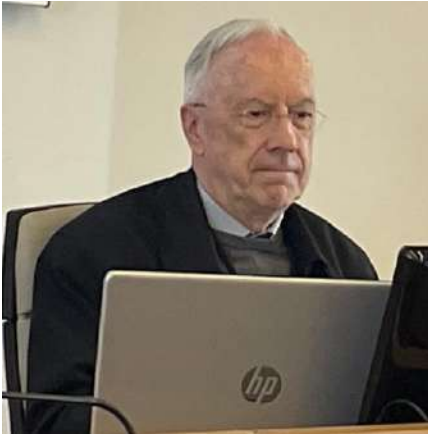


How can what we do become truly meaningful and fruitful?



Everyone dreams that what they do may be meaningful to themselves and fruitful to others. We often focus on the satisfaction we may or

the cross took hold and became the sign par excellence with which Christians identified themselves.

But it is again the apostle Paul who tries to come to our aid to correctly assess the value of the life of Jesus and that with his well-known Christ hymn that we can read in his letter to the Philippians. We write this one out for a moment because it contains several steps that can set us on the road in our reflection on the meaningfulness and fruitfulness of what we do with and in our lives.

may not experience ourselves in the activity we perform and the approval, thanks and applause we may or may not also receive from others. But are these the only and proper criteria for judging the value of an activity? What if we are called upon to perform a work that does not seem meaningful to us at all, and what if in the process the hoped-for thanks and applause are also absent? Should we then immediately decide that what we are doing is futile and unfruitful? Meaningfulness and fruitfulness need a different measure to be evaluated. As Christians, we have in Jesus himself an example, indeed the example par excellence, to value something as meaningful and fruitful. In the eyes of his contemporaries, however, his life and the mission he had to fulfill was anything but meaningful and fruitful, for it ended in grandiose failure. When a person is judged because of his words and deeds, and even has to die on a cross in a totally unjust way like a criminal, we can hardly put the words meaningfulness and fruitfulness into our mouths. It has its reason why the first Christians hesitated to take the sign of the cross as their symbol. In the catacombs one can find the Good Shepherd as an image, a dove of peace with a palm branch in its beak or the fish as signs of Christ, but one will search in vain for an image of a cross. Nay, with this hideous martyrdom, the young Christian church could hardly identify itself. It took several centuries before

“He who existed in divine majesty did not want to cling to equality with God. He stripped Himself and took upon Himself the existence of a slave; He became equal to men. And appearing as man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death, to death on the cross. Therefore, God exalted Him on high and granted Him the Name which is above all names, that at the mention of His name, every knee should bow in heaven, on earth and under the earth; and every tongue should confess, to the glory of God the Father, Jesus Christ is Lord” (Phil. 2:6-11).

The hymn falls into two movements: a movement downward, this one of self-emptying or “kenosis,” and a movement upward, this one of exaltation or “hypsosis.” But both movements are essentially and indissolubly linked.

The self-emptying or kenosis of Jesus is expressed in the hymn in three steps. Jesus consciously renounces his equality with God and sacrificed his divine majesty, as it were, in order to become equal to man. We can speak here of the kenosis of the incarnation, and this was not a sham, but was fulfilled 100% by Jesus. Translated to our situation, we could say that we too are invited to become fully human, to fully fill in and live our humanity and radically set aside everything that tempts us to pretend to be somewhat better than we really

are. "Become who you are," sounds like an invitation here. Because deep within us we have a tendency to assume piousness, to live with masks and to do everything possible to appear good, yes, even better, to others through our appearance, obviously in the vain hope of being praised for it. It is the vanity that caresses us and that puts a brake on the invitation to become humble like Jesus, to simply be ourselves, authentic, simple and without pretense. We can immediately ask the question here about this first fundamental movement in our lives, the movement that deals with the worm that constantly gnaws at us and that is so aptly described in the book of Genesis as original sin: the temptation to want to become our own god and thereby deny our humanity. Only when we live our humanity in an authentic way will we find peace with and within ourselves and be reachable to others, and the foundation is laid upon which our actions can become truly fruitful. The path to self-realization is paved here by the seemingly opposite movement, this one of self-emptying.

But Jesus goes even further, and the hymn speaks of slave: the one who puts himself in the lowest place and becomes a servant to others. Service here becomes the watchword as an antidote to our tendency to want to rule over others. Even leadership will henceforth be fulfilled in a spirit of service. It was once again aptly expressed at the coronation of King Charles who explicitly stated that he would exercise his kingship in a spirit of service. "*I have not come to be served, but to serve*" (Mt. 20:28). And as if this were not enough in the downward movement, Jesus' kenosis ends with death on the cross. He is not even granted an honorable death, but a shameful death normally reserved for criminals. Jesus thus expresses in the most radical way his solidarity with those who live at the lowest level of society, with those who are no longer even considered human beings, who have completely lost their human dignity or are no longer considered by others as fully human beings. Here the invitation sounds to become truly solidary with the most marginal human being, and to maintain an unconditional respect for fragile life, especially for those who cannot stand up for their own rights as human beings. It is in this solidarity and respect that we will be able to truly manifest ourselves as

human beings and fellow human beings. But we can add that it was this very thing that the Father asked of Jesus, it was the expression of his total obedience to the Father. Doing the Father's will was the keynote and at the same time the refrain of Jesus' life. To this end He appeared on earth, and to this end we too are invited. Our lives receive a mission from God, and it is to this mission that we must obey, and not the mission we would like to give ourselves. It teaches us that we should not seek worldly success, but simply faithfully go every day on the path God has set out for us, asking each day what God's Will is for us and at the same time asking God's grace to know, accept and also accomplish this Will. The question then no longer sounds whether what we do is meaningful and fruitful, and that based on our supposedly positive feeling about it and the applause we receive from others, but rather whether we live in accordance with the Will of God. It is in this that we must seek the meaningfulness and fruitfulness of our lives and actions.

And here we move on to the second movement, this one of exaltation or hypsosis. It is only then that the work Jesus did here on earth was brought to true completion by his Father and that the redemption of humanity was realized. What a mysterious proclamation we may receive here. So, the real success of our lives does not depend at all on whether we can bring our mission to a good and successful conclusion and thereby be praised and honored by the world, but rather on whether or not we have lived and worked according to the mission we had received from God. Looking at Jesus, this means that we lived our humanity fully and authentically, that we positioned ourselves as a servant to others and not as a ruler, and that we were even willing to go to the extreme and give our lives to promote and restore the well-being and humanity of everyone when it was eclipsed, and willing to suffer and be reviled for it.

The completion of Jesus' work on earth was accomplished by the Father, not by Jesus Himself. It is the Father who exalted Jesus on high after He arrived on earth in the deepest possible valley. What comfort we can derive from these words, when through human

circumstances and especially lowly decisions, inspired solely by envy, the root of all evil and also the greatest sin man can make, the work we do is arrogantly taken out of our hands, negatively judged and even destroyed. How many are confronted with this in their lives, in a world that can be particularly harsh, unmerciful and above all unjust, in a world where there is no hesitation in simply dropping people overnight and pushing them aside? When these then have set everything up for success, they will despair and sink into a bitter struggle against the so-called injustice done to them. And what they will lose most of all is the inner peace and tranquility to continue to see the meaning and fruitfulness of their lives through the so-called injustice done to them. Here we can learn a lot from Jesus. His life became maximally meaningful and fruitful precisely when He was nailed to the cross with open arms completely helpless and thus gave His life out of His hands. He Himself could do nothing more than simply obey the Will of the Father to the utmost and accept what this following of the Will would lead Him to. It reminds us that we all have a mission to fulfill that we have not been given ownership of, but only management of. It is a mission whose scenario is only partially in our own hands, because it is part of the universal plan that God has with the world and with humanity. We are a link in it, often only a weak link, but that is simply the assignment we have received in life. But we know that a weak link is usually nurtured with more attention and care and concern. It is this link that we may be that God uses to realize His Kingdom on earth. For that is our sole and ultimate mission that we have received: to participate in the realization of the Kingdom of God, as we pray daily in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." It is God who takes the initiative for this, engages us for it, gives us the grace to do so, call it the power of the Holy Spirit, and ultimately completes this work. But we are called to cooperate in this, and it is in this that our fruitfulness will consist.

There is something cosmological in the second movement: "Under the earth, on the earth and in heaven." The little that we may do here on earth takes on an eternal and cosmic dimension in the

hands of God. It has value in eternity, no matter how small and humble it may be! This always reminds me of people with severe disabilities, who can only invite others so that people would respect and love them. That is the mission they have received from God in their limitedness: to call fellow human beings to become more respectful and loving. Is there a greater mission than this in a world where respect and love are so often under-present or even completely repressed? That is their participation in the realization of the Kingdom of God!

Finally, the exclamation sounds that Jesus Christ is Lord. This should resound throughout the world, especially in our own hearts, for it is Christ who is our unique reference to make our life here on earth meaningful and fruitful. He is "the Way, the Truth and the Life" (John 4:6). Unlike in the time of the catacombs, we now dare to draw ourselves with the cross and look up to it, to contemplate and meditate in it, on the one hand, the brokenness of our humanity, including and especially our own brokenness and fragility, but also, on the other hand, to perceive in it our ultimate destiny, of man redeemed from the absolute power of evil and allowed to live with the perspective of resurrection.

What better way to end than with another word from our great apostle Paul, this time noted in his first letter to the Christians of Corinth.

"Consider your own calling, brethren. By human standards there were not many learned, not many powerful, not many of high birth. No, what to the world is foolish, God has chosen to shame the wise; what to the world is weak, God has chosen to shame the strong; what to the world is of low birth and insignificant, God has chosen; what is nothing to nullify what is something, so that before God no man should glory in himself. ... If anyone wants to glory, let him glory in the Lord" (1 Cor. 26-31). Here the paradox of the Gospel is at its best. It is up to us to discover in this paradox the true meaning of our lives and to be fruitful in it as well!