

# Seeking God in the Trenches of Everyday Work

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## **The Leadership Forum**

*Boston*

*by John Coverdale*

John Coverdale, Professor of Law at Seton Hall University in Newark, NJ, gave a talk on “Seeking God in the Trenches of Everyday Work”. He said that the central message of the Second Vatican Council, and of the founder of Opus Dei, St. Josemaria Escriva, whom John had the great privilege of knowing and working with, was that we are all called to be holy, that is, to be saints.

That message is easily said, but hard to internalize and make our own. We tend to think of saints as people very different from us who lived lives very different from ours. It is hard to think of St. Peter the bond trader, St. Ralph the web designer, or St. Kevin the airline pilot. But that’s what we are called to be.

We are all called to become saints, to reflect the face of Christ, not by leaving our job and becoming full time catechists or social workers, but by turning our everyday work and activities into service of God and into prayer. In the words of the founder of Opus Dei, “Either we learn to find our Lord in ordinary, everyday life, or else we shall never find Him.”

What does sanctifying work involve? A first condition is that our work be upright, just, honest. We need to apply this condition to our particular situation, e.g. if you are a lawyer: a client comes into your office and as he explains his problem, you realize that last month you put in 35 hours preparing a memo on an identical issue for another client. You cannot change the headings on the memo and bill the new client for 30 hours. Or, you cannot sell someone a computer system that’s a lot bigger than his needs. Perhaps one way of approaching a job is to ask yourself, “Would I be scandalized or at least surprised if someone told me that a person who is really a committed Christian had done what I’m thinking of doing.”

Clearly it is not enough to be just and honest. There are a lot of people who are honest but whose work is not a path to God. We also need to work with a right intention. We work because it is God’s will for us, a part of his plan for us. Christ himself gave us a good example of this, since he spent the vast majority of his life working as a craftsman. One way to work with a right intention, is to learn to offer it up as we go throughout the day. Offering our work to God can transform it meaning.

If we offer our work to God, we must work well. Is our work something we can offer to God with a straight face? Is it finished, well done? Perhaps it is easiest to think about finishing work with regard to manual tasks: did the electrician put the outlets in straight? Did he tape all the connections? But we can find equivalents in whatever kind of work

we do: return phone calls promptly, file papers properly, meet deadlines. It is not a question of perfectionism, but of doing work well because we are offering it to God.

Work in the presence of God. We are in fact in God's presence all the time. But we can be oblivious to his presence or unaware of it. For our work to be a path to union with God, to sanctity, we need to try to be aware of his presence. For this to happen, we need reminders: glance at a picture of the Blessed Virgin from time to time, put a little cross on the top of a page as we begin writing. When reviewing the statutes of Opus Dei, Pope John Paul II, put abbreviation on the top of each page, abbreviations which helped to recall spiritual aspirations. If this practice is good enough for John Paul II, it should be good enough for us.

Work with a spirit of service. Try to help others. In some ways, this takes us back to our starting point of doing work that is honest and upright. Our work has to contribute to the well being of others, to be a real service to someone. We need to do our work with a spirit of service, taking an interest in the people around us. Take time to get to know the people we come in contact with through our work: be interested in their concerns and problems, notice when they are down or stressed out. Structure our work to make that of others easier. For example, we know that a particular project has to be finished by Friday afternoon. We also know that after our part is done, someone else has to put in a couple of days on it. We can turn to it early and get it to the other person on Monday so they can turn to it, or we can give it to them late on Thursday, which means they will have to work late at night to finish their part.

Keep our work in its proper place. Sometimes that means not being lazy. For us, that also means not getting so wrapped up in our work that we shortchange family life, friendship, and spiritual life. A steady diet of 70 hour work weeks cannot be sanctified. Part of our mission as followers of Christ, is to give back to society a sense of balance about work, a sense that work is an important thing, but not the only important thing. To help find the right balance, ask yourself: would you want your son or daughter to work where I do?

It may seem overwhelming to learn to accomplish how to best sanctify our work, given the pressures of time, priorities, etc. But sanctity is the work of a lifetime. We can resolve to try to make our work a way of coming closer to God and pick out one or two small things and try to improve in them. As St. Josemaria says in *The Way*, "Conversion is a matter of a moment. Sanctification is the work of a lifetime."