May 1: St Joseph the Worker (Mt 13:54-58)

 **OUR WORK LEADS US TO GOD**

Today is May Day, Labour Day, the day when mighty nations celebrate their pride in their armed forces, supposed to represent their workers. A great show of military might will parade in Moscow's Red Square. Beijing and Pyongyang will quake under the impact of a million marchers.

Today, in Catholic churches throughout the world, God’s People will offer themselves at Mass in union with St Joseph, an obscure carpenter of Nazareth, and his foster son, Jesus.

Why must the Church always counterbalance the sublime and the mighty – Beijing’s May Day ‑ with the insignificant ‑ a Galilean workman?

If that is how it strikes us, we're missing the whole point of today’s celebration. This is the point: the common workman is important and noble. St Joseph the Worker is significant.

Ancient Greek and Roman society looked down on the common workman, because only slaves did the work, Physical labour and domestic chores won little respect.

Christians have never agreed with that pagan point of view. On May 1, Europe’s traditional Labour Day, the Church presents St Joseph and his foster son to counterbalance obscene shows of military hardware, soulless industry, and the exploitation of labour.

All his life, St Joseph was a tradesman. We call him a carpenter, but he was more than that. He did anything that required the skilled work of hands and implements, for working with wood, stone, and metal.

For thirty years, our Lord did the same. His artisan background and his breadth of experience are reflected in the stories he made up, to convey his spiritual message.

The workman's life was God's determined plan for Joseph and for Jesus, God's own divine Son. In fact, honest work in some form or other is God's plan for everyone, made after the image of Jesus Christ.

The first few pages of the Book of Genesis tell us that when God had prepared the earth, he put the man there "to till the earth". And he made for the man “a helper like himself", so that they could do their God‑given work more perfectly. Genesis is telling us that we were intended from the very beginning to work the earth and to bring it to its perfection.

Work was not originally a curse that has fallen on us. Labour didn't drop in with the first sin. Work was not necessarily easy before sin, but it is certainly harder after it (see Gen 3:18-19). Whatever else was involved in that world‑shattering fall, it involved pride and disobedience. It disposed us to dislike the effort of work. We tend to avoid work and not to serve others.

But the lives of men like St Joseph, and above all the obedient labours of Jesus Christ, restored the spiritual value of work. St Joseph and his foster son taught us that our work leads us to God, as it was always meant to do.

This is one message that their lives deliver to us. This is the precise message of today’s Mass, the special Mass for Labour Day all over the world.

Work consumes most of our time. Whether it is the back-breaking work of unskilled labour, the intricate work of a trade, or the tiring work of the mind, it takes up most of our day.

It is meant to do that. That is God's plan for us, just as it was for St Joseph and for God’s own Son. From the beginning, God gave work the special power to make us godlike: to resemble God the Creator, and eventually to be united with God.

We can come to God through our work just as through daily prayer, attending Mass and receiving the Sacraments. How often we hear people express the idea that holiness involves time not taken up with the normal run of daily duties, and more time spent in prayer. They tell us, "If I had less to do, I could concentrate on prayer.”

We're not meant to write off hours of work as unavoidable waste of time that prevents us from getting on with our spiritual life.

We have just heard the Gospel where the Galileans were scandalized in Jesus Christ because he was a common worker, nobody in their point of view. We rejoice today in our own Christ-like state as working people. Some form of constructive work is necessary in everyone’s life. St Joseph and Jesus Christ have not worked in vain for us if our work leads us to God.