

Work and Family Life: Complementary Realities

A new article in the series on human love. "It takes time and commitment to be a parent. The time invested in parenting will always be worthwhile."

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By Rosemary Kamau

Married women in today's world have multiple roles divided into wives dedicated to their husbands, mothers nurturing their children and

household managers running the home. Some women have to work in formal employment due to difficult family circumstances. Others work formally for personal fulfilment “because everyone else is doing it.”

Work is a means of sanctification, but how do they balance all these roles? Spiritually they seek to follow the will of God, but which role takes priority? Women seek answers to this growing dilemma in their lives. It is difficult for women to balance all these important roles. Many women, who are unable to balance these roles, end up focusing more on their professional lives which appear to be more rewarding and prestigious.

In today’s world it is very tempting for women to focus on themselves more and to reach their fullest potential professionally, because it has an empowering, financial

security. Because of their increasingly busy schedules they have less time for their husbands and children. They believe a smaller family is more manageable financially and emotionally. There is a tug of war in their hearts between following what everyone else is doing and following God's will for them. It could be useful to look at what the Sacred Scripture teaches and the saints have lived and taught so as to be guided in the right direction towards God's will.

PROFESSIONAL WORK AT HOME

Stay-at-home mothers focus on their spouses, children and the home. This path is viewed by some women as less attractive because it comes with no financial gain and with little or no prestige. There are other women, however, who feel being a stay-at-home mother is the best gift they can give to their families.

St. John Paul II realized that society today compelled women to work formally outside the home. Those who choose to stay at home to take care of the children were made to feel guilty and worthless. He commented on this issue by stating that, “It is a disservice not only to children, but also to women and society itself when a woman is made to feel guilty for wanting to remain in the home and nurture and care for her children. It is also necessary to counter that misconception that the role of motherhood is oppressive to women and that a commitment to her family, particularly to her children, prevents a woman from reaching personal fulfilment and from having an influence in society. No response to women’s issues can ignore a woman’s role in the family or take lightly the fact that every new life is entrusted to the protection and care of the woman carrying it in her womb.”[1]

St. Josemaria reminds us of Our Lady and her role as a mother and wife. The greatest of all saints – Mary – “spent nearly every day of her life just like millions of other women who look after their family, bring up their children and take care of the home. Mary sanctifies the ordinary everyday things, what some people wrongly regard as unimportant and insignificant: everyday work, looking after those closest to you, visits to friends and relatives. What a blessed ordinariness, that can be so full of love of God!”[2]

Like Mary, mothers are called to love. A love so complete that mothers forget themselves and are happy just to be there where God wants them, fulfilling with care what God wants them to do. Mary, our mother, is for mothers both role model and a way. Mothers have to try to be like her, in the ordinary circumstances in which God wants them to live. With this

way of life comes happiness, the ability to overcome selfishness and comfort seeking, the ability to understand others and to serve them with a generous heart. This is the divine secret of Christian existence.

St. John Paul II in his letter to women says, "The Church sees in Mary the highest expression of the "feminine genius" and she finds in her a source of constant inspiration. Mary called herself the "handmaid of the Lord" (Lk 1:38). Through obedience to the Word of God she accepted her lofty yet not easy vocation as wife and mother in the family of Nazareth. Putting herself at God's service, she also put herself at the service of others: a service of love."[3]

St. Josemaria advises mothers that it is love that gives meaning to sacrifice. "Every mother knows well what it means to sacrifice herself for

her children; it is not a matter of giving them a few hours of her time, but of spending her whole life in their benefit.”[4]

A mother has to teach her children to be selfless by fostering in them faith, optimistic hope and charity; by teaching them to spend some of their time generously in the service of other less fortunate people, doing jobs suited to their age, in which they can show in a practical way, a human and supernatural concern for their fellow men. It takes time and commitment to be a parent. The time invested in parenting will always be worthwhile. It is difficult when the mother’s time and efforts are focused elsewhere. This is a short life and mothers need the wisdom from the Holy Spirit to choose the right path to follow.

This world does not see the hidden lives of mothers, therefore it does not

fully appreciate the roles they play. St. Josemaria asks, “How many mothers have you known who have been the heroines of some epic or extraordinary event? Few, very few. Yet you and I know many mothers who are indeed heroic, truly heroic, who have never figured in anything spectacular, who will never hit the headlines, as they say. They lead lives of constant self-denial, happy to curtail their own likes and preferences, their time, their opportunities for self-expression or success, so that they can carpet their children's lives with happiness.”[5]

The job of a mother at home contributes to society greatly. As St. Josemaria also noted, in a large family, “The mother's work is comparable to that of professional teachers. 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. 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.”[6]

St. Josemaria continues: “The home and the family will always occupy a central place in the life of a woman. For it is obvious that when she spends time on her family she is fulfilling a great human and Christian role. Nevertheless, this does not exclude the possibility of her having other professional work. Even housework is professional work! The manager of the home combines talents, creativity and skills that are comparable to any formal employment. The mother is the chef,

house-keeper, driver, hair-dresser, barber, teacher, procurement officer, interior decorator among many other roles. One cannot flatly affirm that a woman has to achieve her perfection only outside the home, as if time spent on her family were time stolen from the development of her personality.”[7]

AVAILABILITY FOR THE FAMILY FOR THOSE WHO WORK OUTSIDE

In Kenya, most mothers work in formal employment or run businesses. Most mothers in the rural areas are farmers and housework is a small part of their work. Very few mothers work professionally as home makers. This is because house help is cheap and easily available. There is also the issue of the high cost of living that forces both spouses to work formally to make ends meet.

In some cases that are increasing, more and more mothers are opting

to take on travelling jobs or employment in other counties or even outside the country. These jobs pay more and are prestigious. Some mothers have opted to run businesses where they travel outside the country to buy merchandise to sell in their home country. These options have seen more and more women living for long periods away from their families.

Further studies have become a big attraction for women who wish to progress professionally. Some mothers have chosen to study for long periods outside their country. While other mothers study and attend classes in the evenings and weekends. Most of these mothers have full time jobs and businesses.

Many families have been adversely affected by mothers taking on too many heavy roles of being a wife, mother, professional and student.

There is an urgent need to balance work and family. The rate of divorce has risen to alarming rates, not to mention the neglect of children.

Mothers have to make a deliberate effort to create boundaries that prioritize their spiritual lives, marriages and children. Spiritual lives are important because all graces and help come from God alone, enabling mothers to cope. It may well mean making hard choices in favour of the family. A mother may decide to quit a well paying job for a lower paying job so as to spend more time with the family. A mother may decide not to study further so as to spend more time helping her children to know God and helping them with their homework. A wife may also decide to spend more time with her husband instead of working overtime in the office.

St. Josemaria says, “The attention she gives to her family will always be a woman's greatest dignity. In the care she takes of her husband and children or, to put it in more general terms, in her work of creating a warm and formative atmosphere around her, a woman fulfils the most indispensable part of her mission. And so it follows that she can achieve her personal perfection there.”[8]

CONCLUSION

The family is under attack today: materialism, infidelity and selfishness greatly influence the choices of many married couples. Mothers are far too busy and the children are left under the care of house-helps. Some house helps today have been known to negatively influence children in terms of their faith and morality. The children are exposed to drugs, pornography, materialism and immorality. Today,

mothers seem to have very little time to teach the children the most important things in life, such as the Catholic faith, values and virtues.

We can conclude with the words of Pope Francis "It is beautiful when mothers teach their little children to blow a kiss to Jesus or to Our Lady. What tenderness there is in this! In that moment the child's heart is transformed into a place of prayer. And this is a gift of the Holy Spirit."^[9] In the attempt to balance work and family, we should not forget the real contribution made to society of a well-run home and a happy family. Let mothers realize their important role and focus on the mission God has given them.

[1] Pope John Paul II Speaks on Women by St. John Paul II; edited by

Brooke Williams Deely, p. 251; The Catholic University of America Press, 2014, Washington DC

[2] Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ is Passing By*, "To Jesus through Mary," No. 148

[3] Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, no. 10

[4] Josemaría Escrivá, *Conversations, "Women in Social Life and in the Life of the Church,"* no. 111

[5] Josemaría Escrivá, *Friends of God, "In the Footsteps of Christ,"* No.134

[6] Josemaría Escrivá, *Conversations, "Women in Social Life and in the Life of the Church,"* No. 89

[7] *Ibid*, No. 87

[8] Josemaría Escrivá, *Conversations, "Women in Social Life and in the Life of the Church,"* No. 87

[9] Pope Francis, Address, 26th Aug
2015

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