

A Labor of Love



The Spiritual Impact of Technology Upon Our Work

By Dr. Jared Staudt

A job well done offers a satisfying experience. We must keep that in mind as we face the temptation to view work as a punishment. Its laborious nature, fighting back the thorns, may have arisen from the Fall, but God originally commanded man to subdue the earth, exercising dominion over it, which Adam fulfilled in the second chap-

ter of Genesis through tilling and keeping. Work flows forth from our creation in the image of God the Creator, who calls us to extend and complete creation through our own work. If we view work primarily as punishment, we will seek to avoid it. If we accept it as a primal command of God for our own perfection and that of the world, then we must take it up conscientiously


in love as a means of sanctification.

Our understanding of work will shape how we approach it, including the instruments we employ to complete it. Tools extend our own human powers, using naturally available materials shaped by human intelligence. Technology, as we understand it, arose more recently, using mechanisms to replace human work rather than facilitate it. Subduing the earth can easily descend into domination, no longer harnessing and perfecting God's work but forcing it to conform to abstract constraints of technological power.

New technology often enters our lives without true discernment, creating attachment to the convenience it introduces. It requires sacrifice to resist the current of change when everyone else follows it, especially if it means being left behind and facing an added obstacle as the culture builds structures around new means of communication. We must take the time to judge whether a new technological tool assists us in our work or poses a threat that will supplant its very foundation.

Today, the lens of efficiency and profit dominates other considerations. If a machine facilitates these ends, it must be good. On the other hand, this way of thinking misses the heart of labor as a task given to us by God, which we carry out for His glory. This divine obedience





constitutes its ultimate purpose, even as we engage in it to care for ourselves, our families, and society more broadly. Not many people want to smash all machines these days as neo-Luddites—we’ve become too reliant on them for that—but, at the same time, we haven’t attended to the spiritual cost of this reliance.

A machine cannot substitute for a human being in realizing the spiritual goal of work. John Senior described labor’s ultimate purpose beautifully in *The Restoration of Christian Culture*:

The immediate purpose is simply to do the job to be done—for the butcher to cut the meat, for the baker to bake the bread, for the teacher to teach the multiplication tables. The proximate purpose is from the Latin *proximus*, meaning “neighbor,” exactly as in the phrase, love thy neighbor—*diliges proximum tuum*. The proximate end, perhaps surprisingly, is chiefly accomplished in prayer. And the final, or ultimate, purpose, the reason why we work and pray, is to know and love God as He is in Himself, so far as that is possible, in imitating His earthly life in Christ, the chief act of which was sacrifice. The immediate, proximate and final purposes of all our operations can be summed up in three words: work, prayer, sacrifice.

Love expresses the goal of work, taken up as a means of

choosing the good for others. The work itself is a good action we perform, undertaken to provide for the needs of others and as a way of honoring God.

A machine cannot perform work in this sense, as it is unable to pour love into what it produces. We, on the other hand, extend ourselves into our work, impressing it with our personality, as Pope Leo XIII expressed it in *Rerum novarum* (9), as a gift of ourselves for others. Think of the difference between knitting a sweater for someone and buying a similar manufactured one. Giving the former as a gift would be laden with personal significance, expressing the gift of the person’s own creative self, even if nothing different could be deciphered between the sweaters themselves. Likewise, as Pope John Paul II points out, we can approach our work as a means of personal fulfillment, employing our talents and creativity to perfect God’s creation and build up our community (*Laborem exercens* 9).

Efficiency and profits cannot suffice to guide our decision making about technology. We also must attend to the human impact of employing it. If automated machinery in a workshop can cut costs by eliminating jobs, a business owner would also have to consider the moral and spiritual ramifications of the decision. We often approach business decisions in a spiritual vacuum, taking a secular approach of holding work and spiritual goods apart from one another. Why has God given us the opportunity to work and own a business?

What good does He want us to derive from this enterprise? How is it meant to build up and perfect those involved in the work? Fundamentally, our work should produce spiritual fruit alongside material outcomes by building up all those involved in it.

The human impact of technology can be considered by asking if a new tool dignifies or diminishes the work. We cannot avoid the use of machinery and automation altogether, but as Catholics we can strive to employ them in ways that truly build the common good. As I am writing this, in October 2024, dockworkers are striking throughout the United States, protesting the rise of automation and bots that will displace their jobs. The strikers’ signs include the phrases of “robots don’t pay taxes” and “automation hurts families,” which point to work’s connection to the community and its building up of the common good and the family.

Machines cannot exercise intelligence or creativity, for they only manipulate raw material or data according to their design. The fundamental problem with automation stems from swapping the spiritual fruit of labor for a material one by not attending sufficiently to the contribution of human creativity and love. The end does not justify the means. Too often we seek the wrong end and employ improper means. Labor offers us the means given to us by God to become co-creators with Him by pouring ourselves out in love in order to give Him glory and to serve others.