

## Chapter 9: MANUAL LABOR

*“Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands.”* (Psalm 90:17)

The idea of manual labor as a tool for contemplation is old, old, old. The Rule of St. Benedict from the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, which governs most monastic communities in the Western Hemisphere, explains it as half of the *ora et labora* (*pray and labor*) existence of monks and nuns. Holy Redeemer has chosen to put a great emphasis on manual labor because the Mothers find it to be good for body and soul. What follows is from a teaching they prepared many years ago.

### Why We Work

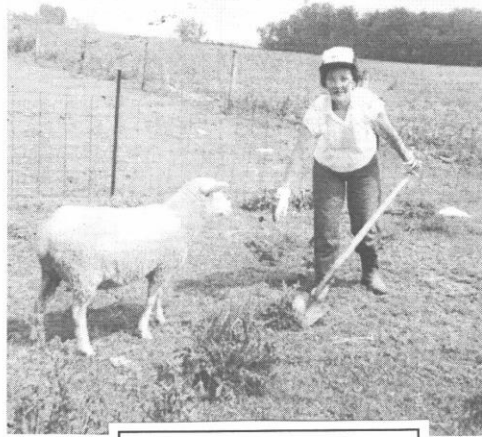
Some things simply need to be done, and if we don't do them nobody will. St. Benedict looked upon work in a highly traditional way. Its purposes were to provide a means of subsistence, to be an ascetical discipline in harmony with the rest of life, and to produce a surplus for almsgiving to others in need. The nature of work, or rather our attitude toward it, can change when we see that it is God who marks out this line of duty for us. Every task can become a service to Him. But, whatever our attitude, some activities simply need to be done.

This story was shared by New Skete Monastery in Cambridge, New York: “A certain brother went to see Abba Sylvanus on the Mountain of Sinai. When he got there, he saw the brothers working hard, so he said to the monks, ‘Why are you working for the bread that perishes (John 6:27)? Was it not Mary who chose the better part, namely to sit at the feet of the Lord, and not to bother with the work (Luke 10:42)?’ Abba Sylvanus said to one of his disciples, ‘Zachary, give this brother a book and show him to his cell.’ When the ninth hour came, the monk reading in his cell began watching the door, expecting someone would be sent to call him to the meal. When no one came, he got up, went to find the abba, and said to him, ‘Have the brothers not eaten today, Abba?’ The old man replied, ‘Oh, certainly, they just finished dinner.’ The brother then said, ‘Well, why didn't anyone call me?’ The old man said to him, ‘But you're such a spiritual man, surely you don't need food that perishes. We, being carnal, want to eat, which is why we work. But you have chosen the better part; you read the whole day long and can get along without food.’ When he heard these words the brother said, ‘Forgive me Abba.’ The old man said to him, ‘Mary needs Martha. It is really thanks to Martha that Mary is praised.’ “

One specific reason that the Mothers work, or rather, the specific things they choose to work on, has to do with the name they have chosen. They want to be involved in redemption, to do physically redemptive work. The Ladoga house, Shepherd's House, and Agape House were all in need of some tender loving care and lots of manual labor to make them pleasant places of reflection and hospitality. They needed to be put in order as a reflection of lives being put in order. They needed beautifying to reflect the beauty of the Lord. *“One thing have I asked of the Lord, and that shall I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life to behold the beauty of the Lord and to meditate in His temple.”* (Psalm 27:4) Holy Redemption!



Mother Pilar and Carol cleaning out the barn



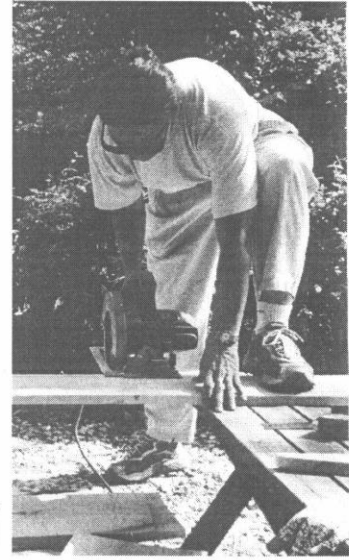
Mother Pilar's own mother digging thistles from field



Regular household laundry, dishwashing, and cooking



Gardening



Carol building a fence on an EOC workday on the farm

## The Nature Of Our Work

Hopefully, our motivation toward work is different from that of the world at large. Profit, productivity, competition, and status are not the rewards we of Holy Redeemer are seeking. All our goods are held in common. Both communal and individual labor result to the benefit of all.

The nature of tasks is chosen to sustain us economically and also to contribute to growth and well-being. That well-being can be for those a part of Holy Redeemer, their guests, their animals, or those who receive the work of their hands.

Work was given dignity as far back as the Garden of Eden when God made Adam responsible first for the cultivation and care of the garden, then gave him authority and care over the animals. It is a privilege to work in and with the divine creation. St. Francis (13<sup>th</sup> Century) said, "I worked with my hands, and I wish to work, and I wish firmly that all the other brothers should work at some labor which is compatible with honesty." (THE IDEALS OF ST. FRANCIS by Hilarin Felder, 1925)

## Following In The Monastic Tradition

The picture most people have of a monastic is of a cerebral individual totally given over to pietism and prayer, who couldn't be bothered with the practical demands of everyday living. However, authentic monastic tradition is conscious of the integrated nature and balance of the whole of life.

St. Benedict as well as St. Basil the Great (4<sup>th</sup> Century), both responsible for monastic communities, put manual labor on the same plane as meditation. Their view of work has affected monastic daily practice for hundreds of years. As a result, much of the development of European civilization is the result of the quality of what could be called the monastic work ethic. That attitude toward work emigrated to America.

In the monastery work can be a tangible expression of the vow of obedience. The whole point of anyone's committing themselves to obedience is to learn to obey God wholeheartedly, to express humble submission. Tasks assigned to you by others can be a testing ground. Work can be undertaken unwillingly, half-heartedly, or slovenly. Work can also be undertaken eagerly, conscientiously, even lovingly. The worker chooses. As you mature in the way you work, working may even become a gift to reflect what St. Paul declares in 2 Corinthians 9:7, "*God loves a cheerful giver.*"

Two further Scriptures come to mind. The first is the Lord's parable from Matthew 21:28-30: "*A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' And he answered, 'I will not'; but afterward he repented and went. And the man went to the second son and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, Sir,' but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?'"*

The second is from St. Paul: "*Slaves, give entire obedience to your earthly masters, not merely as an outward show of service, to curry favor with men, but with single-mindedness, out of reverence for the Lord. Whatever you are doing, put your whole heart into it, as if you were doing it for the Lord and not for men, knowing that there is a Master who will give you your heritage as a reward for your service. Christ is the Master whose slaves you must be.*" (Colossians 3:22-24)

## The Sense of Work

If you know anyone who loves to garden, they will tell you they love to get their hands in the dirt. There is something important about your hands coming into contact with what you are doing. Touch grounds you to the physical reality of your world. There is a humorous saying that goes: “Don't be so heavenly minded that you're no earthly good.” Hands-on work helps. Of course, it is not just the sense of touch that gets involved. We are wonderfully made, and sights and smells and tastes can all be involved to enhance the experience of work.

## Is Work Spiritual?

Verbal prayers and silent mental prayers are not all there is to prayer. Cannot work well-done be an expression of thankfulness for skill? Is creative work not praise to the Creator in whose image we are made? Work done for the sake of another is, in a mystery, work done for the Lord Himself. (See Matthew 25:34-40) According to 1 Corinthians 6:19 the body is the “*temple of God*”, and active work is good physical exercise for the body.

Work, especially really taxing physical work, can force us to grapple with our sinfulness. Selfishness, self-centeredness, laziness, cursing, lack of self-control, impatience, bitterness, slothfulness, envy, and ungratefulness are just some of the “issues” which can rise to the surface in the midst of manual labor. St. Peter warns us in 1 Peter 5:8, “*Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.*” Ever found work to be a battlefield for your spirit?

Work and spirituality are not at opposite poles in our lives. We can choose to view work as the opportunity to express our existing relationship with God, to encounter His presence everywhere, to appreciate God's handiwork around us, to seek out more experience and knowledge of God, to mirror His kingdom to others, and to accomplish tasks He has set for us. Manual labor, in particular, can free the mind to focus on these things while the hands are busy.

Sometimes others can put your meaning into words better than you can yourself. This is quoted from the 19<sup>th</sup> Century writer Gerard Manley Hopkins in THE QUOTIDIAN MYSTERIES: Laundry, Liturgy and “Women's Work” by Kathleen Norris, 1998:

“It is not only prayer that gives God glory, but work. Smiting an anvil, sawing a beam, white-washing a wall, driving horses, sweeping, scouring, everything gives God some glory if being in His grace you do it as your duty. To go to communion worthily gives God great glory, but to take food in thankfulness and temperance gives Him glory too. To lift up the hands in prayer gives God glory, but a man with a dungfork in his hand, a woman with a slop pail, give Him glory, too. God is so great that all things give Him glory if you mean that they should.”