



Ama et labora: Augustine's Theology of Work as a Resource for Catholic Social Teaching

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In Laborem exercens, Pope St. John Paul II proposes some fundamental “Elements for a Spirituality of Work.” In thinking about the future development of a theologically robust “Spirituality of Work,” this paper explores Augustine’s theology of labor. It frames its examination by setting forth the philosophical evaluation of labor contemporary to Augustine. It then appraises the different facets of Augustine’s teaching on labor in *De opere monachorum*. Finally, it looks to his *De Genesi ad litteram* for a more developed account of labor, which is grounded (ultimately) in the very being of God, who himself labors in his creation.

INTRODUCTION

In closing his 1981 encyclical *Laborem Exercens* on the Catholic Christian understanding of human work, Pope St. John Paul II proposes in section V what he refers to as “Elements for a Spirituality of Work.” In this regard, the Pope comments that

[t]he Church considers it her duty to speak out on work from the viewpoint of its human value and of the moral order to which it belongs, and she sees this as one of her important tasks within the service that she renders to the evangelical message as a whole. At the same time she sees it as her particular duty *to form a spirituality of work* which will help all people to come closer, through work, to God, the Creator and Redeemer, to participate in his salvific plan for man and the world and to deepen their friendship with Christ in their lives by accepting, through faith, a living participation in his threefold mission as Priest, Prophet and King.¹

For the Pope, human work is a fundamental good according to both the natural and supernatural orders. In this context, he emphasizes the latter:² the exertion of labor is not just something that we must endure merely to put bread on our tables or to secure some relatively stable (though perhaps always tenuous) financial security for the future. Rather, John Paul somewhat boldly suggests, human work can even be a means of “participat[ing] in [God’s] salvific plan for man,” and a way by which we may enter more

deeply into “friendship with Christ” himself. Human work, that is to say, can even be a means of sharing in the life of God, and thus—I would extend the Pope’s remarks to say—of deification.

John Paul wrote his 1981 encyclical as a means of commemorating the ninetieth anniversary of Pope Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* (1891), a watershed text that offered a magisterial response to the challenges posed to the fundamental dignity of the human being by the degrading ideologies of capitalism and socialism/communism in the modern period. And yet, as I propose in this essay, the “Spirituality of Work” that John Paul discusses in this encyclical as a development of the tradition going back to *Rerum Novarum* is, in fact, not at all modern. Rather, the basis of the “Spirituality of Work” that he proposes is found already in the patristic period, having its origins in a seemingly insignificant dispute between a Carthaginian bishop named Aurelius and some local monks causing him trouble. Specifically, around the turn of the fifth century, there was a group of monks in North Africa who interpreted the Lord’s words in the Gospel of Matthew literally: “Look at the birds of the air: they do not sow, or reap, or gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them.”³ Taking Jesus’ words according to their bare surface meaning, these monks went around without exerting physical effort to provide for their needs.⁴ Disturbed by this practice, Aurelius did the most sensible thing that a North African Churchman in 400 could do: he turned to his fellow bishop in Hippo for help.⁵ Thus in response, in 401 Augustine wrote a treatise against these non-working ascetics, *De opere monachorum* (*op. mon.*).⁶

In this paper, I will examine Augustine’s theology of labor as a potential resource for the future development of the Catholic understanding of labor—specifically (for my interest) manual labor.⁷ According to my interpretation, *De opere monachorum*, read in connection with *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim* (a text nearly contemporary to it), helps to mark the emergence of a distinctively Christian understanding of labor.⁸ As I will show, in meditating on the importance of Paul’s choice to earn his own wages through manual labor instead of accepting the pay due to him for preaching the Gospel (see 2 Thess. 3:10), Augustine came to an appreciation of manual labor that marked a decisive break with the view then dominant.⁹ In this way, Augustine’s texts provide the Catholic tradition with a robust theological understanding of work, which resonates exactly with the “Spirituality of Work” proposed in *Laborem Exercens*. Augustine’s texts are therefore a fitting resource to consider for future theologies of labor.

AUGUSTINE'S THEOLOGY OF LABOR

In order to appreciate fully the theology that Augustine offers in *De opere monachorum* and *De Genesi ad litteram*, it is first necessary to make a few remarks about the classical (i.e., Greco-Roman) philosophical view of manual labor, since it provides the intellectual background within which Augustine stands. In this regard, although in earlier Greek thought (e.g., Homeric society) there existed “a unity between work and all aspects of culture,”¹⁰ the later philosophical turn of Greek thought departed considerably from the earlier positive evaluation of manual labor.¹¹ By the time of Aristotle, for example, work was no longer seen as an integral part of human life. Rather, the elite looked upon those who made their way in the world through their own physical exertion as the object of derision.¹² Thus in book three of the *Politics*, Aristotle remarks that “the best city will not make an artisan into a citizen”¹³ because “[i]t is not possible for an artisan or a menial laborer to pursue the things that pertain to virtue.”¹⁴ He explores the rationale for this position more fully in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In book ten, for example, he takes up the topic of happiness as that activity which pertains to our highest intellectual faculty (the *nous* or mind).¹⁵ For Aristotle, happiness is above all about contemplation, which is done for its own sake, in direct contrast with activities that tend to some other end.¹⁶ Furthermore, happiness (Aristotle comments) “seems to be in leisure,” but most activities are without leisure.¹⁷ It is therefore contemplation alone with its accompanying freedom from fatigue that human happiness consists in.¹⁸ This point is significant, for it means, correlatively, that since one cannot be happy (and thus, one cannot be a flourishing human being) except by contemplating, and since contemplation is only possible when one is at leisure, one whose life is involved in toilsome work cannot flourish as a human being. The full significance of this point is put into further relief when we take account of the ultimate grounding of Aristotle's theory of happiness—namely, his theology. As Aristotle comments while examining the activity of the gods, the gods do not engage in any action that involving “making” (*poiein*)—i.e., in any activity that has a further end. Nevertheless, inasmuch as the gods are living, they must be active. Therefore (he reasons), the only possible activity in which they can engage is contemplation. As we see, then, Aristotle's “happy person” is the one who mirrors divine life mostly fully: just as the gods do not engage in “making” (i.e., in any activity that has another end), neither does the wise or blessed person: both are alike in their leisure.¹⁹ Toilsome work, in sum, inhibits one both from fully flourishing as a human being, and also from achieving similitude to God.

Although various problems of textual transmission preclude our ability to assert that Augustine read Aristotle's texts,²⁰ in light of the predominance of the view expressed by Aristotle,²¹ there is little doubt that some form of it would have been familiar to Augustine.²² How, then, did it influence his understanding of what makes for a flourishing life? In this regard, it is noteworthy that, when we turn to Augustine's earliest works from the time soon after his conversion to Christianity, it is apparent that he was conflicted in regard to how he should reconcile his pre-Christian intellectual formation with his newly found faith in Christ.²³ Thus Dennis Trout comments on "the personal anguish [that Augustine] experienced" because of his attempt to wrestle with "the ultimate incompatibility of the tradition of the *otium honestum* and the logic of a still nascent ascetic ideal."²⁴ That is, at this time Augustine struggled with the question of whether the Christian life should be akin to the contemplative *otium* of the philosophers (namely: the life of leisure), or whether it should instead be like the active life of asceticism pursued after the model of what Anthony was doing in the Egyptian desert.²⁵

In regard to this negotiation between Augustine's philosophical formation and his biblical Christian faith at this early stage of his life as a believer, it has been debated which provided the ultimate framework within which the other was then integrated.²⁶ Although I myself would not want to suggest that Augustine's Christianity at this time was simply a philosophy manqué, it does seem that, when it comes to his thinking about the necessity to be at leisure in order to flourish, his position tends towards the Greco-Roman view. For example, in book two of *Contra academicos* (386), Augustine inquires into what is necessary in the search for wisdom.²⁷ On the one hand, Augustine emphasizes the need to invoke God in this quest because the Son of God *is* virtue and wisdom. Thus it is clear that there is a Christian element in his understanding of the philosophical task.²⁸ And yet, Augustine's earlier formation also overshadows his remarks in some ways. For example, while speaking to his interlocutor about the philosophical life, Augustine praises him for all that he owes him in his search, including

whatever I now enjoy in my leisure; the fact that I have escaped from the bonds of needless desires; that in laying down the deadly burden of anxiety I begin to breathe again, to recover, to return to myself; that I seek most seriously for truth; . . . that I feel confident that I shall arrive at the highest measure itself.²⁹

Although these remarks are incidental, what Augustine says about leisure here does provide a point of contrast with his later comments about work in *De opere monachorum* (401). By this time, of course, Augustine's

life had undergone immense changes. He was no longer a Christian neophyte preparing for baptism, but rather was himself an eminent Churchman with many years of pastoral experience as both a priest and (more recently) bishop. Likewise, whereas in *Contra academicos* Augustine's ideal of human flourishing required (or so he thought) seeking retirement from the world in order to contemplate Wisdom in leisure time on a country estate with a select group of friends, he had by now completely immersed himself in the day-to-day life of the North African Church—being engaged in ecclesiastical affairs as a bishop, writing on all kinds of questions of heresy and orthodoxy as a theologian—and all in addition to his most important task: regular preaching to his flock at Hippo.

In turning now to *De opere monachorum*, we must first note Augustine's principle argument with his interlocutors, since it helps to guide our interpretation. As noted earlier, the monks argued for the propriety of their choice not to work by invoking Matt. 6:25–34. But, as Augustine comments, this way of interpreting Jesus' words raises a problem, because at 2 Thess. 3:10 the Apostle Paul makes comments about work that are clearly at odds with how the monks interpret Matthew's text: "For even when we were with you, we gave you this command: If any one will not work, let him not eat" (RSV).³⁰ "How then," Augustine asks, "can the Apostle, oppos[e] the direction of the Lord, . . . ?"³¹ The monks replied to this objection by offering a non-literal interpretation of Paul. In specific, the monks argued that they work by giving people advice and by sharing in conversation with them.³² For the monks, in other words, the words of the Apostle should not be taken as referring to manual labor, but rather interpreted spiritually. Augustine, however, rejects their attempt to spiritualize Paul's precepts about labor, and instead upholds the literal meaning of the passage. Thus he insists that Paul is speaking about corporeal work,³³ which is clear (he argues) based on the overall context of Paul's remarks.³⁴

The question of the proper method of interpreting scripture is thus of prime importance in this text.³⁵ At the same time, Augustine's argument against the monks' position goes deeper. His concern in this text seems to be the following: granted that (as Augustine argues) these monks are wrong to take Paul's remarks about work spiritually, why does Paul insist on manual labor? That is: Augustine's concern is not only the fact that Paul intends to speak of real, corporeal labor, but also to inquire into the particular reason for why his engagement in manual labor is fitting. In this regard, based on Paul's own comments about why he did not accept pay, one of Augustine's answers to this question is to highlight the evangelical value of freely willed engagement in manual labor. He notes that, in not accepting his rightful pay, the Apostle puts to rest the worry that he might

be preaching for the sake of gain.³⁶ By thus foregoing his right to compensation for preaching, the Apostle engaged “with greater mercy and labor [*misericiordius et laboriosius*] in preaching the Gospel.”³⁷ At the same time, it becomes clear that, in Augustine’s view, Paul’s decision to forego pay is not simply an act of expedience (inasmuch as it allays the fear that he might be trying to profit from the Gospel). Rather, Augustine argues that Paul’s work in fact actively promotes the Gospel. In this regard, Augustine later contrasts the behavior of the monks with the Apostle’s directly. Whereas the monks wonder if the Apostle would have had time to evangelize if he had been engaged in manual labor, Augustine instead asks the monks what they have done for the spreading of the gospel and for the building up of the Church, and highlights the non-accomplishments of their non-activity, in comparison with Paul’s great achievements:

Who can say, moreover, when the Apostle was wont to do this manual labor, that is, at what periods of time was it possible to work without interfering with the preaching of the Gospel? He himself declares quite definitely that he worked day and night. In very truth, what are those persons doing who, apparently busy and occupied about many things, propose this question as to the time of the Apostle’s manual work? Have they ever filled the lands from Jerusalem up to Illyricum with the Gospel? Have they undertaken to approach and to fill with the peace of the Church whatever barbarian peoples were not reached by the Apostle? We know well that they are gathered together into a certain holy association living in a most leisurely fashion [*otiosissime*]. The Apostle, on the contrary, accomplished a truly marvelous work since, in his great solicitude for the people belonging to all the churches, both those who had been instructed and those who were yet to be taught, he added manual labor to the care and labor of his ministry.³⁸

In making his tongue-in-cheek comment about the monks being “gathered together into a certain holy association living in a most leisurely fashion [*otiosissime*]” in contrast to Paul who, on the contrary, “added manual labor to the care and labor of his ministry,”³⁹ Augustine once again highlights that Paul’s labor is not extraneous to his ministry, but rather is essential in his task of preaching the Gospel. Furthermore, for Augustine it is not only the case that Paul’s preaching enabled him to preach the Gospel. Rather, in his view, Paul’s work itself became (as it were) performative of the Gospel. In this regard, in chapter 17 Augustine calls into question these monks’ desire for leisure time to read. He asks them rhetorically: “What kind of perversity is it, then, to be unwilling to obey the works which one wishes to be at leisure to read, and, in order that what is good may be read for a longer period, not to wish to do what is read?”⁴⁰ The comment is striking. Whereas the monks apparently had adopted the ancient view

that work inhibits contemplation (since they thought that the contemplative reading of scripture required them to abstain from physical effort), Augustine's rhetorical question turns the ancient understanding of labor and contemplation on its head by its suggestion that it would only be by putting into effect what is read in scripture (in this case, Paul's comments about laboring to provide for his needs) that one would truly succeed in reading the text. That is to say: in Augustine's view, the proper contemplative reading of the biblical text cannot terminate in contemplation. Rather, inasmuch as the text itself speaks of the need to exert oneself actively, the only proper reading of it (and perhaps, we might even say, the only reading of it that would be truly contemplative) is that by which what the word of God exhorts passes into active deed.⁴¹

As we already see from these few passages, Augustine's positive evaluation of manual labor as having practical and even evangelical value is remarkable in light of the ancient understanding of labor.⁴² In fact, although in classical philosophical thought leisure and manual work were seen as opposed, in this treatise Augustine connects the two time and again, thus marking a major shift in the ancient understanding of labor. This shift in the labor/leisure dialectic is especially pronounced in chapter 17, where Augustine again calls into questions these monks' need for leisure: "I would like to know what the monks who do not wish to do manual work are doing which makes it imperative that they be at leisure (*uacent*)."⁴³ He then gives a list of the activities for which they (supposedly) require rest from manual work: "They say they must be free for prayers, for chanting the psalms, for reading, and for the word of God."⁴⁴ All of these activities, we note, are contemplative. And of course, Augustine does not deride them, since they are all essential Christian practices: "This is certainly a holy life, and in the sweetness of Christ praiseworthy."⁴⁵ And yet, as he continues, he also makes a bold suggestion. Whereas the Greco-Roman tradition epitomized by Aristotle understood labor to hinder contemplation, Augustine comments that engaging in manual labor actually helps one in one's more contemplative endeavors. "As a matter of fact," he comments, "persons who are engaged in manual labor can easily sing divine canticles and lighten the labor itself."⁴⁶ Once again, in Augustine's view, manual labor and contemplation are not seen as a zero-sum game; the two are not opposites, such that one must yield to the other. Rather, as he says, labor can provide the opportunity for contemplation on the one hand; on the other, contemplation can in turn lighten the burden associated with labor in the post-fallen world. The two are thus essential to one another.⁴⁷

There are several other dimensions of labor's importance in *De opere monachorum* that call for attention, such as the role that engaging in man-

ual labor has in human formation. For example, in chapter 15 Augustine makes a connection between manual labor and the end times. He asks yet another rhetorical question: “what spirit should a citizen of that eternal City, the heavenly Jerusalem, have, except that he should hold in common with his brother whatever he gains with his own labor and that he should receive whatever he needs from the common supply.”⁴⁸ To work with one’s hands not only contributes to the social cohesion of the Church on earth, but also forms one’s spirit in a certain way, thus making one into the kind of person who will enjoy fellowship with one’s sisters and brothers even in “that eternal City, the heavenly Jerusalem.” In regard to labor’s formational power, Augustine comments further that “the servants of God ought so to obey [God’s] precepts as to suffer with the weak, freed from the love of private possessions, work at manual labor for the common good and submit without murmuring to those placed over them.”⁴⁹ For Aristotle, we recall, “[i]t is not possible for an artisan or a menial laborer to pursue the things that pertain to virtue.” By contrast, Augustine holds that labor is a positive element in the development of one’s virtue, because engaging in it frees one from possessiveness and disposes one to obedience instead.⁵⁰ In consideration of the intended target of this work, and knowing that Aurelius had asked Augustine to write this treatise because he could not control these wandering monks, the subtle sharpness of this comment should be underscored: if engaging in manual labor frees one from possessiveness and makes one obedient, then it stands to reason (as a corollary) that refusal to engage in this type of work renders one possessive and disobedient. Augustine makes explicit comments about some of the vicious effects of not working later. For example, he asks: “Why, then, do these monks wish to have empty hands and full storehouses? Why do they take away from the labor of others, hide away, and save what they may draw upon for daily use.”⁵¹ Non-work is, effectively, a form of parasitism. Augustine notes a final connection between manual labor and moral formation in chapter 25, where he comments that to engage in lowly labor is instrumental in correcting the pride that lies in the heart.⁵² Engaging in manual labor thus assists one in developing humility—the key Christian virtue made manifest for us by the incarnation of God in Christ Jesus. In this regard, it is noteworthy that, while examining the significance of Paul’s choice to forego the pay due to him in chapter 11, Augustine asks the following:

What weakness does he say that he assumed in the company of the weak unless it be that of suffering with them to the extent that he was unwilling to accept what was due him by the Lord’s direction lest he should seem to be putting a price on the Gospel and lest he should thus,

by becoming an object of suspicion among the ignorant, hinder the progress of the word of God?⁵³

Importantly, in this passage Augustine frames Paul's act of foregoing pay (and thus his decision to engage in manual labor) in incarnational language. Paul's entering into the "company of the weak," and his desire to suffer with them and yet ask nothing in return, is an act of condescension. For Augustine, Paul's decision to engage in manual work is thus an act of imitating Christ's humility. The key virtue inculcated by engaging in manual labor, therefore, is not just any humility, but specifically the humility of God himself.

All in all, in light of the disdain for manual labor expressed in the pre-Christian intellectual tradition, Augustine's steady stream of remarks in praise of labor is remarkable, and even marks a watershed moment in the ancient understanding of work.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, it is also true that Augustine's theology of work it is not completely developed in *De opera monachorum*.⁵⁵ We find a more complete flourishing of this theology instead in *De Genesi ad litteram*. An especially important text is *De Genesi* 8.8.15,⁵⁶ where Augustine ponders why God put humanity into the garden "for working and guarding" it.⁵⁷ He asks rhetorically:

The Lord, surely, did not wish the first man to work at agriculture, did he? Is it not simply incredible that he should have condemned him to hard labor before sin? Certainly we would judge it to be so, had we never seen how some people till the fields with such pleasure, such uplift of spirit, that it is a severe punishment for them to be called away from that to anything else. So then whatever delights there are to be found in agriculture, they were of course far and away more complete at that time when neither earth nor sky was putting any difficulty in the way. You see, there was no stress of wearisome toil but pure exhilaration of spirit, when things which God had created flourished in more luxuriant abundance with the help of human work. As a result the creator himself would be praised more copiously for having given a soul set in an animal body the rational facility of working as much as would satisfy its willing spirit, not as much as it would be reluctantly forced to do by the wants of the body.⁵⁸

Several points in the passage are particularly striking. First, bodily work does not inhibit one's flourishing as a rational being. Rather, because bodily labor is under the guidance of man's rational faculty, it is for man's good. As Augustine continues, he develops this point in depth, noting that it is through his exertion of labor that man enters most intimately into communion with the very "nature of things" itself, and also that, by coming to deeper knowledge of the very "nature of things," the human being

comes to see more clearly God's action both in creating and also in providing for that creation.⁵⁹

Second, Augustine does not think that labor was imposed upon humanity because of the fall.⁶⁰ Rather, in his view, work has always been part of the God's intention for humanity. Only the wearisome toil that now comes with it resulted from the fall:

The man of course was put in Paradise to work this same paradise, . . . by cultivating it in a way that was not painfully laborious but simply delightful [*non laboriosam, sed deliciosam*], furnishing the sensible and observant mind with the most important reminders and useful advice.⁶¹

As in *De opere monachorum*, so too in this text from *De Genesi*, it is important to stress that Augustine not only refrains from evaluating labor negatively (in this case, by not evaluating work as a punishment), but also evaluates work positively (in this case, as being a pleasure for man and as something that benefits him intellectually). It is in this regard, again, that Augustine is most revolutionary with respect to the earlier tradition. In this regard, it is noteworthy that the Greek word for "toil" (*ponos*) had a lexical range that included not only physical effort, but also distress, suffering, and anxiety in general. That is to say, in ancient Greek thought, the concepts of physical effort and general hardship were almost indistinct.⁶² The same is true of *labor* in Latin.⁶³ In commenting on Genesis, in contrast, Augustine makes a critical distinction: in the garden, he teaches, humanity's work in agriculture was not laborious (*non laboriosam*),⁶⁴ but rather full of delight (*sed deliciosam*). As he says again later, after speaking at length about God's providential arrangement of nature:

And so God, then, Most High above all things, who established all things and governs all things, creates all natures out of his goodness, disposes all wills according to his justice. How therefore can it be abhorrent to the truth, if we believe that the man was set up in Paradise to work at agriculture, not in servile toil, but with genuine pleasure and uplift of spirit [*non labore servili, sed honesta animi uoluptate*]? What, after all, is more innocent than such work for our moments of leisure [*uacantibus*], and what can provide more material for our serious reflection [*et quid plenius magna consideratione prudentibus*]?⁶⁵

In light of the earlier Greco-Roman tradition, the latter claim is especially radical. Work not only is no longer seen as a constraint to contemplation; instead, work actively enables our "serious reflection."⁶⁶ But the theological depth of the text runs even deeper. As we recall, Aristotle's view of contemplation as the highest human good was ultimately grounded in his understanding of God. Intriguingly, Augustine likewise roots his

teaching about labor in his theology. Thus, as he continues in *De Genesi*, Augustine speaks about humanity's cultivation of the earth as analogous to God's cultivation of humanity. Speaking of how the verbs "work" and "guard" are predicated not only of man but also of God, Augustine comments that

the same God who creates the man to be a man, is himself the one who works and guards him also into being good and blessed. For this reason the turn of phrase by which the man is said to work the land, . . . is the same as the one by which God is said to work the man, . . . and to guard him.⁶⁷

As a corollary, humanity's engagement in work echoes God's own action in tending to and nurturing his creation, which he exercises so that man might not only be made, but also be given the further gift of being made good.⁶⁸ Our labor, therefore, is a response to God's creative love, which both brought us into existence and sustains us even now.⁶⁹ Bold though such comments are on their own, they are put into even greater relief when read in light of book 1 of this commentary. There Augustine speaks about creation as coming into being by God's love, which (he says) is doubly effective, in that his love both brings it about that things exist, and also that they "abide" (i.e., that they may be good): "There are two things, in fact, on account of which God loves his creation: in order that it should be, and in order that it should abide. So in order that there should be something to abide, *the Spirit of God was being borne over the water*; while in order that it should abide, *God saw that it was good*."⁷⁰ By reading the texts given above in light of this comment from book 1, we come to the ultimate theological foundation for Augustine's theology of labor. Specifically: since in laboring man imitates God's creative providence in continually nurturing his creation, and since God acts in his creation (both by bringing it into being and by providing for it) because of his gracious love, man's labor participates in that same love. Hence, if we were to sum up Augustine's theology of labor and what it does in a pithy way, we might adjust the classical Benedictine saying in this way: *ama et labora*, love and work.

CONCLUSION: AUGUSTINE AS A SOURCE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEOLOGIES OF LABOR

At the beginning of this paper, I suggested that turning to Augustine's thought provides an apt source for a modern Catholic theology of labor. As we have now seen, in *De opere monachorum*, in contrast with the understanding of the labor/leisure dialectic found in Aristotle, Augustine attacks the leisure of the wandering North African monks and instead insists

on the real, positive value of manual labor. In fact, not only is it the case that Augustine does not ascribe to the earlier philosophical view that labor prevents contemplation; rather, he holds that labor helps one in contemplation.⁷¹ By way of recapitulation, Augustine presents us with the following principles of his own “Spirituality of Work” (as we might call it): work is evangelical; work is performative of scripture; work forms one morally; work brings about the unity of the social body of the church—both in *via* and (what is perhaps among the most notable of his claims) in *patria*. Theologically speaking, work also takes a new significance—one that is especially radical in consideration of ancient thinking. To engage in manual work is a self-emptying act that assimilates one to the God who in Christ “emptied himself, having taken the form of a servant” (cf. Phil. 2:7). Finally, to engage in work is to imitate God in his creative love, which both nurtures and also keeps all of creation in existence. Work thus becomes a principle means of becoming like unto God, and thus of deification itself. As Pope Francis commented in his first papal general audience on the Latin Rite feast-day of St. Joseph the Worker: “Work is fundamental to the dignity of a person. Work, to use a metaphor, ‘anoints’ us with dignity, fills us with dignity, makes us similar to God, who has worked and still works, who always acts (cf. Jn 5:17).”⁷² Augustine would concur entirely. Thus, in light of the fact that the dignity of work is rooted in God’s very being itself, in chapter 27 of *De opere monachorum* Augustine even speaks of manual labor as a *munus*⁷³—a word that means “gift,” but also “function,” “duty,” or “office.” Stretching the term a bit, we might even say a “calling” or “vocation.” In sum: in Augustine’s theology of work, we find a Christian spirituality that inflects with respect to labor the heart of the Good News: namely, that access to God does not come through the effacing of what is in this world, but rather that, inasmuch as God himself has taken that which is of this world upon himself, we have access to God precisely in and through the normal means of our everyday lives—including through those acts which, in outward appearance, may appear to be the least illustrious of all.

Notes

1. Pope John Paul, II, *Laborem Exercens*, 24 (emphasis in the original).
2. For more reflection on the former, see Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, 127–28.
3. Matt. 6:26. Augustine quotes the entire passage (Matt. 6:25–34) at *op. mon.* 1.2 (CSEL 41:532; FC 16:332).
4. For an introduction to this work, see FC 16:323–25. For Augustine's comments on this treatise, see *retr.* 2.47 (CCSL 57:106–7; FC 60:162).
5. The dates here are based on *Augustine through the Ages*, ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge, U.K. Eerdmans: 1999).
6. For an earlier study of this text, see Rudolph Arbesmann, "The Attitude of Saint Augustine Toward Labor," in *The Heritage of the Early Church: Essays in Honor of the Very Reverend Georges Vasilevich Florovsky*, Orientalia Christiana Analecta 195, ed. David Neiman and Margaret Schatkin (Roma: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1973): 245–59. Arthur T. Geoghegan also makes some remarks about Augustine in his larger study, *The Attitude towards Labor in Early Christianity and Ancient Culture*, The Catholic University of America Studies in Christian Antiquity 6 (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1945).
7. In his encyclical, Pope John Paul has both intellectual and manual labor in mind.
8. For other early Christian understandings of labor, see George Ovitt, "The Cultural Context of Western Technology: Early Christian Attitudes toward Manual Labor," *Technology and Culture* 27:3 (July 1986): 477–500. See also Geoghegan, *The Attitude towards Labor in Early Christianity*.
9. Cf. Herbert Applebaum, *The Concept of Work: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 193.
10. Applebaum, *The Concept of Work*, 165. Cf. his earlier comments on work in Homeric society at 3–21.
11. For a summary of some of the philosophical views, see Maurice Balme, "Attitudes to Work and Leisure in Ancient Greece," *Greece & Rome*, second series 31:2 (Oct. 1984): 140–52.
12. Applebaum, *The Concept of Work*, 169.
13. Aristotle, *Politics* 1278a1. Text in *Aristotelis ethica Nicomachea*, ed. Ingram Bywater (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894 [repr. 1962]: 1–224 [1094a1–1181b23]). ET in *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*, vol. 19, translated by H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, and London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1926 [repr. 1962]): 197 (alt.).
14. *Ibid.*, *Politics* 1278a; my ET.
15. See Aristotle, *NE* 10.7, 1177a. Text in *Aristotelis ethica Nicomachea*, ed. Ingram Bywater (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894 [repr. 1962]: 1–224 [1094a1–1181b23]).
16. Aristotle, *NE* 10.7, 1177b.
17. *Ibid.*, *NE* 10.7, 1177b. Aristotle comments on various activities that are without leisure throughout this section.
18. *Ibid.*, *NE* 10.7, 1177b.

19. See *Ibid.*, *NE* 10.7, 1178b.

20. The reception of Greek thinking in fourth century Latin Christian thought is problematic. Augustine would not have read Aristotle's *NE* directly, although he may have known Aristotle's ideas from the philosophical handbooks (doxographies) then circulating. In any case, Aristotle's ideas with respect to happiness certainly did influence Cicero, who played a large influence on Augustine. For a brief review of the problems of sources with respect to Aristotle and the Latin tradition, see Michael Tkacz, "St. Augustine's appropriation and transformation of Aristotelian *eudaimonia*," in *The Reception of Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Jon Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 67–84, as well as Christopher Gill, "The transformation of Aristotle's ethics in Roman philosophy," in *The Reception of Aristotle's Ethics*, 31–52.

21. In this regard, Aristotle's understanding of manual labor is representative of both Greek and later Roman thought alike. Applebaum draws our attention to many of the negative sentiments about labor in the Roman world. For example, Cicero thought that to sell one's labor was to sell one's freedom. See *The Concept of Work*, 193. On Roman attitudes toward work, see also Kenneth Steinhauser, "The Cynic Monks of Carthage: Some Observations on *De opere monachorum*," in *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum*, ed. Joseph T. Lienhard, S.J. et al. (New York et al.: Peter Lang, 1993), 455.

22. On the other hand, since most ancient people were laborers of some kind, popular thinking with respect to manual labor was probably more positive. See Balme, "Attitudes to Work and Leisure in Ancient Greece." See also Charles Sylvester, "The Classical Idea of Leisure: Cultural Ideal or Class Prejudice?" *Leisure Sciences* 21 (1999): 3–16. For example, one tradition of Roman thought emphasized the ideal nature of the agricultural life, including Vergil's *Georgics* and Varro's *De re rustica*. An in-depth examination these works is outside of the bounds of this short study, but in light of what my later comments, it would be interesting to see if there are any literary traces of these works in his later writings.

23. On Augustine's time at Cassiciacum, see Dennis E. Trout, "Augustine at Cassiciacum: *Otium honestum* and the Social Dimensions of Conversion," *Vigiliae Christianae* 42 (1988): 132–46.

24. Trout, "Augustine at Cassiciacum," 133.

25. Cf. *Ibid.*, "Augustine at Cassiciacum," 135–37.

26. Cf. Carol Harrison, *Rethinking Augustine's Early Theology: An Argument for Continuity* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

27. On this dialogue, see most recently *Against the Academics: St. Augustine's Cassiciacum Dialogues, Volume I*, translated, annotated, and with commentary by Michael P. Foley (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2019).

28. Augustine, *Acad.* 2.1.1 (CCSL 29:18).

29. *Ibid.*, *Acad.* 2.2.4 (CCSL 29; ACW 12:68).

30. For Augustine's comments on these two passages, see *op. mon.* 1.2 (CSEL 41: 532–33; FC 16:332).

31. *Ibid.*, *op. mon.* 1.2 (CSEL 41:533; FC 16:332).

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32. See *Ibid.*, *op. mon.* 1.2–2.3 (CSEL 41:533–34; FC 16:332–33). On the self-perception of the monks, see Maria E. Doerfler, “‘Hair!’: Remnants of Ascetic Exegesis in Augustine of Hippo’s *De Opere Monachorum*,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 22:1 (Spring 2014): 81, n. 6.

33. See Augustine, *op. mon.* 2.3 (CSEL 41:535; FC 16:334).

34. See *Ibid.*, *op. mon.* 3.4 (CSEL 41:536; FC 16:335).

35. For a treatment of Augustine’s principles of exegesis in this treatise, see Doerfler, “‘Hair!’: Remnants of Ascetic Exegesis,” 85–7.

36. See Augustine, *op. mon.* 10.11 (CSEL 41:549; FC 16:348).

37. *Ibid.*, *op. mon.* 6.7 (CSEL 41:542; FC 16:341).

38. *Ibid.*, *op. mon.* 14.15 (CSEL 41:556; FC 16:355).

39. The use of irony abounds in this part of the text. On Augustine’s style, cf. the comments at FC 16:325.

40. Augustine, *op. mon.* 17.20 (CSEL 41:565; FC 16:363).

41. Cf. John Paul’s comments on “the gospel of work” in *Laborem Exercens*, 26.

42. Cf. Augustine’s comments later at *op. mon.* 8.9 (CSEL 41:546; FC 16:345).

43. *Ibid.*, *op. mon.* 17.20 (CSEL 41:564; FC 16:362).

44. *Ibid.*, *op. mon.* 17.20 (CSEL 41:564; FC 16:362).

45. *Ibid.*, *op. mon.* 17.20 (CSEL 41:564; FC 16:362).

46. *Ibid.*, *op. mon.* 17.20 (CSEL 41:564; FC 16:363).

47. In other works where Augustine is not engaged in the sort of polemic in which he is involved in *De opere monachorum*, he stresses the mutual relation between action and contemplation even more. On these works, see the comments of Giles Constable, *Three Studies in Medieval Religious and Social Thought: The Interpretation of Mary and Martha, The Ideal of Imitation of Christ, The Orders of Society* (New York/Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 18–19. See also Kimberly F. Baker, “Augustine on Action, Contemplation, and their Meeting Point in Christ” (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2007).

48. Augustine, *op. mon.* 15.32 (CSEL 41:579; FC 16:378).

49. *Ibid.*, *op. mon.* 16.19 (CSEL 41:564; FC 16:362).

50. Cf. his earlier comments about the anxiety that businessmen and others have because of their possessions at *op. mon.* 15.16 (CSEL 41: 557; FC 16:356–57).

51. See CSEL 41:573; FC 16:372.

52. See CSEL 41:578; FC 16:377. Augustine attributes the monks’ disposition to pride (*superbia*) at *op. mon.* 22.25 (CSEL 41:571; FC 16:370).

53. Augustine, *op. mon.* 11.12 (CSEL 41:551; FC 16:350). On the theme of Paul’s condescension to the weak, the entirety of this section is pertinent. Cf. also Augustine’s comments at *op. mon.* 12.13 (CSEL 41:553–54; FC 16:352–53).

54. Cf. Arbesmann, “The Attitude of St. Augustine Toward Labor,” 248.

55. Cf. the stronger comments of Steinhauser, “The Cynic Monks of Carthage,” 455.

56. Arbesmann also draws attention to *Gn. litt.* as a key text in “The Attitude of St. Augustine Toward Labor” (see 249 n. 10, 251 n. 16, and 253 n. 25). Steinhäuser’s comments follow in a similar vein.

57. Augustine, *Gn. litt.* 8.8[.15] (CSEL 28:242; WSA I/13: 356–57).

58. Ibid., *Gn. litt.* 8.8[.15] (CSEL 28:242–43; WSA I/13: 356–57).

59. Au *ibid.*, *Gn. litt.* 8.8[.16] (CSEL 28:243; WSA I/13: 357). This extraordinary quote is worthy of citing in full: “What greater or more wonderful spectacle can there be, after all, or when is human reason more able after a fashion to converse with ‘The Nature of Things,’ than when after seeds have been sown, cuttings potted, shrubs planted out, graftings made, each root and seed is questioned, so to say, on what its inner vital force can or cannot do, what helps and what hinders it, what is the range of the inner, invisible power of its own numerical formula, what that of the care bestowed on it from outside? And then to perceive by these very considerations that *neither the one who plants is anything nor the one who waters, but the one who gives the growth, God* (1 Cor 3:7), because the work and skill applied from the outside is applied by one who also was nonetheless created and is being governed and directed invisibly by God?”

60. Cf. Arbesmann, “The Attitude of St. Augustine Toward Labor,” 249.

61. Augustine, *Gn. litt.* 8.10[.22] (CSEL 28:246–47; WSA I/13: 360–61). Augustine specifies here that this reading of the text is the “meaning that is staring us in the face.” Cf. on the toil of work as resulting from the fall, cf. Pope John Paul, *Laborem Exercens*, 27.

62. See the examples given in LSJ s.v., πόνος.

63. See the examples given in *Lewis and Short*, s.v. “labor.”

64. On Aristotle’s understanding of agriculture in specific, see John S. Marshall, “Aristotle and the Agrarians,” *The Review of Politics* 9:3 (1947): 350–61, esp. the remarks 354–55.

65. Augustine, *Gn. litt.* 8.9[.18] (CSEL 28:247; WSA I/13: 358).

66. In regard to this point, it is noteworthy that, even in thinking about a contemplative activity such as reading and interpreting scripture, Augustine highlights the labor involved in the task and how this labor is meant to correct the pride that affects the human heart in its post-fallen sinful state. Thus at *doctr. chr.* 2.6.7 Augustine speaks of reading scripture as work (*labore* [CCL 32:35]) or again later at 2.9.14 as “work and labor” (*operis et laboris* [CCL 32:40]). For Augustine, then, it is not only the case that labor assists us in undertaking a contemplative activity such as reading scripture. Rather, in his view, even a contemplative activity such as reading is now construed as a form of a labor, which he thinks is divinely granted to us to curb our pride (see esp. his remarks at *doctr. chr.* 2.6.7).

67. Augustine, *Gn. litt.* 8.10[.23] (CSEL 28:247; WSA I/13: 360).

68. Cf. Augustine’s later comments in the same vein at *Gn. litt.* 8.12[.27] (CSEL 28:250; WSA I/13: 363).

69. Cf. Pope John Paul, *Laborem Exercens*, 25.

70. Augustine, *Gn. litt.* 1.8[.14] (CSEL 28:11; WSA I/13: 174–75).

71. An even more noteworthy rejection of the ancient ideal of leisure is found at *op. mon.* 28.36 (CSEL 41:586; FC 16:384–85), where Augustine con-

trasts the “easy life of leisure” with the “narrow way” of the Gospel. That is to say: he suggests here that leisure is not only non-necessary for the sake of coming to God, but also that it is antithetical to Christian faith itself. Cf. his remarks about the “labor and suffering” that we must face on the “narrow way” at *op. mon.* 29.37 (CSEL 41:588; FC 16:387).

72. Pope Francis, “General Audience of 1st May 2013.” http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130501_udienza-generale.html.

73. *Op. mon.* 27.35 (CSEL 41:584; FC 16:383).