

On Work

Perhaps one of the trickiest elements of following the spirituality of Blessed Charles while being a member of a secular institute is that of work. Charles envisioned his communities to work as the poor work, to live as the poor live. In a community of several brothers, there is a combined income and an ability to allow for a brother to be in between jobs without it jeopardizing the finances of the community. If a person is living this spirituality alone, things are a different matter.

I would like to describe my own experience, as it might illuminate some of the problems that could emerge. When I first moved to Biloxi, Mississippi in 2004, I found a menial job at a casino as a security guard. I was earning a little over \$8 per hour. I found an upstairs duplex for \$300 per month that was barely livable. I had to tear out the battered carpeting and scour the kitchen to clear it of roaches and filth. I did not have air conditioning or heat, as I could not afford it. I made do with a fan and a space heater. In the winter, I remember coming out of my bedroom and seeing my breath in the kitchen as I hurried to make breakfast. A bicycle served me instead of a car. I tried an experiment of buying a sailboat for a little over \$5000 and living on it in a marina. I was desperate to try and find a place that I could afford for the long term while working near the poverty line.

After many months of scraping by, my spiritual director advised me to find a job that would allow me to buy a house. “This way,” she explained, “you would have a permanent, stable place that would give you more freedom to stay here long term.” I resisted her advice. Wouldn’t this be a betrayal of the whole spirit of Fr. Charles? But, remembering that obedience is the highest form of self sacrifice, I grudgingly agreed, and started to send out applications. A few months later, I was hired by a casino to work in their IT department. A few months after that, I bought a house. A few more months passed, and Hurricane Katrina destroyed my little duplex (I had since sold the sailboat—I felt an increased desolation from owing it, and I don’t think it survived the hurricane.) If I was not obedience in following my spiritual director’s advice, I would have been homeless. Who knows if I would have found a place to live in the housing chaos that followed the storm?

There are some people that I know who have found a way to work as the poor work and to find some sort of stable housing, but I believe they are the exception. Brother Charles was adamant that the brothers would not accept alms, but would work for their needs. Yet, he himself (living alone, I might add) did not achieve this; instead, he relied on family to send him inheritance money to support him.

Of course, working at a job that makes more money does not mean that one has to live at that level of income. As my career has established, I still live in the same small house in the same very humble neighborhood. I drive a beat-up car. In fact, I have found great apostolate opportunities with my coworkers, remembering that I am supposed to be a “brother to all”.

In essence, what I am saying is that living the spirituality of Nazareth by oneself may require some creative thinking regarding employment. Follow the Holy Spirit, follow your spiritual director, and do not be afraid to make hard choices. If your prayer life is solid and your will is good, push boldly forward.