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The most important "business": the children

An article written by the Prelate
on the 30th anniversary of St.
Josemaría's death.

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From ancient times there has been a kind of dichotomy between "big history" and "little history," between the unusual and the everyday. On the one hand are the grand gestures (real or imagined) of kings and heroes; on the other hand, the ongoing tasks,

often tiring, that occupy ordinary people most of each day as they work to support their families.

Even in Christian lands, people often regarded work as a punishment from God. Those words of Yahweh when he cast our first parents out of the Garden of Eden after they committed the original sin are familiar enough: "You shall eat your bread in the sweat of your brow." But many seem to have forgotten the divine command, "Increase and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it," when the Lord made man and woman in his image and likeness.

For many centuries work (especially manual, but not only that) was considered something that lacked dignity, and people tried to be free of it when good fortune, a noble birth, or an important position in society made that possible. Today, what wounds human dignity is not work

but precisely the contrary-unemployment. In this sense, the changed perspective has a positive side. The social teaching of the Church, beginning with the 19th-century popes, has played a role in bringing about that change.

The popes' social teaching has also influenced the life and writings of spiritual authors who find it congenial with their own insights. Several writers of the 20th century come to mind, especially St. Josemaría Escrivá. In a commentary on God's command to Adam to till the earth, the Founder of Opus Dei asserted that work is dignified and holy, "a human necessity God has entrusted to us here on earth, filling our days and making us partakers of his creative power, that we might harvest 'fruits for eternal life' (John 4:36) while earning our living" (Friends of God, 57).

Thanks to this change to a more mature evaluation of work during the past century, professional tasks have been recognized as a commonplace that does not lower human dignity. Unfortunately, however, many people regard those occupations as something out of the ordinary that interferes with normal living. Professional success at all costs has come to occupy center stage: achieving great dreams of epic proportions is what matters. Morality-the human and supernatural value of the ordinary-is often set aside.

Today ordinary life has been reduced in practice to domestic life. The family is cast on the ash heap, the great loser in a feverish rat race. Plainly, a culture shaped by "stakhanovites," by fathers and mothers absent from the home, has had a very negative impact on family life.

Sometimes, unfortunately, it becomes easier to break the marital bond than a professional contract. And disproportionate work also places the children in danger. A boundless increase of juvenile violence, for example, has been attributed to a reversal of values represented by the frenetic urge to produce that leads many to undermine the family's strength as an institution.

An absentee father who is more interested in his career than in his children cannot serve as a firm reference point for them. In the same way, a child's relationship to an absent mother cannot fail to be disregarded even if it is always a necessary relationship at the bottom of everyone's heart. Schools that sacrifice authentic human formation to criteria of efficiency do not help their students to cultivate what is most basic to their needs.

When John Paul II spoke of "the gospel of work" he helped us to discover its supernatural meaning. When performed with a Christian outlook, any task can humanize families, jobs, and society as a whole.

"Children are your most important 'business,' " St. Josemaría once told a businessman to dissuade him from devoting too much of himself to his job at the expense of his family. It has been 30 years since the Founder of Opus Dei died (June 26, 1975). His message can fill us with new hope in the permanent quest for meaning as we face the continuous barrage of questions the contemporary world aims at us. St. Josemaría reminds us of a great truth that Benedict XVI has emphasized in proclaiming that the Church is alive. She invites us to explore her treasury of hidden answers that can become lights to guide us on our way.

+ Javier Echevarría

Prelate of Opus Dei

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