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The family as active participant in social life – The family, economic life and work

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In the majority of families worldwide individuals leave the house and “go to work”. What is the significance of this to us? Is it just a way for us to earn some money, so that we can either feed our children, buy clothing, pay bills, pay for vacations, or, basically for some of us to survive in the world today?

Before the majority of persons in families worked for others outside of the home, economic work was organised around the family to a large extent. Many businesses were family based. We all know of family furniture stores, family shops, family farms, family shoemakers and locksmiths.

The principle of exchange was strong and the whole production or work system was based on sharing the strengths and competencies of one's family with others. A great deal of pride was often placed on what “the family” could produce.

Today, however, this family network economy based on the principles of sharing has largely been eroded. With industrialisation and capitalism the economy is now largely driven by demand and supply. The family is not seen as an essential agent to economic life. It does not organise the economy; in fact the economy largely determines how the family organises itself.

The *Compendium* tells us, “The relationship existing between the family and economic life is particularly significant. On one hand, in fact, the economy (*oikonomia*, household management) was born from domestic work. The home has been for a long time – and in many regions still is – place of production and the centre of life.

The dynamism of economic life, on the other hand, develops with the initiative of people and is carried in the manner of concentric circles, in ever broader networks of production and exchange of goods and services that involves families in continuously increasing measure. The family, therefore, must rightfully be seen as an essential agent of economic life, guided not by the market mentality but by the logic of sharing and solidarity among generations.”

Family and work are united by a very special relationship. “The family constitutes one of the most important terms of reference for shaping the social and ethical order of human work (*Laborem Exercens*).

This relationship has its roots in the relation existing between the person and his right to possess the fruit of his labour and concerns not only the individual as a singular person but also as a member of a family, understood as a “domestic society” (*Rerum Novarum*)

The importance of work to the family cannot be overemphasised... “Work is essential insofar as it represents the condition that makes it possible to establish a family, for the means by which the

family is maintained are obtained through work. Work also conditions the process of personal development, since a family afflicted by unemployment runs the risk of not fully achieving its end (*Laborem Exercens*)”.

In the vast majority of families, there are individuals who are not yet of the age to work, have passed the age of work or are unable to work. These persons must also “survive” and will require resources to do so.

The rewards of work are therefore not only for the benefit of those of us who traverse to work every day, but are to be shared with those family members who are not employed – it provides an opportunity for showing love, consideration, care, teamwork and solidarity in the family.

In support of this, the *Compendium* tells us “The contribution that the family can make to the reality of work is valuable and, in many instances, irreplaceable. It is a contribution that can be expressed both in economic terms and through the great resources of solidarity that the family who are without work or who are seeking employment.”

A key consideration in the discussion of work and family is that of salary/wages. What is a decent salary? – “A wage sufficient to maintain a family and allow it to live decently (*Quadragesimo Anno*).” It “must also allow for saving that will permit the acquisition of property as a guarantee of freedom. The right to property is closely connected with the existence of families, which protect themselves from need thanks also to savings and to building up of family property (*Rerum Novarum*).”

Those of us who are employers, do the wages we pay enable persons to live decently and guarantee their freedom? Or does what we pay ensure that they are never able to afford property, cannot save for a better future, tying them in dependent unhealthy relationships or even leading them into “illegitimate” activities seeking the resources to ensure that they are able to live “decently”.

“There can be several different ways to make a family wage a concrete reality. Various forms of important social provisions help to bring it about, for example, family subsidies and other contributions for dependent family members, and also remuneration for the domestic work done in the home by one of the parents (*Laborem Exercens*).”