

## Salary & Meaning

by Philip Dodgson, PhD

The other day I met with a sister and a member of her leadership team. Part of the discussion was ministry and salary; at 68, the sister was anxious about her ability to find a job that paid well, after a move that necessitated a change in ministry. She was anxious that a generously paid position would be difficult to find at her age and with her particular set of background skills. The conversation interested me because it highlighted the often painful inconsistencies between pay, value and effort.

Salaries do not reflect hours worked, effort, or contribution to life. What they do reflect is what the market will pay for a given task—a value that is determined in part by how desirable the job is, and in part by how skilled the person who performs it must be. That is why cosmetic surgeons and professional athletes are well paid—they both require a high level of skill and people are willing to pay for them. Still, there are many jobs that are best performed by highly skilled people, yet do not pay well. Missionary, chaplain, and pastoral educator are a few examples.




The sisters' conversation flowed from concerns at the community level around the issue of value and meaning in the larger context of the community's charism and value to consecrated life. At a community level, there was the idea of "able-bodied" members working to generate resources for the community. Money is needed to support members who do not or cannot work, and to help fund the various mission projects of the community. One sister drawing a significant salary may allow another to function in charitable activity with little or no compensation. If no one worked for pay, the community would rely on donations and reserves to continue.

At 68, the sister acknowledged both the energy to work and the desire to do something that fit her physical ability and her desire for meaning. She pointed out that, many years ago, sisters worked for little or no pay in roles that normally carried a salary. The reward was in their specific presence and contribution—they were at work for the work's sake, not to generate revenue to support others. There was idealism in this, with religious undertaking a work assignment as a gift of themselves, as opposed to a *quid pro quo* exchange. Unfortunately, sisters' efforts were not only taken for granted, but exploited. Women's congregations in particular suffered dramatically; failure to compensate them for their work left them in dire financial straits from which many have been unable to recover. Equal-pay-for-equal-work has more and more come into force, in an attempt to rectify this. This shift in practice was highly significant, not simply as a justice issue that cried out for correction, but also because it carried an implicit affirmation that salary is important in terms of meaning.

At the level of the community, sisters are encouraged to function in accordance with their charism and current vision statement. Members of a teaching order generally work in education; members of a medical order generally function within health care and health promotion. Today, many congregations exercise a great deal of flexibility within the spirit that guides them, gathering regularly to renew and revise their mission. Even if a job was not specifically identified, it could be explored and considered. Today, many jobs are possible, allowing members to exercise skills and talents in a great variety. Still, we do not tend to see religious in law enforcement, investment banking, the travel industry, or professional sports. Working at something that supports the mission of the institute is not only a priority, it is required; a sister is therefore not encouraged to follow any direction she might choose.

Historically, less consideration (if any) was given to a particular sister's desires about work. Many were told what training or job they would undertake, their consent taken for granted as part of obedience. Today, we are far more likely to hear leadership express an interest in what a particular member wishes to do for ministry. Each sister's particular set of gifts is considered in discerning where she would function most effectively and happily. This was very much a part of the conversation I have been describing; the sister was asked to consider what she *wanted* to do at this stage of her life. She was affirmed for her past contribution and encouraged to do more of what made her happy, with the proviso that it fit with the community mission. In this we witness the struggle to balance communal responsibility with individual fulfilment. This particular community was in a position to identify salary as important but secondary; it was emphasized that salary provided valuable support to the community, but was not an expectation at this stage of the sister's life. In fact, the sister in leadership shared that this prioritization was the result of conscious deliberation on the part of the community during meetings several years ago. She added that, despite clearly prioritizing mission and meaning ahead of salary, societal priority of salary habitually crept up the hierarchy.



My window into this conversation provoked thoughts about the connection between salary and self-esteem. Thankfully, salary is not the only basis for self-esteem, nor is it the most important. Self-esteem is best understood as an attitude toward oneself, and consequently is made up of both affective and cognitive aspects. Cognitively, I might know, "I am good at X and bad at Y," and emotionally I might feel good (or bad) about that situation. Salary is a specific message about your worth both from someone else (your employer) and to someone else (you and others around you). If someone is willing to pay you \$45,000 a year to perform a service, you might feel quite good about yourself. However, this perception is also relative to what your peers earn—if the other sisters living with you earn \$150,000 a year to perform a service, it might contribute to feeling inferior. The salary differences reflect the corporate values of society as a whole, rather than a deeper, spiritual value. And, despite awareness of this fact, a sister earning substantially less than those around her may still find it hard to feel good about this situation. Detachment from this kind of social comparison is a relatively challenging spiritual task.

Interestingly, it is possible to consider that the lower paid sister might be doing more "objective" good than the higher paid sisters. Perhaps her role touches more lives, or deals with issues that are somehow more profound. Consider salary differences between doctors who work in North America, and those who work for organizations like *Médecins Sans Frontières*. Even without somehow measuring and comparing their respective contributions, it is easy to see that how well someone is paid does not directly bear on what they do.

Irrationally, money carries great importance. Married couples deal regularly with this issue. In the era when men worked and women stayed home, men often made more of the financial decisions. Somehow, decisions about buying houses, cars, etc., fell to the "breadwinner". These days, with more women working and earning salaries (and not uncommonly more than their husbands), there is a demand for a shift in financial power within the household. Even still, women staying home with children, working part-time and/or deferring their career in child-related decisions, question their worth when income drops or is nonexistent. Another example is the wealthy donor in a parish. While many donors will contribute money with no "strings" attached, others expect their contribution has purchased decision making power (e.g. the donor who expects to have greater say about which architectural design is approved in a building project).

Although it may be easier, in religious circles, to expound the view that "salary doesn't matter," the inherent value statement that salary makes is hard to avoid. I was impressed by the length at which the two sisters discussed the nuances of this situation. Both agreed that charism-based ministry outweighed salary

considerations, and yet both agreed that salary could create stress, create disapproval in others, and become a strong source of personal insecurity. Recognizing that “we live in the real world” allows clergy and religious to acknowledge the common struggle they share with laypeople, rather than jumping to a spiritualized defence of false indifference to material matters. These sisters realized that, although values have been clearly prioritized in their community, discussion and education are still required in order to maintain community focus. In short, they were engaging in a thoughtful struggle with the tension between the need for financial resources and the importance of communal and personal mission.

Salary and money matters are a constant stress in many lives. Although there are very practical reasons that salary should be (and is) a concern, it continues to function as an unnecessarily stressful and divisive force among those who earn enough. It distracts focus away from other significant matters in relationships and lifework. Today, religious and clergy serve as role models in this regard, dedicating themselves to the highest spiritual priorities. It is my hope that they can be affirmed for these efforts, recognizing the way they call all of us to consider more who we are and what we do, rather than what we get paid for it.

