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Thinking About Women in Family, Church, and Society

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THE QUESTION NOW, AS IT WAS TWO THOUSAND YEARS AGO, IS: WHOM DO YOU serve? The current American answer seems to be: neither family nor friends; neither church nor civil society. Where, then, are we putting our energies? What takes our time, occupies our attention, diverts our minds? If the available data affords an accurate representation of the complexities of the moment, it must be said that Americans are working longer and harder than they ever did to earn a living, to "get ahead," to save money, to buy goods, to live out one version of the American dream. We believe that we are serving our families when we do this. We want our children to live a more prosperous, successful life than our own. So, in order to promote this end, we deprive our children of our time and attention here and now when they are before us, when we are together in a home as we will not be in the future. Our church and civic lives suffer as well. We are just too tired. There is nothing left to give.

At one point, men worked hard to support families—although the time most workers spent on the job was less twenty-five years ago than it is today. Then, the massive entry of women into the work force, rather than spreading the burden of

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We have been taught to find our value in work and public life, but work now consumes and does not give. Jesus offers a gift economy that can free us for meaningful service.

work between two people who might together have more time for family, friends, church, and community, has instead militated against any such possibility. Indeed, with women drawn away from communities and into work, there are now millions fewer volunteers to pitch in than there were in 1970. It is more difficult for those still involved in communities to sustain their efforts. Churches remain the most robust of our community institutions but they, too, have suffered. What those of us involved in the Council on Families in America have learned over the last decade is that the primary concern of parents in America is time. Increasingly, American parents believe that they are losing their children to an excessively materialistic and violent culture. But they don't see that they can do much about it. They are on the treadmill, they say, and can't get off.

I. Changing Expectations

What is going on here? Part of what is happening is that our expectations about the roles men and women are to play in family life, church, and community have altered profoundly. We hold that there are no legitimate and justifiable reasons why a woman should devote herself to family and community in contrast to men's involvement in work and career. The problem with the way this has worked out in practice, of course, is that no one is any longer charged with the task of devotion to family and community. If men keep working as before and women are now to work as men have always been required to, who tends to the smaller world, the hands-on tasks of love and service? To say that we have not sorted this out is to understate. Churches haven't come to grips with this new reality. It is, admittedly, difficult to figure out what to do. Do you tell men and women to rearrange their priorities and to think about where they are placing their love and energy? Some Americans are doing this. A movement called "voluntary simplicity" is beginning to take hold among a small minority of Americans who are taking voluntary cuts in work hours and pay in order to spend more time with family and in community.

But many Americans are not in a position to step back from the economic treadmill. They are just barely keeping their heads above water. Many other Americans, caught up in our version of success, believing, wrongly, that their children are better off with more things than more hours with parents, cannot see their way through to an alternative. They are trapped in a pattern of habituation that precludes glimpsing some better or more decent—one is tempted to say more *Christian*—way. For Christians are called upon not to conform to the world's ways but to challenge them. If the world dictates that men and women are most human when they are earning, why should Christians follow suit? What are churches doing to help their parishioners serve as what Pope John Paul II calls "signs of contradiction" amidst the distorted values of the present moment?

For all the salutary features of altered expectations about men and women, it is what social scientists call the "unintended consequences" of the sort I have been describing that should now draw our critical attention. We are worshiping at the wrong altar. We must find some way, as dignified human beings, men and women

working together, back to certain basic truths. We must live poised precariously between *contra mundum* and *amor mundi*. Certainly our love of this beautiful world should not be love of the glitz and glory it dangles before us. Churches should sustain their members in finding new ways—perhaps rediscovering old ways—to support one another through good times and bad. And bad times are coming, make no mistake about it. An emerging body of analysis suggests that the expectations surrounding work and what it promises us are going to be dashed over the next few decades. Even as work has become a more intense focus for men and women alike, work is changing in such a way that it will no longer serve as a stable frame of reference. Given de-skilling, out-sourcing, and down-sizing, workers face the prospect of changing jobs some eleven times over the course of a life as a matter not of choice but of harsh necessity.

A distinguished sociologist, Richard Sennett, in a study now underway, is learning something very distressing. He hears from Americans, men and women, that they are coming to see themselves as *dispensable*. This fuels a corrosive sense of uselessness. At earlier points in our history we had other sources of meaning and purpose. In his wonderful book about Chicago in the years following World War II, *The Lost City*, Alan Ehrenhalt describes a densely textured world of religion, ethnicity, neighborhood, and family. As that world was abandoned or disintegrated, work and what it could buy rose in importance—with women now added to the world of work in overwhelming numbers. And now that expectation is harder and harder to meet. It is as if a tacit social contract has been broken. Work was the promise. Work—careers, public lives—was the overwhelming emphasis of 1970s feminism. But what if work no longer exists as a predictable frame of reference or meaning? Sennett is finding that the self-worth of the men and women he has been interviewing is deeply disturbed as they increasingly view themselves as flotsam and jetsam on the surging waves of the new economic order. We haven't begun to plumb the depths of these changes and their long-term implications for Americans as citizens, parents, and workers. But a story stripped of long-term reference points, including the dignity and recognition conferred by work, is a story without a happy ending.

II. A Christian Gift

Let me suggest that now is the time for us to think about the difference between the cash economy that controls us and the very different economy proffered by Jesus of Nazareth. That is a gift economy. Christianity teaches us that we are born to community. It is God's desire that we move out of solitude and into communion. It is not good for man and woman to be alone. Our self-awareness is both an achievement and a gift. Indeed, it is the communion of persons that is the authentic *imago Dei*. Communion expresses more than help or helper; it names the existence of the person for another, of the gift of the self to another. It is a special reciprocity; it affords intimations of divine communion. Have we lost the capacity for full communication with one another? How and in what ways can the church

help us to find our way to authentic reciprocity, reciprocity that turns on mutual recognition of our intrinsic integrity?

We cannot offer the gift of self to one another if we ourselves are entirely consumed by consumption; wholly given over to a relentless fast-paced life in which the more we earn, the more we spend, the more we need to earn—on and on without any apparent oasis in sight. The Christian gift economy holds that in giving we are enriched. This is a strenuous task in a culture that pushes us in a very different direction and rewards us, on its terms, when we go that route. But, as we near century's end, it is surely the time for those in America who call themselves by the name "Christian" to take stock. Can we glimpse an alternative? Can we sustain a way of being that repudiates any and all invidious distinctions between men and women and that, in so doing, frees us for love and service? Frees us, in other words, to be most fully human, to live life and to live it more abundantly.

The church in our time must help us to remember that there is a way of being in the world that does not measure us and who we are by the world's standards. Is it too harsh to suggest that perhaps the church itself has given away too much, has taken on board too many of the presuppositions of a culture based on buying, selling, and exchange rather than a culture that speaks to deeper human possibilities? Can we embrace at one and the same time the radical egalitarianism that lies at the heart of Christianity, yet make claims about a right ordering of human existence that sustains and supports men and women in their distinctiveness? Surely there is something profoundly distorted about a culture prepared to send nursing mothers of six-week old infants into a war zone (as happened during the Gulf War); a culture that doesn't support parental leave in any generous way; a culture that cuts children and parents adrift from the moment of birth. Surely there is something profoundly out of whack with a culture that makes women who want to stay home with their infants feel guilty—as many women have told me they have been made to feel—and holds that they are somehow not living out some feminist ideal.

I have argued in my own work that the historic devotion of women to families and communities was vital, dignifying, and important in ways we are only now beginning to appreciate as more and more women have been drawn out of families and communities and into the paid labor force. The pity is not that women historically did the human work of sustaining the world; no, the pity is that this work was insufficiently honored and recognized. Now we rightly expect that men and women should both be involved with families and children. (Although the years of feminist triumph have also been years in which the out-of-wedlock birth rate has soared and the number of American children growing up with no sustained relation to their fathers has exploded: what a terrible development.) But we do not arrange social life in such a way that men and women can be thus involved. Christians and churches are called, then, to a special task at century's end. We must remind ourselves, first, and others, second, that there is a world we come to know only when we re-situate ourselves inside a gift economy. The scripture reassures us that the more we try to emulate God's love, the stronger

will be our hope, the more decent our lives with and among one another. In the wonderful words of St. Augustine in one of his letters:

> Love, then, is not expended like money, for in addition to the fact that money is diminished by expenditure and love is increased, they differ in this too, that we give greater evidence of good-will towards anyone if we do not seek the return of money we have given him; whereas no one can sincerely expend love unless he insist on being repaid; for when money is received, it is so much gain to the recipient but so much loss to the donor; love, on the other hand, is not only augmented in the man who demands it back from the person he loves, when he does not receive it, but the person who returns it actually begins to possess it only when he pays it back.

As I note in my book, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics*, what Augustine is describing here is far more complex than "what goes around comes around." It is a story of increase through apparent—but only apparent—depletion. It is not a sentimental tale. Augustine tells us that the self emerges only through a project of reciprocity that includes expectations; that, indeed, we only actually hold to love given when we give love back, because love is a work of dignity and recognition. We cannot dignify and recognize one another if we are racing around with no time to pause and see and come to know one another. If the churches do not lead in this work of love and recognition, what are we doing? Why are we here? This is a task for all persons of good will, men and women together.