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SANCTIFICATION OF HUMAN LABOR

PART II

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SAINT JOSEPH THE WORKER

PROFESSIONAL ETHICS AND SANCTIFICATION OF WORK

*In this study we will discuss how the message of sanctification of work, spread among persons of all walks of life by St. Josemaría, the founder of Opus Dei, helps clarify many of the central questions of professional ethics in the contemporary world.

St. Josemaría summed up this message as follows: “Those who want to live their faith fully and do apostolate according to the spirit of Opus Dei, must sanctify themselves with their work, sanctify their work, and sanctify others through their work.”

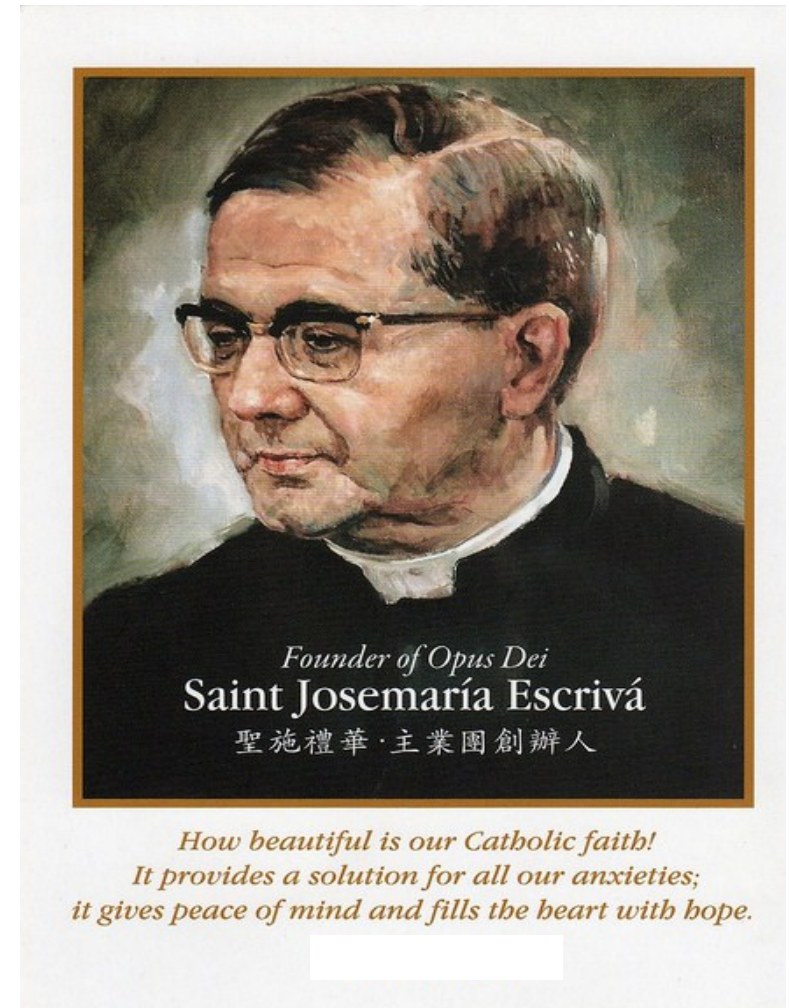
Sanctifying professional work

Beginning with the second of these three points, work is the primary and permanent material that the *ordinary* Christian has to sanctify. The founder of Opus Dei speaks of “ordinary work,” but he usually made the term more precise by adding the adjective “professional.”

Certainly, the ordinary duties of the Christian cannot be reduced to what would today be called professional work by a sociologist. Work is an essential element in the constitution of civil society, but it cannot “be reduced to its professional dimension, but rather transcends this restricted sphere. . . We can think of the work duties of the mother of a family who devotes herself to domestic tasks and the education of her children on a full-time basis.”

Thus even though “a reduction in the number of hours of work may continue in the future, as history has shown from the beginning of the industrial revolution until today, the message of Opus Dei will continue to exist in a permanent and ever timely way.” St. Josemaría’s concept of work “places before us a primary anthropological concept, with a permanent philosophical meaning.”

The term “professional” has acquired progressive importance throughout the past century. In his encyclical *Mater et Magistra* (part 2), Pope John XXIII, described the professionalization of human tasks as a phenomenon according to which one placed greater confidence in the income and rights obtained through work than in those derived from capital. One might say that if nineteenth century society was centered on owners and the proletariat, the twentieth century was centered on the professional. Along these lines Pierpaolo Donati observes that the kind of work that is emerging in today’s society is to a large extent made up of relationships. This web of personal relationships in work facilitates the sanctification of tasks, which are thus made more properly human.



Every kind of work brings with it a social praxis, a tradition, a collective context with ethical and religious implications. It is significant that no current book of “management” fails to emphasize transparency, honesty in presentations, sincerity in leadership, and truth in advertising. Mutual trust constitutes what has become known as “social capital,” which is more important than monetary capital.

St. Josemaría always opposed the separation of private and social virtues, just as today the separation between private and public morality proclaimed by ideological liberalism is being refuted.

The apostolate of witness and of word

This apostolate of example, of witness, of friendship and trust contributes to the effective spread, from person to person, of the Christian criterion of life: “Through your professional work, which you bring to completion with all the human and supernatural perfection that is possible, you can and should give Christian standards in the places where you carry out your profession or job.”

One can clearly see that this open and logical (we might say inevitable) apostolic way of acting is not the result of a tactic: it is simply naturalness. “Let your lives as Christian men, as Christian women—your salt and your light—flow spontaneously, without anything odd or foolish: always carry with you our spirit of simplicity.” The question remains as to what is the principal content of the apostolic message that the ordinary Christian can transmit in his work. The answer is simple. The principal content of the message is precisely that of sanctifying what one is doing in the very dynamics of one’s activity of working. The ethics of work necessarily includes doing good to the persons with whom we are working, for whom we are working, under the direction of whom we are working... But for those who are eager to sanctify their work, this ethical imperative leads to its ultimate consequence: encouraging the others to seek sanctity in that which unites them, in their work.

“We have to remember and remind people around us that we are children of God, who have received the same invitation from our Father as the two brothers in the parable: ‘Son, go and work in my vineyard’ (Mt21:28). I give you my word that if we make a daily effort to see our personal duties in this light, that is, as a divine summons, we will learn to carry them through to completion with the greatest human and supernatural perfection of which we are capable.”

*(excerpted from: Gloria.tv; a study by Prof Carlos Liano Cifuentes- professor at the Graduate School of business (IPADE) ; Pan-American University, Mexico)

The moral code of every profession includes the obligation to carry out a work that is well done. This basic ethical imperative to work well becomes, for the person trying to sanctify his work, an ideal of perfection, since to sanctify something means in the first place to make of it an offering to God. “It is no good offering to God something that is less perfect than our poor human limitations permit. The work that we offer must be without blemish and it must be done as carefully as possible, even in its smallest details, for God will not accept shoddy workmanship.” “If you consider the many compliments paid to Jesus by those who witnessed his life, you will find one which in a way embraces all of them. I am thinking of the spontaneous exclamation of wonder and enthusiasm which arose from the crowd at the astonishing sight of his miracles: *bene omnia fecit* (Mk 7:37), he has done everything exceedingly well: not only the great miracles, but also the little everyday things that didn’t dazzle anyone, but which Christ performed with the accomplishment of one who is *perfectus Deus, perfectus homo*, perfect God and perfect man.” Thus our service to God is not true service if “we don’t put as much effort and self-sacrifice as others do into the fulfillment of professional commitments; if we can be called careless, unreliable, frivolous, disorganized, lazy, or useless.”

The ethical imperative to carry out a work that is well done has, for Josemaría Escrivá, ultimately a divine origin, because “work is a command from God.” “After two thousand years, we have reminded all humanity that man was created to work :*homo nascitur ad laborem, et avis ad volatum*(Job 5:7), man was born to work, and the bird to fly.”

Because of the moral decay that has occurred in our time in many professional practices, it is becoming ever more necessary to clearly explain the basic moral rules that are a condition *sine qua non* for a particular activity to be qualified as professional. Thereby one can help clarify that immoral behavior, for example, lying, falsifying the evidence supporting a hypothesis, or presenting as one’s own someone else’s ideas, cannot be part of the demands of a profession. These ways of acting are not “professional.” What is more, if they are permitted, one could say that the activity is “de-professionalized.”

Anyone seeking to sanctify his work should consider it indispensable to maintain and strengthen the consistency between his profession and morality. Work, besides being a way of supporting oneself and one’s family, is for St. Josemaría, “an opportunity to develop one’s personality.” Pope John Paul II gives great importance to this quality of work throughout his encyclical *Laborem Exercens*: “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.’”

This effort entails a great respect for each one's personal freedom. One should strive to live one's faith while respecting and trying to understand the points of view and choices of one's colleagues. In this respect the teaching of the founder of Opus Dei is clear: "Avoid an abuse that seems to be exaggerated in our times...which shows the desire, contrary to the licit freedom of mankind, to try to oblige all men and women to form a single group in regard to matters of opinion, to create as it were dogmas in temporal questions."

Finishing tasks well

The ethical importance of professional work being well-done is indisputable. But someone might ask: What do you mean in this context by "work that is well done?" What are the criteria by which one can judge about "professional" goodness in carrying out a task?

It is not enough to consider the opinion of others, although it would be imprudent to ignore this. First of all, for a task to be well done it has to be *finished* and not left *half done*. As the founder of Opus Dei said: "You asked me what you could offer God. I don't have to think twice about the answer: offer the same things as before, but do them better, finishing them with love."

As the social scientist Peter Drucker has said felicitously, *to do good* one first has *to do something well*. This play on words recalls one used much earlier by St. Josemaría: *para servir, servir*: if you want to be useful, serve. In order to perform a service, to benefit others, one has to serve: to know how to do things, to be useful. "As the motto of your work, I can give you this one: 'If you want to be useful, serve.' For, in the first place, in order to do things properly, you must know *how* to do them. I cannot see the integrity of a person who does not strive to attain professional skills and to carry out properly the task entrusted to his care. It's not enough to want to do good; we must know how to do it."

If sanctity is found in the heroic exercise of the virtues, "heroism at work is found in *finishing* each task." In many of his writings, St. Josemaría emphasized the requirement to finishing tasks well with italics or even exclamation points. Such emphasis is very understandable if one takes into account that the Christian concept of sanctity implies the "fullness of charity." This fullness has as its necessary corollary fulfilling as perfectly as possible one's particular professional duties. It is perhaps here that one can see most graphically the consequences for professional ethics when the person performing a task takes as his goal not merely to *fulfill* certain minimal ethical rules, but to achieve the *fullness* of Christian life all his actions.

A deep moral effort is required to tear down the barriers between people that impede the carrying out of joint work. This ethical effort can be focused not only from a Christian vision of man but also from a purely natural and professional perspective on work. From this perspective it has been said, and rightly so, that work is the best therapy for selfishness. According to Fritz Schumacher, traditional wisdom teaches us that the basic function of work is simply to give a person the possibility of developing his faculties, of producing the goods and services that we all need for a dignified life, "permitting a person to overcome his innate egocentrism by uniting with other men and women in a common task."

This requires shared purposes and the interrelationship of efforts, which facilitates apostolate. "The apostolic concern . . . is not something separate from their everyday work. It is part and parcel of one's work, which becomes a source of opportunities for meeting Christ." St. Josemaría anticipated the Second Vatican Council's teaching on the intrinsic nobility of human work: "Moreover, we believe by faith that through the homage of work offered to God man is associated with the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, whose labor with his hands at Nazareth greatly ennobled the dignity of work."

Work relationships result in the apostolate of an ordinary citizen becoming "a great work of teaching. Through real, personal, loyal friendship, you create in others a hunger for God." The practice of the virtues that work favors, as we have seen, leads to apostolate. "In fact it already is apostolate. For when people try to live in this way in the middle of their daily work, their Christian behavior becomes good example, witness, something which is a real and effective help to others. They learn to follow in the footsteps of Christ, who 'began to do and to teach' (*Acts*1:1), joining example to word. That is why, for these past forty years, I have been calling this apostolate an 'apostolate of friendship and confidence.'"

Thus work groups become true communities of persons among whom there arises a mutual enrichment, in place of the mutual impoverishment which results when work is detached from the moral values by which it is intrinsically constituted.

In addition to being an ethical requirement, sanctification of others through work arises, we might say, as a consequence of the “priestly soul” of the ordinary faithful. The real and effective ordering of temporal structures to the ends foreseen by God—the “effort to build up the earthly city”—is not an individualistic task, carried out atomically or in isolation by each individual: it is a social task. Hence the ordering of temporal structures is not only impossible without apostolate, but constitutes part of the apostolate itself.

The associative character of work and apostolate

Sanctifying others in daily work requires, in the first place, being conscious of the social value of work. St. Josemaría points to the consequences of a certain type of individualism: “If you occupy a position of responsibility, you should remember as you do your job that personal achievement perishes with the person who made himself indispensable.” The need for dividing up work and delegating responsibility, makes it even more indispensable to “work side by side with our companions, sharing their interests.”

Studies of industrial psychology have made it clear that the required division of functions has to be complemented by the coordination of efforts. This double aspect of work is not foreign to its ethical dimensions. “In our ordinary work, we have to always foster an ordered charity, the desire and reality of making our task perfect by love. We have to strive to get along with all men and women, in order to bring them ‘in season and out of season’ (2Tim 4:2), with God’s help and with human refinement, to Christian life, and even to Christian perfection in the world.” This social character of work becomes evident when one considers its purpose as service to the social community: “That is one of the battles of peace we have to win: to find God in our work and, with Him and like Him, serve others.”

Work ethics and Christian asceticism

The recognition of the associative character of work has important consequences for the moral behavior of the worker, fighting against overly individualistic tendencies in one’s work. For example, overcoming the rivalries, suspicions and envies that can easily arise, the tendency to belittle the importance of the work of others, mistrust, disparaging one’s subordinates, etc.

Care in the details

The importance of finishing work well for it to be perfect, and hence suitable material for the attainment of sanctity—“Be perfect as my heavenly Father is perfect—is closely related to another basic idea in the message of St. Josemaría: putting care into little things, into details. Speaking of his apostolic work in the early years of Opus Dei, he said: “I liked to climb up into the cathedral tower, to look closely at the stonework, a real lacework of stone, the fruit of costly labor.” He would point out that this marvelous craftsmanship could not be seen from below: “That is working for God, the work of God! To fulfill one’s personal task with perfection, with beauty, with the loveliness of that delicate stone tracery.”

This teaching of Josemaría Escrivá is reflected in our ordinary language when we speak, for example, of putting the finishing touches on a building. In fact, today material objects are appreciated and given greater value precisely on the basis of such *finishing touches*.

Ordinary work

St. Josemaría’s emphasis on the importance of details is well suited to those at whom his message is aimed: ordinary Christians called to sanctify their *ordinary* work. Sanctity is identified not with extraordinary actions but with a life in which, as the founder of Opus Dei repeatedly said, one does *ordinary things extraordinarily well*. “It is very much our mission to transform the prose of this life into poetry, into heroic verse.”

Another quality of work that St. Josemaría emphasizes is the need for cheerfulness. “Msgr. Escrivá, with Gospel in hand, constantly taught: God does not want us simply to be good; he wants us to be saints, through and through. However, he wants us to attain that sanctity, not by doing extraordinary things, but rather through ordinary common activities. It is the way they are done which must be uncommon. There in the middle of the street, in the office, in the factory, we can be holy, provided we do our job competently, for love of God and cheerfully, so that everyday work becomes, not ‘a daily tragedy,’ but ‘a daily smile.’”

Finally, the ethical requirement of working well necessarily entails the obligation, also ethical, of continuous education, even more necessary today because of the accelerated advance of science and technology.

Duties of justice in one's work

The ethical imperative of work that is well done is explicitly related to duties of justice. The “exact fulfillment of one’s obligations” is the best means at hand for a Christian to contribute what he owes to society, making a positive impact on it and ordering it in accord with Christian ends. “While Christians enjoy the fullest freedom in finding and applying various solutions to these problems, they should be united in having one and the same desire to serve mankind.” This is not just a question of a human service to society, but also the effort to ensure that temporal institutions and structures “are in accordance with the principles which govern a Christian view of life.”

St. Josemaría Escrivá founded Opus Dei by divine will as a path of sanctification in professional work and in the fulfillment of the ordinary duties of the Christian. Its faithful strive to live this message in the midst of the activities of the world. In these activities, each one works and moves “with the full rights of a citizen,” and thus carries out a beneficial influence on the real Christianization of temporal structures from within, at their very source and origin. Therefore exemplarity in the exercise of one’s profession contributes “to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven.” Many years prior to the Second Vatican Council, Josemaría Escrivá taught that involvement in the world and intimacy with God were perfectly compatible.

This way of fostering the Christianization of the world brings with it “a concern to perfect this world” and to “improve the ordering of human society;” while at the same time contributing to its “temporal progress.” This ordering is “of vital concern to the kingdom of God,” as one reads in the pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world.

The ordering of human society to God is brought about, according to *Gaudium et Spes*, through work: “Individual and collective activity, that monumental effort of man through the centuries to improve the circumstances of the world, presents no problem to believers: considered in itself, it corresponds to the plan of God.”

Sanctifying oneself in professional work

One’s particular profession or job represents the *material* that has to be sanctified, but in addition and simultaneously, it is the *means* by which one can attain sanctity. Professional work that is well done contributes positively to the growth of the spiritual life in many ways. In first place, work is an indispensable means for the development of the natural virtues, which are the foundation for the supernatural ones.

It would be a simplistic reduction to think that the problem of human development in work is restricted to mere worker-owner relationships, as if the directors, owners or executives of organizations were the only ones responsible for solving the problem. On the contrary, human development is attained through relationships with one’s colleagues, subordinates and superiors, providers and clients, patients and students... In the network of connections through which contemporary work has developed (which in *Mater et Magistra* is called *socialization*), the expansion of our anthropological possibilities is many sided and multi-dimensional and is conditioned in all directions.

The “socialization” of work means that no one can carry it out by himself. Professional ethics makes a mistake if it thinks that each individual, although having work relationships with others, is in reality isolated. A fundamental principal of the ethics of work consists in seeing to it that “individuals” grow as “persons” in their relationships with other men and women.

Supernatural development through work

In affirming that work is a means for helping other men and women attain sanctity, we confront the need to foster their development in all aspects. Consequently, apostolate cannot be absent in work, nor should it be considered as an accidental juxtaposition.

For St. Josemaría “professional work is also an apostolate, an opportunity to give ourselves to others, to reveal Christ to them and lead them to God the Father—all of which is the overflow of the charity which the Holy Spirit pours into our hearts. When St. Paul explained to the Ephesians how their conversion to Christianity should affect their lives, one of the things he said was: ‘Anyone who was a thief must stop stealing; he should try to find some useful manual work instead and be able to do some good by helping others that are in need’ (*Eph 4:28*).”

Sanctifying others through one's profession

Work, besides being the environment for our sanctification, is also converted into an "instrument" of apostolate. This is both an ethical requirement implied in every profession or job and a consequence of our *priestly soul*, stemming from the common priesthood of the faithful.

"Our Lord wants men and women of his own in all walks of life. Some he calls away from society, asking them to give up involvement in the world, so that they remind the rest of us by their example that God exists. To others he entrusts the priestly ministry. But he wants the vast majority to stay right where they are, in all earthly occupations in which they work: the factory, the laboratory, the farm, the trades, the streets of the big cities and the trails of the mountains."

The ethical requirements that human work entails are stressed clearly in the papal encyclicals on social questions: *Rerum Novarum*, *Quadragesimo Anno*, *Populorum Progressio*, *Centesimus Annus*, and specifically in this case, *Laborem Exercens*. Evident in all of them is a concern for the state of man the midst of the ever more complex realities of industrial society.

Human development through work

Work can never be allowed to become more important than the persons carrying out the work. To use the terminology employed by John Paul II, objective work can never be allowed to supercede subjective work. Men and women have to be helped to grow as persons while engaged in producing products or performing services. Fostering this human development is undoubtedly part of the apostolate we are called to carry out.

"The apostolic concern which burns in the heart of ordinary Christians is not something separate from their everyday work. It is part and parcel of one's work, which becomes a source of opportunities for meeting Christ. As we work at our job, side by side with our colleagues, friends and relatives and sharing their interests, we can help them come closer to Christ." An apostolate of this kind, aside from its clear personal character, rests firmly on the value of human freedom, which our Lord does not destroy. "That is why he does not want to wring obedience from us. He wants our decisions to come from the depths of our heart."

Work, for the founder of opus Dei, is undoubtedly "a chance to develop one's own personality" and "to draw fruit from the few or many talents God has given to each person," and is thus a "witness to the worth of the human creature." This perfecting of the person who is working goes hand in hand with the reality that is being perfected through one's work, as Pope John Paul II has stressed. Employing the concepts *objective work* and *subjective work* developed in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, he stresses the need both to sanctify work and to sanctify oneself in that work.

One can say that the first and most basic contribution of the Christian to society is to Christianize the world by means of his own work, which constitutes his most noble mission: "Work is a participation in the creative work of God," who upon creating and blessing man gave him dominion over the earth and all of its creatures. In this context John Paul II wrote: "As man, through his work, becomes more and more the master of the earth, and as he confirms his dominion over the visible world, again through his work, he nevertheless remains in every case and at every phase of this process within the Creator's original ordering."

Priestly soul

Work is the privileged milieu for Christians to exercise the supernatural virtues: "to live their faith perfectly," to engage in "filial contemplation, in a constant dialogue with God," converting their ordinary activities into an "encounter with God," into "constant opportunities of meeting God, and of praising him and glorifying him through our intellectual or manual work."

St. Josemaría emphasizes the intimate relationship between work as a means of sanctification and the *priestly soul* that every Christian has by reason of baptism, which confers the common priesthood that all the faithful possess. "Acting in this way, in the presence of God, for reasons of love and of service, with a priestly soul, all our actions take on a true supernatural meaning, which keeps our life united to the fount of all graces." So much so that we can become "contemplative souls in the midst of the world." Hence our work cannot be done haphazardly or left half-finished, since then it would not be in harmony with the practical requirements of our "priestly soul."

The common priesthood of the faithful is united, without being confused, with the ministerial priesthood in the sacrifice of the Mass, where the natural elements cultivated by man (the bread and the wine) are converted into the Body and Blood of Christ. As St. Josemaría taught, the worktable of a Christian can be considered as an altar of offerings to God. Since all Christians are “priests of our lives,” and since work constitutes an essential element of human dignity, by offering our work to God at Mass we offer him our entire lives.

Synthesis of the finis operis and the finis operantis

The consideration of work as the material we are called to sanctify and the environment for seeking sanctity constitutes, in our judgment, one of the most important contributions of the founder of Opus Dei.

In human work “sometimes the end of the worker differs from the end of the work.” In ethical considerations of human work there have been those who identify or superimpose both ends, so that the one who carries out the work cannot have any end other than the institutional or objective end of the work itself—as in the case of some socialist interpretations of human work. Others see a complete divorce between the subjective ends of the worker and the objective ends of the work, in what could be called “paleoliberalism.” Here the selfish aim of the individual can be enough to produce a good work, that is, something which is socially useful.

St. Josemaría Escrivá points out the danger of a double life. We can’t have a split personality if we want to be Christians, because “we discover the invisible God in the most visible and material things.” Objective work, visible and material, cannot be indifferent to the life of a Christian, since it “is a participation in the creative work of God.” In addition, work has been taken up by Christ “as something both redeemed and redeeming,” and made into “a means, a way of holiness, a specific task which sanctifies and can be sanctified.”

But the moral goodness of the work done—which should be carried out, as we have said, with the greatest possible human perfection—is assured and increased by the supernatural intention with which it is carried out. The intention has always been important in Christian ethics to attain moral rectitude in one’s actions, which are judged good if they are *soex toto genere suo*, in all their aspects. Josemaría Escrivá never stopped stressing that a job poorly done cannot be offered to God. But now we can add that the intention of offering it to God is the fundamental incentive for a Christian to *do a good job*.

An upright *finis operantis*, a right intention, is not limited then to merely human goals: “feeding one’s self-esteem,” “assuring peace of mind,” or being concerned about what people will say. “First of all you should worry about what God will say: then, very much in the second place, and sometimes not at all, you may consider what others might think.” In line with this, Antonio Aranda has stated from a theological perspective: “Sanctified work (in its double dimension, objective and subjective, that is to say as a work done and the intended action in doing it, both *in Christ*), has a meaning of its own: it means something in itself and by itself; it is something substantive and not only accidental or instrumental in the plane of the economy of salvation, that is, in the mystery of Christ...Sanctified work (in its objective and subjective dimension) is the essential internal moment of that dynamism of sanctification, and not simple an external or accidental framework or instrument for carrying it out.”

In addition, rectitude of intention leads us to remain vigilant so that professional successes or failures do not make us forget, “even for a moment,” what the true aim of our work is: “the glory of God.” The desire to attain sanctity in our work even leads us to give up, if the Kingdom of God requires this, goals that in themselves are good and licit: “Being a Christian means rising above petty objectives of personal prestige and ambition and even possibly nobler aims, like philanthropy...It means setting our mind and heart on reaching the fullness of love which Jesus Christ showed by dying for us.” This is so because “being a Christian is not something incidental; it is a divine reality that takes root deep in our life. It gives us a clear vision and strengthens our will to act as God wants.”

Striving for rectitude of intention is part of the continuous ascetical effort a zeal for holiness brings with it. Although this is a totally supernatural endeavor, it leads us to fulfill faithfully the natural and even material demands entailed in any human work. Thus the *divine reality* of the Christian vocation to sanctity *is deeply immersed* in the realities of our human life. As St. Josemaría said forcefully, “the Christian is no expatriate. He is a citizen of the city of men, while his soul longs for God.”