

The Seven Revolutions: The 3rd Revolution—Work

Work in Roman Empire

In proper Roman society, work was for the little people. It was beneath a proper Roman to work with his hands. Work was for the lower classes. Work was for the servants and slaves. For the upper class, time was to be spent thinking about life and indulging every appetite. The rest of humanity was there to make this possible. Physical labor was beneath them. Those who worked with their hands were beneath them.

Slavery was widespread in the empire. Slaves, like most, had no rights. The best a slave could hope for was to buy his freedom. Otherwise he or she was property of the master and could be used, misused, and thrown away when seen fit. A Roman nobleman would buy attractive slaves for the purpose of sex. That was the purpose of that slave. Slaves were not taken care of by most masters because it was cheaper to buy a slave than furnish food, shelter, and clothing for slaves.

This was backed by a class system. There was no true movement between classes. A merchant might become wealthy based on his business acumen, but would be looked down upon because he worked with his hands. Classes existed because it was believed that nature had made some superior to others. The rulers were naturally superior to the ruled and hence should not have to work with their hands. Nature favored them, so to speak, by virtue of what family they were born into. The worth of a person was based on the class into which he was born.

One of the great problems proper Roman society had with Christianity was that it began in what they deemed the lower classes. The Blessed Mother came from the lower classes. It was seen as absurd that a god would consort with such riff-raff and produce a son. Worse yet, that son, Jesus, was a carpenter by trade prior to His proclamation of the Gospel. A man who worked with His hands! Again, how could a god arise from the lower classes and then have the audacity to breakdown the whole class structure? This was dangerous because it upset the entire social order. St. Paul's directive in II Thessalonians 3:10, "If anyone will not work, neither let him eat" would have been seen as a direct attack on the upper Roman classes.

What Christianity Brought to Work

Dignity. The Church brought dignity to work and those who worked. Work, in Judaism, was seen as cooperation with God's plan. In Genesis, God gives stewardship of the created order to humanity. Work was seen as an essential and noble part of God's plan. One might have servants to help with the labor. However, one was not to sit idly by.

Furthermore, what class one was born into did not preclude one from leadership in the community. Slaves could be bishops, for example. As the priesthood was not Levitical (passed down from father to son within the Jewish tribe of Levi), the office was based on capability and not status. Furthermore, that

a slave would have authority over a freeman was unique to the Church. That every person was expected to work was complementary to a well lived life gave a dignity to those who worked with their hands that Roman society would not afford.

Following this, the dignity of workers was to be upheld. In Roman society, leisure was for the aristocracy. In Judaism, you have a commandment requiring a day of rest every week. Even slaves were to have a day of rest! Furthermore, if one had slaves, one had to provide for their needs and readily accept payment for their freedom. Where work was seen as a shameful thing for the Roman society, a work ethic was seen as a badge of honor in Christianity. Since class system did not exist in Christianity (not to say Christians did not re-instate classes throughout the ages) work was expected for all, rest was expected for all, and the fruits of that labor were to be shared by all in the form of payment to the laborer and charity to the needy. Even those who went into monasteries were expected to work as well as pray (ora et labora...prayer and work... as is in the Rule of St. Benedict.

This last concept, charity to the poor, was also an innovation. The poor and needy were left to suffer by Roman aristocracy. They might offer food and entertainment (bread and games) to curry favor with the public, but to help simply because people needed help was not done. It was considered beneath the person. Again, in the Roman mind, nature had determined who was to be ruled and who was to rule. Historically, things such as labor unions, labor laws, mandated time off, and such arose out of this Christian ethic of the dignity of labor and the rights of the laborer.

What Christianity can bring Again to Work

There are multiple variations of the following quote: We must move beyond loving things and using people to loving people and using things. The attitude of the old Roman aristocracy never went away. It morphs into different shapes that have a similar theme: I am entitled. Every election cycle we are treated to a new list of 'free' stuff that is seen as a right to have; not something that should be the fruit of one's labor. Nothing aside of God's grace is truly free. Everything else someone has to pay for. We should strive that every able-bodied person be able to work and those who find themselves in poverty can be helped.

Work is noble. It should be compensated fairly. The worker should be given time to rest. The worker should be given time to worship. There are happy Christian mediums between redistributing wealth and social Darwinism. Catholic teaching, while endorsing no social-economic philosophy (it does condemn some like communism), holds that the rights of the person, the dignity of work and workers, and the order of society should all work toward a just compensation for labor and the building up of the human family. As in all other avenues of the human experience, the God-given rights of the individual are to be maintained.