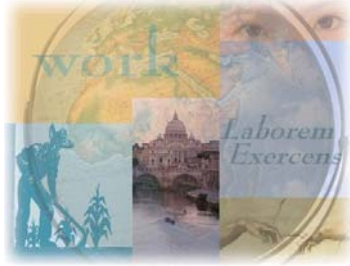


Work as Key to the Social Question

The Great Social and Economic Transformations and the Subjective Dimension of Work



A Gender Analysis of the Relationships Between Work and Family in the USA

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One important message that history teaches us is that in the name of justice, the Catholic social teachings on work and family have perpetuated gender inequality and a patriarchal view of the family that has benefited male workers as fathers and inflicted harm on female workers as mothers, thus increasing the demands on family. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the social encyclical, *Laborem exercens*, and to point out the Church's inaccuracy in granting rights, assigning roles, and issuing mandates on the basis of sex.

The Roman Catholic Church in its official writings has tried to prescribe proper behavior and duties for men and in the process has helped construct female identity. There are two major concepts that have contributed to the Church's construction of womanhood: patriarchy and natural law. Foremost, the Church has defined womanhood within a patriarchal context, and here I use Paula Kane's definition of patriarchy, "a system of male domination that preceded capitalism but which is also functional for capitalism and the gender relations institutionalized in its family structure." Kane goes on to say that patriarchy's residual effects have informed Catholic ideology about women by its articulation of a sexual division of labor, and its control of women's sexuality and spirituality. Another consequence of the patriarchy's system of male domination, she concludes, "has denied women their individuality and defined women relationally. That is, women are defined as being responsible to and for others, rather than as an autonomous individual."^[1] Next, natural law also informed Catholic ideology about womanhood. Natural law's emphasis on "nature" directly influenced Catholic theology and led the Church to mandate "motherhood" as woman's essential role. Patriarchy and natural law combined to provide distinctive role identities for men that functions well within capitalism: man is the "breadwinner", husband and father while woman is wife, mother, and "homemaker."

The first social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, reflected these influences on the Church's construction of male and female identity. Pope Leo XIII supported the sexual division of labor in *Rerum Novarum* when he stated that "certain occupations likewise are less fitted for women, who are intended by nature for work in the home—work indeed which especially protects modesty in women and accords by nature with the education of children and the well-being of the family."^[2] As historians have observed, this first of the social encyclicals was conservative in most respects. Since the document suggested no changes in the Church's mandate for motherhood as woman's essential role, *Rerum Novarum* was a useful tool against feminism and careerism.

Over the past forty years, knowledge pertaining to the "nature" and "roles" of man and of woman especially when related to work has changed dramatically. The forces of history have reshaped the position of woman in America's workforce.. Today, in the United States women have left the home to become "breadwinners." Over 80 percent of women between the ages of 18 and 64 are in the workforce. Over half of mothers with preschool children are working mothers. A majority of women work because of economic need. Nearly three-fourths of working women are single, widowed, divorced or separated, or have husbands whose earnings are less than \$15,000 a year. A correlated change is the dramatic rise in single parent families (25 percent) mainly due to the breakdown of family where the divorce rate hovers at 50 percent.^[3]

The major concern of U.S. women in the workplace is the inequality and discrimination that they experience, yet it is not addressed in the encyclical *Laborem exercens*. Concentration of women in low-paying jobs is compounded by pay inequity and a minimum wage which is below the standards of justice to qualify as a living wage. For the last half century women have earned two-thirds or less of every dollar earned by men. Racism also worsens the situation of minority women. Thus, both sex and race are significant factors in the discrimination faced by women in the workforce. These factors are also compounded by class. In the year 2001 the majority of college graduates in the U.S. are women, yet, women with four years of college average less pay than white men with an eighth grade education.^[4] The intersection of sex, race and class account for the diversity found among American women and also the degree of inequality women experience in the workforce.. Again, single parent headed families endure the greatest burdens from the injustices of inequality and discrimination. This data raises serious challenges to the position of women presented in Pope John Paul II's 1981 social encyclical, *Laborem exercens*. In America in the year 2000 where a large number of women (25 percent of all families raising their own children under 18 years are headed by a woman with no husband living in the household)^[5] are the principal or sole supporters of families, additional emphasis on the equality of women in the workplace is necessary.

Though the Church constantly assures us that "man" is always to be understood as referring to both men and women in its texts and commentaries, the encyclical, *Laborem exercens*, constantly speaks of man, of his labor and his destiny without accompanying signs indicating that these terms have generic meaning. When the encyclical defends a "family wage," that is to say, a remuneration for labor that allows the breadwinner and the breadwinner's family to have a decent life, the reader gets the impression that the worker in

question is the male worker, indicating that “man” is not used generically. Thus, the papal message often has an alienating effect at least on many North American readers. Many U.S. men and women believe this generic use of “man” undervalues or renders invisible both paid and unpaid work performed by “woman.”^[6] Many U.S. men and women also believe that recognition of “man’s” work is limited to his paid labor as “breadwinner” while “man’s” unpaid work in the family as husband and father is undervalued and rendered invisible. The Church’s continued use of traditional role assignments for men and women severely limits the definition of work not only for women but also for men. Such a view of labor also has serious ramifications on the family.

Laborem exercens states that labor lays the foundation for the family. Labor produces the material conditions in which families can live and thrive. At the same time, family life reflects back on the laboring society because in the family children are socialized and prepared for labor. The family is the first school of labor.^[7] The encyclical only makes a brief reference to this interconnection between work and family, yet in doing so it opens a new perspective on the family which Catholic social teaching has not explored until now. Gregory Baum in his commentary on *Laborem exercens* writes: “In the first place, if labor lays the foundation for the family, then unemployment, underpaid work, and damaging and humiliating conditions of labor must be seen as factors affecting family life. Conversely, if the family is the novitiate of labor for society then the family is not free of its own conditions of alienation. For if an economic system refuses to allow workers to participate in the decision-making process affecting their work, then this organization of labor is likely to be mirrored in the family, the primary school of labor.... While these matters are not discussed in the encyclical, the link that this document establishes between the family and the primacy of labor opens the door to such reflections.”^[8] Catholic social thought can no longer shy away from examining the conditions of alienation within the family and the socio-political impact of child-raising.

The interconnection between work and family is a crucial issue that needs to be addressed, especially in the USA, where, for the first time, the number of nuclear families has dropped below 25 percent of households. By nuclear family I am referring to a household made up of a married couple with children. The USA 2000 Census offers a glimpse into the shifting and complicated makeup of American families. The figure of 23.5 percent of nuclear families in 2000 stands in sharp contrast to the 45 percent of nuclear families in 1960. Other data from the census concerning living arrangements in households reveals that the number of unmarried couples living together in the United States nearly doubled in the 1990s to 5.5 million, 9 percent of all households. Some of those couples have children. The number of families headed by women who have children, which are typically poorer than two parent families, grew nearly five times faster in the 1990s than the number of married couples with children.^[9] The number of US households headed by single fathers also has nearly doubled in the 1990s bringing estimates to 2million such households in the year 2000. Though more data is necessary on households headed by single fathers such data has definitely shattered the myth that fathers lack nurturing and domestic skills.^[10]

Demographers point to several factors to explain the decline in the number of

nuclear family households. The factors given are: the aging population of Americans, people are marrying later, and the increase in the size of the baby boomer cohort (ages 45 to 54) to 49 percent of the population. Yet, the median age in America is 35.3 years, an age when most Americans are married and raising children.^[11] The above data reveals that today's historical reality does not reflect traditional beliefs concerning the central role of nuclear families in the social stratification of American society. Many women do not marry. Women who marry and women who do not marry are bearing children. The raising of children is being done by both mothers and fathers, married and unmarried, in households. Women and men seek paid labor outside the household. Today, both women and men are "breadwinners" in American society. And some men and some women are the sole support of their families.

Even if the American woman does not seek employment outside the home and embraces the traditional role of wife and mother within the home, "she will spend on average 20 years of her 80 years life expectancy producing and raising 1.6 children. This means that 60 years of her life will be spent in other activity. Finally, the data reveals that many American women are producing fewer children and controlling their fertility both within and outside of marriage and the family. Thus, women spend a very limited portion (one fifth) of their life span producing and raising children.

From the data presented in this paper, it is an understatement to say that American women today do not reflect the Church's construction of female identity: wife, mother, "homemaker" of home. First, many American women, like men, expect to work their entire lives. As Gregory Baum said, "It is through labor that people create their world, and it is through the same labor that in a certain sense they also create themselves, both as the subject laboring and hence entering into self-actualization, and as people socialized by the objective conditions produced by their labor."^[12] Though the encyclical emphasizes paid labor that provides the material conditions in which families can thrive, it is also the unpaid labor of both men and women within the household that contributes to self-actualization and family. Church teachings must address this area of unpaid labor within the family. Now that women like men labor for pay outside the home their entire lives, the unpaid labor and traditional role assignments for women and men within the household raises serious questions pertaining to gender role assignments and who is raising the children.

When *Laborem exercens* specifically addresses women and work, priority is given to women's unpaid labor within the home. Woman is praised for her traditional role as homemaker. Pope John Paul II recognizes that in many countries "women work in nearly every sector of life"^[13]. He also states that women must demand that they be able to "fulfill their task in accordance with their own nature, without being discriminated against and without being excluded from jobs for which they are capable, but also without lack of respect for their family aspirations and for their specific role in contributing, together with men, to the good of society"^[14]. The encyclical insists that when women have an occupation they should be treated in such a manner that they can continue their family life and if they so choose, become mothers. The encyclical also asks that women not be obliged to leave home and family to assume outside work, either for economic reasons or because of cultural pressures. Women have the right to stay at home and devote themselves to their

family. As *Laborem exercens* states, “The true advancement of women requires that labor should be structured in such a way that women do not have to pay for their advancement by abandoning what is specific to them and at the expense of the family, in which women as mothers have an irreplaceable role.”^[15] If the wage of the husband does not suffice, then society must protect the freedom of women with the help of family allowances or grants for the labor they do at home. Thus, the encyclical affirms the right of women like men to labor outside the home, but the Church continues to mandate motherhood as the essential role of woman. The Church continues to define woman according to her nature determining and limiting her to a biological destiny. This definition permeates everything that is stated concerning women, even when the encyclical praises women for their labor.

There is no corresponding mandate of fatherhood for men in the Church’s teachings. Statistics from Wade Horn, director of the National Father Initiative reveals the extent to which fathers in the USA are abandoning their responsibilities. Horn states, “among children not living with fathers, 40 percent haven’t seen dad in the past year, and 50 percent have never been in his house.”^[16] Thus, when *Laborem exercens* does not mandate fatherhood as it does motherhood, “men are getting off the hook” in relation to their responsibilities as a fathers. Obviously, man’s labor does not prevent him from biologically becoming a father nor from contributing unpaid labor and devoting himself to family. Nor should woman’s labor prevent her from biologically becoming a mother, contributing unpaid labor and devoting herself to family. Yet, the Church insists that “women have the right to stay at home and devote themselves to family.”^[17] Do not men have the same right? Men in America are taking paternity leaves and leaves to care for sick members of their family. In America, the role of government protects this right of women as proclaimed by the Church and extends it to men. Unfortunately, the U.S. government does little except to proclaim this right and provide unpaid leaves from the workplace in these two areas. The priority in America is work not family. Unfortunately, *Laborem exercens* reinforces this American value system by not explicitly delineating the rights and responsibilities of men to protect and devote themselves to family except by defining and thus limiting his man’s role in the family to “breadwinner”. Though Pope John Paul II has a great sense that women’s work at home is heavy labor and praises her for her toil,^[18] the bestowal of this additional right by the Church to women and not to men is the core of the dilemma.

Church teaching, by bestowing the right to labor to both men and women, grants both the ability and responsibility to be “breadwinners” for the family. When the Church only grants to women the right to stay at home and devote themselves to family, women are required to assume the double-burden of toil both inside and outside the home. When the Church does not grant men the right to stay at home and devote themselves to family, men are denied the ability and responsibility to exercise their biological nature as father and to perform the unpaid labor necessary for their family. A new paradigm that reflects the historical reality in which we live is necessary. Traditional assigned roles based on nature/sex are no longer an adequate way for the Church to prescribe proper behavior and duties for both men and women if they are to achieve self-actualization and the family is to be strengthened.. Perhaps the Church should heed the call of the Lilly Project on Religion, Culture, and Family for a new “postindustrial ideal”: an egalitarian family in which husband

and wife participate relatively equally in paid work, childcare, and domestic duties.[19]

ENDNOTES

[1]. Paul M. Kane, *Separatism and Subculture: Boston Catholicism, 1900-1920*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994, 147.

[2]. John F. Cronin, *Catholic Social Principals: The Social Teachings of the Catholic Church Applied to American Economic Life*, Milwaukee: Bruce, 1950 as cited in Kane, *Separatism and Subculture*, p.147.

[3]. Kathy Desmond, "Women in the Workplace," *On Human Work: A Resource Book for the Study of Pope John Paul II's Third Encyclical*, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 31. I have used the US Census 2000 update the figures used by Desmond.

[4]. *Idem.*

[5]. Todd J. Gillman, "Data provide treasure-trove of trivia," *South Bend Tribune*, August 6, 2001.

[6]. Gregory Baum, *The Priority of Labor: A Commentary on Laborem exercens, Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II*, New York: Paulist Press, 1982, 7.

[7]. *Laborem exercens*: Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II, 1981, n.10.

[8]. Baum, *The Priority of Labor*, 65 and 66.

[9]. "For First Time, Nuclear Families Drop Below 25% of Households," *The New York Times*, May 15, 2001.

[10]. "Single Dads Wage Revolution One Bedtime Story at a Time," *The New York Times*, June 17, 2001.

[11]. "For First Time...", *The New York Times*, May 15, 2001.

[12]. Baum, *The Priority of Labor*, 65.

[13]. *Laborem exercens*, n.19.

[14]. *Idem.*

[15]. *Idem.*

[16]. Wade Horn as cited in “Investigations: The sacred valence: Why marriage is more than a piece of paper,” *University of Chicago Magazine*, August 2001, 8.

[17]. *Laborem exercens*, n.4.

[18]. *Ibid.*, n.19.

[19]. The Lilly Project, *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*, as cited in “Investigations: The sacred valence...,” 9.