



DIGNITY OF WORK IN THE BUILDING OF PEACE
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Traveling with a few friars through the Colombian countryside, in route to the Marian Shrine of Chinchiquera, I found myself on an ABC-tour visiting again and again “Another Beautiful Church” along the way. While praying in one of these churches, two statues caught my attention because the saints were holding objects purchased in a local home goods store. Saint Isidore the Laborer was holding a shovel with the barcode sticker very visible, and the Peruvian Saint Martin de Porres was wielding a broom which seemed to have been recently used.

This blending of religious statues and modern household items reminded me of the image that the Gospel of Saint John offers of Jesus, immediately after His resurrection. We are told that Mary Magdalene, having arrived at the tomb, supposed Jesus to be the gardener! This is not a Jesus in dazzling white robes. Rather, Jesus is seen dressed as a common laborer wielding a shovel and perhaps with his broom propped up against the stone that had been rolled away.

“When people in your ministry mistake you for the janitor, you will have found an important way of truly being the presence of the risen Jesus, who was once mistaken for a common gardener”. This sage advice, which I received years ago from an older friar, always reminds me of my own need to cultivate an appreciation for the dignity of labor in my own life.

Early in his pontificate, Pope Francis spoke of this during a General Audience saying, *“Work is fundamental to the dignity of the person. Work, to use an image, ‘anoints’ with dignity, fills us with dignity, makes us similar to God who has worked and still works, who always acts”* (1 May 2013). So, in that Colombian church I found myself wondering if I truly recognized such an anointing of others and in turn afford equal respect to people regardless of their job, not seeing any occupation as better or superior.

The Franciscan way of life is rooted in manual labor. In the small church of San Damiano the young Francis of Assisi prayed before the crucifix and heard the voice of Jesus say, *“Francis, go repair my house, which as you see, is falling completely to ruin”.* Francis’ first response to this “anointing with dignity” was to give money to the priest to keep a lamp burning before the image of the cross. Then he began his work, the literal rebuilding of the church of San Damiano. During the three years following this moment of conversion, Francis being filled with the light of dignity through work, attracted others to join him in rebuilding churches.

Francis and the early friars became living stones. With the laying of each physical stone, they too fitted together their very selves to become a church, a community that was sensitive to the intentions of the master builder. This is why these Franciscan laborers rebuilt churches without touching the foundations. Christ the architect was also the firm foundation in which they would discover their own dignity and fundamental goodness, to better prepare themselves for the preaching of peace.

When the church dedicated to the Mother of God, the Portziuncula, had been restored, Francis and his followers prayed within the church. They opened the Book of the Gospels to the passage where it is described how Jesus sent his disciples into the world to preach, to work: *“And he called to him the twelve, and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the*

unclean spirits. He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics” (Mark 6:7-9).

After having had the passage explained to him, Francis exclaimed, *“This is what I wish, this is what I am seeking, this is what I long to do with all of my heart”*. In this context of the fruits of his labor, in the last of the churches he had rebuilt, Francis heard again the voice of Jesus. Through the Gospel, the Lord called him and the friars to amplify their work of rebuilding by preaching repentance through the message of peace. We are told that when Francis preached, he would always say, *“The Lord give you peace”*.

Gathered in Medellín, Colombia in 1968, the bishops of Latin America (CELAM) taught how such a preaching of peace must defend the dignity of all persons, of workers, and of labor. For the symbol of peace rests in the integral development of a person to become an agent of his or her own history, through an anointing with dignity. Today, Franciscans give living witness to the insights of the Medellín gathering, which saw the building of peace is a “permanent task” carried out by Christians as the “artisans of peace”.

During my ABC-tour in Colombia, I encountered many statues of Saint Francis. All of them had Francis gazing lovingly at a cross or holding a Book of the Gospels as he raised his hands to preach peace. While these images certainly highlight Francis’ relationship with the Lord Jesus, the bringer of peace, they fail to capture the specificity of the dignity of labor to which the Lord personally called Francis and similarly anoints Franciscans today.

I cannot help but wonder if it might not be more appropriate for an occasional redo of the statues of Saint Francis, in the same manner of the statues of Isidore the Laborer with his spade and Martin de Porres sweeping with an actual broom. How much more appropriate would it be if Francis were to be found standing at the base of a ladder, with stones around his feet, holding a bucket of mortar and a trowel in his hands? Of course, with such an image one might too easily mistaken him for a common laborer, as someone once mistook the risen Lord, the Prince of Peace, for a gardener.

