Robert L. Kinast

Getting the Most Out of Work

When Jesus told the parable of the sower, or made references to vineyard workers and shepherds, or drew upon the experience of merchants and toll collectors to speak of God, did the people in those occupations come away with a better sense of how God was present in their work? It is hard to tell but that seems to be what the gospel writers (and no doubt Jesus himself) hoped for. At least, that is the implication of the recurring phrase: “Let those who have ears to hear, listen.”

This idiom is a summons to pay attention to the deeper meaning of Jesus’ teaching, a meaning imbedded in stories and parables about ordinary, everyday events. Then, as now, people’s work occupied a large part of their everyday experience. And today, if not then, a large number of working people seem to want to find a deeper, spiritual meaning in their work. They want to discover how God is present in their work and how they should respond to the divine presence they feel. They want to get the most out of their work.

This desire is different from classic inquiries into business ethics, economic justice, or problem-solving in the workplace. It is a spiritual search for the presence of God in the experience of work, an interpretation of the meaning of work from the perspective of faith. It is variously called a spirituality of work, the integration of faith and work, or theological reflection on the experience of work.

Pope John Paul II gave a significant impetus to this search when he outlined in the last section of his encyclical on work (1981) “Elements for a Spirituality of Work.” The pope mentioned three such elements: participation in the creative work of God; identification with Christ, the man of work; and collaboration with Christ the redeemer, overcoming the toil of work and all it symbolizes.

The National Center for the Laity, which had come into existence a few years before the pope’s encyclical as a corrective to an overemphasis on lay ministry in the Church, has focused its efforts on promoting a spirituality of work through its newsletter Initiatives, periodic retreats for working people, and a series of booklets on the spirituality of work based on the reflections of nurses, teachers, lawyers, homemakers, business people, unemployed workers, and visual artists.

A steadily growing literature explores these and other themes relating Christian belief and the experience of work. Among the most recent titles are The Reflective Executive by Emilie Griffin, The Reinvention

In this article I would like to describe three ways of reflecting theologically on the meaning of one’s work, and thereby getting the most out of it.

REFLECTING ON THE LANGUAGE OF WORK

One way to reflect theologically on work is to pay attention to the terminology, slogans, and definitions used in the workplace. All of these can be a source of deeper meaning for those who have ears to hear. For example, listen to the ways we use the simple term “work.”

“Let’s get to work,” snaps the crew chief.

“If you’re going to win first prize, you have to work at it,” urges the coach.

“This pen isn’t working,” complains the student.

“I’m sorry. This just doesn’t work,” replies the editor to the freelance writer.

“Now remember. Don’t work too hard,” counsels the doctor to the heart patient.

“If you don’t work, you don’t eat,” quotes a prison warden.

“You think you’re too good for this kind of work?” asks a maintenance worker of a resistant newcomer.

“I’ve worked my fingers to the bone for you,” shouts a parent to an ungrateful child.

“Well, I do have my work to keep me occupied,” admits a widower who is fighting depression.

“Let’s see if we can work through this together,” says the counselor to the family.

“Everything will work out fine,” the wife assures her husband who has just been laid off from his job.

In each of these statements work has a different connotation, conveys a different feeling, and suggests a different spiritual implication. The meanings range from getting a job done (the first quote) to having a positive outlook on the future (the last quote), and all of them invite further theological commentary. The same is true for many of the specific terms used in the world of work.

Sometimes the deeper, spiritual meaning of work terminology is spelled out by those who use it. For example, Sam Walton, the founder of Wal-Mart, once said: “Employees are your biggest capital investment, so it makes sense to maintain them—their morale, their skills, and their participation.”
Ordinarily, terms like capital investment, capital improvement, and capital expenditure refer to material things like buildings and equipment. Walton gave the word a different, human meaning—one constantly reiterated in Catholic social teaching, namely, the priority of persons over things and wealth. The Second Vatican Council stated it unequivocally: “[P]eople are the source, the focus and the aim of all economic and social life” (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no. 63).

Does the business word “capital” properly have the human meaning Sam Walton gave it or was he forcing this meaning on it? Human language is remarkably flexible and terms defined in one context can have analogous meanings when used in another context. In fact, much of our theological vocabulary arose in just this way—by giving religious meaning to terms from government (minister, laity), law (sacrament), medicine (cure/care of souls), philosophy (transcendence, transubstantiation), and business (redemption).

Business slogans are another form of language that can have explicit theological meaning. Jack Welch, the CEO of GTE, likes to say that “people don’t care what you know until they know that you care.” In the emerging Information Age this saying has special significance. It is a reminder that human, relational values are more important than impersonal facts and expertise. It is also a reminder that knowledge should not be used to manipulate people or make them feel inferior—a tactic of the religious leaders of Jesus’ time which he harshly condemned (Matt 23).

Most often, of course, the language of work is used without any explicit theological reference. In this case believing people can still supply their own spiritual meanings. A good example is the phrase, “the bottom line.” In a business context this ordinarily refers to financial profit or loss. However, the same term is widely used to mean: what really counts, what is really important, what an activity is ultimately all about.

When the phrase “bottom line” is used in a company’s financial report or in conversation among workers, a Christian might hear it as an invitation to recall what the work of a company at its deepest level is all about: developing God’s creation, producing goods and services to improve people’s lives, providing for the needs of oneself and one’s family. Making a financial profit is certainly implicated in these meanings, but that is not the only meaning associated with the bottom line, and for those who have ears to hear, it is not the most important meaning.

Similarly, the word “competition” ordinarily implies rivals in the marketplace fighting for market shares and profits. But competition does not have to imply winners and losers. The word literally means seeking-with, even petitioning together, for a goal or prize. This sug-
gests a more cooperative, mutual effort, as in the concept of benchmarking or comparative practices which enable companies to learn from and stimulate one another toward continuous improvement.

This understanding of competition is much more compatible with Christian values. It recalls St. Paul prodding his communities toward full maturity in Christ (1 Cor 13) or Vatican II invoking the “friendly rivalry” of ecumenical cooperation (Decree on Ecumenism, no. 13). Interpreting the word in this way when a company speaks of “our competitors” or needing a “competitive edge” can help workers see their competitors not as enemies or threats but as protagonists, challenging them to new levels of achievement, much as individuals and groups currently stimulate one another to explore and utilize the common resources of the Internet.

Reflecting theologically on the language of work not only brings spiritual meaning to familiar terms, it can also expose misleading or deceitful meanings. When a company speaks of downsizing, it is not talking about occupying less space. It is talking about unemployment and all the disruption, anxiety, and stress that it may cause workers and their families. A company should not be allowed to avoid these painful realities by hiding behind a euphemism.

Similarly, supervisors and executives can invoke the image of a team when they really want workers to do what they are told rather than make innovative contributions to the company. To accuse a hard-working, creative person of not being a team player may be just a ploy to achieve conformity and make life easier for the one in charge.

The purpose of reflecting on the language of work is not to play a word game. It is to listen for a deeper, spiritual meaning in the language of work, relate this meaning to the tradition of faith, and keep this spiritual meaning in mind when the terms are used in the workplace. This does not mean artificially or self-righteously imposing religious language on the business world. It means translating and interpreting the language of work from a perspective of faith.

REFLECTION ON WORK EXPERIENCE

A second way of reflecting theologically on work is to concentrate on specific events which occur in the workplace. Suppose the CEO of a manufacturing firm announces that a Total Quality Management (TQM) system is to be implemented in the company. TQM is a growing trend in business management which aims at the continuous improvement of one’s work processes in order to meet or exceed customer expectations. In this approach employees are empowered to act without waiting for approval from superiors.

As these principles are explained in more detail, a number of employees sense that there is a close connection between TQM and their
faith values. They see a new possibility for affirming their faith through their work and of experiencing a deeper level of meaning in the work itself. They want to explore this possibility more fully, but they are not sure how to do it.

One option would be to follow a basic model of theological reflection. This is the approach used in supervised ministry programs to help students relate their hands-on practical experience to their classroom learning. It is also the approach used in a number of adult education programs (such as RENEW and Vatican II—Act II), which draw upon the experience of the participants as an integral part of the learning methodology. For veterans of Catholic Action, and especially the Christian Family Movement, it is the same approach neatly summarized in the phrase, see-judge-act.

Essentially theological reflection begins with a specific situation, examines it in light of Christian belief, and determines what the practical outcomes should be. The employees who want to see how TQM principles relate to their faith are already in a specific situation. They are not discussing this topic hypothetically or as an academic exercise. They are trying to determine what their actual work experience will mean spiritually in light of the announced change in management style.

The heart of the theological reflection is bringing the resources of faith to bear on the situation. In this case it means examining how TQM principles may express Christian values in business terms. As just indicated, one of the primary goals of TQM is to meet, or exceed, the customer’s expectations. This begins by surveying customers to determine what they want from the company and then analyzing the company’s work processes to assure that the customer will be truly “astonished.”

While it is true that there is a profit motive behind this strategy, it is also true that this approach affirms central Christian values. According to Dr. Judith Schloegel, vice-president of Quality Systems for PRIDE of Florida (a company that operates prison industries in that state), TQM coincides with three Christian values.

First of all, it is other (customer) oriented. TQM’s emphasis on satisfying customers harmonizes with Christianity’s orientation to the needs of others rather than gratifying oneself or using others for selfish purposes. Similarly, TQM presupposes that customers know what they want (rather than being told what they will get) and will be fair in their demands. In effect this means that customers are treated with respect and valued for who they are—principles which Christians are taught to practice, stemming from the belief that each person is made in the image of God.

A second theological implication of TQM’s customer focus is that it fosters the attitude and practice of service. This is not only a rich bib-
lical theme but the primary characteristic of Jesus’ life. As Dr. Schloegel sees it, if TQM enables workers to become genuine servants of others, it is helping them be better Christians and implicitly promoting gospel values.

The third benefit of TQM’s customer focus that Dr. Schloegel promotes is helping employees see their co-workers as internal customers. This means they give one another the same preference, the same respect, and the same service which they offer their external customers. This can make quite a difference in the way a supervisor treats an administrative assistant or the way the marketing department relates to the industry managers. It can also lessen the artificial importance of titles, status, and executive perks—all of which concretize the ideals of equality and mutual cooperation which Christianity proclaims.

These theological/spiritual meanings have direct implications for action. Employees who see the connection between TQM principles and their Christian beliefs have an added incentive to put them into practice, especially when dealing with disgruntled or lost customers. One of the plant managers in Dr. Schloegel’s company drove fifty miles to demonstrate personally the quality of their paint products to a former customer because she did not want even one person to drift away and feel they were not missed. Parallels with the image of the Good Shepherd are not inappropriate in this case.

Of course, there is also the “Dilbert” factor: inconsistent, pointless, or absurd company practices; moody, incompetent, or insulting co-workers; arbitrary discrepancies in pay scales and recognition; favoritism, lack of career opportunities, and mindless commuting. Dilbert may be a cartoon character but he is not a figment of imagination. These types of situations also call for theological reflection, not so much to solve a problem or to change a situation but to reaffirm that God is still present, to clarify how God is present, and to respond in faithful ways.

REFLECTING ON TYPES OF WORK

A third approach to reflecting theologically on work comes from Thomas Smith and his book *God on the Job*. Smith uses the term “faith-work” to describe the integration of a faith perspective with work experience. This is done primarily by pairing the type of work a person does with a corresponding work of God or theme from Christian tradition.

Smith identifies two basic kinds of work: production and service. Production corresponds to the work of God the creator; service corresponds to the work of God the redeemer (echoing though not quoting the same distinction made by John Paul II in his encyclical on work). Smith pushes this parallel further, examining five examples of each
type of work and spelling out in more detail how each one reveals the
God waiting at work.

For example, workers in a soft drink factory make a product to re-
lieve people’s thirst. This in itself is one way of exercising a corporal
work of mercy: to give drink to the thirsty. Most people would not
make this association when they think of standing at a conveyor belt
for eight hours a day bottling a soft drink, which is why Smith en-
courages this kind of theological reflection. It offsets the false di-
chotomy between the spiritual and material life and enables people to
experience the intimate connection between the two.

Among those in the realm of service, there are electricians who in-
stall or repair electrical systems, thereby using productively the laws
and power of nature. Contemporary life has become dependent on
electricity even though most people don’t understand how electricity
works and probably have a fear of it. When electrical service is inter-
rupted, people’s lives are disrupted; they can become disoriented and
even feel endangered—none of which God wants. On the other hand,
electricity helps to bring people together (through communication,
lighting, warmth or cooling) and thereby foster community—some-
thing which God does want.

Naming the theological character of various occupations constitutes
a kind of “Yellow Pages” theology. Are these parallels just a pious
flight of spiritual fantasy? It all depends on how one understands God
and God’s presence. If God continues to create and care for the world,
and if God does so through the work of human agents, then human
work is a share in the creative, caring work of God. If the spiritual and
material worlds are really interrelated, then it should be meaningful
and practical to correlate the type of work a person does with the type
of work God does and to claim the spiritual value of the experience
which results.

The Hilton Hotel in Ocala, Florida, demonstrates this by placing the
following message on each person’s pillow: “To Our Guests: In ancient
times there was a prayer for ‘The Stranger within Our Gates.’ Because
this hotel is a human institution to serve people, and not solely a
money-making organization, we hope that God will grant you peace
and rest while you are under our roof. May this room and hotel be
your ‘second’ home. May those you love be near you in thoughts and
dreams. Even though we may not get to know you, we hope that you
will be as comfortable and happy as if you were in your own home.”

CONCLUSION

Work is a rich resource for theological reflection, and theological re-
flexion can deepen and enrich the spiritual meaning of work. This
may be done by redefining familiar work terms to express the spiritual
meaning hidden within them. It may be done by reflecting on specific incidents to discover how God is present in them and how to respond faithfully to that divine presence. It may be done by pairing the type of work with a type of divine activity or theological meaning. None of these techniques is difficult, but all of them require a little time, a few companions, and ears that are willing to hear.

REFERENCES


Robert L. Kinast, a priest of the Archdiocese of Atlanta, directs The Center for Theological Reflection at Indian Rocks Beach, Florida, and has just published Let Ministry Teach: A Guide to Theological Reflection (The Liturgical Press).