



**Center for Faith & Learning
Scholar Program**

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"Why Work?"

by Dorothy Sayers

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Why Work?

DOROTHY SAYERS

I have already, on a previous occasion, spoken at some length on the subject of Work and Vocation. What I urged then was a thoroughgoing revolution in our whole attitude to work. I asked that it should be looked upon, not as a necessary drudgery to be undergone for the purpose of making money, but as a way of life in which the nature of man should find its proper exercise and delight and so fulfill itself to the glory of God. That it should, in fact, be thought of as a creative activity undertaken for the love of the work itself; and that man, made in God's image, should make things, as God makes them, for the sake of doing well a thing that is well worth doing.

It may well seem to you – as it does to some of my acquaintances – that I have a sort of obsession about this business of the right attitude to work. But I do insist upon it, because it seems to me that what becomes of civilization after this war is going to depend enormously on our being able to effect this revolution in our ideas about work. Unless we do change our whole way of thought about work, I do not think we shall ever escape from the appalling squirrel cage of economic confusion in which we have been madly turning for the last three centuries or so, the cage in which we landed ourselves by acquiescing in a social system based upon Envy and Avarice.

A society in which consumption has to be artificially stimulated in order to keep production going is a society founded on trash and waste, and such a society is a house built upon sand.

It is interesting to consider for a moment how our outlook has been forcibly changed for us in the last twelve months by the brutal presence of war. War is a judgment that overtakes societies when they have been living; upon ideas that conflict too violently with the laws governing the universe. People who would not revise their ideas voluntarily find themselves compelled to do so by the sheer pressure of the events which these very ideas have served to bring about.

Never think that wars are irrational catastrophes: they happen when wrong ways of thinking and living bring about intolerable situations; and whichever side may be the more outrageous in its aims and the more brutal in its methods, the root causes of conflict are usually to be found in some wrong way of life in which all parties have acquiesced, and for which everybody must, to some extent, bear the blame.

It is quite true that false Economics are one of the root causes of the present war; and one of the false ideas we had about Economics was a false attitude both to Work and to the good produced by Work. This attitude we are now being obliged to alter, under the compulsion of war – and a very strange and painful process it is in some ways. It is always strange and

painful to have to change a habit of mind; though, when we have made the effort, we may find a great relief, even a sense of adventure and delight, in getting rid of the false and returning to the true.

Can you remember – it is already getting difficult to remember – what things were like before the war? The stockings we bought cheap and threw away to save the trouble of mending? The cars we scrapped every year to keep up with the latest fashion in engine design and streamlining? The bread and bones and scraps of fat that littered the dustbins – not only of the rich, but of the poor? The empty bottles that even the dustman scorned to collect, because the manufacturers found it cheaper to make new ones than to clean the old? The mountains of empty tins that nobody found it worthwhile to salvage, rusting and stinking on the refuse dumps? The food that was burnt or buried because it did not pay to distribute it? The land choked and impoverished with thistle and ragwort, because it did not pay to farm it? The handkerchiefs used for paint rags and kettleholders? The electric lights left blazing because it was too much trouble to switch them off? The fresh peas we could not be bothered to shell, and threw aside for something out of a tin? The paper that cumbered the shelves, and lay knee-deep in the parks, and littered the seats of railway trains? The scattered hairpins and smashed crockery, the cheap knickknacks of steel and wood and rubber and glass and tin that we bought to fill in an odd half hour at Woolworth's and forgot as soon as we had bought them? The advertisements imploring and exhorting and cajoling and menacing and bullying us to glut ourselves with things we did not want, in the name of snobbery and idleness and sex appeal? And the fierce international scramble to find in helpless and backward nations a market on which to fob off all the superfluous rubbish which the inexorable machines ground out hour by hour, to create money and to create employment?

Do you realize how we have had to alter our whole scale of values, now that we are no longer being urged to consume but to conserve? We have been forced back to the social morals of our great-grandparents. When a piece of lingerie costs three precious coupons, we have to consider, not merely its glamour value, but how long it will wear. When fats are rationed, we must not throw away scraps, but jealously use to advantage what it cost so much time and trouble to breed and rear. When paper is scarce we must – or we should – think whether what we have to say is worth saying before writing or printing it. When our life depends on the land, we have to pay in short commons for destroying its fertility by neglect or overcropping. When a haul of herrings takes valuable manpower from the forces, and is gathered in at the peril of men's lives by bomb and mine and machine gun, we read a new significance into those gloomy words which appear so often in the fishmonger's shop: NO FISH TODAY.... We have had to learn the bitter lesson that in all the world there are only two sources of real wealth: the fruit of the earth and the labor of men; and to estimate work not by the money it brings to the producer, but by the worth of the thing that is made.

The question that I will ask you to consider today is this: When the war is over, are we likely, and do we want, to keep this attitude to work and the results of work? Or are we preparing, and do we want, to go back to our old habits of thought? Because I believe that on our answer to this question the whole economic future of society will depend.

Sooner or later the moment will come when we have to make a decision about this. At the moment, we are not making it – don't let us flatter ourselves that we are. It is being made for

us. And don't let us imagine that a wartime economy has stopped waste. It has not. It has only transferred it elsewhere. The glut and waste that used to clutter our own dustbins have been removed to the field of battle. That is where all the surplus consumption is going. The factories are roaring more loudly than ever, turning out night and day goods that are of no conceivable value for the maintenance of life; on the contrary, their sole object is to destroy life, and instead of being thrown away they are being blown away – in Russia, in North Africa, over Occupied France, in Burma, China, and the Spice Islands, and on the Seven Seas.

What is going to happen when the factories stop turning out armaments? No nation has yet found a way to keep the machines running and whole nations employed under modern industrial conditions without wasteful consumption. For a time, a few nations could contrive to keep going by securing a monopoly of production and forcing their waste products on to new and untapped markets. When there are no new markets and all nations are industrial producers, the only choice we have been able to envisage so far has been that between armaments and unemployment. This is the problem that some time or other will stare us in the face again, and this time we must have our minds ready to tackle it. It may not come at once – for it is quite likely that after the war we shall have to go through a further period of managed consumption while the shortages caused by the war are being made good. But sooner or later we shall have to grapple with this difficulty, and everything will depend on our attitude of mind about it.

Shall we be prepared to take the same attitude to the arts of peace as to the arts of war? I see no reason why we should not sacrifice our convenience and our individual standard of living just as readily for the building of great public works as for the building of ships and tanks – but when the stimulus of fear and anger is removed, shall we be prepared to do any such thing? Or shall we want to go back to that civilization of greed and waste which we dignify by the name of a “high standard of living”? I am getting very much afraid of that phrase about the standard of living. And I am also frightened by the phrase “after the war” – it is so often pronounced in a tone that suggests: “after the war, we want to relax, and go back, and live as we did before.” And that means going back to the time when labor was valued in terms of its cash returns, and not in terms of the work.

Now the answer to this question, if we are resolute to know what we are about, will not be left to rich men – to manufacturers and financiers. If these people have governed the world of late years it is only because we ourselves put the power into their hands. The question can and should be answered by the worker and the consumer.

It is extremely important that the worker should really understand where the problem lies. It is a matter of brutal fact that in these days labor, more than any other section of the community, has a vested interest in war. Some rich employers make profit out of war – that is true; but what is infinitely more important is that for all working people war means full employment and high wages.

When war ceases, then the problem of employing labor at the machines begins again. The relentless pressure of hungry labor is behind the drive toward wasteful consumption, whether in the destruction of war or in the trumpery of peace.

you make the State the sole employer, even when you make Labor into the employer. It is not simply a question of profits and wages or living conditions – but of what is to be done with the work of the machines, and what work the machines are to do.

If we do not deal with this question now, while we have time to think about it, then the whirligig of wasteful production and wasteful consumption will start again and will again end in war. And the driving power of labor will be thrusting to turn the wheels, because it is to the financial interest of labor to keep the whirligig going faster and faster till the inevitable catastrophe comes.

And, so that those wheels may turn, the consumer – that is, you and I, including the workers, who are consumers also – will again be urged to consume and waste; and unless we change our attitude – or rather unless we keep hold of the new attitude forced upon us by the logic of war – we shall again be bamboozled by our vanity, indolence, and greed into keeping the squirrel cage of wasteful economy turning. We could – you and I – bring the whole fantastic economy of profitable waste down to the ground overnight, without legislation and without revolution, merely by refusing to cooperate with it. I say, we could – as a matter of fact, we have; or rather, it has been done for us. If we do not want to rise up again after the war, we can prevent it – simply by preserving the wartime habit of valuing work instead of money. The point is: do we want to?....

Whatever we do, we shall be faced with grave difficulties. That cannot be disguised. But it will make a great difference to the result if we are genuinely aiming at a real change in economic thinking. And by that I mean a radical change from top to bottom – a new system; not a mere adjustment of the old system to favor a different set of people.

The habit of thinking about work as something one does to make money is so ingrained in us that we can scarcely imagine what a revolutionary change it would be to think about it instead in terms of the work done. To do so would mean taking the attitude of mind we reserve for our unpaid work – our hobbies, our leisure interests, the things we make and do for pleasure – and making that the standard of all our judgments about things and people. We should ask of an enterprise, not “will it pay?” but “is it good?”; of a man, not “what does he make?” but “what is his work worth?”; of goods, not “Can we induce people to buy them?” but “are they useful things well made?”; of employment, not “how much a week?” but “will it exercise my faculties to the utmost?” And shareholders in – let us say – brewing companies, would astonish the directorate by arising at shareholders’ meeting and demanding to know, not merely where the profits go or what dividends are to be paid, not even merely whether the workers’ wages are sufficient and the conditions of labor satisfactory, but loudly and with a proper sense of personal responsibility: “What goes into the beer?”

You will probably ask at once: How is this altered attitude going to make any difference to the question of employment? Because it sounds as though it would result in not more employment, but less. I am not an economist, and I can only point to a peculiarity of war economy that usually goes without notice in economic textbooks, In war, production for wasteful consumption still goes on: but there is one great difference in the good produced. None of them is valued for what it will fetch, but only for what it is worth in itself. The gun and the tank, the airplane and the warship have to be the best of their kind. A war consumer does not buy shoddy. He does not buy to sell again. He buys the thing that is good for its purpose, asking nothing of it but that it shall do the job it has to do. Once again, war forces the consumer into a right attitude to the work. And, whether by strange coincidence, or whether because of some universal law, as soon as nothing is demanded of the thing made but its own integral perfection, its own absolute value, the skill and labor of the worker are fully employed and likewise acquire an absolute value.

This is probably not the kind of answer that you will find in any theory of economics. But the professional economist is not really trained to answer, or even to ask himself questions about absolute values. The economist is inside the squirrel cage and turning with it. Any question about absolute values belongs to the sphere, not of economics, but of religion.

And it is very possible that we cannot deal with economics as all, unless we can see economy from outside the cage; that we cannot begin to settle the relative values without considering absolute values. And if so, this may give a very precise and practical meaning to the words: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you.".... I am persuaded that the reason why the Churches are in so much difficulty about giving a lead in the economic sphere is because they are trying to fit a Christian standard of economic to a wholly false and pagan understanding of work.

What is the Christian understanding of work? I should like to put before you two or three propositions arising out of the doctrinal position which I stated at the beginning: namely, that work is the natural exercise and function of man – the creature who is made in the image of his Creator. You will find that any of them if given in effect everyday practice, is so revolutionary (as compared with the habits of thinking into which we have fallen), as to make all political revolutions look like conformity.

The first, stated quite briefly, is that work is not, primarily, a thing one does to live, but the thing one lives to do. It is, or it should be, the full expression of the worker's faculties, the thing in which he finds spiritual, mental and bodily satisfaction, and the medium in which he offers himself to God.

Now the consequences of this are not merely that the work should be performed under decent living and working conditions. That is a point we have begun to grasp, and it a perfectly sound point. But we have tended to concentrate on it to the exclusion of other considerations far more revolutionary.

- (a) There is, for instance, the question of profits and remuneration. We have all got it fixed in our heads that the proper end of work is to be paid for – to produce a return in profits or payment to the worker which fully or more than compensates the effort he puts into it. But if our proposition is true, this does not follow at all. So long as Society provides the worker with a sufficient return in real wealth to enable him to carry on the work properly, then he has his reward. For his work is the measure of his life, and his satisfaction is found in the fulfillment of his own nature, and in contemplation of the perfection of his work.

That, in practice, there is this satisfaction, is shown by the mere fact that a man will put loving labor into some hobby which can never bring him any economically adequate return. His satisfaction comes, in the godlike manner, from looking upon what he has made and finding it very good. He is no longer bargaining with his work, but serving it. It is only when work has to be looked on as a means to gain that it becomes hateful; for then, instead of a friend, it becomes an enemy from whom tolls and contributions have to be extracted. What most of us demand from society is that we should always get out of it a little more than the value of the labor we give to it. By this process, we persuade ourselves that society is always in our debt – a conviction that not only piles up actual financial burdens, but leaves us with a grudge against a society.

- (b) Here is the second consequence. At present we have no clear grasp of the principle that every man should do the work for which he is fitted by nature. The employer is obsessed by the notion that he must find cheap labor, and the worker by the notion that the best-paid job is the job for him. Only feebly, inadequately, and spasmodically do we ever attempt to tackle the problem from the other end, and inquire: What type of worker is suited to this type of work? People engaged in education see clearly that this is the right end to start from: but they are frustrated by economic pressure, and by the failure of parents on the one hand and employers on the other to grasp the fundamental importance of this approach. And that the trouble results far more from a failure of intelligence than from economic necessity is seen clearly under war conditions, when, although competitive economics are no longer a governing factor, the right men and women are still persistently thrust into the wrong jobs, through sheer inability on everybody's part to imagining a purely vocational approach to the business of fitting together the worker and his work.
- (c) A third consequence is that, if we really believed this proposition and arranged our work and our standard of values accordingly, we should no longer think of work as something that we hastened to get through in order to enjoy our leisure; we should look on our leisure as the period of changed rhythm that refreshed us for the delightful purpose of getting on with our work. And this being so, we should tolerate no regulations of any sort that prevented us from working as long and as well as our enjoyment of work demanded. We should resent any such restrictions as a monstrous interference with the liberty of the subject. How great an upheaval of our ideas that would mean I leave you to imagine. It would turn topsy-turvy all our notions about hours of work, rates of work, unfair competition, and all the rest of it. We should all find ourselves fighting, as now only artists and the members of certain professions fight, for precious time in which to get on with the job –instead of fighting for precious hours saved from the job.
- (d) A fourth consequence is that we should fight tooth and nail, not for mere employment, but for the quality of the work that we had to do. We should clamor to be engaged in work that was worth doing, and in which we could take pride. The worker would demand that the stuff he helped to turn out should be good stuff – he would no longer be content to take the cash and let the credit go. Like the shareholders in the brewery, he would feel a sense of personal responsibility, and clamor to know, and to control, what went into the beer he brewed. There would be protests and strikes – not only about pay and conditions, but about the quality of the work demanded and the honesty, beauty, and usefulness of the goods produced. The greatest insult which a commercial age has offered to the worker has been to rob him of all interest in the end product of the work and to force him to dedicate his life to making badly things which were not worth making.

This first proposition chiefly concerns the worker as such. My second proposition directly concerns Christian as such, and it is this. It is the business of the Church to recognize that the secular vocation, as such, is sacred. Christian people, and particularly perhaps the Christian clergy, must get it firmly into their heads that when a man or woman is called to a particular job of secular work, that is as true a vocation as though he or she were called to specifically religious work. The Church must concern Herself not only with such questions as the just price and proper working conditions: She must

concern Herself with seeing that work itself is such as a human being can perform without degradation – that no one is required by economic or any other considerations to devote himself to work that is contemptible, soul destroying, or harmful. It is not right for Her to acquiesce in the notion that a man's life is divided into the time he spends on his work and the time he spends in serving God. He must be able to serve God in his work, and the work itself must be accepted and respected as the medium of divine creation.

In nothing has the Church so lost Her hold on reality as in Her failure to understand and respect the secular vocation. She has allowed work and religion to become separate departments, and is astonished to find that, as result, the secular work of the world is turned to purely selfish and destructive ends, and that the greater part of the world's intelligent workers have become irreligious, or at least, uninterested in religion.

But is it astonishing? How can any one remain interested in a religion which seems to have no concern with nine-tenths of his life? The Church's approach to an intelligent carpenter is usually confined to exhorting him not to be drunk and disorderly in his leisure hours, and to come to church on Sundays. What the Church should be telling him is this: that the very first demand that his religion makes upon him is that he should make good tables.

Church by all means, and decent forms of amusement, certainly – but what use is all that if in the very center of his life and occupation he is insulting God with bad carpentry? No crooked table legs or ill-fitting drawers ever, I dare swear, came out of the carpenter's shop at Nazareth. Nor, if they did, could anyone believe that they were made by the same hand that made Heaven and earth. No piety in the worker will compensate for work that is not true to itself; for any work that is untrue to its own technique is a living lie.

Yet in Her own buildings, in Her own ecclesiastical art and music, in Her hymns and prayers, in Her sermons and in Her little books of devotion, the Church will tolerate or permit a pious intention to excuse so ugly, so pretentious, so tawdry and twaddling, so insincere and insipid, so bad as to shock and horrify any decent draftsman.

And why? Simply because She has lost all sense of the fact that the living and eternal truth is expressed in work only so far as that work is true in itself, to itself, to the standards of its own technique. She has forgotten that the secular vocation is sacred.

Forgotten that a building must be good architecture before it can be a good church; that a painting must be well painted before it can be a good sacred picture; that work must be good work before it can call itself God's work.

Let the Church remember this: that every maker and worker is called to serve God in his profession or trade – not outside it. The Apostles complained rightly when they said it was not meet they should leave the word of God and serve tables; their vocation was to preach the word. Bu the person whose vocation it is to prepare the meals beautifully might with equal justice protest: It is not meet for us to leave the service of our tables to preach the word.

The official Church wastes time and energy, and moreover, commits sacrilege, in demanding that secular workers should neglect their proper vocation in order to do Christian work – by which She means ecclesiastical work. The only Christian work is good work well done. Let the Church see to it that the workers are Christian people and do their work well, as to God: then all the work will be Christian work, whether it is church embroidery, or sewage farming. As Jacques Maritain says: “If you want to produce Christian work, be a Christian, and try to make a work of beauty into which you have put your heart; do not adopt a Christian pose.” He is right. And let the Church remember that the beauty of the work will be judged by its own, and not by ecclesiastical standards.

Let me give you an illustration of what I mean. When my play *The Zeal of Thy House* was produced in London, a dear old pious lady was much struck by the beauty of the four great archangels who stood throughout the play in their heavy, gold robes, eleven feet high from wingtip to sandal tip. She asked with great innocence whether I selected the actors who played the angels “for the excellence of their moral character.”

I replied that the angels were selected to begin with, not by me but by the producer, who had the technical qualifications for selecting suitable actors – for that was part of his vocation. And that he selected, in the first place, young men who were six feet tall so that they would match properly together. Secondly, angels had to be of good physique, so as to be able to stand stiff on the stage for two and a half hours, carrying the weight of their wings and costumes, without wobbling, or fidgeting, or fainting. Thirdly, they had to be able to speak verse well, in an agreeable voice and audibly. Fourthly, they had to be reasonable good actors. When all these technical conditions had been fulfilled, we might come to the moral qualities, of which the first would be the ability to arrive on stage punctually and in a sober condition, since the curtain must go up on time, and a drunken angel would be indecorous.

After that, and only after that, one might take character into consideration, but that, provided his behavior was not so scandalous as to cause dissension among the company, the right kind of actor with no morals would give a far more reverent and seemingly performance than a saintly actor with the wrong technical qualifications. The worst religious films I ever saw were produced by a company which chose its staff exclusively for their piety. Bad photography, bad acting, and bad dialogue produced a result so grotesquely irreverent that the pictures could not have been shown in churches without bringing Christianity into contempt.

God is not served by technical incompetence; and incompetence and untruth always result when the secular vocation is treated as a thing alien to religion....

And conversely: when you find a man who is a Christian praising God by the excellence of his work – do not distract him and take him away from his proper vocation to address religious meetings and open church bazaars. Let him serve God in the way to which God has called him. If you take him away from that, he will exhaust himself in an alien technique and lose his capacity to do his dedicated work. It is your business, you churchmen, to get what good you can from observing his work – not to take him away from it, so that he may do ecclesiastical work for you. But, if you have any power, see

that he is set free to do this own work as well as it may be done. He is not there to serve you; he is there to serve God by serving his work.

This brings me to my third proposition; and this may sound to you the most revolutionary of all. It is this: the worker's first duty is to serve the work. The popular catchphrase of today is that it is everybody's duty to serve the community, but there is a catch in it. It is the old catch about the two great commandments.

“Love God – and your neighbor: on those two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

The catch in it, which nowadays the world has largely forgotten, is that the second commandment depends upon the first, and that without the first, it is a delusion and a snare. Much of our present trouble and disillusionment have come from putting the second commandment before the first.

If we put our neighbor first, we are putting man above God, and that is what we have been doing ever since we began to worship humanity and make man the measure of all things. Whenever man is made the center of things, he becomes the storm center of trouble – and that is precisely the catch about serving the community. It ought perhaps to make us suspicious of that phrase when we consider that it is the slogan of every commercial scoundrel and swindler who wants to make sharp business practice pass muster as social improvement.

“Service” is the motto of the advertiser, of big business, and of fraudulent finance. And of others, too. Listen to this: “I expect the judiciary to understand that the nation does not exist for their convenience, but that justice exists to serve the nation.” That was Hitler yesterday – and that is what becomes of “service,” when the community, and not the work, becomes its idol. There is, in fact, a paradox about working to serve the community, and it is this: that to aim directly at serving the community is to falsify the work; the only way to serve the community is to forget the community and serve the work.

There are three very good reasons for this:

The first is that you cannot do good work if you take your mind off the work to see how the community is taking it – any more than you can make a good drive from the tee if you take your eye off the ball. “Blessed are the single hearted: (for that is the real meaning of the word we translate “the pure in heart”). If your heart is not wholly in the work, the work will not be good – and work that is not good serves neither God nor the community; it only serves mammon.

The second reason is that the moment you think of serving other people, you begin to have a notion that other people owe you something for your pains; you begin to think that you have a claim on the community. You will begin to bargain for reward, to angle for applause, and to harbor a grievance if you are not appreciated. But if your mind is set upon serving the work, then you know you have nothing to look for; the only reward the work can give you is the satisfaction of beholding its perfection. The work takes all and gives nothing but itself; and to serve the work is a labor of pure love.

And thirdly, if you set out to serve the community, you will probably end by merely fulfilling a public demand – and you may not even do that. A public demand is a changeable thing. Nine-tenths of the bad plays put on in theaters owe their badness to the fact that the playwright has aimed at pleasing the audience, in stead of at producing a good and satisfactory play. Instead of doing the work as its own integrity demands that it should be done, he has falsified the play by putting in this or that which he thinks will appeal to the *groundlings* (who by that time have probably come to want something else), and the play fails by its insincerity. The work has been falsified to please the public, and in the end even the public is not pleased. As it is with works of art, so it is with all work.

We are coming to the end of an era of civilization which began by pandering to public demand, and ended by frantically trying to create public demand for an output so false and meaningless that even a doped public revolted from the trash offered to it and plugged into war rather than swallow anymore of it. The danger of “serving the community” is that one is part of the community, and that in serving it one may only be serving a kind of communal egotism.

The only true way of serving the community is to be truly in sympathy with the community, to be oneself part of the community and then to serve the work without giving the community another thought. Then the work will endure, because it will be true to itself. It is the work that serves the community; the business of the worker is to serve the work.

Where we have become confused is in mixing up the *ends* to which our work is put with the way in which the work is done. The end of the work will be decided by our religious outlook: as we *are* so we *make*. It is the business of religion to make us Christian people, and then our work will naturally be turned to Christian ends, because our work is the expression of ourselves. But the way in which the work is done is governed by no sanction except the good of the of work itself; and religion has no direct connection with that, except to insist that the workman should be free to do his work well according to its own integrity. Jacques Maritain, one of the very few religious writers of our time who really understands the nature of creative work, has summed the matter up in a sentence.

What is required is the perfect practical discrimination between the end pursued by the workman (*finis operantis*, said the Schoolmen) and the end to be served by the work (*finis operas*), so that the workman may work for his wages but the work be controlled and set in being only in relation to its own proper good and nowise in relation to the wages earned; so that the artist may work for any and every human intention he likes, but the work taken by itself be performed and constructed for its own proper beauty alone.

Or perhaps we may put it more shortly still: If work is to find its right place in the world, it is the duty of the Church to see to it that the work serves God, and that the worker serves the work.