

On Labor Day, teach your kids about the dignity of work

Labor Day is the last hurrah of summer, a day for barbecues and, for many kids, their last taste of freedom before school starts up again. But, Labor Day is so much more! Perhaps it's fitting that it comes as school is ramping up, because school is the labor of children. It also comes as some parents' jobs move from a slower summer pace to a fuller schedule. Labor Day is also the celebration of the fruits of our labors, our various contributions to society.

Our Catholic faith has a long tradition of teaching about labor...and Labor Day is the perfect time to share it with your kids! Here's some background, plus some activities to try.

Church Teaching about the Dignity of Work

Here's a super-quick summary of Church teaching about work:

- **Work is good.** Way back in the Book of Genesis, God charges the man and woman to "cultivate and care for" creation (Gen 2:15). "Cultivating the earth means not abandoning it to itself; exercising dominion over it means taking care of it, as a wise king cares for his people and a shepherd his sheep," says the [Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church](#). Work is good because 1) it reflects our creation in the image of God; it is a way for us to be creative, just as God is creative; 2) when work is directed toward some good goal, it is a way of serving God; 3) it provides people with what they need for a good life and increases the common good, especially for the poor.
- **Sin makes work hard.** When Adam and Eve turned away from God, seeking absolute dominion over all things without God, they broke God's original intention for work, making it toil. That doesn't change God's original plan

for work; it can still be used for good. But sin all too often interferes with that plan, causing us to experience work as oppressive drudgery.

- **Work isn't everything.** God gave us a day to rest (the Sabbath, which we observe on Sunday) as a way of keeping things in perspective: our work shouldn't define our life; our relationships should, starting with our relationship with God.
- **Work must respect the dignity of the worker.** Starting with the papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (on capital and labor) in 1891, the Church began teaching more explicitly about work. A major theme of Pope Leo XIII's ground-breaking encyclical was the simple idea that workers are first and foremost human beings—and work must respect human dignity. “Any form of materialism or economic tenet that tries to reduce the worker to being a mere instrument of production, a simple *labour force* with an exclusively material value, would end up hopelessly distorting the essence of work and stripping it of its most noble and basic human finality,” says the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church.
- **Work ought to contribute to the good of society.** Besides respecting the dignity of workers, work ought to serve the common good, the Church says.
- **Work can be a form of prayer.** “Human work, directed to charity as its final goal, becomes an occasion for contemplation; it becomes devout prayer. . . .” ([Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church #266](#)). This attitude toward work has been developed and nurtured over the centuries in monasteries, where work is an integral part of the daily routine. Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection's *The Practice of the Presence of God* and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux's “Little Way” are just two of many examples of methods that elevate even menial work to God.

In the years since Pope Leo XIII wrote *Rerum Novarum*, other

popes have continued to develop the Church's teaching about the dignity of work. The encyclicals deal with issues of safe work environments, protecting the rights of workers, fair wages, making sure that everyone has access to gainful work that pays enough to secure a decent quality of life. You can check out a good summary of these papal encyclicals on work at the [Catholic Labor Network website](#).

Besides the formal teaching of the Church about work, we also have the example of the life of Jesus, who spent most of his life as a simple worker. Work and workers are also a prominent theme in his teaching—just think of how many of his parables have to do with work!

And then there are the lives of the saints. Joseph is honored May 1 as St. Joseph the Worker. He's one of the patron saints of work and workers. And Dorothy Day began her ministry to put the Church's social teaching on the dignity of work and the rights of workers into action; the movement she co-founded with Peter Maurin, the [Catholic Worker](#), directly advocated for the rights of workers.

Ways to Celebrate the Dignity of Work on Labor Day

Here are some suggestions for how your family might make Labor Day a little more meaningful:

- 1. Check out the U.S. Catholic bishops' Labor Day statement and educational materials.** Every year, the U.S. Catholic bishops issue a statement. [Read an excerpt to your kids!](#)
- 2. Make a saint table for your BBQ.** Look up the patron saints of work and workers and either draw or print out pictures of them to honor their contribution to our appreciation of work. When you say grace, thank God for their good example.
- 3. Write thank you cards and bake cookies for some of the workers you appreciate.** Who works harder than sanitation engineers, road crews, landscapers, farmers, police

officers and first responders (or maybe your local clergy...)? Think about the people who do the jobs that keep your life comfortable, and take some time to thank them.

4. **Talk about what you want to be when you grow up.** Or, if you have an occupation, share what you love about it, as well as the challenges, and how it contributes to your joy and fulfillment. Parents, what did you want to be when you grew up when you were a kid?
5. **Help with chores that you wouldn't normally help with.** If you're hosting a party, everybody pitch in to get ready! If you're going to a BBQ, offer to help the host with the dishes, the garbage, the cooking—whatever!
6. **Commit to a service project as a family to help those who are suffering from unemployment or underemployment.** Volunteer at a soup kitchen, a thin out your closet (you probably just got some new school clothes) and donate to a thrift shop or other charity, make [comfort kits](#) for the homeless and donate them to your local emergency services (like Catholic Charities, or other local outreach).
7. **Ask your congressman or local government officials what you can do.** Catholic Social Teaching tells us that we have to participate in the political process. Find out how you can do this on a local and practical level.
8. **Look up the history of Labor Day** at [the History Channel website](#).

Learn more:

- ▶ [Catechism of the Catholic Church #2427-2428](#)
- ▶ [Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church #255-322](#)