

Statement for Website
From Fr. Michael Basque

01 May 2020

For thirty-one years my father worked at the General Motors plant in Oshawa. While his job provided him with a good income as well as benefits with which he could support a family, for him work was about more than earning a living. Although he was a common labourer who could be replaced easily, he took pride in his work and put a part of himself in every job he finished. His example taught me regardless of the job you have, there is something sacred about using the talents God gave you to serve others.

Today is the Memorial of St. Joseph the Worker. In the Gospel reading, some people refer to Jesus as “the carpenter’s son” when wondering from where his wisdom and deeds of power came. Clearly, they thought someone from such a working class background should not possess these abilities. The fact that Joseph was a carpenter (likely the kind who made furniture rather than a construction worker according to Scripture scholars) can be found in several Gospel verses. It is possible Joseph found work when a major construction project was undertaken at Sepphoris near Nazareth. Although Christ’s mission was a religious one (to save humanity from its sins), it required him to encounter the fullness of the human condition. As his earthly father, Joseph would have enabled Jesus to experience all dimensions of life from a human perspective, including work. It is likely Joseph would have taught his son the carpentry trade and worked with him until his death (likely some time before Jesus began his ministry). The fact the Son of God worked as a carpenter highlights the spiritual dimension of labour which can be traced back to the Book of Genesis where the man was told by God to till the garden and keep it. Clearly, work has more than economic value as shown by the example of Jesus.

During this Covid-19 pandemic, our society has become conscious of how certain jobs were underappreciated in the past. Truck drivers, cleaners, Personal Support Workers in Long Care Facilities for the elderly and clerks who stock grocery store shelves are now being called heroes in newspapers and on television. Those employed in these jobs keep the supply of key goods flowing to us, prevent the spread of the virus through surface contact and care for the vulnerable within our society. I am certain these individuals appreciate the recognition and occasional free lunch. Although I am not claiming to speak on their behalf, I think they might appreciate knowing something else: how will they be treated when this crisis is over? Will the truck drivers who work such long hours be replaced by self-driving vehicles? Will those who are constantly re-stocking grocery store shelves be replaced by robots? Artificial intelligence has made such changes possible in the near future. When a company needs to cut costs during tough times (which could happen after the pandemic), the temptation to forget about past loyalties will be strong. Will governments facing mounting deficits because of the increased spending required during the crisis be tempted to privatize publicly owned operations which usually results in job cuts and lower wages? These are serious conversations we need to have now.

Catholics and other people of faith can contribute to this discussion by reminding others work has more than economic value. Work is done by people who have dignity and make up our society. They have the skills needed to help our world a better place. They need a living wage in

order to look after themselves and their families. They need to have safe working conditions and be shown respect by those who employ them. Religious traditions point us towards something beyond satisfying our immediate material needs and can help build bonds between various groups of people.

This Covid-19 pandemic has required a lot of people to work harder. Let us hope it can also get us to think harder and longer about the meaning and value of work.