The Dignity of Work

Homily for the Feast of Saint Joseph the Worker, May 1, 2015
Genesis 1, 26-2:3; Colossians 3,14-15, 17, 23-24; Matthew 13,54-58

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Peace be with you! Why this Feast for St. Joseph the Worker? Why remember this Feast on May 1st? The history of this feast goes back to Pope Pius XII in 1955. He did so to counter the May 1st workers' holiday. During the Cold War, Communist countries aligned to the Soviet Union and China held huge parades on May 1st.

Interestingly those May 1st celebrations originally commemorated an event in early May here in the United States – May 4th 1886 – and the bombing that took place killing workers in front of the McCormick Harvesting Machine Company. Those workers were peacefully demonstrating for an eight-hour work day. In the aftermath of that bombing, flyers were distributed in both English and German – the main languages of Chicago at that time calling for revenge – "Rache" in German.

The Church deliberately selects this day to provide a richer and more profound response to counter social injustice and that response lies in the dignity of the human person – a dignity that those hearing the preaching of Jesus so hardly believe. Note well the reaction of those listening to Jesus in today's Gospel from St. Matthew: "Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works? Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brethren James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all this?"

It seems as though the people in Nazareth who have known Jesus his whole life could scarcely believe. How could a lowly carpenter be the possessor of such great wisdom? In explaining the response of Jesus and – by extension – the response of the Church to this question of disbelief, St. John Paul the Second in his own encyclical titled "Labored Excercens" succinctly notes that work is not about making more but being more. Work is not just about what others can buy. The true dignity of human labor stems from the fact that when we use our labors for others we become more human. When we become more human, we become more ourselves and more the person God created us to be.

Friends, let me suggest that this was precise struggle of our Mexican patron, San Juan Diego. When Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to San Juan Diego telling him that she wanted a Church built, San Juan Diego thought she was talking about mere human work – a construction project. Even more he thought she was asking him to "sell" this construction project idea to the bishop.

No wonder, then, that San Juan Diego avoids encountering Our Lady of Guadalupe a second time and goes to visit his sick uncle a different way so as not to run again. But she finds him and appears to him a second time telling him once more to go to

the bishop. "No soy digno," he tells her. "No soy nada más que una escalaría de tabla." Juan Diego tells her. I am so low, I am so "indigno" that people walk on me. I am not worthy to even go to the bishop.

What does Our Lady of Guadalupe tell him in response? "Yo te eligido a ti!" Unlike English or my grandmother's native German, Spanish is very unique grammatically speaking. It has the capacity to emphasize with the word "you" ("tu") twice – "te" and "ti." "Yo te eligido a ti!"

By directly using the word "you" twice, Our Lady of Guadalupe is telling San Juan Diego that this command of hers not about a the building project but about him. This command of hers is about placing Her children in a spiritual house where they are constantly reminded of their God-given human dignity.

Friends, even today we struggle to remember our human dignity. How is it, asks Pope Francis, that when a homeless person dies of cold it is not news, "…but if the stock market drops ten points it is a tragedy!" *(General Audience on U.N. World Environment Day, June 5th 2013)* We could expand this list of Pope Francis, could we not?

- How is it that an employer of an "emplace" can be sued for racial profiling if that employer inspects employment documents but if he does not inspect employment documents a competing "empace" can call in to the "Migra" and trigger a "redada?"
- How is it that the Yakima taxpayers are now on the hook paying for *both* the lawyers who have been defending the City of Yakima's racially exclusive system of city council voting *and* paying the lawyers from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) for suing the city?
- How is it the American Congress can be so strident against the undocumented as "lawbreakers" but so blind that our nation's immigration laws are so complex and contradictory that here in Washington State the single largest sector of our state's economy – the 49 billion dollar fruit industry – can only operate on the basis of fraudulent documents?
- How is it that Mexican Congress can pass a resolution condemning the death of Pasco migrant worker Antonio Zambrano-Montes but be so impotent when in handling the despair of thousand of workers willing to risk death crossing the border?
- Why is it so many of our friends and relatives in Michoacán have risked everything to escape "a failed state" as Miguel Patiño, my brother bishop in Apatzingán, so aptly stated?

In raising these kinds of questions, Pope Francis provided us with an answer during last year's celebration on the Feast of St. Joseph the Worker: He noted that all of us are complicit in this fraud because many times we have a "….purely economic conception of society which seeks selfish profit, beyond the parameters of social justice." (5/1/13, Feast of St. Joseph the Worker and World Labor Day,)"

At this Eucharist on this Feast of St. Joseph we envision a different world. For one hour everyone – employer and worker – is equally fed the Bread of Life and his thirsts for justice quenched by the Blood of Christ. For one hour we are all equally housed in a place of dignity and beauty. We do so in hopes that when we leave, the world may imitate the gratuitous gift of God's very self – in all of his humanity and divinity through the Eucharist Christ send sends us on a mission in order to create spaces of freedom and dignity that can not be defrauded by the politicians and lawyers of our own era.

When we elevate the bread and the wine – "fruto de la tierra y trabajo del hombre" – we are elevating all human labor as blessings of God. "Bendito eres tú, Señor, Dios del Universo" are the first words we pray. It is these gifts – these blessing from God – that the bread and the wine are transformed in the very presence of Jesus Christ in all of his humanity and all of his divinity. Receiving this Body and Blood of Christ as spiritual food, we become assimilated into Him thus becoming His instruments of His justice. In this way his labor and his work become visible for those around us.

Why this Feast of St. Joseph the Worker? Because in him, we can see our selves, our nobility, our dignity and a society that is bigger than mere economics! In him we have a force larger than the fraudulent political and legal power plays. In him we have the capacity to become our "better" selves, to become the very worker that God made us to be. May we be faithful to his mission of this Feast! Peace be with you!