

Reconciling Work and Family

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In the Greek world, family and work expressly justified each other. It was not a coincidence that work was confined to the sphere of the *oikos*, the family, the domestic economy, in other words, the realm of women and servants. Both work and family were thought to be related only to the sphere of man's biological life: in one of them, the family served to reproduce the human species; and in the other, work served to procure what was necessary in order to survive. Both, however, were perceived as "inferior" spheres. Nevertheless, the family was and is crucial for the life of the *polis*, just as work was and is crucial for those activities which the Greeks deemed to be most human, namely politics and philosophy.

Our modern age presents, among other things, a greater divide between family and work. As we know, one of the effects of industrialisation was that work was physically removed from the sphere of the family home. In order to maintain his family, the man needed to work away from home. He may have found it strange that, while being the head of the family, he had to be physically distant from home. This is the case of the so-called "bourgeois family" where the man works to provide his family with its material needs and the woman stays home to care for the home and children.

As women also began to work outside the home, over the past thirty years, tension between home and work developed and increased, sometimes in dramatic ways. Before work and family had been united in a worldview wherein both were degraded. Now, when it seemed that work would finally become the instrument to achieve the true self-realisation of men and women, it collided with family in a way that made it seem as though there was not enough room for both.

I will not go on about the innumerable analyses that have been carried out and are still being carried out concerning this phenomenon, that is as worrying as it is complex. I just want to point out that a new evaluation needs to be made of

the relationship between work and the family. This new consideration needs to take into account that work and family do not belong to “lesser” dimensions of the human being or to selfish spheres of self-affirmation, but rather that they are the specific articulation of what is *human* par excellence.

From this perspective, it is very easy to understand the social dimension of work as a service to others. This positive view of work as a service and as something which helps construct the fabric of society, is learned in the family. The family is the best place to learn and assimilate these values.

This view does not derive from a simplistic desire to convert the workplace into a sort of extended family. It does however require the recognition and encouragement of work well done, professional ethics and the virtues implicit in working together harmoniously. This is the only way to truly make the work world a human place.

«A disciple of Christ will never treat anyone badly. Error he will call error, but the person in error he will correct with kindness. Otherwise he will not be able to help him, to sanctify him. We must learn to live together, to understand one another, to make allowances, to be brotherly and, at all times, in the words of St John of the Cross, *where there is no love, put love and you will find love* (cf St John of the Cross, Letter to María de la Encarnación, 6 July 1591) and we have to do this even in the apparently uninspiring circumstances that arise in our professional work or in our domestic and social life. You and I must therefore seek to make use of even the most trifling opportunities that come our way, to sanctify them, to sanctify ourselves and to sanctify those who share with us the same daily cares, sensing in our lives the sweet and inspiring burden of the work of co-redemption»¹.

In the same manner, we are obviously not advocating returning to what has often been referred to as the “lovely families that were”, where a sort of pre-established harmony ruled. It is a matter of working on both fronts. On the one hand, the family needs to be valued again as a place where important relationships are built, where one learns the naturally reciprocal nature of human relationships, for the welfare of everyone. This obviously does not mean that a woman cannot work away from home, or that women who dedicate themselves full time to working in the home will be considered to be “inferior”. It means rather that every couple must decide responsibly in their own case what they should do for their own welfare and for that of their children. Their decisions must be made in light of the conviction that society cannot do without the resources that only the family can provide. It is a question of loyalty and a sense of responsibility.

¹ *Friends of God*, 9

Blessed Josemaría frequently underscored the dignity and importance of all work, and especially the work of the home. While this work is carried out by the entire family, women, due to their conditions as mothers and their talents in offering hospitality, confer a special character on this work. «Take the case of a large family. The mothers’s work is comparable to that of professional teachers and in many cases will outdo them in comparison. A teacher manages to educate a number of boys and girls more or less successfully in the course of his life. A mother can give her children a solid set of values and shape their character, and can make them, in their turn, other teachers, thus setting up an uninterrupted chain of responsibility and virtue. In these matters it is easy to be misled by mere numbers and think that the work of a teacher, who sees hundreds of people pass through his classes, or that of a writer who reaches thousands of readers, is more valuable. That is all very well, but how many people are really formed by that teacher or writer? A mother has three, five, ten or more children in her care and she can make of them a true work of art, a marvel of education, of balance and understanding, a model of the Christian way of life. She can teach them to be happy and to make themselves really useful to those around them»². In short, women should neither seek to run away from home nor to lock themselves up at home. The objective must be something that is appropriate both for women and for the rest of the family.

If the family is very important to the parents, the education of the children should not be the exclusive responsibility of the school. Blessed Josemaría insisted on this point. The experience of many people who have sought to follow his teachings has confirmed their soundness, in particular concerning the participation of parents in the direction of schools. Integration into society and education in virtue thus acquire consistency and continuity. From the family to the school and from the school to society. Furthermore, the business world also benefits from this chain of relationships, since society thus provides prepared and qualified workers, not just from the technical standpoint but also with strong family bonds and family values. People with strength of character will be valued in the complex, changeable, and at times unethical world of work.

On the other hand the workplace should be “humanised” in order to free the person from the merely instrumental routine that can absorb this sphere. In this way, it can become one of the places where the human being realizes his or her own humanity. One of our most urgent tasks is to reconcile the worlds of work and the family so that both are privileged spheres of true human realisation. A more human job is certainly not one where one contributes less to society. One

² *Conversations*, 89.

only needs to think of the contribution that society receives in terms of wealth from the vast array of family-owned enterprises.

As we know, our society is becoming increasingly diversified and complex at every level. Sometimes this results in an attempt to restrict what is human to one aspect of the social system, if not beyond it. Nevertheless, sociological research shows us that it is precisely these types of human resources that are increasingly decisive in our type of society. As Blessed Josemaría used to say, «Our life — a Christian’s life — has to be as ordinary as this: trying every day to do well those very things it is our duty to do; carrying out our divine mission in the world by fulfilling the little duty of each moment»³.

If we seriously meditate on our experience as husbands, wives, children or human beings who work, we will realize that this “simplicity” is the greatest gift that Christians can offer the “complexity” of our times. Lastly, we can and should think of God in all we do, in accordance with the recommendations of St. Paul. In this way, even the most humble activity can take on greater meaning. Even the people who are close to us can also take on a new aspect, indeed the aspect of the Other. Viewed in this light, all of our everyday problems will provide opportunities for growth for ourselves and all those who are close to us.

³ *The Forge*, 616.