

## **The Importance of Labor for North Korea**

Fr. Ben Torrey, Director, The Fourth River Project, Inc.

© 2005 Reuben G. Torrey. All rights reserved.

“Prayer is labor, labor is prayer.” These words attributed to St. Benedict of Nursia who organized European monasticism in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century sound quite strange to the modern ear. We can understand that serious intercessory prayer can be hard work, but how can our manual labor be considered prayer? How can we think of sweating and getting dirty and tired as something holy? And what does this have to do with North Korea?

Jesus Abbey, high in the Taebaek Mountains of Kangwon Do is a community devoted to prayer and labor. They live by these words displayed beside the altar. Through participation in the common life there, we can begin to find answers to these questions. But first, let us think for a moment what prayer is—a communication, a special relationship with God. Through prayer, we get to know God more deeply and we make known to Him the things that are on our heart. Prayer is a commitment of time, energy and thought on our part to deepen our relationship with Him. It encompasses worship, praise, intercession, petition and, perhaps the most important and least practiced, listening. It is, in all this, an expression of our love for and obedience to Him.

So, how does any of this relate to physical labor and what does it mean when we think of North Korea. We learn in Genesis that God gave Man work to do from the very beginning, “Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to cultivate it and keep it.” (Genesis 2:15) Labor was given to man by God before sin ever entered the world. We see from this that labor becomes something sacred, a gift of God, one of the “good things”, the “perfect gifts” given to us by the Father of lights (James 1:17). We also learn in Genesis Chapter 3 that there was to be regular communication between God and the man but that his sin cut that communication and that his labor then became a trial and burden, something that came between him and God—but such was not God’s intent from the beginning. Now, in Jesus Christ’s redemption of the world, our communion with the Father is restored and that which He gave us to do in the beginning can now, once again, become holy, an intimate aspect of our relationship to Him. Labor can become prayer—this is a gift bought for us by the precious blood of Christ.

As we work with our hands, we remember that our Lord, Himself, was a laborer, a construction worker. His first and closest disciples were fishermen, men with strong muscles and calloused hands. This can bring us into a deeper sense of our participation of the life He led. We also see our work as given to us to do, ordained by God, and thereby made holy. As we do the work given us, we show obedience to and love for Him, we respond to Him, we are in a conversation.

Labor is also something that tends to deepen the relationship of those engaged in it together. As we work together with those who are loved by God, we deepen our relationship to them and to the One who loves them. And, God can always be the comrade laboring along side of us. An active sense of this, whether we work alone or with others, can lead us into a special intimacy with the Master. As we toil with our

hands and bodies, we can reflect on Jesus, His words, His intent for us – we can listen to Him.

One other aspect of labor as prayer is the positive sense we can have of thankfulness to God for the strength and ability to be productive that He has given to us. We know ourselves to be following in the footsteps of Christ and using the body that He gave us to do so. This becomes a special source of joy for us and thankful praise to Him.

It is this sacred, holy sense of labor that we bring to those indoctrinated with the humanistic ideology of the importance of the working man, Communism. We agree with them that labor is something exalted but for very different reasons. We labor not for the supremacy of man and the state but for the glory of God (Colossians 3:17). Indeed, labor is arduous, it causes us to sweat and makes us tired but it becomes a glorious thing when consecrated by us to the work of prayer and to intimacy with Him. Our very sweat and tears become sacred sacrifices to God that we are blessed to offer in love and communion with Him. No human joy in labor for a cause, no revolutionary victory of the working class can ever begin to compare with the glory of working as a companion to the greatest Laborer of all time, the Maker of the Universe.

This we bring to the laborers of North Korea and this becomes our prayer.