the end of the profession as such.'

Another manifestation in catechesis – especially the catechesis of children – and related to the adulation of amusement, is the 'Hop scotch for Jesus' syndrome! The most important thing in religious education is whether the children have had fun or not. Of course, fun in the classroom is not to be excluded; nonetheless, we need to beware of simply turning the classroom into an art class where collages are made, or into a gymnasium.

Responding to the idolatry of work

How then can we deal with this in handing on the faith?

First, in teaching we must be aware of these issues, while never downplaying the dignity of work. John Paul II tells us, ‘Work is a good thing for man - a good thing for his humanity - because through work man not only transforms nature, adapting it to his own needs, but he also achieves fulfillment as a human being and indeed, in a sense, becomes “more a human being.”’ (*Laborem exercens* 9) Our students need to come to understand it in its proper perspective, in relationship to amusement and to worship.

Secondly, we must be able to show students that there is more to life than work and amusement; they also has a spiritual nature that must be nourished. Some seek amusement because they find the faith boring; however, we can gently suggest that this is a human problem, not a problem to do with God. God is not boring! Giving them the example of the saints is a good place to start. There is no saint whose life can be considered boring. And we are called to be saints, not to be bored!

Finally, we need to explain to our students the importance of Sunday, that it is infinitely more than just a part of the weekend. Sunday is the first day of the week when we are called to enter into the dynamic life-giving love of the Trinity, into the glory of the Resurrection, into the Mass where we step into heaven, when we are mystically transported to Calvary, where we partake of the very flesh and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. From entering into the work of the Trinity in the liturgy we are thus equipped to live a holy life at work, and during our amusement. Here we are given the strength to not only be reliable, polite and punctual, but also the grace to be humble, pure, loving and just.

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