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## ***Laborem sanctificare et cum Ecclesia sentire*** **(To sanctify one's work and to think with the Church)**

Michael J. White  
Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and of Law  
Arizona State University  
Tempe, Arizona

**Abstract:** In this reflection, I discuss the two imperatives of the title in their application to Catholic philosophers in the secular academy. These two imperatives apply to all Catholics—and perhaps, in some form, to all Christians—not just to academics or philosophers. But, of course, the manner in which they apply will depend, to a degree, on one's particular profession or work.

There are two injunctions that I take to be imperative for the Catholic Christian who happens to be a philosopher in the secular academy. These are the imperatives of my title: *laborem sanctificare* (to sanctify one's work) and *cum Ecclesia sentire* (to think with the Church). I emphasize that neither of these imperatives is in any way limited to the philosopher in the secular academy. Both apply to all Catholics; and the first would seem to apply to all Christians, as perhaps does the second, in some form. However, the second may be thought both to be of particular importance to the philosopher and to raise particular difficulties for the Catholic philosopher who finds himself or herself in the secular academy. I shall return to this issue at the conclusion of my remarks.

The sanctification of work is a multi-faceted matter. It is something the meaning of which should deepen and expand throughout our lives. Any morally licit type of work is capable of sanctification. This is the principal theme of the Catholic organization (technically, a personal prelature) Opus Dei. As a Cooperator of Opus Dei, I have found "The Work", as Opus Dei is known, and the writings of its founder St. Josemaría Escrivá to be immensely helpful in understanding and practicing the imperative *laborem sanctificare*. In the words of St. Josemaría, "your human vocation is a part—and an important part—of your divine vocation"<sup>1</sup>; "work, all work, bears witness to the dignity of man, to his dominion over creation"<sup>2</sup>; and human "work is a participation in the

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<sup>1</sup>Josemaría Escrivá, "In Joseph's Workshop," in *Christ is Passing By* (Sinag-Tala

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 107.

creative work of God.<sup>3</sup>

As I said, the sanctification of work is a complex matter. But one important element of it is striving for the professional *competence*—indeed, *excellence*—on which some other contributors to this Project have commented.<sup>4</sup> Again in the words of St. Josemaría,

It is no good offering to God something that is less perfect than our poor human limitations permit. The work that we offer must be without blemish and it must be done as carefully as possible, even in its smallest details, for God will not accept shoddy workmanship.”<sup>5</sup>

For the philosopher, intellectual rigor and honesty and careful scholarship are among the more obvious elements of workmanship that is not shoddy. One of my favorite illustrations of non-shoddy workmanship occurs in a story told by St. Josemaría about the ornamentation at the top of the cathedral towers in Burgos in Spain, “a veritable lacework of stone that must have been the result of very patient and laborious craftsmanship” but “none of the beauty of [which] work could be seen from below.”<sup>6</sup> The injunction against work that is shoddy applies equally to philosophical work that is not ‘seen by the world’ (the world of fellow professional academic philosophers)—e.g., referee’s reports for academic journals and publishers; comments on student papers, theses, and dissertations; and preparation of lectures and other class materials. And here, of course, the temptation of the quick, easy, and slip-shod is at its greatest.

Of course, the effort to achieve not ‘mere’ competence but excellence of workmanship is only one aspect of the sanctification of work. Much more could be (and has been) said on the matter. But I conclude with a passage from *The Way (Camino)* that I have found apposite to myself as an academic and even more particularly apposite as a philosopher:

In addition to being a good Christian, it’s not enough to be a scholar. If you don’t correct your rudeness, if you make your zeal and your knowledge incompatible with good manners, I don’t see how you can ever become a saint. And, even if you are a scholar—in spite of being a

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 107-108.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the insightful comments of Professor Marilyn McCord-Adams on becoming “socialized to your profession.” Competence and excellence obviously require such disciplinary-relative socialization.

<sup>5</sup> Josemaría Escrivá, “Working for God,” in *Friends of God* (Scepter Publishers, 1989), 82.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 99.

scholar—you should be tied to a stall, like a mule.<sup>7</sup>

The second imperative, *cum Ecclesia sentire* (to think with the Church), is particularly associated with the founder of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), St. Ignatius of Loyola, and his *Spiritual Exercises*, where he gives eighteen rules for thinking with the mind of the Church. Although many of these are tied to specific theological issues of dispute at the time of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the first rule lays down the basic principle: “All judgment laid aside, we ought to have our mind ready and prompt to obey, in all, the true Spouse of Christ, which is our holy Mother the Church Hierarchical.”<sup>8</sup> And, famously, we find in the thirteenth rule: “To be right in everything, we ought always to hold that the white which I see is black, if the Hierarchical Church so decides it.”<sup>9</sup> It is obvious that this principle is inimical—perhaps shocking—to the contemporary Western *Zeitgeist*. But it seems to me to remain fundamental, a *sine qua non* of Catholic Christianity.

Like the first imperative, the imperative *cum Ecclesia sentire* applies to all. And it is similarly multi-faceted. Particularly, I think, in philosophy but also in other disciplines such as mathematics and the sciences a sort of ‘great man’ view prevails. The picture is that of the solitary thinker (a ‘genius’ if he or she is lucky) making his/her own *novel* discoveries and developing his/her own *novel* theories, beholden to no one, ferreting out The Truth in the face of opposition from various critics and nay-sayers. Part of the force of the injunction to think with the Church is a repudiation of this picture, a recognition that the acquisition of knowledge is a social and cumulative process—that even fundamental and novel intellectual developments are supported by layers of social and intellectual bedrock.

For the Catholic Christian, the most fundamental layer of bedrock is the *magisterium*, the authoritative teaching of the Church Hierarchical. In his contribution to this Project, Professor Christopher Tollefsen has expressed this point well: “all inquiry is guided in part not only by the object yet unknown but also by truths already known, and the truths by which my work is guided are the truths of the Catholic Church.”<sup>10</sup> To think with the Church is ultimately a manifestation of the “obedience of faith” (Romans 1:5; 16:26). Obedience, although it involves the intellect, is primarily a function of the will. Obviously,

<sup>7</sup> Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way* (Scepter Publishers, 1982), 116.

<sup>8</sup> Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, trans. Father Elder Mullan, S.J. (P. J. Kennedy and Sons, 1914), 97.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>10</sup> Available here: [http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Tollefsen%20\(FaithfulChristianAcademics\)\\_Edited.pdf](http://www.epsociety.org/userfiles/art-Tollefsen%20(FaithfulChristianAcademics)_Edited.pdf), 3.

the Roman Catholic understanding of the injunction *cum Ecclesia sentire* depends on Catholic ecclesiology. However, I think that most other Christians can understand and accept, in some form, the ideal of humility—in particular, *intellectual* humility—that grounds the second imperative. The practice of intellectual humility (like holy purity and mortification of self) is not really looked upon as a part of virtue in the modern secular world of the West. So it is particularly challenging to Christians to remain ‘counter-cultural’ in this respect.

I conclude my brief reflection on this imperative with a few personal remarks. The Church has (with a few perhaps unfortunate exceptions) been remarkably prudent about restricting to ‘faith and morals’ the areas where She requires the obedient assent of the faithful. Consequently, I have never found the Church’s requirement that ‘I think with Her’ to be harsh or oppressive. On the contrary, the effect of this requirement has generally been, if anything, liberating: *That* has been settled; so I needn’t worry about it, but can proceed to think about *this*. However, my Catholic Faith has had one curricular consequence for my teaching in the secular academy. I believe—although some Catholics would disagree with me—that ‘ethics’ in a disciplinary sense (as opposed to the history of ethics) cannot be correctly taught apart from Roman Catholic theology. In the words of the twentieth-century theologian Bernard Häring, “[a]ccording to the Christian teaching morality is not separate from religion. Nor can it be characterized as having perspective and motivation directed to man alone rather than to God. On the contrary, true morality may be said to accept all earthly tasks only in relation to God.”<sup>11</sup> Because of this conviction, I have refrained—more as a matter of prudence than of principle—from teaching non-historical courses in the ethics curricula in the several secular universities where I have been employed.

*Michael J. White is Professor Emeritus of Philosophy and of Law at Arizona State University in Tempe, AZ.*

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<sup>11</sup> Bernard Häring, *The Law of Christ*, vol. 2 (The Newman Press, 1963), 123.