

# “He Worked with Human Hands”. Work as Human Action and Christ’s Action\*

**CÉSAR IZQUIERDO**

Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona

[cizquier@unav.es](mailto:cizquier@unav.es)

ORCID: 0000-0003-0679-0421

**Abstract.** The complexity of work in our time presents new challenges for a theology that understands this fundamental dimension of existence and gives it an integrating, truly human meaning and a path to holiness. In order to embrace all modern forms of work, a definition of work is proposed as an action that involves the whole person and leads to fulfilment through work. Not only is work not a punishment, but the punishment would be not to be able to work. In work there is a convergence between nature and spirit. In order for the relationship between them to be harmoniously realised, a mediation is necessary that can only be exercised by man in which both meet. This avoids the risk of materialism and spiritualism in the understanding of work. But this mediation is limited to „this“ concrete work. In order for there to be a mediation that includes all work, a Mediator is necessary, and that Mediator is Christ. The work that Jesus of Nazareth carried out was an exercise of his pro-existence and was therefore redemptive and salvific. It is in union with Christ that human work finds its ultimate meaning and transcendent efficacy.

**Keywords:** labor, sense of life, action, mediation, pro-existence.

---

\* This paper is part of the project “The meaning of work in recent theology”, of the Faculty of Theology, and is framed within the line ‘Work, care and development’ of the Strategy 2025 of the University of Navarra.

The title of this paper is taken from the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (GS) of the Second Vatican Council concerning Christ, the Incarnate Word of God, Who has placed Himself in solidarity with our human nature. *“He worked with human hands, thought with a human mind, acted with a human will and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin”* (GS 22). The preceding words of the document express the foundation of the solidarity of Christ with men. After affirming that Christ is the *“perfect man that has returned to Adam’s descendants the divine likeness, which was deformed by the first sin”*, the document establishes that human nature -assumed but not absorbed- has also been elevated in us to an incomparable dignity, concluding with the audacious affirmation: *“The Son of God by His Incarnation has united Himself, in a certain way, with every man.”*

By emphasizing work as one of the essential features of the life of Jesus Christ, we want to indicate from the outset the source of inspiration for our theological reflection on human work. This reflection has its origin and heart, to which one should constantly turn, in the mystery of Christ, Mediator between God and men (1 Tm 2:5). Because He is the Mediator, nothing human is alien to Him: whether it be work considered theoretically, or the situations that make it not just hard or tiring, but even unworthy of man, enslaving, oppressive, dehumanizing, unjust... These conditions have also been assumed by Christ *Who “in has united Himself, in a certain way, with every man”*. In any case, it is necessary that a clear distinction be established between work in itself and the conditions in which this work is done; only in this way will it be possible to indicate theological paths for a consideration of work as a sanctifying and sanctifiable reality.

## 1. Towards a definition of work

The first task we face is that of precisely defining the meaning of *work*, a challenge faced by all those who reflect on it in our time (Granada 2024, 377–394). As with other realities, we find ourselves with a paradox: we identify it without difficulty in the various forms in which it is imme-

diately presented to us and, at the same time, we find ourselves in the predicament of not being able to find a definition that encompasses all these manifestations of work. The multiplication of types of human action brought about daily by technical progress continues to complicate the search for a conceptual synthesis adequate to the complex reality of work. For this reason, it seems prudent to renounce, at least for the moment, a complete definition of work and limit ourselves to pointing out the nucleus that appears in the various proposals for definition. This core or common basis will necessarily be conceptually clear and, at the same time, indeterminate and very general so that it can be realized in the different senses in which we speak of work.

### 1.1. Work is action

At the beginning of the encyclical *Laborem exercens*, John Paul II states: "‘Work’ means every kind of action performed by man regardless of its characteristics or circumstances" (John Paul II, 1981). The ultimate core of all work is the action which, because it is human, is directed to an end. It therefore responds in some way to the intelligence and the will and becomes reality in something objective. In work understood as action there predominates the subjective aspect over the objective. In this sense it is particularly close to the philosophies of action in which the category "action" is an essential element of the constitution of the person: the person transcends himself in the action that manifests itself by establishing interpersonal relations and, at the same time, as an objective action that modifies nature.

Without entering into a discussion of moral approaches, the general framework which, with *Laborem exercens*, identifies work with action is necessary if work is not to be reduced to socio-laboral or economic schemes of performance and profit which not infrequently end in short circuits. This explanation is shared by some and disputed by others. Thus, for example, Todolí states: "Work in itself is action. Human work is the action of man in his action that transforms things" (Todolí 1952, 568). For this reason, strictly speaking, only man is capable of work (Todolí 1952, 568). Clavier, on the other hand, does not accept the identification of work with

action because he thinks that work is only a “variety of action” (Clavier 1944, 95–96). Ruyer, for his part, specifies that work is identified with the freedom that is proper not to being but to the act, and is *freedom-for* that is directed towards a value (Ruyer 1948, 31. 42).

A first consequence is that, as a human action, work is a core element of the fact of simply living, if one accepts, with Blondel’s philosophy of action, that the primary expression of life is action. At the beginning of his work *Action* (1893), the French philosopher asks himself about the meaning of life, and in this context, he writes: “I act, but without even knowing what action consists of [...] Action is a fact in my life, the most general and the most constant of all; it is the expression in me of universal determinism” (Blondel 1893, VI–VIII). From this we can conclude that the consideration of work as human action that does something useful allows us to grasp its transcendence with respect to the being of the person and its intrinsic relational and interpersonal sense.

If –in this still general sense– work is determined by action, we already have an initial answer to the question which many ask themselves concerning the vocation to work. Luther considered this question, and Lutherans of our time are considering it with regard to the concept of *beruf*, which can mean vocation and profession (Borne-Henry, 49). Some authors, like Volf, distance themselves from the concept of vocation as understood by Luther which –he affirms– corresponds to a “protological way of thinking” (Volf 2018, 93) , and proposes instead a pneumatological understanding of work based on a theology of charisms according to which work has to be seen from the perspective of the action of the Spirit of God (Volf 2018, 83) . Others reject work outright because they interpret it as opposed to life and, from a Christian point of view, it has to be limited as much as possible (Posadas 2017, 356–357) .

In the Catholic sphere, the question of the vocation to work also arises, although in another context: the “vocation” to work is a subject studied in the field of spiritual theology as a basic condition of the call of every man to holiness. But, in any case, if work is, in the first instance, action that does something useful, the question of the vocation to work is simplified, since this vocation is included in the call to existence. For this reason, the

affirmation in Genesis that God created man to work (cf. Gen 2, 15) is not something added, but an explanation of the original vocation to existence, given that work is one of the manifestations of living. Only one who does something lives humanly, and the one gives up that action –the one who does not work– does not live humanly. As Chevrot says, what would have been a severe punishment for man after the fall would be a condemnation to idleness (Chevrot 1939, 105). For their part, Borne and Henry write, "Man's dignity lies in his vocation to work" (Borne-Henry, 17).

If we understand work in a transcendental sense, that is, as an action that does something useful and, therefore, as a core element of existence, it is understandable that neither in the Old Testament nor in the New Testament do we find a specific teaching for what we call a theology of work. The wisdom books offer considerations on the conditions of work, its meaning, its effects, but not a theology of work, because work is not separate from living itself. Something similar happens in the New Testament, where we do not find substantial and independent elements on work, but on life in Christ, which will be the basis for the elaboration of an authentic theology of work.

Only if the vocation to work were to radically add something to the call to live, one would expect further insights into work. But this is not necessary because work is involved in living as persons. What, instead, the theology of work must ask itself sooner or later is the question of the relationship between nature and grace, which will necessarily lead to the examination of an understanding of the human and the divine in Christ. We shall see this later.

The assertion that work is human action that does something useful obviously needs to be further determined in order to be beneficial in dealing with the complex situations in which this action is involved. First of all, it is necessary to integrate the subjective sense of work with the objective one. In the objective sense, work refers to its effect, which is, in one way or another, the modification of reality. The work done can be qualified as good, mediocre, beautiful, useful or useless, etc. "A perfect work", we say of a craft, a repair or the artistic creation of an object. Also belonging to the objective sense is human activity quantitatively con-

sidered or subject to contractual rules: a mechanic's hour's work costs 60 euros; or the working day comprises eight hours of work; or a uniform must be worn at work. Similarly, work understood as a trade or profession has an objective meaning: my job is plumbing, or I work as a proofreader.

For a theology of work, the objective sense cannot be separated from the subjective. Objectively, a "work" done perfectly by a machine is not really work and is therefore not subject to further theological or moral considerations, but only to technical ones. On the other hand, the perfectly finished result that a person has achieved through his work implies an exercise of virtue and, in this sense, is a necessary condition for it to be part of the sanctification of the subject and, consequently, of the theology of work.

The theology of work takes into account both the subjective sense of the action that is performed and the perfection of what is performed. The object performed must be good (*finis operis*) and must be subject to the agent's purpose (*finis operantis*), which is the determining factor here (Delhay 1957, 434). In turn, the agent's purpose can be directed at things themselves or at persons. Thus, we speak of work as human action that transforms things and, understood in this way, it connects with the objective sense because the transformation of things must be done virtuously, which implies the quality of the action and the usefulness of the object.

In terms of purpose, work can be directed towards achieving benefits for the agent. This is done in two ways: by using work as a means to achieve something else (salary, position, fame), or by finding in work the perfection of the one who performs it. In the second sense, the worker gains experience that makes him an "expert" in that which he carries out, a greater capacity to carry out the object, a greater connaturality with the work that is being pursued, etc.

Similar to the above, but in a more liberal sense, work can be the natural and joyful performance of activities in which the agent finds a way to fulfil himself, to perfect his faculties and to enrich himself inwardly. These are actions which are free of economic or social interest or in which this interest is at least secondary. This type of work can be carried out not

only by those who are free of concern for their own or their family's subsistence, but also, to a certain extent, by all those who devote some time to the cultivation of *otium*. These include, among others, play, physical exercise and cultural activities. In these, the importance of the subject's purpose is particularly noticeable: the same sporting activity can be for one person rest and for another (professional) work.

Human action, the work of the highest anthropological and moral quality is that which is moved by the desire to serve others. In this case, the *finis operis* and the *finis operantis* are identified as the result of the love that leads to acting for the good of others. The object of this work is the good that is done for the benefit of those who need it. There is a transformation of reality so that it serves those who live in it, who are perfected by the action of others. And as for the purpose of those who act, one discovers that it is free of personal interest and that it seeks to make the conditions of life possible, easier or more pleasant for others. We will return to this later.

## 1.2. Work, an action of the whole person

The objective and subjective aspect of work is related to man's somatic-spiritual constitution. Work is the action of the person, and therefore responds to the natural-cosmic and spiritual dimensions that are proper to him. Since we are talking about matter and spirit that is not abstract but realized in the concrete, it is worth asking how man, by working, nourishes matter with spirit. We are aware that the question is by no means a superficial one but is ultimately connected with the problem of the relationship between nature and spirit, which has arisen in modern philosophy since Descartes. It is also the problem that was already faced by idealist philosophy and that continues to this day, in which for many people the integration of the material and the spiritual remains problematic.

There is a materialist and a spiritualist view of work. For the former, work is reduced to the articulation of complex interactions of the mechanical and nervous systems of individuals within a social organism governed by forces that compete with each other for control of processes of domination in society and in the state. When the predominant force

is capital, control is exercised by a group of powerful people who impose themselves on the social mass and may be tempted to abuse the workers. If collective organizations overcome the powerful, then the mass of equal individuals who compose it achieves power, but with the result – repeatedly proven – that the theoretical equality of all drifts towards a reduced caste that administers power and imposes control over society by force (as has happened in communist regimes); work is then theoretically liberating, but little by little it ends up subjected to processes of depersonalizing control. In both cases, a mechanistic view of work is imposed.

There is also a spiritualist idea of work that sees it as an activity of the body, alien to the spirit. In work, the spirit would not express itself through the body, but there would be a certain opposition between them. In its classic version, work – mainly manual work – was seen as a necessity to support subsistence, to avoid idleness, to exercise oneself to curb concupiscence and to give charitable help to one's brothers and sisters (Aquinas, II–II, q. 187, a. 3). "Work frees from the sorrows of the spirit and is what makes the poor happy", read the corresponding article in the *Encyclopaedia* (Delhay 1957, 450). In the modern version, work is still seen as a burden due to our bodily dimension, which we have to bear and try to alleviate through technical development. The activity that cultivates the higher faculties of the spirit is of a different kind and is not available to all, so that this view inevitably leads to one form of elitism or another.

Neither materialism nor spiritualism offers answers to the questions raised by work that is both bodily and spiritual action, and only in this way is it truly human and an immediate expression of living<sup>1</sup>. One works with the mind and with freedom, and one works with the members of the body; one also works *with* and *for* others. And from this fully integrated action comes both joy and weariness.

As work belongs to the natural unfolding of human existence, what specifically accompanies it is not sorrow but joy. The joy of living is the natural state that flows from the very depths of being and is manifested

---

<sup>1</sup> An atheistic view of work has no answer to the questions posed to the worker: what does work bring me in human terms? If not for financial gain, why work? Is there more to it than product and salary? What is the point of service?

in the dynamism of life in which being itself is re-created. Humanly performed action is therefore the source of the joy that is confirmed in the effects of the action. "*Quand l'homme a bien travaillé, il chante*" (Chevrot 1939, 106). And Borne and Henry do not hesitate to affirm that "true joy is the reward of work" (Borne-Henry 1944, 17). For this reason, to renounce work would mean falling into one form or another of meaninglessness, of absurdity in which life itself is cut short and reduced to the violent state of doing nothing, that is to say, of living less. It is not, therefore, an ideal to reach a state in which it is not necessary to work; it would rather be a condemnation. Just as we are made to live, we are made to work.

The fatigue of work, the tedium of repeating the same thing, the wear and tear, the conditions that make it unpleasant and difficult –like the so frequent mobbing (Vveinhardt 2023, 175–195) are the consequence of the original downfall that permanently affected human nature and interpersonal relationships. The world ceased to be the garden in which man's work and the cosmos met in perfect harmony. After sin, the "sweat of the brow" (Gen 3:19) is a sign of the clash of realities, of the resistance of things and of the uncertainty in which man often moves in relation to them. In addition, relationships with others are also altered, so that one must be prepared to encounter selfishness, the desire to dominate others, exclusion, exploitation or violence against one's fellow human beings. All these attitudes have a particular field of action in the world of work, which then becomes a place or an occasion for unjust suffering. This is how we can understand why slavery has been in place for centuries.

As was affirmed above, one works with the mind and with freedom, and one works with the members of one's body. A very special expression of the interaction of spirit and body can be found in the human face, in which the inner world of the person is revealed. When we look at someone's face, we find signs of what he is experiencing, of what affects him, of his dispositions, etc. In the order of action, what appears on the face has an extension in a human limb that is particularly expressive of the natural-spiritual co-action that takes place at work: in the hand. It is not the only one, no doubt, because we also have the spoken word. But the hand has the characteristic that with it we do things, we work, we relate,

we modify, we express ourselves. This is why this integration has been formulated with the expression “thinking with the hands” (De Rougemont 1972).

In his work, Clavier beautifully describes what the hands of the artist, the craftsman, the worker, the nurse, the missionary, and the bearer of the Eucharist do. They are all expressions of a “work of the spirit” (Clavier 1944, 21). Indeed, the hand is the basic instrument with which the subject expresses, and at the same time realizes, intentions and decisions that have their origin in the spirit and are prolonged in a member of the human body that becomes a “tool”. Some animals, such as primates, also have “hands”, but compared to those of humans it can be seen that they are actually claws, since only human hands contain a surplus value of meaning because the agency of the spirit can be seen in their gesture. This happens, for example, when the hand shows the will to take possession of or to let go of something it grasps or lets go of. With the hand we show our generosity or our indigence by extending it to ask or by opening it to give. Faced with the risk of falling or of losing something, the hand immediately comes to hold or support. For the artist, the hand is the channel through which the beauty conceived internally takes shape in the drawing that creates or reflects reality, in painting or sculpture, and even in music. In writing, with the hand we reflect the world within us in texts capable of containing lofty thoughts, fiery poems or literary works. The hand serves us to express signs, to encourage, to threaten, to express joy. The hand wields the sword, it strikes, it expresses anger or reflects the enthusiasm of victory; the hand invites or rejects, caresses, leaves the mark of one’s own identity. The hand, finally, is the fundamental instrument of work in manual labor as well as in the rest; even the most automated machines must be programmed with the hands: the hand is the extension of our will and of the ability to carry out all kinds of work. The hands, finally, move naturally in the movement of the person when praying or worshipping God. In the hands, therefore, we find a harmonious and effective interaction of nature and spirit.

“Man’s hand is the instrument of his action, it is the symbol of his capacity to face the world, to ‘dominate it’”, Benedict XVI said in a homily

addressed to priests. Commenting on the liturgical gesture of the laying on and anointing of hands, he continued: "The Lord laid His hands on us and now He wants our hands to become His hands in the world. He wants them to be no longer instruments for taking things, people, the world for ourselves, to take possession of it, but rather for transmitting His divine touch, placing themselves at the service of His love. He wants them to be instruments for serving and, therefore, an expression of the mission of the whole person who becomes the guarantor of it and brings it to men". And he concluded: "If man's hands symbolically represent his faculties and, in general, technology as the power to have the world at one's disposal, then the anointed hands must be a sign of his capacity to give, of the creativity to shape the world with love; and for that, without doubt, we need the Holy Spirit" (Benedict XVI, 2006) .

### 1.3. Mediator and mediation in the theology of work

In his work *Towards a Theology of Work*, Chenu quotes an ancient medieval theologian who said that God, in a creative expansion, wanted to bring His love to all things, and "could do so only through mediation and through an original being who, connected with matter, would carry within it the destinies of love" (Chenu 1955, 25)<sup>2</sup>. This original being in which matter and spirit converge and which consequently is a mediator between them is man.

The mediation of man is realized in the work he does, that is to say, in *human work*, which is not just effort (which could be mechanical) but action endowed with purpose, which modifies nature and has social value. The premises for such an affirmation have to do with the relations between matter (the cosmos) and spirit that are found in reality-transforming work, and to which we have already referred above. "The impassable discontinuity of matter and spirit does not break this unity of the history which has man as an agent, constituted as such by the Creator". It is man himself who performs the function of mediator in the relationship be-

---

<sup>2</sup> In a footnote, Chenu points out that this is the author of the *Ars catholicce fidei*, at the end of the 12th century, probably Alain de Lille (PL 210, col. 607-608).

tween matter and spirit that takes place in work: being constituted at the same time by both elements, man is suitable “to bring into history the mystery of the spirit” (Rondet, 1955, 42).

But this mediation is limited to the concrete history of *this* man, of *this* work. The question of how a mediation could reach all work of all times, of all places, and of all people still remains. This mediation could not be carried out by a Humanity that encompasses all men, of all times, because such a humanity does not exist, but is the fruit of a conceptual generalization. It would require “hands” that transcend the created, capable of expressing the full encounter between nature and the spirit. The famous text of Irenaeus that sees the missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit as “the two hands of the Father” (Iraeneus, IV, 20, 1) takes on an enlightening meaning for our subject. In this way we have the tools to show that work is “a type of human action that only reaches its anthropological and social fullness in a theological context” (Guitián-González 2021, 771).

It should also be borne in mind that the mediation between matter and spirit is not the only one. From a theological point of view, there is another, no less important mediation, which is that between the natural and the supernatural, between nature and grace, and between the human and the divine in man. Man is called to communion with God, and his work is both a human act (nature) and a channel of God’s gratuitous action. It is not a “natural” reality of those grafted into Christ, but supernatural in the sense of a means of identification with Christ himself and configuring with Christ the Head and Priest.

In a Christian vision, it is necessary to overcome the dualism of a perfectly human action to which a supernatural intention is added. If we were to transfer this dualism to the work environment in, for example, a business, the consequence would be that one would have to add a humanizing or spiritual purpose to an autonomous organization in the social or economic sense. Faced with this, the challenge of an integrated vision of the two elements appears. The action of working must include in itself the spiritual and supernatural dimension that configures to Christ because it includes the service (pro-existence) and the social-ecclesial value. One consequence of this integrated vision would be that the social organiza-

tion of work would have to shape itself in such a way that the worker can maintain his dignity, and to this end make him "co-responsible" for burdens and benefits.

All this leads us to a mediator who is total and universal, who participates in matter and spirit, and at the same time is fully human and fully God: the Mediator who is Christ Jesus. He is the concrete being who is at the same time universal (*universale concretum*) in whom matter and spirit converge to the fullest degree in such a way that any other human realisation of this mediation is a participation in the unique mediation of Christ. "The holy history of the Incarnation transcends this earthly history on all sides and does not escape it. On the contrary, it will consume in a new heavens and a new earth all temporary hardships and all unsatisfied loves" (Chenu 1955, 23).

#### 1.4. The work of Jesus

For a theology of work, it is essential to bear in mind that it involves, as in all human reality, nature and grace. To this, we must add an original datum, which is *God's work*. Some authors have wondered about the meaning of Jesus' words: "My Father never stops working, and I also work" (Jn 5:17). From the context in which they appear, these words have to do with the interpretation of the Sabbath and, ultimately, with the work of creation.<sup>3</sup> God works in the sense that he creates, redeems, sanctifies. The Father works and the Son also works in the same action of the Father. Even more: the work of the Father is accomplished precisely through the work of the Son. By including Himself in that work of creation, the listeners rightly interpreted Jesus' words as an attribution to Himself of something proper to God. Jesus works with His hands, and that work is filled with the divine meaning of creation, sanctification and redemption. Therefore, Jesus' work is a strictly theandric action because human action divinely accomplishes God's work.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. St. Augustin, *De Genesi in litteram* 4, 11, 21 – 12, 23; *In Ioannis evangelium* 17, 15; Theodore of Mopsuestia, *Commentarium in Ioannis evangelium* 2, 5, 17; Hillary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate* 9, 44. Cfr. G. Chevrot 1939, 89: "Dieu lui-même, plénitude et source de la vie, est toujours occupé à son oeuvre créatrice".

Nothing is said in Scripture about Jesus' work in Nazareth, but it seems beyond doubt and is a logical conclusion from the 30 years He spent in Nazareth. Submissive to Mary and Joseph (cf. Lk 2:51), Jesus, "the carpenter's son" (Mt 13:55), learned the manual trade by which Joseph earned his living and "grew in wisdom, stature and grace before God and man" (Lk 2:52). It was manual work that was carried out with effort and with the skill of an expert professional; tiring, and at the same time, a source of joy for the finished result; carried out under the "technical" conditions of work at that time; an occasion of service to others and, finally, in solidarity with the work of all men –with human work, in general– through which creation directs itself towards its final end. To this we must add that the last part of His life, dedicated to the proclamation of the kingdom of God, was also made up of work, although of a different nature from the years that preceded it.

It was through work that Jesus' "personality" was formed, his capacity to perceive in depth the human experience of physical wear and tear, of goals pursued and sometimes achieved and sometimes not, of human relationships in all their variety of manifestations. One thing to bear in mind is that, as Rondet reminds us, we do not find here that, for example, Jesus contributed revolutionary ideas about the way of working wood, or an improvement in the tools that were used. The work that Jesus carried out was one more aspect of the full assumption of humanity with all its capacities, its limitations, or the conditions of life at that time. It is necessary to take the work of Jesus seriously, in all its fundamental human condition, if it is to be a source of inspiration and a redemptive instrument.

The work of Jesus introduces us to a strictly Christological theme from which the theology of work is proposed in its fundamental nucleus. It can be affirmed that the theological meaning of work ends up having its hermeneutical key in the work carried out by Jesus Christ, the Word of God made man, especially during the thirty years that preceded his public life. As the action of the God-man, the work of Jesus expresses His ontological constitution, the manifestations of His two natures, their specific actions, human freedom, etc. This work is redemptive and salvific; it is not just an action of Jesus like any other, but participates in a very particular

way in four aspects: 1) of the object of Jesus' pro-existence, since in work is especially present the "for" of his life on earth, i.e., service; 2) of the fulfilment of the mandate of charity, insofar as work, besides being carried out in justice, is a key element of human relationships (one works in and for the community) which must not renounce fraternity and even the sense of human family; 3) the exercise of the priesthood in making the offering of work which is directed, through service to others and, ultimately, to God; 4) depending on the above, the onerous and at the same time glorious character of human actions, which will ultimately have to do with the Passover.

Thus, the ultimate source for a theology of work is Christological. The work of Jesus expresses several realities: the saving efficacy, the model and example to follow, the encounter between grace and nature. He is "the perfect man, who has restored to Adam's offspring the divine likeness, deformed by the first sin", that "worked with human hands, thought with human intelligence, acted with human will, loved with a human heart" (GS 22).

The Son of God worked with the hands of man because He was truly man as a consequence of having assumed human nature. In order to avoid any risk of Docetism or Monophysism in considering the work of Jesus, it is necessary to bear in mind the profound significance of the affirmation that Christ is the Mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:5) (Izquierdo 2017), and thus clearly affirm the unity of the person and the two natures of Christ.

### 1.5. Work and pro-existence

The work that Jesus did was real human action which, like all work, co-creates insofar as it is "participation in the creative work of God" (Escrivá 1985, 74–75). Through work, Jesus served His fellow citizens. His work was His means of supporting Himself, and, like that of others, it made Him weary, at the same time as it was an occasion of both joy and suffering. It was also the Son's worship of the Father, an offering that was part of the total offering of life.

Pro-existence, which is the fundamental characteristic of the life of Christ (CTI 1979, 236), has in the work of Jesus a privileged expression. The existence of those for whom self-giving, being-for, is the only *raison d'être* of their life and action is manifested in a particular way in the acts in which the person dedicates himself totally to the service which includes the gift of his own life. In Jesus Christ, His whole being and life has no other *raison d'être* than the gift of the Father to humanity. The whole of Jesus' life has this sole purpose: from his conception to his death on the cross, Jesus gives himself to his mission to save mankind. Pro-existence gives Christ's existence a full unity in which each of its moments contributes to the whole, and from the whole each receives a fuller meaning. In this unity and fullness, work represents a particularly significant element because of its gift, its service, its increase of good and goodness, fruit of the "wear and tear" that work implies. One consequence is the redemptive capacity of work: "Since Christ took it in his hands, work has become for as a redeemed and redemptive reality. Not only is the background of man's life, it is a means and path of holiness. It is something to be sanctified and something which sanctifies" (Escrivá 1985,75).

The unity and totality of Christ's pro-existence implies the total integration of all the acts of which it is composed, so that action, charity, contemplation are given at the same time in a harmonious integration. There is no room for an excess of charity at the expense of a lesser contemplation, nor for a pious isolation which implies an abandonment of responsibility. Between all aspects of existence there is a kind of *circumincessio* which respects the identity of each act and at the same time enriches it with the contribution of everything else.

A step forward is taken when God's gift to humanity in Christ's pro-existence (*exitus*) is continued in the offering of His own life which Jesus, as priest, finally makes to the Father on the cross (*reditus*). Included in this offering is the offering of all people with whom Christ has uniquely united Himself to the point of becoming one with them (Izquierdo 2017, 13–28). From now on, the Christian too, united to Christ, can live his whole life as an offering which, as "priest of our lives" (Escrivá 1985, 137), he can make to God. A fundamental element of this existence is work,

which, like that of Christ, can be lived in a sense of service. Moreover, the Christian vocation of many people will be, in fact, the following of Christ in a life that adopts pro-existence as the backbone of all their action. These are vocations of special dedication to the Kingdom of God that can develop in the midst of the ordinary circumstances of life, but with a purpose of service to the Kingdom of God itself. Some of these vocations will make service the sole purpose of their work; others will make their work a means directed towards the ends of evangelization or the Christianization of the world.

The basis for the redemptive efficacy of the life - the work - and death of Christ lies in the human-divine constitution of the Mediator. The Chalcedonian principles of the unity of the human and divine natures in the person of Christ also play a role here. Through this union, the life of Jesus has meaning and full salvific efficacy. But is it possible to overcome a certain dualism when we speak of the work of Jesus as both a human and a divine act?

In the work of Jesus, which has salvific efficacy, the same thing is reproduced as happens in the being of Christ: he is man, and therefore not-God, and at the same time he is God, and therefore not-man. The great paradox of the hypostatic union is the result of the meeting of the human and divine natures in the person of the Word, in the Mediator. The integrity and relationship of the natures in Christ (without separation, without division, without confusion and without change) posed for a long time a difficulty in achieving an integrated vision of the unity of person and the reality of humanity and divinity. The Second Council of Constantinople, responding to the post-Chalcedonian discussions on unity and duality in Christ, shed illuminating light by teaching that the union was according to composition (*kata synthesin*) and according to the hypostasis (*kath'hypostasin*) and the distinction took place *in theoria moné*, theoretically (Izquierdo 2021, 465–470).

If we apply this scheme to the work of Jesus, which is both human and divine, we can conclude that it is carried out according to composition, according to the hypostasis and with a "theoretical" distinction; clearly and briefly put: that it is the work of the Mediator, Christ Jesus, in whom

matter and spirit, human and divine action, are fully related. From Him human work receives a unique significance insofar as it is a free activity and an activity of grace and at the same time an essential part of existence. Work is not, therefore, a self-sufficient human reality which then receives a supernatural meaning and efficacy but is in itself sanctifying and redemptive as the action of the human being incorporated into Christ.

Is the above valid when a person is subjected to work conditions that are unjust, inhuman, or degrading? In no way can such situations be justified; rather, one must do everything possible to overcome them. Nevertheless, it can happen that it be impossible to improve such situations because of underlying violence or the need to accept them as a lesser evil. In such cases, the person subjected to oppression lives in a special way the collaboration with the redemptive work of Christ that is proper to all human work. In the same way that pain, injustice, and sickness can be lived in union with the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus Christ, humiliating or enslaving work that, of itself, has a destructive force for the person can also be associated with the passion of Christ and made part of his sacrifice. “We can love this redeeming work because it contributes to the love of Christ for His Father and for men” (Chevrot 1939, 106).

As I conclude these reflections, I venture to include here a *Paschal* corollary to Christ’s work that sheds light on the work of men. Jesus completed His work when His industrious, merciful hands and diligent feet were savagely nailed to the cross. And it is precisely these hands and feet that the risen Jesus shows in His apparitions to His disciples: “Behold my hands and my feet: it is I myself” (Lk 24:39). The connection between the hands and feet and the personal identity of Jesus is undoubtedly based on the wounds left by the nails in those limbs. But the interpretation of the passage can be broadened to mean that the risen Christ, by showing His hands and feet, was placing before the eyes of His disciples the action and purpose of existence. Through His hands, Christ acts and shows Who He is and who we are for Him, the recipients of His self-giving and love. The feet, which support and set the person in motion, indicate the aim and purpose of the action being carried out. Christ’s wounded hands are the

image of an action – of a *work* – that no longer retains anything for itself but gives up the fruit of its action completely. The wounded feet, in turn, are a sign that the direction and purpose of life is not to put the self at the center, but to turn to others through service.

The theological vision of work shows the unique value of that human action performed in the unity of the total Christ, of the Mediator. Human work cannot be "bought" because it is priceless and can only be offered as a gift of love by the one who performs it. A spirituality of work does not consist in pious considerations of the effort involved, or the realization of God's presence while working. Rather, the work of those who are and live united to Christ in the Church is a reality that transcends the subject himself and, as *opus salutis*, attains in itself a transforming efficacy for the world and its sanctification. In this way, work, which in itself "in a certain sense creates social energy put immediately at the service of the whole of humanity" (Chenu 1955, 20), when theologically vivified by its union with Christ, becomes an instrument of vivification and sanctification of the *Christus totus* which is the Church and, through it, of the renewal of the world.

## References

- Benedict XVI. 2006. *Homily*. [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2006/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20060413\\_messa-crismale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20060413_messa-crismale.html)
- Blondel, Maurice. 1893. *L'action. Essai d'une critique de la vie et d'une science de la pratique*. Paris: Alcan.
- Borne, Étienne, and François Henry. 1944. *El trabajo y el hombre*. Buenos Aires: Desclée de Brouwer.
- Comisión Teológica Internacional (CTI). 1983. *Documentos 1970–1979*. Madrid: Cete.
- Chenu, Marie-Dominique. 1955. *Pour une théologie du travail*, Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Chevrot, George. 1939. *La vie de l'homme nouveau*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer.
- Clavier, Henri. 1944. *Le Christianisme et le travail*. Clermont-Ferrand-Valence: Impr. Réunies.
- De Rougemont, Denis. 1972. *Penser avec les mains*, Paris: Gallimard.

- Delhay, Philippe. 1957. "Théologie du travail." *L'Ami du Clergé* 67: 432–5; 449–55.
- Escrivá, Josemaría. 1985. *Christ is passing by*. New York: Scepter.
- Granada, Daniel. 202. "Consideración unitaria del trabajo como acción en la historia de la teología del trabajo." *Scripta Theologica* 56: 377–406.
- Guitián, Gregorio and Ana Marta – González. 2022. "Theology of Work: New Perspectives." *Scripta Theologica* 54: 757–87.
- Izquierdo, César. 2017. "El Mediador, una clave para la teología." *Scripta Theologica* 49: 351–70.
- Izquierdo, César. 2017. *El Mediador, Cristo Jesús*. Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos.
- Izquierdo, César. 2021. "Cristo mediador en el II concilio de Constantinopla." *Scripta Theologica* 53: 459–82.
- Juan Pablo II. 1981. Enc. *Laborem exercens*. [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091981\\_laborem-exercens.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/es/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091981_laborem-exercens.html).
- Posadas, Jeremy. 2017. "The refusal of work in Christian ethics and theology. Interpreting work from an anti-work perspective." *Journal of religious studies* 45: 330–61.
- Ratzinger, Josef. 1971. *Introducción al cristianismo*. Salamanca: Sígueme.
- Rondet, Henri. 1955. "Eléments pour una Théologie du travail." *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 77: 24–48.
- Ruyer, Raymond. 1948. "Métaphysique du travail." *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 53: 190–215.
- Todolí, José. 1952. "Teología del trabajo." *Revista Española de Teología* 12: 559–79.
- Volf, Miroslav. 2018. "Work as cooperation with God." In *Work. Theological foundations and practical implications*, edited by en Loftin, R. Keith and Trey Dimsdale, 83–109. London: SCM Press.
- Vveinhardt, Jolita, and Mykolas Deikus. 2023. "Strategies for a Nonviolent Response to Perpetrator Actions: What Can Christianity Offer to Targets of Workplace Mobbing?" *Scientia et Fides* 11(2): 175–95. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.12775/SetF.2023.021>.