



What are we looking for in work?

Summary by

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MILAN

Saturday, February 7, 2026

Introduction

In recent years, the topic of work has taken on increasing urgency, not merely as an economic or social issue, but as a crucial sphere for understanding the human experience in its entirety. It was from this awareness that, in early 2025, together with some friends from Cdo and other companions of the journey, the idea was born to create the exhibition 'Every Man at His Work,' inspired by T.S. Eliot's famous verse and Cdo's Manifesto of Good Work.

The great response generated by the exhibition—presented at the Rimini Meeting before an audience of about 4,000 people and later touring various Italian cities—confirmed just how much work remains an open and crucial issue today, capable of profoundly touching everyone's life. At the same time, the very experience of preparing and sharing the exhibition made it clear that a cultural initiative, however significant, is not enough on its own to fully address the scope of this topic.

It has become increasingly clear that only within a lived experience of friendship and companionship is it possible to form an original judgment on work: on what makes it a place of fulfillment, on the wounds and obstacles that run through it, and on the attitude with which each person is called to live their work.

From this arose the need to foster spaces for discussion and dialogue, where we can help one another make sense of what happens every day in that sphere that occupies much of our time and constitutes one of the most concrete expressions of who we are.

It was within this perspective that more than 100 participants gathered on February 7, 2026, for an assembly, conceived as an opportunity for dialogue with Fr. Paolo Prosperi, starting from some fundamental questions:

What fulfills and attracts us in our work? In what do we find interest, motivation, and fulfillment? What obstacles do we encounter in our work? What stifles our humanity, and when does fatigue become an objection? What attitude should we adopt toward work? Is it necessary to settle for less, or can we strive for more?

To continue and deepen the journey we have embarked on together, several texts and experiences can serve as points of reference:

- **Ávila and Assisi**
- **Fr. Paolo's talk at the 2025 Rimini Meeting**
- **the catalog of the exhibition "Every Man at His Work"**
- **the Manifesto of Good Work**

Below are Fr. Paolo Prosperi's contributions to the assembly on February 7.

Transcript of Fr. Paolo Prosperi's intervention

Morning Session – Saturday, February 7

[This contribution concludes the assembly, conceived as an opportunity for dialogue with Fr. Paolo Prosperi, starting from on some fundamental questions: What fulfills and attracts us in our work? Where do we find interest, motivation, and fulfillment? What obstacles do we encounter in our work? What stifles our humanity, and when does fatigue become an objection? What attitude should we adopt toward work? Is it necessary to settle for less, or can we strive for more?]

What is work?

If I understand correctly, my task now is to gather together the main points that have emerged during this assembly to kick off the work you will do in groups around the tables after lunch. Essentially, it seems to me that we can gather the questions, reflections, and achievements shared around three core themes.

The first core theme concerns the **meaning of work**.

We began from the idea, which had already emerged at the Meeting, that the contemporary crisis in the sphere of work is a **crisis of meaning**. In this regard, I think it is important first of all to recall that the term *crisis is a vox media*—that is, a word that can have both negative and positive connotations, depending on one's perspective. In short, being in a crisis is not necessarily a bad thing. It can be an opportunity—an opportunity to broaden one's horizons, asking questions that perhaps, when everything was going smoothly, one was not compelled to ask. In our case, the question is this: what is the meaning of work?

We have heard some very moving testimonies— which I will not repeat here—that document the experience of an awareness of the meaning of work that is decidedly at odds both with the compulsive need for self-affirmation typical of what Chul Han calls the achievement subject, and, on the opposite end of the spectrum, with a 'downgraded' conception of work. Here I am thinking of Francesco di Cremona's deeply moving account. At times we risk forgetting that, for many people, work continues to be nothing more than an alienating toil, in same sense as the labor of the Jews in the land of Egypt was that we spoke about in Assisi.

Yet several of you have clearly shown us how work can truly return to being what it is meant to be: a way of collaborating in the construction of the common good, as one of you put it; of increasing value, as another said, where this very self-giving for the construction of the common good becomes the source of a joy in self-giving that would otherwise be absent. No idealism, then. The term idealism refers to setting goals that are in fact unattainable, which cannot be experienced. Instead, what so many of you have testified to is a real experience, which means that what we are talking about is an ideal that is achievable, realistic, and attainable, simply because it corresponds to what we are made for.

Now, here is another question—somewhat provocative, because it is even more fundamental than the one asked earlier—which at this point I am tempted to throw out there to reignite the discussion. We have been asking ourselves about the meaning of work. Fine. ***But what exactly is work? Better yet: what do we mean, what are we referring to, when we use the word work?*** It seems to me that all too often, when we speak of work, we consciously or unconsciously use this word in a narrow sense, that is, as though it refers only to one's profession. It seems to me that disunity of life often stems precisely from this 'narrow' perspective. In reality, the word 'work' encompasses all of life, if it is true that the great work, the great task of life, is the realization of ourselves—the task of becoming fully human.

This evidently includes learning to love our children and our spouse, building relationships of true friendship, no less than the profession for which we are paid. Is loving and devoting oneself to raising children less work, less effort—work, from the Latin *labor*—than building a career in a company? If the word work, as Father Giussani said, indicates the application of human affective energy to a certain reality in order to improve it, to 'shape' it according to an ideal, then it is clear that educating is also work. Indeed, every action that in some way contains an idealistic impulse is work. Getting out of bed in the morning when you would rather continue sleeping is work. Praying is work. Is prayer not work?

In short, I believe that even the issue of **work-life balance**—which has come up repeatedly—cannot truly be addressed unless we realize that perhaps the problem lies in having a narrow conception of work. The real problem, it seems to me, is not 'working too much' per se. If one has plenty of energy, they should be thankful. The problem is perhaps the fact that sometimes we lose sight of the whole task—that is, we have a narrow concept of the 'work' to which we are called. For me, for example, praying is no less important or serious a work than preaching or teaching. On the contrary, in a certain sense it is the most important work, because it is in prayer that I draw the inspiration, the passion, and even the words to say when I preach. In short, work is not just one's profession.

This could be a first provocation: what relationship exists between work understood as a profession and a total conception of life as work? What is that kind of 'work' which, when 'done,' also makes work in the professional sense of the term more human?

Objects, struggles, difficulties

The second thematic focus is linked to the second item on the agenda, which addressed objections, struggles, and difficulties. Here I would like to summarize what emerged around a few key expressions.

The first is: the **'struggle with the images'** of self-realization that we have—Giorgio spoke clearly about this.

I think each of us can easily relate to the struggle described by Giorgio: the struggle that sooner or later arises within us between the images of success and fulfillment that inevitably and spontaneously take root in us when we enthusiastically throw ourselves into something, and our collision with a reality that never matches our vision. Another interesting thematic 'thread' opens up here. As Father Giussani taught us, images and preconceptions are not always something negative. First of all, they are inevitable. But beyond that, especially when work is at stake, are they not actually necessary? Someone who lacks images is someone with little capacity for planning, is that not so? Just as prejudice in the realm of knowledge is not in itself a bad thing, so too—and even more so—the image of 'how things should go' in work is not in itself a bad thing. The problem arises when the image becomes an idol—that is, a petrified, closed-off image, unwilling to be modified and reshaped by the unexpected, by the reality that demands we abandon this or that aspect of our idea. When the image becomes an idol, it becomes something that alienates us. It deprives us of the ability to engage positively with and thus savor the present, to

Work-life balance and the unity of life

see the good in what is, and thus to enter into the true experience of the hundredfold.

What, in fact, is the hundredfold, if not that appreciation of the present moment, in which you find yourself ***completely immersed in the detail*** before you, without that annoying 'little voice' buzzing in your ear, telling you how much better it would be to be somewhere else and doing something else? What is the hundredfold if not that reverence for detail, for the given detail, that blossoms within us when in that detail we see the Whole—that is, the Master of reality coming to meet us?

It seems to me that the theme of the struggle with our images is properly understood only when we begin to focus on what we lose in stubbornly pursuing the dream: we lose the enjoyment of the reality given to us, which coincides with the perception of its sacramental nature—that is, its being the concrete terminus, small or large, through which the Infinite comes to meet us. To make this point clear, Father Giussani loved to use the example of the medieval scribe. Think of those monks who copied, copied entire books, letter by letter, with such extraordinary care for each one— something we can still see for ourselves in the large manuscripts preserved in museums. Why did they do it? Why? Because for them every single letter was literally sacred, a sacred thing.

The second word I want to draw your attention to is **the word time**.

Giorgio, along with others, emphasized that the whirlwind pace and frenzy of a work environment that demands faster and faster performance seems to prevent, or hinder, the continuous recovery of the gaze we were just discussing. It is a contemplative gaze, saturated with the memory of the origin of things, which requires a certain detachment, a certain distance from the things themselves to be cultivated. How can I see something I am called to manipulate unless I take a step back and look at it within the total horizon of which it is a part? I end up treating it instinctively, reactively, without respect, in the deepest sense of the term. This provocation, too, seems to me anything but trivial. What can be said about it?

The third issue that emerged is the issue of the **unity of life**. Teresa raised it, but so did Giulia (two women— is that a coincidence?). Both interventions emphasized— if I understand correctly—that balance is not achieved simply through a careful and clever management of one's energies, without denying the importance of growth in 'work-life balance.' What makes the unity of life possible, if it is true that balance— given the 'inevitable circumstances' in which we often find ourselves—is, for most of us, an unstable equilibrium? What brings peace, substantial peace and unity into our days, capable of holding back the otherwise overwhelming anxiety of keeping the 'pieces together'?

This seems to me to be the third question, which I would call: the question of order, of the 'principium ordinis'. The word order implies proportion among the parts of a whole. Our life is precisely that: a whole made up of many pieces, many parts. What makes those parts an ordered whole, what gives unity and order—that is, beauty (order is beauty and therefore enjoyment, gusto)—to the pieces of the puzzle? What is the 'principle' (that is, the cause, the determining factor) of the unification of the parts?

Environment

The fourth theme, which has been raised by many from different angles and with varying nuances, is the **scandalous nature of the work environment** in which we are immersed. It is an environment that seems to make the desire to live work in a new and different way utopian, naive, and idealistic. I am thinking here of Davide's contribution, in which he spoke with remarkable bluntness and directness about money as the sole purpose for which everyone in his company works. This, too, seems to me a topic worthy of consideration, does it not? Do we or do we not perceive the problem raised by Davide? How do we face it? How do we deal with the dialectic, the conflict—which inevitably concerns us—between the laws of neoliberal capitalism prevailing in the working world in which we are immersed, and the ideal we would like to live? As you know, not only do I not have a degree in economics, but I really know very little about these issues. Yet the underlying problem, in its most basic form, seems clear to me. Ultimately, the question is this: for a company to survive, to exist, and to produce the goods it is meant to produce—to contribute to the common good—it must first and foremost survive; it must exist; and to exist, it must generate revenue. The point, therefore, is whether a company today can pursue profit, grow in health and capital, and at the same time have as its goal the pursuit of the good of the person and the common good? Can these two things be reconciled? That seems to be the real question.

Jesus says: you cannot serve two masters. Either you serve God, or you serve Mammon. That much is clear. The problem lies elsewhere: is it possible, in today's concrete world, to build a business that serves not Mammon but the kingdom of God? And assuming that perfection is not of this world—we would indeed fall into *utopianism* if we sought it—what does it mean to at least strive toward this ideal?

To work is to be in relationship with others

Another related theme is the issue of interpersonal relationships, raised primarily by Salvatore. We could refer to this as an **'affective problem or issue.'** Being immersed in a work environment always means being immersed in a network of human relationships, that is, in a 'society.' Even someone who physically works always or almost always alone is, in reality, always working in relationship with others, if only because their work is ordered toward producing goods intended for society.

Therefore, working inevitably means being in relationship with others. This means that the emotional feedback—let us call it that—we receive from and within our relationships with others, whether they are my bosses, subordinates, colleagues, clients—all those 'others' with whom work leads me to interact—inevitably influences the choices we make, as well as the way we work.

Salvatore rightly spoke, in this sense, of a sense of pressure and even fear that the network of relationships in which he is immersed as an entrepreneur tends to instill in him: fear of what? First and foremost, of the judgment of other, of his father's judgment; fear that his relationship with the workers might take a turn for the worse, with negative consequences for the company, and so on.

The fear of how others might react or act leads to cautious, timid behavior, and even to lowering one's standards, to giving up on an idea—perhaps a beautiful and just one—by compromising on this or that.

This, too, strikes me as a very interesting topic. As I see it, however, the problem raised by Salvatore is actually part of a broader and truly crucial issue. What issue? The issue of the vocation or mission of the layperson, or, to put it in less general terms, the following question: what does it mean for a layperson to live out their presence in the world, and thus also to view work as a mission? What is the mission of the layperson, and how does work relate to this mission?

In the world and not of the world

It goes without saying that there is much to be said on such a broad subject. In light of the question posed by Salvatore, I would like to highlight a phrase that seems to me to be connected to the issue at hand: to be a layperson—a Christian layperson, a baptized layperson—means, among other things, to be called to be both **in the world and not of the world**. This expression encapsulates the entire drama—exhilarating yet involving struggle and tension—that characterizes the paradoxical condition, the specific paradox of the lay vocation. What is characteristic of the layperson—compared to the monk, the nun, or the priest—is first and foremost the fact of being called to a total immersion in the world, that is, to move in the same circles as everyone else, doing the same jobs and frequenting the same places (perhaps not quite all of them) as everyone else. Now, often (even in a rather unreflective narrative that is common among us) we stop there: “I am a layperson!” means: “I am in the world; I am not a priest or a nun...”. True. That is right. Except that a fundamental part is missing. The Christian layperson is not merely called to be in the world. He or she is called to be in the world without being of the world, which also implies an element of dialectic, of irreducibility, and—let us even say—of struggle with the world’s mindset. The lay vocation is a calling to be in the world where everyone else is, but not to live *like* everyone else. It seems to me that in this simple—and if you will, obvious—observation lies the crux of the matter, because, as Salvatore has observed with great realism, it is in fact impossible to be in the world, immersed in a network of relationships. To be in the ‘world’ concretely, means this: having a relationship with people, with this and that person, with this and that entity, without being influenced by them, without being inevitably shaped by the atmosphere, by the way of thinking and reacting of those around us. That is simply the way it is.

The question, then, becomes: how can one not withdraw from an environment that obeys logics that are often alienating, without yielding to these logics and even attempting to introduce new ones? John Paul II spoke, in this regard, of ‘structures of sin.’ The most serious problem of the society (or societies) in which we live is not, that is, the fact that there are so many sinners—it is clear that we ourselves, taken individually, *are* sinners.

The most serious problem lies in the fact that there are social and economic structures which, regardless of individual freedom, are inherently problematic, in that they generate and institutionalize dynamics in our relationships—with money, with others, with work, with the community, with nature—that are toxic (for example, because they are based on pure individualistic competition, or on a purely profit-driven logic, with no regard for the common good, etc.). So, how can we exist in

this 'world' without being devoured by it? And even before that: do we have to stay here? *When* should we stay, and when should we have the courage to walk away? These are serious questions.

Friendship and belonging

It is here, I think, that another theme raised in the inventions comes in, which has to do with **the 'salvific' function of friendship, of belonging to a human place** that is somehow different, a place where we can draw that oxygen that allows us to keep fighting, to not be sucked in. There would be much to say here as well, but at this point, perhaps it is best to stop. It seems to me we have already got more than enough on our plate.

To be honest, I am not entirely sure whether Camu and Ciccio wanted me merely to summarize the issues that emerged or whether they were also asking for a deeper reflection that would begin to say something positive on the matter.

In any case, the only thought that comes to mind, reacting in the heat of the moment and immediately to what has emerged, is this.

As I was listening—I am thinking, for example, of Davide's remarks, or, in a different sense, of Francesco di Cremona's—I found myself thinking that we can say many good, beautiful, and true things about the meaning of work, about what work should be. But are these things actually achievable in the real world, in your workplace, or are they true only for a tiny minority who may have the chance to work in a happy oasis, surrounded by friends (assuming these oases are truly such)? In short, are the things we are saying actually achievable? Or are we just telling ourselves beautiful, utopian fairy tales to make ourselves feel a little better, all things considered?

I would like to say just a few words on this, not to offer some grand solution, but rather to invite you to look at the issue from another perspective, opening a 'new file,' so to speak, which I do not think we have opened yet, and which I believe must be opened to view the bigger picture with proper realism.

Realism and the need for redemption

Let me put it this way: it seems to me that one thing we risk not truly taking into account when we talk about work is the fact that work, as we experience it 'on this planet'—that is, *in the world* as it is—is not what it should be; it is not what it would be if we were in Eden, if, that is, there had been no Fall. It is no coincidence that I have emphasized the category of 'the world'—that is, a category that is ambiguous in the Bible, especially in John. In what sense? In the sense that, on the one hand, the world is good; it was made well by God. As God's creation, it is good, and therefore it is right to work in it; it is a beautiful, great, and exhilarating thing. As we have been saying since Assisi, it is an honor, a glory to be able to collaborate with God in the perfection of the world, to be sub-creators, etc., etc. On the other hand, insofar as the world is enslaved by falsehood and filled with 'structures of sin,' it is not good; it is evil. In fact, in John, the word 'world', kosmos, often has a negative connotation. Thus we grasp the heart of the problem. Work in itself is good; it is a beautiful and good task. However, since we are not in the earthly paradise, but in a world that is a slave to vanity, as St. Paul says, **it is as if work could take no other form than that of redemption—that is, of the cross.**

There is nothing to be done. If we wish to do good in this world, we must take up the cross, we must suffer. Why? Because in the world there is resistance to the good, even in the physical world. Let us read Genesis 3, which is the key text for understanding this issue. Indeed, if we not meditate on these verses, we cannot truly understand the poignant condition of human beings as they are called to work, to the task of 'working the ground' (I remind you that the word work, from the Latin labor, means toil!):

17 *And He said to Adam, "Because you listened to your wife's voice and ate from the tree about which I commanded you, 'Do not eat from it': The ground is cursed because of you. You will eat from it by means of painful labor all the days of your life.*

18 *Thorns and thistles will spring up from the ground for you, but you will eat the crops of the field.*

19 *By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return."*

First of all, I would like to point out the connection that the biblical author suggests exists between Eve and Adam's act of eating the fruit of transgression, of self-defecation (this is what Adam's act represents), and the disastrous consequences of that very act on the work of the land. There is already much to say and reflect on here: why does this act of man making himself God, this 'eating everything,' without respect for the limits imposed by the Lord on his freedom, have such devastating effects on the soil and on labor? I will not delve into it further; I will just leave it there as a question to ponder.

Instead, I will focus on what follows: "The ground is cursed because of you. You will eat from it by means of painful labor all the days of your life." These are strong words, on which we perhaps do not meditate enough. And yet perhaps we should: friends, toil is an inevitable condition, because we live in a fallen world—that is, in a world that must be redeemed! You might say: but it has already been redeemed by Christ! Yes, true. But in what sense?

Already, yet not yet! Already, yet not yet! The cross and Resurrection of Christ have established a beginning, an inexhaustible and invincible source of redemption in the world—a source that cannot be dried up, exhausted, or overcome by anything. A source that will ultimately cause everything to flourish anew. But the flourishing today, in the present, of the part of the world entrusted to us, to our responsibility—this flourishing also depends on the collaboration of our freedom, of our flesh, of our hands with His Grace, with the redemptive Power that comes from Him. Here, then, is the great word: redemption.

Work, as we are called to live it, as we experience it, is not merely creative energy, or sub-creative (as Tolkien would say). It would only be that if there had been no original sin. Instead, since both man and the world have been poisoned by the Fall, this creative energy must accept becoming a redemptive force, which means toil, sweat, a struggle against entropy, the tendency toward disorder that exists within us and in the earth, in all things; it means toil, pain, the sweat of blood; it means sacrifice. It would be wonderful—and perhaps we will do so at another time—to help one another understand, perhaps through examples and testimonies, how this event, which seems sad and melancholy, instead becomes, for those who live in Christ, an occasion for glory, for a dedication even more glorious than it would have been had the Fall not occurred. It would be nice—indeed, it would be good—to try to help one another understand why and how this original 'sin' might call a 'felix culpa', that is, something God permitted in view of an even greater good than what would have existed if everything had gone 'smoothly'. But for now, I want to emphasize this point: much of our scandal and many of our objections seem to me to stem also from a lack of realism—that is, from failing to take into account all the factors at play, and above all one: the fact that both the human being, subject of work, and the object of work, namely the earth are wounded; they need to be redeemed, that is, freed from the evil that pollutes them. And this implies toil, struggle, sweat. The real point, then, is: what does Christ—the lived relationship with Christ in Christian fellowship—bring anew to this toil? How does faith transform, if indeed it does, the 'yoke' of work, from a beastly yoke into a light yoke, that is, into something sweet, something beautiful? That passage from Genesis 3 that we cited is interesting, where the sacred author says: "Thorns and thistles will spring up from the ground for you, but you will eat the crops of the field." You will eat the grass of the field. I do not know if you have ever noticed, but there is something truly strange being said here. Have you ever seen a human being eat the grass of the field? Man does not eat the grass of the field; in fact, Genesis 1 states that the grass of the field was set aside as food for beasts of burden. So it becomes clear: after the Fall, man has been degraded to such an extent that his toil and existence have become akin to those of beasts of burden. But is not someone who lives only for money—that is, for material well-being—like a beast? Are they not, at heart, an alienated person, someone who, without realizing it, lives like an animal? Someone who idolizes material well-being, the pleasure that comes from it, and toils from morning to night with the sole purpose of increasing their own material well-being—are they not, at heart, a slightly more sophisticated version of a beast of burden?

Another interesting point is the phrase "by the sweat of your brow you will eat your food." By the sweat of your brow. We associate sweat with hard work, and this is certainly the primary meaning of the text. But sweat is not merely a sign of hard work. We also sweat when we are afraid; sweat can also be a sign of anguish, of fear, which brings us back to Salvatore's question—that is, to the atmosphere of anxiety and anguish that characterizes the world of work, due to the logic of self-assertion, rivalry, competition, and the constant feeling of being under scrutiny, which, like a kind of toxic gas, wafts from the soil of the fields we are called to till.

In short, going to work—and going there with a genuine idealistic zeal—is a bit like going to war; we need to be aware of this. But not war against our colleagues! The point—and this perhaps could be another theme for reflection—is understanding precisely against whom or what... ■

Transcript of Fr. Paolo Prosperi's intervention

Afternoon – Saturday, February 7

[This intervention follows a group workshop session and a plenary discussion summarizing the main topics addressed]

The Kingdom of God

What is the purpose of work? What should we look for in work? Many things have emerged, many things have been said, bringing to mind suggestions and possible answers that we may have heard repeated many times. Let me try to summarize: ultimately, what seems to make work truly meaningful—an activity in which we experience an enhancement of our being, so to speak—is when we realize that all our intellectual and creative energies are put to work in building something beautiful and good, contributing to the kingdom of God, to use a grand biblical expression. This ultimately means contributing to a world, a society, a reality in which there is a little more order, a little more beauty; a world, a society that reflects, at least in part, the justice in the relationships between people and things, the harmony and communion among the many, which is the world's realized reflection of the glory of God. He is the God who, as we know, is a Communion of Persons: a communion in which there is both equality in dignity and difference (each person has a different place and role, contributing to the common good in a unique way).

All of this is so beautiful to say and articulate. It seems to have been the common thread running through today's conversations, or at least one of the common threads. Yet, as noble, and clear as this ideal is, it is difficult to put into practice. So difficult, in fact, that it risks seeming utopian, abstract. Allow me to share a personal anecdote. I was in my first or second year in Russia—I must have been a little over thirty. One day, while walking through the streets of Moscow, a young woman from the Movement over there, who was climbing the corporate ladder within her company, suddenly decided to provoke me. Out of the blue, she asked me a question that I admit initially caught me off guard, but which I have never forgotten, because it allowed me to look at my life from a new perspective, one I had not actually considered before: "Fr. Paolo," she said—with a certain aggressiveness, so to speak—*po moemu, ti durak*, which means: "As far as I am concerned, you are an idiot, a moron." "Why?" I replied. "Because with the talents you have, you could have had an amazing career in many fields. You could have been successful, and instead you are here serving as a Catholic priest in a city where there are no Catholics—in fact, people even look down on you here. At the very least, if you absolutely had to become a priest, you could have tried to make a career for yourself in the Church. Instead, you are stuck here, studying a language you will never even speak well. What is the point?" I have to admit it took me a few seconds to absorb the blow. Then, though, after thinking about it for a moment in silence, I replied bluntly: "But I am pursuing a career. I do not feel any less of a career-minded person than you are. I have just chosen a different career." "And what is it?" she asked me. And I, a bit awkwardly, replied: "Well, look, I... I would really like to become a saint. The only career that seems truly interesting to me—if I have to put it in those terms—is that." As I walked home, I was happy. But I remember also asking myself: "Is this answer entirely correct? Does it take into account all the factors at play?" Today, I do not know if I would answer in exactly the same way. Why?

I would say for the same reason that today I felt so challenged by certain remarks, which revealed the great risk we run—and which Kadolph seems to have brought into sharp focus. It is the risk of living a fundamental dualism between faith, to which we adhere with conviction, and our working life, which instead runs on its own tracks and according to its own laws, before which our faith remains passive and has nothing to say.

**The
hundredfold
here below**

It seems to me that the real question is this: is it possible to reconcile a 'career' in the spiritual sense of the term—and thus the desire to devote oneself to serving the 'Kingdom of Heaven'—*with a career 'in this world below'*, that is, with the pursuit of success within the concrete work environment in which we find ourselves operating?

I confess that, setting aside all the beautiful and true things we can (and perhaps should) say on this subject, drawing, for example, on the social doctrine of the Church, I find it interesting—indeed even fascinating—that this question exists among us and has been raised. For it is certainly true, as we often remind ourselves, that if our charism has a distinctive emphasis, it lies in saying that Christianity is not a renunciation of the enjoyment of *'the realities of this world,'* but rather a path toward an understanding and a way of dealing with them that leads to a truer appreciation of them—an appreciation that is, paradoxically, a hundred times greater than that of those who reason according to the logic of the world.

The question, therefore, becomes more specific: is this thing we love to talk about actually true? Is it a fairy tale, or is it real and therefore something we can experience? Is this famous hundredfold we speak of possible for *everyone* in the workplace, or is it accessible only to some—for example, to those engaged in social service or charitable works? And if we say it is possible, what does this hundredfold consist of? What experience do we have of it? What concrete evidence can we provide? I think it is clear to everyone that the 'hundredfold' Jesus speaks of cannot be understood in a material sense—that is, as a quantitative multiplication of what one 'leaves behind to follow Jesus.' If we were Calvinists—as Weber teaches, liberal capitalism finds its fertile ground for growth in Calvinism—perhaps we could interpret the hundredfold this way: "You can tell you have been favored, that God has blessed you, by the money you make and the social status you have achieved. You can tell God blesses you by the fact that He makes you richer than others." We know that this is not the hundredfold. Even though we are increasingly influenced by the Anglo-American neoliberal mindset (which is nothing other than secularized Calvinism), we know that the famous 'hundredfold' does not consist in this. So then, what is it?

I see two possible temptations in facing this question. The first, already mentioned, is the dualistic one. Kadolph said it, but others have said something similar as well. There is the life of faith with my friends, and there is my 'spiritual life'—which may even include a certain refined morality, and even a sincere desire to share with others the encounter I have had. But it stops there. Faith is there, but it does not introduce anything new; it does not change the way I work, so that my work itself does not become a *witness*—it does not speak of my faith. At most, I talk about faith at work. But my work does not 'speak'; it does not reveal who I am. It is clear that the *specific environment* in which one finds oneself working—the little 'world' in which one is immersed—plays a decisive role here, at least so it seems to me.

In other words: what stands in the way—to the point of making the sincere desire to introduce a different logic into the concrete form of action seem utopian, as Davide put it so directly and almost bluntly—is the fact that the general climate of the environment in which we find ourselves, the very atmosphere we breathe, is saturated with a different logic, one that is alienated and alienating (as we briefly mentioned this morning). So, what is the way forward? How can we enter—and help one another enter ever more deeply, or at least aspire to enter—into the experience of a true hundredfold? The true hundredfold is a way of working that is truly redemptive, liberated from and liberating from worldly logic, because it returns to what work is meant to be: the offering of oneself in service to the common good.

On this point I do not presume to offer grand or elaborate solutions. I will limit myself to opening a couple of windows, so to speak, hoping they might broaden the horizon a bit and suggest directions for further reflection. Both are linked to quotations from the Church Fathers, which came to mind spontaneously while I was listening to you.

To immerse oneself in the world for the love of Christ

The first is taken from St. Augustine's commentary on the Gospel of John, and focuses on a passage from the Song of Songs that I have always loved—namely, the beginning of the so-called 'second nocturne,' at the start of chapter 5 of the Song, when the Beloved knocks on the door of the Shulammite's house in the dead of night, asking her to rise and open the door for him: "Open to me, my sister, my darling, my dove, open to me." [We have spoken of vocation, of feeling called. Well, the same thing happens here. The Shulammite hears the voice of the Beloved calling her to rise, to move. But she does not want to get up to go and open the door...]

"I slept by my heart was awake. I have taken off my robe—must I put it on again? I have washed my feet—must I soil them again?"

To be honest, I came across Augustine's commentary on this passage I have just mentioned while reading an article by Ratzinger, who in turn was commenting on Augustine. Allow me then to read to you both Augustine's text and Ratzinger's commentary on it, because each is more beautiful than the other:

"Augustine reflects: the lover, who stands at the door of his beloved is Christ, the Lord. The beloved is the Church; she is the souls united to their Master by a love nourished by faith. But this raises the major question: how can their feet become dirty if they are going to meet Christ in order to open the door for him? How can it be that the path to Christ, who washed the feet of his own, should make their feet dirty? It is precisely this paradox—Ratzinger observes—that points to something crucial, which also helpful for the preaching bishop [that is, Augustine himself, who desired a life of contemplative quiet, but had been made bishop against his will] to understand and endure the painful division of his own life between contemplation and action. The bride who refuses to open the door—because she is already cleansed—represents contemplative people, who prefer to remain shut away in their own rooms and desire nothing more than to meditate deeply on eternal truths, without concern for the world, which outside goes about its noisy and chaotic business. But then Christ comes knocking and says: 'You devote yourself to contemplation, yet you thus shut the door in my face; you seek the comfort of a select few, while outside evil spreads like abundant weeds and cools the love of the many.

(...) *'Aperi mihi... aperi mihi et praedica me!'* [which means: Open to me... open the door to me, that is, proclaim me, preach about me!] Of course: whoever opens themselves up to Christ in this way and dedicates themselves to apostolic work among people is bound to get their feet dirty; it is inevitable. But they get them dirty out of love of Christ, who waits outside the door among the many, to whom no other path leads except the one that passes through the filth of the world."¹

It is important to note, as Ratzinger explains later, that Augustine's words are actually addressed first and foremost to himself. As is well known, the great native of Hippo had withdrawn to Cassiciacum to live a life of contemplation with a few friends. The Sulamite who has already washed her feet and gone to bed is therefore, for Augustine, himself. Except that Destiny—through the vox populi—had called him to become a bishop, and thus to re-immersing himself in the turmoil of life in the world, and in this way to soil his 'feet' once more. For Augustine, these feet are the symbol of our flesh, of our fragile humanity, so prone to becoming soiled by contact with the 'world.'

And so —as Augustine had come to understand over time—it is true: immersing oneself in the world for the sake of Christ, to share Him and bring Him to others, means getting dirty. It means—and this is somewhat inevitable—exposing oneself more to a certain kind of sin, so to speak, to impurity, to getting one's feet muddy (we can include here, for example, a whole series of compromises, of petty lapses that we cannot avoid, into which we end up falling constantly, swept away by the environment around us...). And yet, Augustine continues, if it is charity—that is, love for Christ—that is the driving force propelling us out of bed; if it is charity that shapes the movement that leads to 'soiling' our feet, then even this willingness to 'plunge into the mud' becomes valuable, becomes added value. Not in a Machiavellian sense, not in the sense that the end justifies the means (sin remains sin!). Rather it means reckoning with the risk of falling—indeed, the inevitability of falling a few more times (which is always a humiliation)—if this reckoning is motivated by charity, by the desire to participate in Christ's movement toward the world, to participate in the great movement that led the Word, instead of remaining in the comfort of the Father's house, to become entangled with our humanity, so as to bring us and communicate to us His life as the Son. If this willingness to get dirty is lived with this motive, then even the humiliation and pain that this getting dirty inevitably entails becomes an added value, becomes part of your sacrifice, of your offering. And so, it is fertilizer that does not disfigure, but on the contrary, paradoxically causes our humanity to flourish. Because what truly builds us up is, ultimately, charity lived out—the 'yes' spoken and repeated every day, as best we can, to the voice that calls: "Open to me, open to me, my sister, my darling..."

¹ J. Ratzinger, *Das neue Volk Gottes: Entwürfe zur Ekklesiologie*, Düsseldorf, Patmos-Verl., 1969 (our translation). Ratzinger continues: "What Augustine is addressing here is the very problem of his own life. From 391, he had irrevocably lost the dreamlike silence of contemplation; in his waiting brothers, Christ had knocked on the monastery door: *Aperi mihi et praedica me*. Augustine never abandoned his desire for contemplation, his longing to possess 'the part of Mary,' but he learned to understand and love ever more deeply the fact that the Christian in this world is entrusted with something else. In place of the Neoplatonic mysticism of ascent, which he himself had experienced in the vision at Ostia, a mysticism of service".

**To bear
the light of
Christ**

Let me turn to the second quotation, which comes from another Church Father, somewhat less famous, but no less dear to me: Ephrem the Syrian. The great Ephrem, who was not only a saint but also a great poet, offers an interesting insight in one of his poems on the Passion of Christ. He perceives a connection, a profound link between the 'sweat' of the first Adam we spoke about this morning—a negative, evil sweat, because it is like a symptom of what working the land has become (cf. Gen 3:17–19) after Adam decided to trust the serpent in the Garden of Eden (cf. Gen 3:1–6), something alienating and oppressive—and another kind of sweat. The second is the sweat of blood of the new Adam in another garden, Gethsemane. The purpose of the second sweat, the sweat of Jesus, is in fact the redemption of the first:

"Blessed are you, O place [he is addressing the Garden of Gethsemane, which is personified here], that you were deemed worthy of the Son's sweat / that fell upon you; / to the earth [that very earth, that very soil that had been cursed after the Fall and had since then had produced 'thorns and thistles': cf...] he mingled his sweat, to drive away Adam's sweat (...) Blessed is the earth, which he perfumed with his sweat, and which, though sick, was healed]" (Hymn VIII on the Crucifixion).

How beautiful. In what sense does Christ's sweat drive away Adam's sweat and, falling to the ground, transforms the soil from cursed to blessed? Ephrem's words, as is often the case with poetry, can obviously be interpreted in various ways and with different meanings. I like to see here an allusion to the redemption of labor, of the toil of labor, that Christ's sacrifice has brought into the world, at least for those who look to Him with faith, for those who have the grace to grasp the 'glorious' meaning, that is, the hidden fruitfulness in His sweat of blood. In other words: looking at Christ's sweat does not 'remove the sweat' from Adam's brow, in the sense that it magically eliminates toil. Rather, it transforms its meaning, and thus makes it lovable (that is the Gospel idea of a light yoke, is it not?).

In short: toil, tribulation, grappling with the ruthless laws of the working world—and therefore being partly sucked into dynamics that oppress us, cause us suffering, and even lead us to 'sweat blood'—are somewhat inevitable, unless we all retreat to an Indian reservation or an Amish village, like Harrison Ford in *Witness*. To turn to a better-known story: could Frodo Baggins avoid being ensnared, almost dominated, by the Ring he is tasked with carrying and destroying? Perhaps not, I do not know. But in any case, does the fact that in the end it is Providence, rather than his own virtue, that ensures the mission does not fail, detract from the merit and heroism of his undertaking, from the 'yes' he repeated day after day until the very end? Is Frodo a 'failed hero'? No, not at all! His greatness lies entirely in his fidelity to the task. The fulfillment of the mission, as Péguy says, is in the hands of Another.

In summary: being affected by, contaminated by the mentality of the world—this exposure to contamination—is part of the risk and the epic nature of the Christian's mission and, in particular, if I may say so, of the layperson's mission. The layperson's task is precisely this: to 'evangelize' secular realities, to bring the light of Christ precisely into those caves, into those 'underworlds' that are most resistant to this light.

We might say, to use another image that is not my own but Von Balthasar's, that you as laypeople, are Christ's 'paratroopers'—the team of those who are thrown into the fray for the first assault.

It seems clear to me that today, in a neo-pagan social and cultural context like the one in which you find yourselves living and working, this image of the paratrooper is increasingly apt.

This may inspire a certain fear, but on the other hand, it is also exhilarating, is it not? Of course, by saying this I am not claiming that the monk who remains sheltered behind the monastery walls is not also engaged in the battle for the world's redemption. He is, but in a different way and in a different sense—more invisible and interior. And yet the essential point remains. The paratrooper is, in fact, the one most exposed to the enemy's machine-gun fire...

Now, to stay with this image: what prevents the paratrooper from crashing immediately upon landing? In other words, what enables him to be an effective presence, a soldier equipped and ready for battle, and thus also capable of savoring its epic nature? This seems to be the question. That is: what is the source that allows one, to return to Augustine, to immerse oneself in the mud without sinking into it, to get dirty but only on the outside, so to speak? What allows for this paradoxical blend of light and filth, of 'purity' and 'impurity', which—if, how, and when God wills—becomes a witness that illuminates the surrounding darkness and disturbs it?

As I speak, another extraordinary figure comes to mind—perhaps the female character I love most in the entire history of literature: Sonja, the small yet great Sonja Marmeladova, the prostitute who is the protagonist of *Crime and Punishment*, alongside the young murderer Raskolnikov.

It is true, Sonja is a prostitute. From a strictly ethical standpoint—that is, from the perspective of sound and proper moral theology—even though motivated by generosity and selflessness, Sonja was wrong to agree to prostitute herself to provide for the needs of her unfortunate family. It is clear that the end does not justify the means. And yet, Providence ensures that her outpouring of sacrificial love—however disjointed and confused, however wrong and reckless in the form it takes—to become an instrument of a great, indeed immense, good: the salvation of another human being, namely Raskolnikov. In the novel, both things are true, and paradoxically intertwined. It is true that Sonja was wrong to become a prostitute (Dostoevsky never suggests otherwise). But it is also true that if Sonja were not a prostitute—that is, if she were not where she is, in the situation she finds herself in, when she meets Raskolnikov—the young murderer would never have been attracted to her as he was. Why does Raskolnikov become attached to Sonja? At first, he believes he is drawn to her out of a sheer need not to be alone—and she seems to him the only possible companion precisely because she is, in a certain sense, similar to him; she is where he is. Except that, over time, he discovers that she is not at all like him in every aspect. He will gradually discover—and it will be this, almost against his own will, that saves him—that this tiny little being, seemingly 'lost in the darkness', carries within herself a fire, a Light that makes her different, infinitely different from him. The point, however, that I wish to emphasize is the first one: could Sonja's difference—let us even call it her holiness—have attracted the hardened and proud Raskolnikov if she had not at the same time been so close to him, so near to him?

Right where you are

This brings me to my final point. What does it mean to be close? Of course, there are many forms of closeness. But first and foremost, to be close means being in the same *place*. What brings us close is the place itself. And is it not precisely what distinguishes the mission of the layperson, for example, from that of the monk or the priest? I cannot be in a *factory* or a law firm. Why? Because I am a priest!

So, to stick with Sonja's example: ultimately, it does not matter how someone ended up in a certain position in a certain company. Perhaps they are there because,

at a certain stage in their life, they sought nothing more than to make money and step on everyone else's toes. It does not matter. The point is how you love that situation now, in the present. If you now realize that what you truly desire is to devote yourself to Christ, to building His kingdom, why should it be impossible for the very fact that you 'find yourself right where you are'—much like Sonja in the novel—to become an opportunity for some Raskolnikov to encounter through you the true meaning of life?

So, to return to Davide's question: perhaps the question we need to ask is whether we currently have a source that nourishes that 'difference' or not, which allows Sonja to be, for Raskol'nikov, what she in fact becomes—despite being a prostitute. Here, I would say, is where the added value comes into play—not only of faith, but also of companionship, that is, of the relationships that nourish the person. On this point, I just want to reiterate something I have already said, which, incidentally, picks up on a concept that already emerged in Assisi. What did I mean when I said that it seems wrong to reduce companionship to a place for learning about what is right and best—to a 'place of formation,' so to speak (without denying the importance of this aspect, of course)?

What I meant, in simple terms, is this: what is the heart of this diversity that we are called to bring into the environments in which we live? What is the essence of this diversity? Undoubtedly—as we have said—it is a way of living that follows a logic different from that of the world, a logic that the words gratuitousness and charity perhaps capture most succinctly. The heart of this diversity cannot lie in the fact that I am better and more efficient than others at doing what I do. There is no need for Christ for that—it is enough to work harder or have more brainpower. The heart of this diversity lies in the fact that what ultimately motivates me to act is no longer (for it is no longer I who live, but Christ in me) the pursuit of power; it is no longer the pursuit of my own individual pleasure, nor is it the allure of the ring of power, but rather a passion for the common good—or, to put it in Giussani's words, for the destiny of everyone and everything. But what is the destiny of everything? It is the kingdom of God, universal communion. We can thus understand why communion—that is, conceiving of myself as part of a 'we' to which I belong—is not something extrinsic to what I am called to bring, to the diversity I am called to bear witness to. Why? Because the essence of this diversity is precisely a self that does not live for its own individual self-affirmation, but for the building of a 'we,' of a communion, of a friendship in which it already lives.

These are the ideas that came to mind as an immediate reaction to what was published. Obviously, as I said, these few reflections were not intended to address the many issues that have come up. It seems to me, though, that they may suggest avenues for further reflection and work.

Thank you!