



From the Hearthstone to the Headstone: Rethinking Housework

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When all the promises of mere traders are perforce broken, when all the praises of mere trade have perforce become a jest, when all that was called practical has turned out to be a practical joke, and all that was called modern is in ruins more useless than Stonehenge—then, there is a very real psychological possibility that men may think of things forgotten; of property, of privacy, of piety in the old sense of reverence for the human sanctities; for the family, from the hearthstone to the headstone.

G. K. Chesterton¹

¹Old bridge, England.

An Outstanding Issue

In the wide range of “lights and shadows”² which affects modern families, scientific discussion which seeks to explain the relationship between life in the family home and paid professional work seems to be gaining ground. The reasons vary according to the diverse cultural, social, and political alternatives which abound in the five continents, but at the dawn of the twenty-first century a growing interest in reflecting on the relationship between work and family in certain institutions and social movements is clear. Simply put, to carry out professional work outside of the family home has become, in effect, the *modus vivendi* of a large group of parents who have established an irrevocable relationship with the labour market and with the different social and cultural structures which make up today’s world.

During the last decade,³ all sorts of scholars and thinkers have addressed the work-family binomial, offering a wide range of solutions of a practical nature, without forgetting the conceptual reflection which the topic deserves.⁴ For the most part, these studies promote a “balanced” relationship between work and family. In other words, while companies and organisations must ensure their standards of efficiency without sacrificing the economic, social, and cultural needs of its employees, families will have to develop new internal dynamics that would allow all their members to have a freer and greater participation in the “public” realm (understood as education, social promotion, paid professional work), in order to attain a greater equality between the functions performed by fathers and mothers in the different professions and at home.

To this end, the husband-father must be asked to work fewer hours outside the home, in order to find time to participate in the upbringing and care of his children. He will have to devote the right number of hours to his profession outside the home and demand “paternity leave” during pregnancy and birth of his children, and find enough time to enable the wife-mother to assume a social role or professional work outside the home (once she has recovered from pregnancy and child-birth), in such a way that her paid-professional work is not severely affected, but rather promoted and guaranteed by any company, institution or government. Consequently, father and mother should assume with care, practicality and equality the household chores, the personalised atten-

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tion towards the children and the responsibility for schooling, promoting the construction of a “family” with a father and a “culture” with a mother.⁵ Children, meanwhile, must spend the necessary hours in the care of their grandparents, or babysitters who will gradually demand better treatment, a higher salary, and opportunities for growth in this emerging work environment, because, in many cases, they themselves are mothers, or at least aspire to be. On the other hand, day-care centres, early stimulation centres, and schools are to be subsidised by the state and by those companies that offer a better service to their workers—in order to be called “family-friendly” workplaces⁶—or by parents themselves faced with the constant proposals of private initiative.⁷

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For classic wisdom—perhaps a bit forgotten nowadays⁸—parents (both father and mother) have been called to participate in the “construction” of the world in a unique, exclusive and fundamental way: by bringing people into existence and rearing them from the starting point of their love.⁹ According to this vision, the course of history has set on the shoulders of fathers and mothers the great responsibility of humanising and constructing the foundations of all known societies and cultures, the same which they must erect through their own work. As Chesterton put it: “the man and the woman are one flesh—yes, even when they are not one spirit. Man is a quadruped. Upon this ancient and anarchic intimacy, types of government have little or no effect; it is happy or unhappy, by its own sexual wholesomeness and genial habit.”¹⁰

What, then, is the true difference between work in the home (understood as private) and professional work outside the home (understood as public)? Can the role of the parents in the home be considered true “professional work” or “a job”? We will begin by analysing the concept of work from its anthropological roots and then examine the impact that this has on the formation and upbringing of the human person.

Work, Love and Profession

Ancient civilisations believed that work could be identified with those physical activities, external in nature, which demanded extenuating efforts. Our ancestors worked the land principally with their “hands” to cultivate the wheat which later they transformed in bread. They discovered the benefits of grape juice, which fermented, gives way to wine. They learned to cook their food, polish stones, cut wood, and prepare materials to build lodgings, which were inhabited by families and became homes. Thus, the man of yore learned to take possession, inhabit, and work “in” and “from” his vital and intimate space: his home. With the passing of the centuries, this dynamic advanced towards another, unsuspected, space: his inner life.

Not without reason, Graeco-Latin wisdom distinguished the nature of laborious work (*negotium*) from what they understood as contemplative rest (*otium*), that is, a passive possession of truth and beauty. According to this distinction, most people are to work laboriously the material for the “construction” of the world, whereas others will devote themselves to contemplating the created universe and to being virtuous. In this way, some worked the material world while others contemplated its beauty, marking an unbridgeable gap between the activities of the “body” and those corresponding to the “spirit,” to inner life, to the excellence of being.¹¹

Separating these two elements (work and contemplation), however, poses a practical problem which evidently is prevalent in our times: while a few devote their time to “contemplate” reality, the others “work” without rest to satisfy the primary needs of the former. It seems that work is destined to rob man of all contemplation, that is, the enjoyment of his own well-done toil, divesting him of the spiritual benefits which come from it. Contemplation, according to classical school of thought, does not refer to manual laborious work, to physical and progressive effort, but to the devotion and admiration of reality which leads toward rest.

But this “*otium*,” inasmuch as it is possession of the truth and of love, cannot come to him in a passive way. In reality, it is a systematic and rigorous devotion to the appreciation of reality. It demands the development and execution of multiple tasks which are exhausting.

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If the human being finds himself in the middle of an unfinished activity, he has not yet reached his goal and therefore is working (*negotium*, transient act). On the other hand, when he is in contemplation (*otium*, immanent act), in possession of his end, this means he has reached his goals, and therefore he can appreciate the work done, and finally rest. This indicates that the relationship between work and contemplation can be expressed in the following way: one works to contemplate, and contemplating permits one to continue working.

He who has worked can contemplate the work done, and, if it is agreeable to him, can stop working and therefore, rest. Put in these terms: a true task presents itself to man as an activity “to be done,” which finds its first cause in love, being a natural path to contemplation and delight.¹²

* * *

Now, work understood as a “movement,” a process tending towards contemplation, poses an equally relevant question: what is the role played by work which seeks contemplation in that what is relative to the personal development of a human being? Work and development are two terms which go hand-in-hand when making reference to integral development (beginning with the interior) of persons, which in itself is a task to be done. This is the most basic and elementary activity in the personal plane of a human life, which is not attributable to its having a certain degree of difficulty, nor does it imply the execution of complex acts, feasible for certain types of mentalities.

Truly, the integral development of a person is a task, primarily because it requires the repetition of acts which tend to excellence, to virtue: it is a process which must be followed, a movement; and secondly, because it depends on personal freedom. Both what we can call “inner work” (what happens within me) and “outer work” (what I do with my hands) are the result of the personal initiative of the one who acts freely, who is free when faced with any activity or task which is posed here and now and which does not emerge alone but rather reclaims its freedom. For work to be “real work” it must be done by a human person who

freely says “yes.” It is not carried out by means of a natural biological, physical or chemical process, or thanks to the impersonal laws of the market or of politics. Work must be done by someone here and now, step by step, and it is presented as something good that must be done and which expects the free response of the doer: I must freely respond “yes” from my inner self.

In this sense, when we are faced with a good that must be carried out in the purely natural sphere, which cannot happen alone, but which awaits my free and affirmative “response,” then we are faced with a possible task, which must be expressed as a response. This response carries with it the imprint of one who has answered: who am I? I am one that can freely answer to love “in the flesh,” since we have been begotten in a personal way, and only from our own flesh can we respond to the Love which has introduced us into the created world. In other words, I am he who responds to the Love which constitutes me, by means of my acts . . . by means of my work.

* * *

The response to Love which holds humans in existence acquires a triple dimension, which we can abstract from a personal experience, basic and elementary, of human life. Expressed in other terms, to be a person (of flesh) radically implies growing in an integral manner according to the following three practical elements or tasks to be carried out: 1) to grow and reach maturity; 2) to bring others into existence; and 3) to co-participate in the construction of the world of human beings.

One can see at a glance that these three “dimensions” have something in common: they are tasks in the technical sense of the word. They must be carried out progressively and with total dependence on the subject’s freedom. The “response” to each of these dimensions is the expression of a good that must be done and which “does not do itself.” People are born as beings endowed with a degree of inconclusiveness, a basic characteristic, shared with the world we live in, which expects to be “finished” or “constructed” by us. In it, everything is to be done or renewed; thus, we have to get to work and build the structures that facilitate the

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development of the authentic world inhabited by human beings. The human person finds himself “unripe,” faced with a world which expects to be erected, constructed and inhabited by men and women. It is necessary to exercise intellect and freedom in the realisation of progressive acts which tend towards virtue, giving rise to a unique and unrepeatable history, *viz.*, a personal biography, which, in turn, makes possible a global biography. This is where we catch sight of the origin of our first formal job: to become responsible for our own maturity. The first progressive activity which makes a claim on the freedom of the human person is, thus, to learn, to mature, and to reach ripeness.¹³ The Lord said to Adam and Eve: “Be fertile. . . .”

We have been put into existence as offspring of other offspring. Knowing oneself to be the child of a father and a mother (in the broad sense) constitutes, certainly, the second essential task reclaimed by human love. Vocation to love takes us beyond ourselves and places us in a personal dialogue with our fellow beings, showing us the path to give ourselves, to transmit what we have received, to manifest our intimacy and to exercise our potential to become parents.

This is what older siblings do when “their time has come” and they assume a more active role in the upbringing of their siblings, or their cousins. Or else, adolescents when they become involved in volunteer work, because they are giving—truly—to others “what they have received” in different aspects of their own lives, so that they can mature, grow and be more humane through the experiences and knowledge of others. We can also think of those who respond to the Love which has brought them into existence “without intermediaries,” living an apostolic celibacy, giving themselves to the work of bringing “others into existence” in the spiritual realm.¹⁴ God also commanded to the first man and woman who walked the Earth: “Multiply. . . .”

But the world of men and women possesses, as we have mentioned, a certain degree of inconclusiveness, and it cries out to be finished, in the same way as our character, by means of our work. It is necessary for society to promote the flourishing of homes with well-established families, with institutions, communities, governments that nurture them. Only a culture that understands itself can grow and perpetuate its existence in history, and for this, philosophy, theology,

the positive sciences, art, music, literature, gastronomy, etc. are necessary. A culture must be “challenged” by the new persons being born in its womb. And these new members of every family, for justice’s sake, must assume it, criticise it (from *kriterion*, judgment), and contribute something new, an improvement which makes more peaceable their lives, and those of others.¹⁵ God finally told our first parents: “Fill the earth and subdue it. . . .”¹⁶

Who Will Look After the Home?

Faced with these challenges, Chesterton offered solutions:

I take the principle of domesticity: the ideal house; the happy family, the holy family of history. For the moment it is only necessary to remark that it is like the church and like the republic, now chiefly assailed by those who have never known it, or by those who have failed to fulfil it. Numberless modern women have rebelled against domesticity in theory because they have never known it in practice. Hosts of the poor are driven to the workhouse without ever having known the house. Generally speaking, the cultured class is shrieking to be let out of the decent home, just as the working class is shouting to be let into it.¹⁷

What could hinder understanding of this last statement from a feminist point of view? Placing in the centre of social life, the importance of working in the family home presupposes a certain agreement with what anthropologists and sociologists might term the strictly masculine and the strictly feminine. To me, the latest “joke” which western culture inherited from Marxism can be found in the discourse of a certain radical feminism. Karl Marx (1818-1883) sought to summarise the history of human beings as a constant struggle among social classes. That is, while there was a radical “difference” between the buying power of the rich in relation to the less fortunate (or, as some call them, the poor), the former would invariably opt to abuse the dignity, the work and the time of the latter. Frederick Engels (1820-1895), carried this theory forward into an almost bottomless abyss. The author of the book *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) extrapolates Marxist dialectic materialism to what some have termed “the war of the sexes.”

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Trying to reconstruct a new and arbitrary world, where men and women are overshadowed by the ideological discourse of “other” ways of “loving,” or, at the least, they are exploited in the name of the lucrative interests of unlimited (modern) development, will not be an easy task, though it is not impossible. “This world will reach its plenitude in the moment when both sexes in harmony give it their specific contribution.”¹⁸

What is specifically feminine? We may not find a concrete answer to this question for now, but we can say that we miss it more and more. R. Alvira comments, “It seems to me that our main problem is not in atomic bombs, or unemployment or drugs. In my view, the worst thing that is happening to us is the progressive disappearance of that which is specifically feminine, a situation characterised—like all modernity—by the predominance of power, that is, the masculine element is the main one.”¹⁹ Faced with this bold statement, I dare say that the true contribution of woman (and of man) in the midst of a society which is tearing itself apart at the core, will begin in the family home. The reason for this is that to speak of family is to speak of home, the physical space occupied by a family and which it possesses, inhabits, and cultivates. It is that great paradoxical place which seems *larger inside than outside*.²⁰ But even for Chesterton, it is much more than that:

The shortest way of summarising the position is to say that woman stands for the idea of Sanity; that intellectual home to which the mind must return after every excursion on extravagance. The mind that finds its way to wild places is the poet’s; but the mind that never finds its way back is the lunatic’s. There must in every machine be a part that moves and a part that stands still; there must be in everything that changes a part that is unchangeable. And many of the phenomena which moderns hastily condemn are really parts of this position of the woman as the centre and pillar of health.²¹

The family, the home, is “the place to which one returns”²²; the place to turn to, to come back to. The social and cultural vindication of paternal and maternal work in a home inhabited by their children is definitely becoming a true social and cultural need. And this is neither a myth nor the good will of a few romantics who see the family as the remedy against all the evils of postmodern society. As Chesterton says:

We must instantly begin all over again, and begin at the other end. I begin with a little girl's hair. That I know is a good thing at any rate. Whatever else is evil, the pride of a good mother in the beauty of her daughter is good. It is one of those adamantine tenderesses which are the touchstones of every age and race. If other things are against it, other things must go down. If landlords and laws and sciences are against it, landlords and laws and sciences must go down. With the red hair of one she-urchin in the gutter I will set fire to all modern civilisation. Because a girl should have long hair, she should have clean hair; because she should have clean hair, she should not have an unclean home; because she should not have an unclean home, she should have a free and leisured mother; because she should have a free mother, she should not have an usurious landlord; because there should not be an usurious landlord, there should be a redistribution of property; because there should be a redistribution of property, there shall be a revolution. That little urchin with the gold-red hair, whom I have just watched toddling past my house, she shall not be lopped and lamed and altered; her hair shall not be cut short like a convict's; no, all the kingdoms of the earth shall be hacked about and mutilated to suit her. She is the human and sacred image; all around her the social fabric shall sway and split and fall; the pillars of society shall be shaken, and the roofs of ages come rushing down, and not one hair of her head shall be harmed.²³

1 G. K. Chesterton, *Brave New Family*, (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1990), p. 11.

2 Cf. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, (Pauline Books: Boston, 1981).

3 Cf. C. Hakim, *Work-Lifestyle Choices in the Twenty-first Century: Preference Theory*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2000).

4 On the Spanish-speaking front (they are not the only ones): J. Gallego and J. Pérez Adán, *Pensar la familia*, (Palabra: Madrid, 2001); A. Aparisi & J. Ballesteros, *Por un feminismo de la complementariedad*, (EUNSA: Pamplona, 2002); D. Melé, *Conciliar trabajo y familia: un reto para el siglo XXI*, (EUNSA: Pamplona, 2004); N. Chinchilla and C. León, *La ambición femenina*, (Aguilar: Buenos Aires, 2004); N. Chinchilla and M. Moragas, *Dueños de nuestro destino: cómo conciliar la vida profesional, familiar y personal*, (Ariel: Barcelona, 2009); N. Chinchilla, M. Moragas and A. Masuda, *Balancing Work-family: No Matter Where You Are*, (HRD Press: Massachusetts, 2010).

5 Cf. B. Castilla, *La complementariedad varón-mujer. Nuevas hipótesis*, (Rialp-ICF: Madrid, 1996).

6 What Nuria Chinchilla calls the "Family-Responsible Employer Index" (IFREI), self-diagnostic tool for businesses; the "Index" is available at <http://www.iesedti.com/ifrei2006/ifrei.htm>.

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7 Cf. C. Montoro and G. Barrios, *Políticas Familiares*, (EUNSA: Pamplona, 2008). For a better idea of the real “contribution” of day-care centres to the development of children, cf. M. Eberstad, *Home-Along America*, (Sentinel: New York, 2004).

8 Cf. R. Alvira, “La participación como el alma de la familia,” (EUNSA: Pamplona, 2002), pp. 47-54.

9 Cf. K. Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, (Pauline Books: Boston, 2013). This End-note is different... here I am quoting the works of K. Wojtyła, not John Paul II’s.

10 G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World*, (Serenity Publishers: Maryland, 2009), p. 34.

11 Cf. M. P. Chirinos, *Claves para una antropología del trabajo*, (EUNSA: Pamplona, 2006), pp. 18-26; R. Corazón, *Filosofía del trabajo*, (Rialp: Madrid, 2007) and M. A. Martínez-Echevarría, *Repensar el trabajo*, (Ediciones Internacionales Universitarias: Madrid, 2004). The general idea that we shall follow through the whole paper can be found in M. Santamaría, “*Amor fit labor, homo fit Christus, mundus fit Ecclesia*,” (Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra: Pamplona, 2004), pp. 1011-1030.

12 Cf. M. Santamaría, “*Amor fit labor, homo fit Christus, mundus fit Ecclesia*,” (Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra: Pamplona, 2004), pp. 1012-1014.

13 Cf. M. Santamaría, “*Amor fit labor, homo fit Christus, mundus fit Ecclesia*,” (Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra: Pamplona, 2004), p. 1016.

14 Cf. M. Santamaría, “*Amor fit labor, homo fit Christus, mundus fit Ecclesia*,” (Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra: Pamplona, 2004), p. 1016.

15 Cf. M. Santamaría “*Amor fit labor, homo fit Christus, mundus fit Ecclesia*,” (Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra: Pamplona, 2004), pp. 1014-1016.

16 Gen. 1:28.

17 G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World*, (Serenity Publishers: Maryland, 2009), p. 31.

18 J. Burggraf, “Género.[Gender],” (Palabra: Madrid, 2004), p. 517.

19 R. Alvira, *Filosofía de la vida cotidiana*, (Rialp: Madrid 2000), pp. 19-20.

20 G. K. Chesterton, *Brave New Family*, (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1990), p. 63.

21 G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World*, (Serenity Publishers: Maryland, 2009), pp. 72-73.

22 R. Alvira, *El lugar al que se vuelve*, (EUNSA: Pamplona, 2000), p. 19.

23 G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World*, (Serenity Publishers: Maryland, 2009), p. 150.

