

Spirit at Work

Ministry in an age of cubicles and office parks

ANTHONY SHONIS | AUGUST 31, 2009

For me creativity and frustration are two sides of the same coin. And one of the most frustrating times for me as a priest was when I was appointed a pastor at the age of 55. I had spent my entire priest life as a teacher—high school, seminary and university. I had not worked one day in a parish and now I was a pastor of a church with a large Hispanic population. What do pastors do? Well I began an activity that proved so fruitful that I have continued it for nine years. I began visiting parishioners at their workplace.

Now on the Labor Day weekend I offer the parishioners of whatever church I am stationed at (I have long since ceased to be a pastor and am now a parochial vicar) to sign up for a workplace visit. And in the last nine years I have visited about 250 parishioners.

It works like this: On Labor Day I preach at all the Masses on the spirituality of work, or the dignity of labor or on the church and unions. Then I invite the congregation to sign up for a workplace visit. I tell them it will only last 10 minutes, and that I am not seeking a tour of their plant or office. I simply want to talk with them briefly at their workbench about their job.

Often I will begin with the two questions that Studs Terkel asked people in his book *Working*. "What you do?" and "How do you feel about what you do?" After we talk about their work, I give them a copy of a workers' prayer by Cardinal John Henry Newman. I then write up the visit for next Sunday's bulletin. At the end of the semester, (I still think as a college teacher) I mail each of the workers I visited an invitation to meet with me for a one-hour group discussion on the relationship between faith and work. At the end of that session I give them a copy of Gregory F. Augustine Pierce's book, *The Mass is Never Ended*, which seeks to connect the Sunday liturgy with the work week that follows; and a complimentary subscription to "Initiatives," a newsletter published by the National Center of the Laity that addresses workplace spirituality.

This has been a wonderfully enlightening experience for me. When people come to Mass they come from somewhere; namely, their home and their workplace. When I look out over the congregation at Mass, I now see not only families but workers. For me this is the beginning of the Sunday / Monday connection. After all, outside of their family, where do most people spend their time? At work. And isn't this where they meet the people whose values are often most different from theirs? As Pierce never tires of saying, this is where the rubber meets the road, where people really do carry out the dismissal rite (actually a commission rite) to spread the Gospel.

After the Protestant Reformation, when the church tried to regain those areas of Europe that favored the Reform, one of the strategies' involved getting priests out of their rectories and encouraging them to make home visitations—and it worked! In the early part of the 20th Century the French priest worker movement enjoyed similar success as brothers and priests worked in the factories side by side with French workers. In my ministry I try to apply the same approach to the modern era. The church is present not only in the suburbs where we build our homes but also in the industrial parks where we work.

The author [Joe Holland](#) has written that the spiritual energy of our institutions comes no longer from priests and nuns but from dedicated lay people. Practicing the spirituality of work, and helping people understand that work is not simply an economic activity but rather a way for us to cooperate in God's plan for a better world, is exactly what Pope John Paul II had in mind when he talked about a new evangelization. And besides, where else could a priest meet

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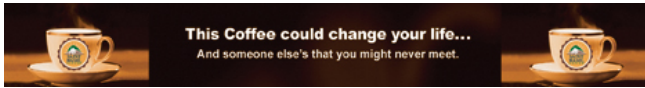
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some many of his parishioners in so short a period of time?



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