

Mother and Professional: Ways of Improving My Performance

Isabella Siekalska

Homemaker and doctoral student of Philosophy at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Poland.

My professional work away from my home started when I already had a husband and three children. At that time, I began a doctorate in Philosophy at the Catholic University of Warsaw and I also started to teach. I had to make my way through difficult philosophical literature with considerable effort. The difficulties were all the greater because for several years I had been totally disconnected from philosophy, being totally absorbed in cleaning the house, washing clothes, cooking and changing diapers.

Initially, I found it very hard to reconcile my domestic duties (in which my husband cannot help me during the week) with the requirements of my doctoral work. I could not cope. There were always things left undone at home and at university; nothing worked out right. Our house became increasingly untidy because I had to commute (I live outside of the city) to the university and spend many hours there. I would work at nights. I was always late picking up the children from school, and my mental state was far from optimal. I never seemed to have enough time. I would do the household chores half-heartedly, rushing through them carelessly, treating them as if they were robbing me of my time. I had the impression that everything and everyone were obstacles to me.

This was how I spent the first year of my doctorate. Then I realized that I had barely begun my doctorate and our home was already suffering because of my research work. I tried to reorganize our family life in different ways, but without achieving the desired results. I read articles about how to make efficient use of my time. I left the children longer at school to get a little more “quiet” time, but all to no avail.

At that time, I started to explore in greater depth the teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá and this brought amazing results. I started to discover that every task, even the ones that seemed terribly monotonous, was something natural and necessary for man and that, what was more, each task should be done well. I understood with increasing clarity that, until now, although my studies took up a lot of time, I was more harassed than busy. Although I would make promises to organize myself better in my work almost every day, most of the time I did not keep them. It can be said that rather than just simply do my work, I would get worked up about it, worrying that I would not be able to get it done, regardless of whether I had half an hour or half a day to do it.

My problem was that I did not know how to work, either at home or at the university. I would work either too much or too little, and always in a chaotic manner. It was quite a discovery for me to read point 506 of *Furrow*: «You are untiring in your activity. But you fail to put order into it, so you do not have as much effect as you should. It puts me in mind of something I heard once from a very authoritative source. I happened to praise a subordinate in front of his superior. I said, ‘How hard he works!’ ‘You ought to say’, I was told, ‘How much he rushes around!’. You are untiring in your activity, but it is all fruitless. How much you rush around».

I had never really thought about putting order into my life and it was something I did not really want to do. I would rather work through the night without sleeping than set a specific time for my housework or my research work during proper hours. Things finally came to a head and that thought in *Furrow* kept bothering me. So I decided to try it. However, I had little or no faith, because I thought that an ordered life was slavery, something boring, just a routine. At first very skeptically and then with increasing enthusiasm, I started to organize all my affairs and my house, so that each thing had its place and time.

First of all, I made a plan for the day. I decided that until 3.00 p.m. I would teach my students, work on my doctorate, prepare the midday meal and settle all the other domestic matters. Then I would have lunch with the children and we would be together until the evening. That time would be for my children and for me. When my husband came home, the whole family would have supper together and, until 9.00 p.m., the children would enjoy being with their father. After that, they would go to bed and my husband and I would have time for ourselves.

This order brought peace and harmony to our home, but this would not have happened if I had not set clear priorities: the most important thing is my home, my family and everything that is related with them; after that comes my scientific work.

I could now do everything that I needed to do because in addition I gave up other things that I liked to do but which “ate up” my time: for example, seeing

my friends in the mornings. With my new schedule, I would see them in the afternoons with the children and I would limit the time to what was necessary. I also stopped watching so much television (sometimes I would watch it all week long).

Dropping the things that I liked very much but which took away my time brought — although this may seem a paradox — a growing feeling of inner peace. Before, I would often worry about wasting time with things that were not necessary, although they were pleasant and I liked them. Now, when I concentrate on doing each activity well and until it is completed, I do not feel that my duties at home are a burden. I give each thing the time it needs, neither more nor less. I try to start studying, cooking, cleaning, at specific times, regardless of whether I want to do it or not and whether I have finished what I was doing before. Of course, sometimes unexpected things happen or I calculate my times incorrectly but, in principle, each day has its plan which I try to adhere to. By setting a plan for the day in which I do my university work only in the mornings, but every day without exception, I have discovered that I enjoy enormously the time I spend with the children in the afternoons. They no longer “steal” my time and it does not occur to me that I have more important things to do than play, read stories or study with them.

When I read point 487 of *Furrow*: «Before God, no occupation is in itself great or small. Everything gains the value of the Love with which it is done», I started to discover the value of the little things of which each day is made. Now I do not feel that my days are boring or prosaic, even though the fact is that one day is not very different from another.

I started to apply a method of rest: changing activity. Generally after doing intellectual work, I cook or do the shopping. After the housework, I rest by going out for a walk with the children. When I have some free time, I read to prepare a book or an article or I do something in the house.

Since I started my doctorate, each member of the family has had more duties. Although my husband has a lot of work, he has to “tear himself away” from his job a little earlier to help me. The children have learnt to be more independent and look after the home more (they buy little things, clean a little, etc.). They know that they must be responsible for what they do and how they spend their time when I am not at home (when I get back, I always check on what they have done).

In my work with my students, one of the main problems is that they do not participate much in class. Initially, I thought that this was normal and I did not try to change it. Now I try to prepare the content of my classes better and I look for ways to give the classes that make my work and theirs more effective.

Bringing greater order into my life and my work has brought all of us positive, tangible results. Of course, there is a price to pay because sometimes I find it hard to get everything done. Overcoming tiredness, starting and finishing a job punctually, giving up occupations that I like but which are not indispensable, etc., all require a continual struggle against my own inertia and my tendency towards disorder. If I were to rely solely on my own effort, my will to continue would wither away after a few days. I try to discover the supernatural meaning of my work, that is, be contemplative in the midst of my occupations.