

**WORK IN THE LIFE OF A MONASTIC**

January 1, 2004

*In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, One God. Amen.*

**Adam Works the Garden:**

I would like to speak to you about work in the life of a monastic. Work is one of the natural laws that God put in place for humans: “*Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to tend and keep it*.” [[1]](#footnote-2) This was not after his disobedience and fall; Adam was then still living in fellowship with God. God gave him work as a pastime because Adam was created in the image and likeness of God, as Christ said, “*My Father has been working until now, and I have been working*.”[[2]](#footnote-3) God created the world in six days, rested on the seventh day, and blessed it. He rested from the work of creation, but He continued to work in His care and preservation for creation. It is impossible for God to stop working; this refers to a specific work. The Holy Bible says, “*He rested from all His work which God had created and made*.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

Likewise, when He created Adam, He placed in him the principle of work. We could not imagine Adam, as a being, living in the Garden in order to experience a life of idleness or laziness. The Garden was abundantly supplied with all trees pleasing to the eye and delicious to the taste. God did not prevent him from eating any of the Garden’s fruit trees: “You have not left me in need of any of the works of Your honor.”[[4]](#footnote-5) It was Adam’s responsibility to tend the Garden and keep it, because there was fellowship between Adam and nature, just as there was fellowship between Adam and God. Perhaps, one of Adam’s duties was to feed and herd some animals, in addition to keeping the Garden. There is fellowship in caring; it is a feeling that one is caring for another, a kind of nurturing. Keeping the trees and the animals had a great philosophy behind it. As I said, idleness does not suit a logical being. On the one side, Adam was glorifying God by his life in the fellowship of love between him and God; on the other side, he also glorified God in the fellowship between himself and nature. He glorified God through the visible objects, as St. Paul said: “*For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead*.”[[5]](#footnote-6) When man fell, he was commissioned to perform heavy labor. In the beginning, his work was carefree and light, but when he fell he was told, “*In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread*.”[[6]](#footnote-7) He began to work and labor to feed himself.

When the Lord Christ, the new Adam, came, He also labored in His lifetime as a carpenter, to affirm the importance of work to humans. Perhaps, in the final years of His life, His work was to minister the Gospel and call souls to repentance. He labored, “*being wearied from His journey, sat thus by the well*,”[[7]](#footnote-8) spoke with the Samaritan woman, and led her to the fountains of salvation. He carried His cross on the way to the Passion and endured pain till death as a condemned person. He endured whipping by the soldiers and mocking by the Jews and Romans, to give us eternal life and forgiveness of sins.

**Sayings of the Fathers on Work:**

The saintly fathers affirmed the importance of work in the monastic life. “Abba Poemen said, ‘In Abba Pambo we see three bodily activities: abstinence from food until the evening every day, silence, and much manual work.’”[[8]](#footnote-9) Monastic life stands on three legs: reading, labor, and prayer. Part of the time is spent in reading in order to develop spiritual knowledge, and to nurture the mind with Hagiography (life-stories of saints) and the life-giving words of God. Another part is spent in prayer, fellowship with God, a fellowship of love. A third part is spent in work.

Some monks called Euchites, or “men of prayer”, once came to Lucius… He asked them, “What manual work do you do?” They said, “We do not work with our hands. We obey St. Paul’s command and pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). He said to them, “Don’t you eat?” They said, “Yes, we do.” He said to them: “When you are eating who prays for you?” Then he asked them, “Don’t you sleep?” They said, “Yes, we do.” He said, “Who prays for you while you are asleep?” and they could not answer him. Then he said to them, “I may be wrong, brothers, but it seems to me that you don’t do what you say. I will show you how I pray without ceasing although I work with my hands. With God’s help, I sit down with a few palm leaves, and plait them, and say, ‘Have mercy upon me, O God, after thy great mercy: and according to the multitude of thy mercies do away with mine iniquity’” (Ps. 51:1). He asked them, “Is that prayer, or not?” They said, “It’s prayer all right.” He said, “When I spend all day working and praying in my heart, I make about sixteen pence. Two of these I put outside the door, and with the rest I buy food. Whoever finds the two pennies outside the door prays for me while I am eating and sleeping: and so by God’s grace I fulfill the text, “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17).[[9]](#footnote-10)

You say you pray, but at the time when you are sleeping and eating no one is praying for you, however, I work and give charity from the work of my hands, and so the poor person who takes charity from me will pray for me. Therefore, at the time when I am eating or sleeping, that person’s prayers will be in place of my prayers, and thus, I am praying unceasingly through this person. Furthermore, I am praying during my work hours. Thus, he had prayed more than them. Abba Lucius continued:

As I do my work, I crush the devil of boredom and lust, because boredom leads to idleness, and lust abides in idleness. This is the way the monastic community handed down to us: we must work with our hands, fast all day long, attain silence of the tongue, and weep over our sins.[[10]](#footnote-11)

Work reduces heaviness and boredom for monastics. When St. Antony was stricken with boredom, the angel appeared to him and began working, saying, “Do this and you will be cured.”[[11]](#footnote-12)

**Importance of Work:**

Work also gives monastics an opportunity to eat from the work of their hands, to give to others in order to give in charity, and to feel that they have labored for the sake of charity. A person might offer charity from charity received. If someone gave you five loaves in charity, you might in turn give one loaf in charity; indeed, you offered charity, but it was on account of another. The one who gave is the one who will receive the reward of charity, however, if you offer of your own handiwork, then you are a fruitful or productive person. Thirdly, work prevents evils that result from idleness. As Abba Lucius has said, “Lust abides in idleness.”[[12]](#footnote-13) Sometimes, idleness helps laxness of the body, and this is why St. Moses the Black said, “Most important among the weapons of virtue is exhausting the body, with discernment. Laziness and negligence give birth to wars. Exhaust your body lest you are put to shame at the resurrection of the righteous... Do not fancy comfort as long as you are in this world.”[[13]](#footnote-14)

**Types of Work:**

There are two kinds of labor in the life of a monastic: one kind is accompanied with noise and commotion, while the other is accompanied with stillness. One kind could destroy the monastic life, while the other could build it. The first kind occurs when the work is intended for the sake of vainglory, pride, or greed. Perhaps one seeks to be very productive in order to be rich, or be glorified by people. This case causes unsettlement among the monastics. What is called for is to work in stillness, working to glorify God. St. Antony said, “Work with all your might, so that your heavenly Father is glorified,”[[14]](#footnote-15) and not so that you gain personal glory. The monastic who works in stillness benefits spiritually from the work. Mar Ephrem says, “The beginning of arrogance is for a monk not to share in the work with the others according to his ability. When we come to work, let us not speak much, but let our concern and thoughts be in the goal for which we left.”[[15]](#footnote-16) Work must be for a higher goal, not for the work itself, but for life with God.

You might find the worker-monastic becoming angry with the one who does not work. Instead, this person might meditate on how the fathers offered an example that propelled others to imitate them: “They used to say that a certain old man, who had young men living with him, told them on one occasion to do something, and when they did not do it, he said nothing further to them about it, but rose up himself in their sight and did what he had told them to do without anger, and without labor.”[[16]](#footnote-17) The phrase “without anger” is very important. If they did not do the requested task, he would rise with humility and calmness and perform it. Consequently, they were put to shame to see him work, and raced him to perform the task. Had he risen in anger, this would have caused unsettlement among them, and they would not have benefited from the example that he put forth. Likewise, one of the fathers was asked what work was needed for salvation. Not raising his head from his work, he said, “Whatever you see, do that,”[[17]](#footnote-18) meaning to say, “Do as you see me do, and thus gain your salvation.”

“An old man asked Abba Poemen, saying, ‘What shall I do, father, with my son Isaac, who hearkens unto me with pleasure?’ [He delights in hearing my advice.] Abba Poemen said unto him, ‘If you wish to be of benefit to him, show him [an example] by deeds and not by words, lest through observing words only he be found useless; for if you show him by deeds, the deeds themselves will abide with him, and he will profit.’”[[18]](#footnote-19) Our problem in this generation is too much knowledge and listening to sayings, while our saintly fathers worked more than they spoke. They taught their disciples virtues by being living examples. The disciples lived with their teachers, and trained their virtues spontaneously without mentally exhausting themselves to learn how to gain virtues.

**Gaining Virtues By Means of Work:**

The saintly fathers gained virtues through work. They considered work as proof of their love for others. Work is also oftentimes a means of gaining the virtue of endurance or patience.

They used to tell a story of a brother who was the neighbor of an old Abba. The brother said that he would go into the cell of the old man, and steal whatever he found there. Although the old man saw him, he never rebuked him, but worked with his hands and wearied himself the more… When the old man was about to die, the brethren sat round about him. When he saw in their midst the brother who used to steal from him, he said to him, “My son, come near me.” When he had drawn nigh to him, he kissed his hands, saying, “My brother, I am grateful to these hands, for through them I shall enter the kingdom of heaven.” Now when that brother heard these things he was sorry, and repented. He became a well tried monk through the things which he had seen in that old man.[[19]](#footnote-20)

He meant to convey to him that these are the hands that stole my handiwork, and so, I worked harder and persevered to compensate. This was certainly a great crown in the kingdom of heaven for this elder. This work, which only seems as work in appearance, was the cause of this saint gaining crowns in heaven, as well as the repentance of the monk who stole.

Monastics considered work as a means of gaining spiritual virtues, not simply a means of subsistence. As they offered charity from the works of their hands, they likewise gained the virtues of patience and perseverance, overcame boredom, grumbling, laziness, and laxness, and exhausted their bodies. With this intended purpose, St. Moses and St. Macarius fatigued their bodies, performing harsh labor. St. Moses carried water for many miles in a water pot through the sandy desert, perhaps spending all night transporting the water. He did this in order to provide water for the monks. Each monk had a water pot dug into the ground in the forefront of his cell. Before each cell there were two benches, and one of them was hollowed out in order to hold water. It was covered over with a wooden slab-like object. St. Moses drew the water to fill the water pots for the monks, in order to receive the blessing of all these fathers’ prayers. Perhaps the identity of the person who did this was concealed, so that he may flee from vainglory, but at least he took their blessings; they might at least say, “May God reward the one who did this and labored to bring me water.”

“They said of Abba Pambo that when he was dying, at the very hour of his death, he said to the holy men standing around him, ‘Since I came to this place in the desert and built myself a cell and lived in it, I do not remember eating bread unless it was the product of my own hands, nor have I regretted any word that I have spoken right up to the present hour. And yet I am departing for God as someone who has not even begun to serve Him.’”[[20]](#footnote-21) He mentioned some spiritual virtues that he practiced, such as not saying a single word that he regretted since he became a monk, referring to the psalm that says, “*I will guard my ways, lest I sin with my tongue*.”[[21]](#footnote-22) He did not mention many spiritual issues, but he did say that he never spent a day without work, and never ate the bread of charity. And after all this, he said he was not sure if he had done anything to please the Lord. This is the very virtue of compunction and humility.

Let us be careful that our work does not turn into the goal, leading us astray from our spiritual life. St. Nilus says, “The work of your hands must be divine not earthly, and its fruits you must share with the poor.”[[22]](#footnote-23) This is why people take a blessing, saying, “We want an item of the handiwork of the monastics.” Others take bread from the monasteries, saying, “Because the monastics are the ones who baked it, and prayed the psalms over it.”

A brother asked Abba Poemen, saying, “‘Give me a word [of benefit].’ The old man replied, ‘As far as you can, do some manual work so as to be able to give alms, for it is written that alms and faith purify from sin.’ Set your manual work as a set canon, and not for the sake of greed; do not hinder spiritual works because of it.”[[23]](#footnote-24) Your work should not disrupt your spiritual work and spiritual life. Sometimes a person is lost in the manual labor and forgets the spiritual labor. “Some saints said, ‘If you are working in your cell and the hour of prayer comes, do not say, ‘I will finish this little work in my hands and then arise,’ but always rise instantly and offer your prayer to God timely, lest you gradually grow accustomed to neglecting prayer.”[[24]](#footnote-25) Sometimes you are finishing up a task and the time for prayer comes, so you might say, “Let me just finish this, and then I will rise to pray.” The fathers advise you to rise up for prayer, and after prayer you will have the energy and drive, not only to finish that part, but also even more. But, if you continue working and postpone prayer, you might grow accustomed to this, and will perhaps later be struck with laxness not only in your prayers, but also in your work.

Sometimes, due to circumstances, a monastic is overburdened with concentrating on manual labor more than spiritual labor. If this happens, it is preferable to distribute the work, to prevent having one overwhelmed, losing the spiritual canons, while the others do not participate.

Provide yourself with such work for your hands as can be done, if possible, both during the day and at night, so that you are not a burden to anyone, and indeed can give to others, as Paul the Apostle advises (cf. 1 Thess. 2:9; Eph 4:28). In this manner you will overcome the demon of listlessness and drive away all the desires suggested by the enemy; for the demon of listlessness takes advantage of idleness. “Every idle man is full of desires.” (Prov 13:4, LXXX).[[25]](#footnote-26)

Sometimes the wars are light on a person living in the world, and in coming to monasticism, without work, one finds the wars overwhelming. The continually working monastic could abate these wars, because what was engaging these wars in the world was the abundance of work and business. Stillness could be the reason for the increased wars. This is why, alongside reading and prayer, work completes the legs needed to support the self and the soul along the spiritual struggle.

*All glory and honor is due to our God forevermore. Amen.*

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1. (The New King James Version 1982), Gen 2:15. All Biblical References are from the New King James Version (NKJV), unless otherwise stated. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Jn 5:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Gen 2:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. (H and H 2007), 272. This is taken from the Trisagion of the Divine Liturgy of Saint Gregory. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Rom 1:20. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Gen 3:19. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Jn 4:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. Abba Peomen (Ward, Sayings 1984), 188 {150}. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. Abba Lucius (Ward, Desert Fathers 2003), 131-132 {9}. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Abba Lucius (Beni-Suef Publication Committee 1977), 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Saint Antony (Ward, Desert Fathers 2003), 60 {1}. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Abba Lucius (Beni-Suef Publication Committee 1977), 206. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Saint Moses. Ibid., 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Saint Antony. Ibid., 208. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Mar Ephrem. Ibid., 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Unknown Elder, Ibid; (Budge 2008), Vol II, 128 {480}. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Abba Sisoes (Ward, Sayings 1984), 220 {45}. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Abba Poemen (Budge 2008), Vol II, 246 {352}. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Unknown Elder. Ibid., Vol II, 280 {530}. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Abba Pambo (Ramfos 2000), 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Ps 39:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Saint Nilus (Beni-Suef Publication Committee 1977), 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Abba Poemen (Ward, Sayings 1984), 176 {69}; (Beni-Suef Publication Committee 1977), 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Unknown Elder (Beni-Suef Publication Committee 1977), 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Evagrios the Solitary (Corinth 1979-95), Vol 1, 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)