

The Spirit of Leisurely Catholicism

Authored by James Gaston, Issue #6.2 of *The Catechetical Review*

Psalm 127:1

*Except the LORD build the house,
they labour in vain that build it:
except the LORD keep the city,
the watchman waketh but in vain.*



Introduction

When I happened to mention to my wife that I was writing an essay about leisure, the following dialogue took place: Wife: “You can’t do that.” Me: “Why not?” Wife: “You don’t know anything about it. You’re working at something all the time.” Me: “That is somewhat true, but leisure isn’t really about what one does when one is not working. It’s fundamentally an attitude toward life.” That is the main point: leisure, properly understood, is a perspective one holds regarding both the meaning of life and the ensuing way of living it. Such a perspective, or spirit, should inform and unify one’s entire way of being. For the Christian, the true Spirit of life is Christ. When our day consists in good ordered work imbued by him, life should and can become a personal pilgrimage that flows peacefully from and back to him.

The subject of the nature and role of leisure in life is therefore an important one. In fact, it has intrigued and at times consumed man throughout history, and this for good reason. For we all share the need to answer the following timeless question: “What must one do in order to gain happiness?” The answer is directly associated with man’s inherent need to understand the proper relationship between the spiritual and the material; the human obligation to discern the nature of happiness and the appropriate means we should seek to secure it. The proposed resolution, and the role of leisure in it, varies greatly, as the world’s religions, great thinkers and attendant cultures bear witness.

For the Christian, happiness is found in *The Incarnation*. God became man so that man might return to God. But how do we accept God’s promise and invitation to be set free by him so that we can return to him? We must serve him in a holy and righteous manner: holy in the sense that we must love God and value the spiritual gifts of faith and reason, and righteous in the sense that we order our day in an honest effort to live a good and honorable life. For we must remember that without God, we labor in vain, no matter how astute and assiduous our daily endeavors. Simply stated, leisure is not the time we enjoy after our duty of making a living is done. Rather, leisure really should be that special time we take to discern and reflect upon *why* and *what* we should be doing in all aspects of our life. As we allow God to incarnate our entire way of being, we can live a leisurely Catholic life because he “will guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Yes, this is a tall order, for the *spirit of leisurely Catholicism* entails the totality of the Christian vocation. But all we want to do here is to reconsider afresh some of the fundamental and practical aspects of the Christian way of life, and do so despite the demands of our modern society. Let’s approach this venture as a three-part endeavor. First, reaffirm for yourself what constitutes the Christian spirit of life, and the role of leisure and work implicitly entailed within it. Second, reconsider and implement some practical daily skills that will help embody and order your life and work. Third, invigorate the Christian meaning of life by seeing it as a personal pilgrimage to God.

This overall perspective and approach will enrich your own true happiness and, in turn, enliven your calling to love and to guide those within your care.

God and the Dignity of Work

First of all, it is imperative to recall and reaffirm the wondrous distinctiveness of the Catholic vision of faith and the reasoned work that flows from and clarifies it. Many other religions and philosophies deny or denigrate this relationship, for they are unable to appreciate the incarnate bond between the two realms of spirit and matter, of thought and action. To amend this false dichotomy, let's briefly revisit the pagan notion of life and work, both ancient and modern, so as to clarify the Christian spirit and approach to life.

Stated simply, pagan societies believe that one's flight to the spiritual is prevented or limited by the material realm or by manual labor. Ancient civilizations (for example the Sumerians and Egyptians) separated leisure and work as necessary for the division of leadership and labor. The priestly leadership caste required leisure for themselves in order to assess the functioning of the city, while everyone else involuntarily performed the work assigned. This recognition that leisure is needed in order to think creatively, instead of just react practically, marks the foundation of the notion that leisure is the source or basis of culture. Classical Western man refined this distinction between leisure and work, between the introspective leadership class and everyone else. In particular, the Greeks held that leisure was the real goal of life, for it afforded one the opportunity to secure the best of life: the freedom to reflect upon and enjoy the eternal things as they understood them. But the same limitation applied here as well: only the free Greek (male) citizens enjoyed such creative respite, and this was made possible thanks to the manual labor performed by the slaves.

Christianity directly challenges the notion that leisure is that which we do instead of work, or after work is done, or done by another. The Christian vision holds that leisure and work are seamless aspects of man's nature, of the human ensemble of the spiritual and the material. God created the Cosmos; therefore, human work, or the material world, is good. Indeed, to labor is to pray. Furthermore, everyone has a right—and a duty—to live such a responsible and unified way of life. Work, as it is sanctified, is especially good and useful as part of our pilgrimage to our final beatific end. This unitive vision of spirit and matter, of prayer and work, informed Medieval culture and is revealed in the integrated culture of the monastery and the guild. This same comprehensive spirit informed *mutatis mutandis*, the common everyday culture of European Christian peasants.

Such is not the case for many modern men and women. They tend to be secular humanists who presume worldly work to be the focus of life. This view arose with the Reformation belief that man's salvation was signaled by work and success, that wealth was an indicator of one's predestined spiritual status. This notion of happiness constitutes a regression from the Roman Catholic vision, because it again separates leisure and labor, faith and good works. Moreover, as man has become more worldly, even this spiritual end has faded. What remains is the modern, materialistic notion that man derives his identity, meaning, and value solely from the work he does. For many today, work has wrongly become their end, and it is no wonder so many have grown to detest the work they do and seek to escape from it. Deep down inside, each of us knows there is more to life than just the here and the what we do in the now.

How does one avoid these false notions that, on the one hand, spiritual happiness is to be found by avoiding the material and the laborious or, on the other hand, that material happiness is to be found by idolizing work and circumventing the spiritual? As every Christian *should* know, the answer is

The Incarnation. Man is called to be in the world but not of it; one must learn to judge the temporal in light of the eternal. When we conform our lives to God's will, within the constraints and possibilities of his created world, we are able to find true happiness. In other words, we must take the time to encounter our final end, God, and to discern the prudent manner of returning to him *by way of* our temporal existence. Leisurely time must be spent first and foremost seeking God, so that we can wisely learn to live a life of dignified work.

Christ shows us the way. He taught us the Kingdom of God is within us, and to find it we must pray. How many times did Christ seek to get away from the crowds in order to pray? Without prayer to guide and sustain him, he could not be about his Father's work. It is the same for all of us. Leisure is the time we dedicate especially to contemplative prayer, for we must internalize—incarnate—God's love and will for us. *God is the Spirit of leisurely Catholicism.* Take the time to get away from the mundane, in order to know and love God, and to seek the wisdom necessary for true assessment of our work.

However, it does not end there. The same dedicated time is necessary for the discernment of our striving to reach our salvific end. It is that time we spend away from the struggle of living and making a living, so that we can use our intellect to reflect upon God's will for us and our journey. During such respite we “recreate” ourselves, and discern anew our life goals and intermediate objectives. It is time for reflection and self-examination. Such self-assessment should encompass all aspects of life – the meaning of our study, our choice of career, our relations with our loved-ones and neighbors, our stewardship of God's natural gifts, everything.

In sum, leisure is not time spent away from work. It is that time we spend coming to know and befriend God so that, unlike modern man, we find our identity as dignified sons and daughters of God, not as an idolatrous creation of our own worldly self-making. Leisure, rightly understood, should constitute the foundation and substance of our lives, and work ought to be a sustaining means to this, our peaceful way of life.

The Good Ordering of Life

How do we actually accomplish all of this? In our daily life, how do we incarnate our love of God and the wise choices we have discerned? I would suggest three broad, practical steps: prayer, reflection, and action. Obviously, there is some overlap here, and the way each of us proceeds will be personal. The key point is that we put into practice the insights we have gained regarding the Christian notion of the seamless life of prayer and work.

First, the primary “practical” step is that we must take the time to have an active prayer life that leads to an intimate, loving relationship with God. All else flows from this central aspect of our faith. Attendance at Mass (daily if possible) is crucial; however, dedicated time to mental prayer is likewise essential. The theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love are vital to this endeavor; study them and grow in them.

Furthermore, strive daily to do the following: pray the Rosary, join the Church in the Liturgical Year and the Liturgy of the Hours, perform an Examination of Conscience, and enjoy some modicum of spiritual reading. Avail yourself of Adoration, Confession, and spiritual retreats. In short, take the time to know and love God, and to accept that you are loved by him and that he always intends our good. Don't worry: we can do all these things with Christ if we but take the time to encounter God through prayer.

Second, make time for reflection. This is the intellectual work that gives direction to our life, including our dedication to persist in mental prayer. Seek self-knowledge. To this end, discover wisdom in the thought and lives of great men and women. Contemplate the Old and New Testament, the teachings of the Church, and the lives of the saints. Find refreshment in recreation, crafts, and manual labor. Do these things when possible with your family and friends. The spirit of leisurely living is taking the time to get away from the strain of everyday life (not just from work) in order to pointedly ponder ourselves and the active lives we lead. Don't be afraid to search for and truly encounter yourself.

Third, neither the spiritual nor the reflective dimensions of our life will bear fruit unless they are prioritized, scheduled, and put into action. The intentions derived from spiritual and intellectual insight must be actualized. This ongoing daily amendment of life, especially in light of our final end, fosters the virtues requisite to the good and ordered living of it. This is the heart of the Christian monastic ideal, and it must inform our way of being as well. The essential thing is to *plan* and actually *pursue* your goals and objectives as best you can. Furthermore, remember this inspired rhythm of life is to be a guide, not a straitjacket. Though your version will be unique as part of your personal journey, the spiritual and reflective dimensions should take precedence. With them, and illumined by them, one develops the other commonplace routines of living.

To some prudent degree, daily, weekly, and even long-range agendas are needed, and they should be reasonable and orderly. You must counter the materialistic and often servile pursuits of the world by creating and living your own personal, family, and professional, Christian culture and lifestyle. Such a culture will depend upon personal temperament, needs, and goals, and this is why time for prayer and reflection is so important. Refine it as you go along, but be assured of one thing: without such an intentional lifestyle—based upon love of God, leisurely reflection, and issuing in good, ordered living—you will find yourself entrapped in the structured routine of a machine or a corporate business model of production. You will end up like other modern men and women: living to work instead of working to live. You will end up defining and measuring yourself according to worldly values instead of Godly ones. Your endeavors will be neither spiritually focused nor leisurely peaceful; your life will pass you by.

Personal Pilgrimage

In summary, we need leisure for prayer and reflection. Prayer is essential because we must know God and rely on his help; and reflection leads to self-knowledge and intentionality. Both are vital to the ordering of our lives and to the pursuit of our salvific end. Nonetheless, there is an additional quality often missing in the lives of contemporary Christians. These three dimensions of leisure—namely: prayer, reflection, and action—also need to be consciously internalized and invigorated with the Catholic notion of the true spirit of *pilgrimage*.

As noted, the idea that there is something man must do in order to find happiness is a common human theme. Most religions and philosophies clearly argue that life is a personal journey of spiritual encounter and self-discovery. This is not so for many today who often deny one or even both facets of the journey. They have come to detest the limitations imposed on life by the false notion that work defines us, and they seek escape in contrived promises of leisure. This secular temperament professes that work is the true substance of life, and the spiritual is at best an aside. This vision of work is reinforced by a false notion of “progress,” wherein the person must submit to the implacable and perpetual advance of modern material culture.

The Christian spirit, on the other hand, teaches us that a pilgrimage is a personal journey with a purpose: a life fully lived in honor of God. Perhaps the earliest Catholic expression of pilgrimage is conveyed by St. Augustine of Hippo in his text *Peregrinatio* (from the Latin “peregrinum,” one who wanders over a distance). St. Augustine describes the Christian spiritual journey as one of a self-imposed exile in search of God’s truth. There is much wisdom in this perspective, and it is an attitude we should embrace. Though we live a “self-imposed exile,” that does not mean that we each must wander aimlessly or selfishly. Rather, we need to recall that God calls each person to a pilgrimage back to himself, and that he wants to share our journey, our personal crossing, and help us on our way. Our pilgrimage is unique, but we are not alone.

This brings us back, one last time, to the spirit of leisurely Catholicism. Chances are good that your initial reaction to the essay title was one of surprise. Yes, the Catholic life should and can be *leisurely*. As St. Paul reminds us, “The spiritual man...can appraise everything” (1 Cor 2:15). If we pray, reflect, and act, and do all three as part of an inspired, self-conscious, and hope-filled pilgrimage to God, we can live a leisurely and serene life, because we know we are doing our best to live as God intended.

This spirit of leisurely Catholicism will shine forth for others. They will see and come to understand that you happily and willingly live a life of daily conversion as a Christian pilgrim. They will come to respect, if not admire, the loving and ordered life that you live. Hopefully, they will want to emulate you. In closing, leisure is not what you do aside from your work. Leisure, properly understood, *is* your work. Use your leisure wisely, primarily to perfect and save yourself, but then, obviously, also for the good of others. Take time to discover and share the true meaning of a Christian pilgrimage to God: a life lived leisurely in the Spirit.

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