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Work and Family

Reconciling work and family obligations is not always easy. We can learn a lot from the Holy Family, as this new article in the series on sanctifying work reminds us.

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"Work is a foundation for the formation of family life, which is a natural right and something that mankind is called to. These two spheres of values—one linked to work and the other consequent on the family nature of human life—

must be properly united and must properly permeate each other."[1]

Harmonizing the demands of one's family vocation with the professional vocation is not always easy, but it is an integral part of the effort to live a "unity of life." It is love for God that gives unity to a person; it brings order to our heart and teaches us what the right priorities are. These priorities includes striving to always place the good of persons above other interests, seeing our work as service, as an expression of charity—and living charity in an ordered way, starting with those God has placed most directly in our care.

Family life and professional life mutually support one another. Work, both within and outside the household, "is a condition for making it possible to found a family." In first place, because the family "requires

the means of subsistence which man normally gains through work."[2]

Work is fundamental for achieving the aims of the family. "Work and industriousness also influence the whole process of education in the family, for the very reason that everyone 'becomes a human being' through, among other things, work, and becoming a human being is precisely the main purpose of the whole process of education."[3]

The Holy Family shows us how to harmonize these two areas in our life. St. Josemaria taught us the lessons he learned from our Lady and St. Joseph. By their work they furnished Jesus with a home in which to grow and mature.

The example of Nazareth deeply marked the soul of the founder of Opus Dei. He saw it as a school of service where "no one reserves anything for himself. There we hear

nothing of my reputation, my time, my work, my ideas, my preferences, my money. There everything is placed at the service of God's marvelous adventure with humanity, the Redemption."[4]

Imitating St. Joseph

"Notice how Joseph behaves towards Mary and Jesus in order to follow the command of the Father and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. He gives up his whole being and places his life as a tradesman at God's service. Joseph, a creature, feeds the Creator; a lowly craftsman, he sanctifies his professional work—something which Christians have forgotten to do for centuries, and which Opus Dei has come to remind them of once more. He gives God his life. He offers him the love in his heart and the tenderness of his care; he places at his service the strength of his arm. He gives all that he is and

all he can do: the ordinary everyday work that is part of his station in life."[5]

St. Joseph worked in service of the Son of God and his Mother. We don't know exactly what kind of artifacts he produced nor have we found any object bearing his signature. But we do know who were the first beneficiaries of his hours of tiring work: our Lady and our Lord Jesus Christ. The humanity of our Lord, given over to suffering many years later on the Cross to save us, truly had human needs. Jesus grew and developed only with his parents' protection. He "needed" the work of Joseph.

St. Joseph's work is a marvelous example of the divine and human adventure of the Redemption. His effort is placed at the service of the most material needs of the Redeemer's Holy Humanity. Joseph

taught the Divine Craftsman his trade; by his work he supported the Lord of all Creation. On returning home after a hard day of work, he didn't let himself be overcome by tiredness, since he didn't want to deprive the Son of God of a human father's care and attention.

St. Joseph attained a place of honor in the History of Salvation by dedicating his life to his Family. The demands that his responsibilities as head of a family imposed upon him (the sudden trips and changes of domicile, with all the dangers and difficulties involved), rather than lessening the importance of his work, infinitely enriched it. St. Joseph's work, like that of our Lady, overflows with transcendence and eternity.

What a great lesson for us who so easily let ourselves be led by the desire for personal affirmation and human glory in our work! Joseph's

glory was to see Jesus grow in wisdom and age,[6] and to serve our Lady. The holy Patriarch's long hours of hard work were enriched by two faces. His efforts were aimed not at a material product, no matter how well done. Rather his work was for him a channel for growing in love for the Son of God and his Mother.

God has also given us the possibility of discovering and loving him, serving those closest to us, through our varied professional endeavors. Many people place photographs of their loved ones or other human reminders on their desk or workplace; this helps give meaning to their effort, reminding them that their work is worthwhile and that they are not alone. If love is lacking; if one's family, all souls, and in the final analysis, God, fail to give meaning to one's work, the heart seeks substitutes, in the form of

vanity and a craving for success or social esteem.

It is sad to see people who are divided interiorly. They suffer a great deal, and uselessly. They try to juggle a multitude of commitments that prove impossible to harmonize in the end. For what they lack is not time, but an ordered and loving heart. Family obligations seem to them an obstacle for professional growth. They would like to be good friends, but they find their head and heart shut to others.

The example of St. Joseph can help all of us here. His care for the Holy Family and his hours of toil in his workshop were not separate lives, but one single reality. He cared for Mary by working and showed his love for Jesus by his daily effort, in a fully coherent life.

An Urgent Apostolate

"It must be remembered and affirmed that the family constitutes one of the most important terms of reference for shaping the social and ethical order of human work . . . In fact, the family is simultaneously a *community made possible by work* and the first *school of work*, within the home, for every person."[7]

We are faced with the marvelous challenge of restoring to the family the central role it should have in people's lives and in the world of work. This challenge has many facets. In first place, giving the proper value, both in terms of prestige and practical assistance, to professions most closely tied to the intrinsic aims of the family. These include domestic tasks, the work of education, especially in a child's early years, as well as the various ways to collaborate (which can never be a substitute for family duties) in

providing assistance to the sick and elderly.

Another pressing challenge is the need to prevent, insofar as possible, the demands at work from giving rise to serious tensions in the family or becoming obstacles to fulfilling one's obligations at home. Such situations are quite frequent: insufficient salaries that hinder the normal growth and development of families; schedules that greatly restrict the presence of the father or mother in the home; impediments to a generous attitude, open to life, for many women who wish to make dedication to their family compatible with a profession outside the home.

Moreover, we should not forget that the demanding competition in the workplace that is so widespread today particularly affects young professionals, who often have to try to make dedication to their family

compatible with the pressing burden of their work. This situation frequently involves work schedules that are very demanding and salaries that are not as generous as one would wish in order to confront peacefully the adventure of forming a family.

The desire to get ahead in one's profession often entails the demand for more dedication, more availability, more trips. Certainly, life is complex and competitive; and the aggressive atmosphere found in the workplace often makes it hard to find a harmony between family and professional life. Denying this would be closing one's eyes to reality; but accepting it as something insoluble would not be the right reaction of a child of God. We need to ask our Lord for the fortitude to know how to say no to certain "demands" at work, and not let ourselves be absorbed by what is no more than a means.

We have all the divine help we need to change the world, the culture, society: to change our own heart. But we should first fill our heart with hope, a divine gift, because our Lord can do all things. If we engrave on our heart the example of service, of self-denial, of authentic and specific self-giving shown by the family in Nazareth, we will learn how to find time for our family, for our dialogue with God, our true treasure. For the secret of a unified life is to have a heart filled with love, a love that illumines every corner of our day, even when it is clouded over and gray.

The challenge is great, and the apostolic task urgent. "In national life there are two things which are really essential: the laws concerning marriage and the laws to do with education. In these areas God's children have to stand firm and fight

with toughness and fairness, for the sake of all mankind."[8]

A society that fails to protect the family, perhaps with the false excuse of technical and economic progress, is actually accelerating its own destruction. Without healthy families, civilization declines; the social order begins to fall apart and becomes stagnant, even economically. The Church never tires of reminding us of this. Christian families are called upon to valiantly protect the beauty and truth of the family.

Supporting and fostering all the values contained in family life is today a priority in the Church's mission. The moral quality of a society depends upon the moral well-being of its families. Families that fail to teach children the importance of justice and service to others undermine the true meaning of

work. Moreover, children will find it difficult to respond with generosity to a divine call when their personality has not matured in Christian virtues in the family setting.

The generations that will assume responsibility in the future will be dependent upon the spiritual and moral resources they receive today, principally in the heart of their families. The social transcendence of what takes place in the small community of each family is incalculable. The happiness of many people is at stake. It is worthwhile taking very seriously this colossal apostolic task, sparing no effort and beginning with one's own family.

"My children, in the middle of the street, in the middle of the world, we must always be striving to create a pool of clean water around us, so that other fish may come to join us.

Then between us we will increase the size of the pool, purifying the river and restoring the quality of the sea's water."[9]

That is the way the Church began, and we Christians have to work in the same way, seeking with determination to bring Christ's atmosphere to society around us. My daughters and sons, the effort you make to foster a deeply Christian tone in your homes and in the education of your children, will make your families focal points of Christian life, pools of clean water that will influence many other families, and also help vocations to blossom.[10]

Javier Lopez Diaz

[1] John Paul II, Enc. *Laborem exercens*, September 14, 1981, no. 10

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] *Ibid.*

[4] Saint Josemaria, *Letter*, February 14, 1974, no. 3

[5] Saint Josemaria, meditation "Saint Joseph our Father and Lord," March 19, 1968.

[6] Cf. *Lk* 2:52

[7] John Paul II, Enc. *Laborem exercens*, September 14, 1981, no. 10

[8] Saint Josemaria, *The Forge*, no. 104.

[9] Saint Josemaria, Notes taken in a get-together, May 20, 1973

[10] Bishop Javier Echevarria, *Letter*, November 28, 2002, nos. 11-12

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