

Creation and labor in the plan of God

September 1 this year had a double significance in the life of the Church. On the one hand, it was Labor Day in the United States. Labor Day was established to recognize the importance of laborers in our country. It is a national holiday that honors and expresses support for all those who work for a living, not only in factories, but also in homes, shops, offices, farms, and every other place where work is carried out. Labor Day acknowledges the essential contribution of workers to the well-being of our country and our society. Without the steady and diligent activity of ordinary workers, the human family would languish and suffer.

But Labor Day doesn't have merely a secular significance. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2427) teaches us that human work proceeds from our activity as persons created in the image of God, and allows us to continue the work of creation and subduing the earth, as God commanded. Through our work, we can honor the Creator who has given us gifts and talents to use. Through work we can enter into communion with Jesus himself, who worked as a carpenter before he began his public ministry. Through work we can also enter into the mystery of redemption by sharing in the hardship that our Lord experienced as he carried the cross. "In work, the person exercises and fulfills in part the potential inscribed in his nature." Our labor flows from our effort but also is for our benefit and the benefit of our families and the entire human community. Lest we forget the dignity and humanity of the worker, Pope St. John Paul II taught us to keep things in proper order: "Work is for man, not man for work" (*Laborem exercens* 6, *Catechism* 2428).

Pope Leo XIII, the namesake and predecessor of our current Holy Father, taught us about the rights and dignity of the worker during the Industrial Revolution. He reminded the people of his time and ours that workers must be treated with proper dignity, and should receive the respect of all, including their overseers and managers. And now, Pope Leo XIV has picked up this theme of the Church's social teaching in a new age with new challenges. He teaches us at this time of great technological change that the human person still has intrinsic value and worth in the sight of God. The contribution that each person makes to the common good, especially workers, must not be forgotten or overshadowed by impersonal forces of progress and the motive of profit.

The second celebration on Sept. 1 this year was the World Day for the Care of Creation. Early in his pontificate, Pope Francis taught us the importance of care for the created world, "our common home." Pope St. John Paul II and Pope Benedict also taught this important truth. By having appropriate reverence for the earth and the created world, we show reverence to God, the author and Creator himself. The created material world is a manifestation of God's power and his beautiful design for this earth and the universe. Through the natural cycles of creation, we see God's hand at work, forming and guiding creation as he carries out his plan for our eternal salvation.

In the Book of Genesis, we see God bringing creation into being by an act of his will. God spoke, and it came to be. And God looked on all he had made and saw that it was good. Because of the innate goodness of God's creation, we have a responsibility to treat the created world with reverence, putting it to good use for the mutual benefit of the human family, and preserving it from undue damage and lasting harm. There are some who take the protection of creation to extremes, disregarding the place of human persons in the created world. Human beings are part of creation too, and deserve the highest reverence, for they alone are created in the image and likeness of God. But our place in the created world makes us stewards of this creation, and we must therefore give God's handiwork the care that it deserves.

This celebration of creation isn't just a form of environmentalism. It is a form of spirituality because it is rooted in our faith in God, who creates out of his infinite love. We believe that God creates *ex nihilo*, out of nothing. He doesn't just rearrange something that was already there; he creates something entirely new, something that did not exist before. We also believe that God sustains all creation. Creation is entirely dependent on God's sustaining love, and without this intentional act of love, creation would simply cease to exist. But we know that God does not and will not forget us. The created world is dear to him, and he promises that he will never abandon us, his children.

There are some who see the magnificence of the created universe, but they fail to see the hand of God in its existence. And yet, the age-old question remains: why is there creation at all? Why do things exist at all? Logic (and St. Thomas Aquinas) help us to see that existing things do not create themselves, and they do not come into existence apart from some act of creation, from the One who creates. The very design of the created world shows the infinite wisdom of God, who is the only answer to the question of why things exist at all.

So, as the days pass by, let us remember the perennial importance of human labor and the dignity of those who work for a living. Let us also remember the awesome beauty of God's creation around us. In our daily work, in our prayer, and in our gaze on the created world, let us strive always to give glory to God.