

A THEOLOGY OF WORK FOR CHANGING TIMES

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Then Your father worked at GM for 34 years, retiring at 60 with a great benefits package. Aunt Agnes worked until she was 70 at Joseph's, a women's fashion store, where she had been a sales representative her entire adult life. Work in the not-so-distant past meant security; your job could be yours for life, if that's what you wanted. Your work was like your parish or your neighborhood, something you could count on to be there.

Now Down-sizing. Right-sizing. Out-sourcing. Maquiladora plants. The transition from an industrial to an information society. Catch phrases that don't begin to capture the gut wrenching change for millions of American workers and their families. Job security has become an oxymoron.

If you've lost a job a found a new one, the likelihood is it will be for less pay. Holding down more than one job has become more commonplace as a necessity to pay the bills. Even for those of us blessed with good jobs, life in the workplace now involves change as a constant. The average American worker just starting out in the workforce can now expect to experience not only numerous changes in positions held but also several career changes over the course of their work lives.

How do we reconcile these dramatic changes with a faith perspective on work? The idea of work as a calling from God, a vocation, developed during the time of the Reformation. It came to be understood that God was calling all persons to a life of holiness and dignity through their work - some as religious, most to a life in the world. Vocation implied stability and continuity - just as a priest was a priest for life so too should a lay person remain faithful to their own particular calling - to be a locksmith, a potter, a mother, a soldier or a seamstress.

Clearly, for an ever-increasing number of individuals in the modern world, the idea of vocation does not fit well with the reality of their work lives. A career change, if one were serious about understanding your work as a vocation from God, could be taken to represent a lack of faithfulness to one's initial "calling" (one's previous job), and, consequently, become a source of guilt.

A way out of this dilemma is offered in a recently published book **Work in the Spirit** by Miroslav Volf (Oxford University Press, 1991). Volf suggests that a Christian worker seek to recognize and use the gifts that the Holy Spirit has bestowed on them in God's immense generosity.

When human beings work, they work only because God's spirit has given them power and talents to work....All Christians have several gifts of the Spirit. Since most of these gifts can be exercised only through work, work must become a central aspect of Christian living.

If work is the God-given means we have to use the gifts of the Spirit that we have received - be they for organization, hospitality, teaching, design, healing, *ad infinitum* - then there is no inconsistency in our faithfulness to our calling (i.e., the use of our gifts) and our changing jobs or even careers. Even if we become unemployed, we can be using the gifts we have been given in our daily lives with our family, community and volunteer organizations.

Our Secular Franciscan Rule and Constitutions are very much in keeping with an understanding of work as the use of our Spirit-given gifts. Our Rule implores us to “esteem work as a gift” (art. 16) while the SFOConstitutions remind us that “For St. Francis, work is a gift and to work is a grace. Daily work is not only the means of livelihood, but the opportunity to serve God and neighbor as well as a means to develop one’s personality,” (art. 21)

Successful conversion to the brave new world of work requires a similar conversion to a new theological appreciation of work. Otherwise, we risk losing heart and losing God at work. Thank God our Secular Franciscan way of life leads us to precisely the understanding of work as gift that we need to center ourselves in these harried, hectic times.

Dialogue starter

1. What are some of the gifts that the Spirit has bestowed on you?
2. How do you express these gifts through work on the job, at home or through other commitments?