

THE MYSTERY OF WORK

OVERVIEW TO THE DISCUSSION LEADER'S AID

This *Discussion Leader's Aid* is intended to assist the leader in the conduct of a group-study of the book, *The Mystery of Work*.

- This *Aid* will give the Discussion Leader a framework for the conduct of this study and an overview of the participants' *Study Guide*.
- The study entails six meetings, recommended to be held every other week.
- The *Study Guide* has six sections or chapters, the relevant section of which is to be distributed in advance of each of the six meetings.
- A separate *Discussion Leader's Supplement* is also provided to help the leader present the themes of the study at the first introductory meeting, as participants receive their copy of the book.
- Of course, all of the above will also serve for individual study as well.

The Mystery of Work took 10 years to prepare. It consists of short reflections by saints, popes, mystics, spiritual writers and even a few secular minds, all dealing directly or indirectly with work and what God has to do with ordinary acts of everyday lives.

- As such the book develops a profoundly Catholic doctrine of work, based on revealed truth that God wants to be in continuous relationship with us *in all our acts*—that, in fact, God wishes us to be collaborators with Him in all that we do, in even the simplest activities of our day.
- This book will help make clear what Jesus meant when he said, in *John 15:5*, “*Without Me you can do nothing.*” The voices in this book will lead the reader to see that, indeed, Jesus is and wants to be a part of what we do in the course of ordinary life.
- This truth is borne out by the fact that Jesus himself spent thirty years of his life in ordinary occupations, all to the glory and satisfaction of his Father. Jesus calls us to do the same.

The *Study Guide* helps engender fruitful discussion as to how ordinary acts intersect with the life of the spirit. Participants who took this course came to see how our daily tasks and duties, rather than detracting from the interior life of the spirit, are an important means by which holiness is achieved. Study groups using this *Guide* have found it helped them “enter” this book and deal with this topic in a systematic, fruitful way.

Here are some comments made by participants:

- “Understanding the message of this book has taken the toil out of work for me.”
- “I no longer work for my employer, or for my paycheck, but for God.”
- “Praying my way through the day has brought me peace as a teacher in a school situation that could only be labeled as ‘chaotic.’”
- “I’m learning to turn away from my first impulses. I was not aware, before this, how readily I react to people and situations out of disordered passion.”

- “I used to resent doing certain daily tasks, but now I find that I’m joyful doing them because I do them with Christ.”
- “Workloads that used to take all day, I now find myself accomplishing in half the time because I’m bringing God into my work.”
- “Some of us come late to the table, but at least now I can begin to live this way.”
- “Where has this book been all of my life?”

THE MYSTERY OF WORK

DISCUSSION LEADER’S AID

The *Discussion Leader’s Aid* provides the Leader with a brief outline of how the Study Guide may be used. The *Study Guide* offers reading selections from *The Mystery of Work* along with discussion topics. Although some may wish to read the book privately from beginning to end, the *Guide* offers an effective, organized way to get at the substance of the book in a group setting.

Reading selections and discussion topics are organized around an interesting depiction of four basic types of workers and the radically different ways each goes about accomplishing his or her work. A brief overview of these four individuals is found in the book’s *Introduction*. At the first meeting, participants are asked to read this Introduction, particularly pages 4-13, in preparation for the subsequent meeting.

The *Study Guide* identifies passages in the main part of the book that relate to each of the individual worker types. Each meeting is devoted to a prototype worker type. Discussion questions revolve around how that particular worker and the way he or she goes about his day relates to one’s own experiences.

SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS

- 1st Meeting – Introduction to the basic thought behind the book
- 2nd Meeting – The First Individual
- 3rd Meeting – The Second Individual
- 4th Meeting – The Third Individual
- 5th Meeting – The Fourth Individual
- 6th Meeting – Summary and concluding discussion

The suggested time lapse between each meeting is two weeks, allowing ample time for reading, etc. Suggested meeting length is one and one half hours, longer if necessary.

Participants are asked to respond to questions and otherwise record their thoughts, questions and reactions in a private journal.



FIRST MEETING

If it seems suitable, the Discussion Leader may want to hand out, in advance of the first gathering, the section found at the beginning of the *Study Guide* entitled “Introduction to the Book and Course of Study.” This brief section will help orient participants and potential participants to the topic and themes of the course.

In preparing for his or her initial presentation at this first gathering, the Discussion Leader may want to draw upon the extensive material provided for this very purpose in the *Discussion Leader's Supplement*. Topics in this *Supplement* may also prove useful for subsequent meetings as well.

DISCUSSION TOPICS

- The Discussion Leader reviews with the group the “Reflections” found at the beginning of the *Study Guide*.
- The Leader might also examine with the group the brief summary of Pope John Paul II's encyclical on work, *Laborem Exercens* given in the book's Introduction, pages 1-4.
- Much of the discussion in this study will center around the four “Individuals” described in the book's Introduction. The Leader should alert participants that they will be reading about these four “Individuals” in the reading assignment for the next meeting. He should explain that these four Individuals exemplify both right and wrong ways of working.
- The Leader will make sure that participants understand that “working” means any conscious activity at all, whether at home, at school, at play or at work.

AIMS

- Books are distributed and participants are familiarized with the book's organization.
- Leader elicits responses to the various reflections at the beginning of the Study Guide.
- Participants are encouraged to reflect on their own attitudes toward work—work as daily duties and work as professional life. This normally stimulates interesting discussion.

PARTICIPANTS' ASSIGNMENTS IN PREPARATION FOR THE 2ND MEETING

- Do the assigned readings regarding the First Individual.
- Journal-write answers to the guided questions.

- Journal-write any comments or questions the participant may have upon reading the assigned passages of the book.
- Encourage participant to share reactions as a basis for discussion among group members. Members should be feel free to raise questions, doubts, difficulties with selected readings or with their own daily experiences in light of these readings.

DISTRIBUTE

- A copy of the Study Guide for the 2nd Meeting regarding the First Individual.



SECOND MEETING

DISCUSSION TOPIC THE FIRST INDIVIDUAL

- Can we personally relate to his shortcomings?
- What do the suggested readings say is the antidote to this way of working?

AIMS

- The Leader encourages participants to consider the danger of acting and reacting impulsively to all that happens to us during the day, i.e., reactions that come from the instincts of our fallen nature.
 - The readings suggested by the *Study Guide* should lead participants to begin to have misgiving about first impulses, and to be more open to the impulse of the Holy Spirit as they undertake their various activities all day long.
 - This stepping back from our first impulses allows for the impulse of grace to enter into our thoughts, our conversations, indeed all our activities without exception.
- It is important to understand that human ordinariness and even human weakness are never an impediment to God's action in us, not if we open ourselves to Him in all that we do.
 - Indeed, our very weaknesses and shortcomings draw God's grace into our actions if we acknowledge our need for help. Just as the emptiness of a vacuum draws to itself, so do we draw God into what we do when we acknowledge our need for Him.
 - The fault of the First Individual is that he is content to do everything by himself, following his own impulses.
- The point of this entire study is that God wants to be let into the humblest of our acts.
 - It is wrong to think that God takes no interest in these ordinary activities that typify our days, no interest how we fry and egg or answer the telephone.

- Consider how humble and ordinary the actions of Jesus must have been in the thirty years before commencing his public ministry, helping his mother around the house and working in the shop with St. Joseph.
- A good part of the each session must concerns itself with asking just how, in fact, do we go about letting God into our activities, i.e., how do we open ourselves to the inspirations of the Spirit.
 - One of the first steps is to realize (a) that Our Lord wants to be in these ordinary activities of ours (his “delight is to be with the children of men”), and (b) that our work habits typically shut Him out.
 - Once we understand (a) and (b), we begin to pray and things begin to change.
 - We can be certain of that because God is always faithful to his word.

PARTICIPANTS' ASSIGNMENTS IN PREPARATION FOR THE 3RD MEETING

- Do the assigned readings regarding the Second Individual.
- Journal-write answers to the guided questions.
- Be prepared to share reactions, questions, etc.

DISTRIBUTE

- A copy of the Study Guide for the 3rd Meeting regarding the Second Individual.



THIRD MEETING

DISCUSSION TOPIC

THE SECOND INDIVIDUAL

- From a human perspective he is a perfect worker, but from God's perspective, he is far from the perfection God seeks in us when Jesus said, “Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (Matt 5:48).
- How does this relate to our own ideas about work?

AIMS

- The assigned passages are discussed.
 - The Leader seeks to have participants understand what St. Paul meant by “Strength is made perfect in weakness.”
- In the previous lesson regarding the First Individual, we saw that our work is hampered and invariably falls short by an inordinate desire for self-sufficiency, by the prideful desire to be the sole author of what we do, thus shutting out any possibility of divine inspiration in our acts, and even shutting out the help of others.

- The point about the Second Individual is that, by human standards, this individual is a perfect worker.
 - But from the divine perspective, as revealed so often by Jesus to these mystics, works done out of an exclusively human appetite for excellence are no equal in God's eyes to works done for the love of God and that are accomplished in union with Him.
 - This is an entirely different measure of perfection, a perfection in work that need not be defeated by human weaknesses and shortcomings.
 - As we know, "God writes straight with crooked lines."
- The Leader should encourage participants to share their own stories of how God entered into moments in their lives when their own powers failed to produce proper outcomes.

PARTICIPANTS' ASSIGNMENTS IN PREPARATION FOR THE 4TH MEETING

- Read assigned selections in the Guide for the 4th meeting.
- Journal-write answers to the guided questions
- Read *Prevenient and Actual Acts* in Appendix B of the Guide

DISTRIBUTE

- A copy of the Study Guide for the 4th week regarding the Third Individual.



FOURTH MEETING

DISCUSSION TOPIC

THE THIRD INDIVIDUAL

- Here we begin to see how men and women of faith are to accomplish their daily tasks, whatever these activities may be.
- We see that the big obstacle to working in the right way is (a) simple unawareness of God's great desire to be involved in our commonplace activities, much as Jesus was in the thirty years before his public ministry, and (b) the resistance of a fallen nature that wants to be in control, that wants what it wants when it wants it, etc.
- This all gets transformed once we begin to want what God wants for us.

AIMS

- To lead participants to a deeper understanding of the merger between work and prayer.
 - The following topics are designed to remind us of what we have read in the assigned selections thus far:
- Topic One: Jesus wants to be invoked, and to collaborate with us as we go through our day.

- Topic Two: The merger of work and prayer has been a long-held ideal in the monastic tradition of the Church.
- Topic Three: The passages cited here contain practical advice from a variety of spiritual people as to how to bring God into our daily activities.
- Topic Four: "Prevenient and Actual Acts." Discuss the definitions found in the Appendix to the *Study Guide* for this meeting.

PARTICIPANTS' ASSIGNMENTS IN PREPARATION FOR THE 5TH MEETING

- Do the assigned readings regarding the Fourth Individual.
- Journal-write answers to the guided questions.
- Be prepared to share reactions, questions, etc.

DISTRIBUTE

- A copy of the Study Guide for the 5th week regarding the Fourth Individual.



FIFTH MEETING

DISCUSSION TOPIC

THE FOURTH INDIVIDUAL

- Here we begin to study the worker who works as Our Lord would have us work. It is an ideal few of us attain, but one which we are all called to desire and to strive for.
- The important thing to realize is that this ideal way of working is not something we accomplish, but something Christ accomplishes in us, if we cooperate and allow Him.

AIMS

- To lead participants to understand the depth of holiness achieved in the lives of the Fourth Individual.
- These persons are saintly models we can only hope to imitate through God's grace.
- Yet, their way of life is the perfection that God calls us to.
 - A perfection achieved not by our own strength but by the grace of God, available to all who desire and seek it.

PARTICIPANTS' ASSIGNMENT FOR THE NEXT (LAST) MEETING)

- Ask participants to read "An Unlikely Story" on pp. 249-271 of the book.
- Ask participants to read the poem "To Live by Faith" in the Appendix of the *Study Guide* for this meeting.
- The Discussion Leader asks participants to peruse the book freely and to choose one or two passages that particularly meant something to them, or that they found difficult to understand or to agree with.

- Discussion in the next (final) meeting will focus primarily on the reading of these passages (or selected portions if the passage is too long), and participant's reasons for its selection.

DISTRIBUTE

- A copy of the Study Guide for the 6th Week (recapitulation)



SIXTH (LAST) MEETING

DISCUSSION TOPIC RECAPITULATION

- The expectation is that discussion will clarify any residual difficulties or misunderstandings regarding the way Our Lord calls us to perform our work.
- It is hoped that participants will be motivated to continue reading and meditating individually on the excerpts in *The Mystery of Work* so as to live a life of recollection and union with God as we work.
 - There is no greater adventure in life than this, nor any greater privilege.

AIMS

- To lead participants to a practical outcome to the study, i.e., an ongoing practice of spiritual recollection as they go about their daily tasks.
- To encourage continued reference to and meditation on the voices in *The Mystery of Work*,
 - That thereby our desire to work and act in the mode of the Third Individual may be stimulated, moving us to pray for the graces of the Fourth Individual and thus eventually, over a lifetime, to become perfect workers in Christ.

DISCUSSION

- Have participants share their chosen passage and explain what it means to them.
- Discuss briefly reactions to “An Unlikely Story” on pp. 249-271 of the book.
- Read aloud and discuss the poem “To Live by Faith” by Fr. Dominic Rover, O.P.
 - The poet uses many images to describe what it means to live by faith. Can you relate to them? (See questions in the Appendix to the *Study Guide* for this meeting).
- How can we make what we have learned in this course practical in our lives?
 - By desiring it to be so.
 - By prayer that Our Lord will make it so by his grace.
 - By continual spiritual reading, to remind and stimulate us to live lives of genuine recollection as we go about doing the things we do in the course of a busy day.

- Review from time to time the Preventive and Actual Acts described in the Appendix to the *Study Guide* for the Third Meeting.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

What have we learned so far?

- We have seen how the First Individual works and we see many reasons for moving away from this mode.
 - Although we can admit that we are that person in some situations, at least now we are aware that it is detrimental to self, others, and that it does not serve God's purposes for our lives.
- We have seen how the Second Individual works and we admire and hope to emulate that way of working.
 - Most of us, hopefully, are that kind of worker much of the time.
 - However, the cumulative message of this book is that doing the things we do without reference to God offers little if any spiritual benefit, not if we wish to progress in holiness.
- We have met the Third Individual and recognize that this is how we would like to live, bringing God into all that we do.
 - Nevertheless, we know that our "net" is empty, our "wombs" are barren, and God often seems to ask us to feed 5000 people with "five loaves and two fish."
 - Sometimes, we feel that we are being called to "walk on water"!

How can we continue to learn?

- The message of this book is definitely challenging and we may be feeling either energized in our spiritual journey or, perhaps confused, and maybe even frustrated.
 - It's good for us to remember that new concepts and practices don't become part of our lives without effort.
 - The concert pianist begins his career by painfully executing the keyboard exercises. He/she doesn't start making beautiful music until much later after much effort.
- The same is true here. We begin by remembering to turn to the Lord as we work; sometimes we remember to listen and sometimes we forget to do so.
 - The harmony of living this way as a recollected state takes time—and practice.
- As one karate master told his pupil: "No one breaks the brick with his hand on the first try." As you open yourself to the understandings in this book, you are learning to work in a new way.
 - Old habits have to be broken. With grace, they can be.
 - As St. Paul says, we are to "put on the mind of Christ."

- If you feel yourself drawn to this way of living, but you find it difficult to practice, it is good to remember that God never asks you to do something you can't do.
- But it's possible that there's something that you still need to understand about The Mystery of Work.
 - Here are the keys: "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me," and "Without Me, you can do nothing."
 - It's not that we do nothing, but rather that we do everything in our power to allow God to act in us.
 - This is the noble life to which we are called.



