

Women, Families, and the Legacy of *Laborem Exercens*: An Unfinished Agenda

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Introduction

Among the many contributions Pope John Paul II made in his first social encyclical was to draw attention to the crucial importance of labor performed within the household, by and for families. This type of work, usually unpaid, has historically been associated with women. In the pope's estimation, household labor has a gendered aspect, and *Laborem Exercens* (hereafter, *LE*) argues forcefully that society must support women, who have a special place in the home, in performing their indispensable domestic roles. Besides calling for public recognition and honor for the work of the home, the pontiff advocates economic and social arrangements that financially support women who perform family labor.

The treatment of women and women's work in *LE* discloses an agenda in modern Catholic social thought that cuts in several different directions. First, by highlighting the importance and value of work performed in the household, *LE* offers a powerful critique of neoliberal capitalist political economies, where care-work continues to be undervalued and under-supported. Second, *LE*'s gendering of home-based work as, in a special way, "women's work," jibes with historical and contemporary social attitudes that continue to link the domestic sphere with women. Third, Pope John Paul's insistence that the advancement and participation of women in all areas of economy and society ought not be curtailed or prevented by reason of their special role in the work of the home, a view which eschews both gender neutrality and gender segregation, fits neither standard "liberal" nor standard "conservative" positions on women and work.

I contend that, in present cultural circumstances, these three facets of *LE*'s agenda work at cross purposes, preventing Catholic social teaching from mounting an effective social-ethical agenda for

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supporting the work of the home. Specifically, an insufficiently critical and capacious approach to gender undermines the encyclical's practical ability to support unpaid labor performed within families *and* women's public rights and participation. As we shall see, John Paul II's agenda concerning work within families and households faces difficulties from without, as well as from within. Externally, modern market economies continue to ignore, under-remunerate, and undermine—even as they simultaneously depend on and exploit—unpaid work contributed to home and family. In current economic and social arrangements, women's disproportionate involvement in unpaid home-labor limits their participation in the responsibilities and rewards of the public realm. Internal to the modern Catholic social tradition itself, papal gender theory, which grounds women's special role in home and society in a distinctive feminine nature, is problematic on two counts. First, promoting women's overriding importance in the home inevitably tends to legitimate an acceptance of men's disproportionate presence and power in the public economy, and their lesser participation in family work. Second, essentializing "feminine genius" as a special "capacity for the other" weakens Catholic social teaching's ability to unmask and effectively address systemic patterns and practices which, in a persistently patriarchal church and society, subject women and family work to the same devaluing effects. By too tightly intertwining femininity and family-work, rather than highlighting this work as part of the domestic vocation of every person, the pope's approach to women and labor within the family ultimately contributes to the very problems—the socio-economic devaluing of women and their contributions, and the socio-economic devaluing of the work of the home—it seeks to ameliorate.

I fully support *LE's* (and modern Catholic social teaching as a whole's) championing of the equal dignity of women and of the importance of the work of home and family. But I believe that both of these values will be more readily advanced by an approach which affirms the domestic and public vocations of all persons, and the right and duty of all adults to participate in family and home work. Given women's disproportionate involvement in unpaid work on the home front, and in poorly-paid caring labor in the workforce, pursuing policies that enact full and equal regard for paid and unpaid care work can accommodate those who find compelling the pope's reflections about "women's genius." But the primary ground for society's support of family and care-work must be, simply, the dignity, responsibility, and value of family/household and the caring work done within it. This provides the deeper, more primary foundation for policies and practices that open the way for households to

distribute the work of the home in a range of flexibly gendered or non-gendered ways.¹

Given the historical power and social utility of gender roles, and the advocacy for a form of gender essentialism found in modern papal social teaching up through the present, one may ask whether an approach to family work that moderately disaggregates it from gender roles is a useful or even a legitimate Catholic social-ethical position. At issue are philosophical, cultural, and theological-anthropological questions concerning human nature as it is, and as it ought to be. Pope John Paul and his successor, in line with theologians like Hans Urs von Balthasar and Karl Barth, regard sexuality as affecting human identity “all the way down.” Given John Paul’s deep-structural understanding of masculinity and femininity, questioning the gendering of women’s work inevitably raises questions concerning the pope’s theological anthropology, with its multiple ramifications for ethics. This is a serious issue, and in the final part of the essay, we will return to it.

The essay proceeds as follows. Part I deals with the approach to family-work found in modern Catholic social teaching, particularly the writings of Pope John Paul II, its rationale and implications. After attempting to clarify what family-work, or the work of the domestic sphere entails, I consider the gendering of home and family work in Catholic social teaching, and especially in the thought of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The social and policy implications of the advocacy for home and family work by Pope John Paul II in *LE* are then examined.

¹ The conviction that underpins my proposal is that gender roles reflect, in part, a society’s way of assuring the performance of socially-necessary work. The work of household and family is clearly necessary for individual and communal survival and well-being. In both its performance and its distribution, family and household work is likely to express personal and social-group identities, including gender identities, in culturally-specific ways. The connections between sex/gender and particular configurations of family work, however, are neither necessary nor immutable, and ought not be portrayed as such. A community’s shared intuitions regarding who should be doing what in families, therefore, deserve respect, but alternative arrangements that also satisfactorily accomplish the work necessary for familial thriving should be neither forbidden, impugned, nor marginalized. I argue, therefore, that the proper aim of contemporary cultural practice and social policies is not “the protection of women’s work in the home,” but rather, equity between those, whether men or women, who do care-work (in or out of the home) and those who do other sorts of work.

Part II draws on the work of feminist scholars, both religious and secular, to first, note how contemporary forms of “difference feminism” compare with the papal vision of family work and women’s special role in it. Next, I lift up two forms of an alternative, “universal care feminist” approach to family-home work—pragmatic-reconstructionist and liberationist. These latter feminisms, I suggest, offer resources for crafting an agenda in support of family and household work that is true to the impulses of Catholic social teaching and capable of upholding so-called “feminine values,” but which steer around debates about gender that serve only to detract focus and energy from the urgent task of pursuing societal and economic arrangements that will make it possible for 21st century families to survive and thrive as sites of crucially needed care-work.

I. Work Within the Family in Catholic Social Teaching

LE, like the entire corpus of modern Catholic social teaching, reflects an appreciation of and commitment to supporting the family, regarded as the first and vital cell of human society. From Leo to Benedict, popes have extolled the family’s significance as, to use the words of John Paul II : “The first and fundamental structure for ‘human ecology’.” the place in which humans receive their “first formative ideas about truth and goodness, and learn what it means to love and to be loved, and thus what it actually means to be a person”²

Supporting the family’s multiple tasks, the work performed in homes comprises a whole spectrum of energy-expending activities directed toward fulfilling basic needs and serving the well-being of household members, in particular, needs emerging from human dependencies and vulnerabilities linked with bodiliness. Family work responds to dependency and vulnerability as facts of the human condition. Beyond serving and tending to dependencies, such

² Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* 39. On Catholic social teaching’s image of family, see, e.g., Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* 36: “But man finds his true identity only in his social milieu, where the family plays a fundamental role. The family’s influence may have been excessive, at some periods of history and in some places, when it was exercised to the detriment of the fundamental rights of the individual. The long-standing social frameworks, often too rigid and badly organized, existing in developing countries, are, nevertheless, still necessary for a time, yet progressively relaxing their excessive hold on the population. But the natural family, monogamous and stable, such as the divine plan conceived it and as Christianity sanctified it, must remain the place where ‘the various generations come together and help one another to grow wiser and to harmonize personal rights with the other requirements of social life.’” [citing *Gaudium et Spes* 52].

work entails nurturing, educating, repairing, building up, and generally equipping members for contributive action, work, and service in the wider community, as their age, condition, and talents warrant. In *LE* and elsewhere, Pope John Paul II treats family work as a crucial form of human work, having the same objective and subjective, necessary and personal dimensions, and enjoying the same status and dignity, as work performed in the paid workforce. The pope's depiction of family work assumes, as well, *LE*'s emphasis on the priority of labor over capital, the priority of the person working and his or her activity over the work product, and work's value as a means to material, personal, and communal survival and flourishing.

Gregory Baum, commenting on *LE*, suggests that philosopher Hannah Arendt's analysis of the human activities of "labor, work, and action" complements and can further illuminate John Paul's treatment of work. We can use Arendt's categories to draw a more finely-grained picture of *LE*'s treatment of work, including the work of the home.³ The necessary and significant work of household and family actually encompasses all three basic behaviors, famously described by Arendt as part of the *vita activa*. Within household and family one engages in *labor*—the necessary, toilsome, and cyclic tasks that enable and support biological survival, including the process of consumption; *work*—activities that harness and shape the material world to "build" durable material objects and products, including constructing and "housing" a durable space wherein familial action, its practices, traditions, and fruits can be nurtured and preserved; and *action*—the distinctly human activity that takes place not in material production, but in initiative, words and deeds shared among persons.⁴ Through the sharing of words and deeds, Arendt notes, "the new," and power—which she defines as "the capacity to effect," come to birth among persons. It is in action that personhood and individual freedom shine through most distinctively, but they do so through and

³ Gregory Baum, "Laborem Exercens," in Judith Dwyer, ed., *New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994).

⁴ Arendt's category of "work" includes the element of domination or mastery by humans over and against the resistance of the material world. A fuller comparison between the way Arendt and Pope John Paul II incorporate the notion of "dominion" into their respective understandings of work would be a fruitful exercise. Though his use of "dominion" in *LE* has been widely criticized for lacking ecological sensibility, the pope links the notion (drawn from Genesis 2) to the principle of the priority of labor, which affirms that in work, the dignity of the person acting always takes moral precedence over the materials shaped or produced.

amid the web of relationships in which each unique individual is enmeshed.⁵

Catholicism's cherishing of family includes a recognition, like Arendt's, of the necessity and value of recurring tasks required for biological survival performed in the home (labor); the activities by which families construct and maintain a stable, secure, and aesthetic environment—a home—which can sustain the range of activities that occur within the family, as well as hospitality and outreach to neighbors and local community; and the fact that household and family are both cradle and springboard for those more intangible but most human activities of interpersonal interaction, education, political engagement, conviviality, play, and healthy bonding among family members themselves, and for each member's taking one's place as a dignified and competent actor in the public realm.

A further, highly significant dimension of household, family and its work, consistently noted in Catholic social teaching, is its status as antecedent to, and distinct from, the larger social groupings of community, civil society, economy, and polis. In the 19th and 20th century west, this integrity of the familial sphere has often been construed in individualistic, privatized, or idealized terms. Catholic thought on family differs from these popular notions in several ways. First, within the household human dependencies and vulnerabilities are most intimately revealed and addressed. The domestic/familial sphere thus aspires to be an environment where the tired are refreshed, where members of the anonymous crowd can be known and cherished persons, where the ailing are tended and comforted, where members' particular "joys and hopes, griefs and anxieties" may be celebrated and shared, and where frailties associated with age, handicap, or the wear and tear of life may be tended, protected, and treated gently.⁶ But, as the locus of special vulnerability—bodily, emotional, psychic—family and household are also places where the negative effects of sin and finitude can cut and scar intimately and deeply. As psychologists

⁵ See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958); and Arendt, "Labor, Work, and Action," in James Bernauer, ed., *Amor Mundi: Explorations in the Faith and Thought of Hannah Arendt*. (Boston: M. Ninjhof, 1987), 29-43.

⁶ In this regard, John Paul has called the family "the *sanctuary of life*. The family is indeed sacred: It is the place in which life—the gift of God—can be properly welcomed and protected against the many attacks to which it is exposed, and can develop in accordance with what constitutes authentic human growth. In the face of the so-called culture of death, the family is the heart of the culture of life" *Centesimus Annus*, 1991, 39.

confirm, the wounds inflicted and suffered in family are often the central and abiding pains in a person's life. An accurate theological and moral picture of family therefore recognizes that its capacity to serve and protect vulnerability is accompanied by a unique capacity to harm. A properly Catholic apprehension of family and its work, then, will be marked by a sober realism concerning the tragedy and sin that is inevitably part of family experience. Such realism illuminates the importance of cultivating dispositions and practices of humility, forgiveness and repentance as part of the warp and woof of daily domestic living.⁷

Second, domicile and family are not simply a space apart from the larger world, but are affected and shaped by their larger environment. Conversely the familial household serves as a base for outreach in neighborhood and publicly-engaged activities that can sustain and enrich the social body in which family is envisaged as the most basic cell. In communities whose members have been systematically marginalized or exploited by more powerful groups, this two-sided feature of family in relation to the public realm has had a particular, resistive significance. Historically, for members of oppressed or disenfranchised groups, familial households have been sites of practices that reinforced persons' sense of dignity and value, despite the mistreatment to which they were subjected in the dominant culture. Far from being an apolitical or privatized haven, family in these circumstances has been the setting for teaching children courage, and equipping members to act in ways that rejected and resisted corrupt powers-that-be. This crucial aspect of family work is affectingly portrayed in Mildred Taylor's fictional works concerning depression-era black families in the rural south, is underscored by womanist writers such as Audre Lorde and bell hooks, and, as we shall see, is highlighted in the thought of contemporary Christian liberationist feminists.⁸ The relative

⁷ One finds in Pope John Paul's official writings references to the effects of sin on families, and to the need for ongoing conversion and reconciliation among married couples and family members. See, e.g., *Familiaris Consortio* 3, 9, 34, 58. But while a theologically-based realism concerning the effects of sin and finitude on family and household are logically part of Catholic thought, it must be said that official Catholic social teaching develops this theme only minimally, often in relation to specific official teachings such as those against divorce, abortion, or artificial contraception. More extensive treatment of the drama of sin and grace as it plays out in the daily minutiae of domestic life would be truer to Catholicism's sacramental and incarnational sensibilities.

⁸ See, e.g., Mildred D. Taylor, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (New York: Herald Press, 1976), *Let the Circle Be Unbroken* (New York, NY: Puffin Books, 1991); bell hooks, *Where We Stand: Class Matters* (New York, London: Routledge, 2000), chs. 1, 2;

autonomy and integrity of the familial household thus make it the site of another type of work, the work of sustaining and renewing the bruised personhood of the oppressed, and preparing members for resistant and transformative action. Though frequently unnoticed and untapped, this counter-cultural potential of home and family work is relevant to other areas where Catholicism's vision of the good life clash with culturally-accepted practices that ignore, demean or diminish it—including matters of bioethics, consumerism, and materialism.⁹

LE's treatment of the work of the home and its internal and public significance reflects Pope John Paul II's framing of family identity around four principal tasks in his apostolic exhortation on the family, *Familiaris Consortio*, also released in 1981. Exhorting families to

Marian Wright Edelman, *The Measure of Our Success: A Letter to My Children and Yours* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992). See also, Joan Williams, *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What to Do About It* (New York, London: Oxford University Press, 2000), ch. 5; Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Resistance*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), chs. 2-4. Audre Lorde captures the ambiguity of this dimension of family work as it affected her own childhood. "My mother taught me to survive from a very early age by her own example. Her silences also taught me isolation, fury, mistrust self-rejection, and sadness. My survival lay in learning how to use the weapons she gave me, also, to fight against those things within myself . . . And survival is the greatest gift of love. Sometime, for Black mothers, it is the only gift possible, and tenderness gets lost. . . . I survived the hatred around me because my mother made me know, by oblique reference, that no matter what went on at home, outside shouldn't oughta be the way it was." Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1984), 149-151.

⁹ Gloria Albrecht notes that in marginalized communities, "family values are those that make survival possible for families who lack race and income privilege." "In these families, critical transformative values are sustained and passed on. . . . As bell hooks writes of her own experience, 'We could not learn to love or respect ourselves in the culture of white supremacy, on the outside; it was there on the inside, in that 'home-place,' most often created and kept by black women that we had the opportunity to grow and develop and to nurture our spirits.'" Gloria Albrecht, *Hitting Home: Feminist Ethics, Women's Work, and the Betrayal of 'Family Values'* (New York: Continuum, 2002) 153. Testimony like hooks' adds teeth to the description offered by John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio* 26: "In the family, which is a community of persons, special attention must be devoted to the children by developing a profound esteem for their personal dignity, and a great respect and generous concern for their rights. This is true for every child, but it becomes all the more urgent the smaller the child is and the more it is in need of everything, when it is sick, suffering or handicapped. . . . Acceptance, love, esteem, many-sided and united material, emotional, educational and spiritual concern for every child that comes into this world should always constitute a distinctive, essential characteristic of all Christians, in particular of the Christian family: thus children, while they are able to grow . . . offer their own precious contribution to building up the family community and even to the sanctification of their parents."

“become what you are!” *Familiaris Consortio* charges families with the four key tasks of “forming a communion of persons—an intimate community of life and love;” “serving life;” “participating in the development of society;” and “sharing in the life and mission of the Church” by being a genuine “church of the home.”¹⁰ Each of these four “works” of families takes place squarely within the home, but also reaches beyond it. Fulfilling each requires daily toil, constructive effort, and creative, energy-expending action—all aspects of *LE*’s understanding of work.

The gendering of home and family work in Laborem Exercens and modern Catholic social teaching

It is impossible to understand modern Catholic social thought’s valorization of the role of women in the work of home and family without adverting to its historical context: the economic marginalization of household work in modern capitalist economies. In premodern societies, the household was the primary site of economic production, and work performed by men, women, and children all contributed to family’s economic survival and well-being. This primary link between household—*oikos*, and economy—*oikonomia* extends back to ancient times; the central economic role of women householders is assumed, for example, in the image of the good wife portrayed in Proverbs 31, 10-31, mentioned by John Paul II in *LE* 26. And it extends forward to the very recent past: In the U.S., the shift from a primarily agricultural to a primarily waged-based economy was completed between 1880-1930.¹¹

A defining feature of modern industrialized economies has been the separation of domicile from workplace, accompanied by a new understanding of productive labor as wage-earning activity.¹² The corollary to the ascendancy of wage labor was the unprecedented redefinition of

¹⁰ See, respectively, *Familiaris Consortio* 17 (become what you are), 18-27 (forming a communion . . .), 28-41 (serving life), 42-48 (development of society), 49-65 (participating in church’s life and mission).

¹¹ See Jody Heymann, *Can Working Families Ever Win?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 3-5. In 1830, Heymann shows, only 30 percent of children did not live in farm families. By 1930, only 30 percent of American children lived in farming families.

¹² In the 19th century this was a novel way of construing “real” or “legitimate” work, and a practical way to reorient economic ideology to the realities of industrial practice. See Christine Firer Hinze, “U.S. Catholic Social Thought, Gender, and Economic Livelihood.” *Theological Studies*, Vol. 66, No. 3: (September 2005): 568-91; Lawrence Glickman, *A Living Wage: American Workers and the Making of Consumer Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

home work as economically “non-productive,” and, by the early 20th century, of non wage-earning household members as “dependents” reliant upon the wage-earning household head.¹³ In practice, this re-negotiation in fact was uneven and incomplete, as women’s work at home continued to provide a great deal to families’ economic survival and well being. More complete was a shift in the predominant gender ideology to a male-wage earner female-homemaker ideal. Adult competence and success for men became associated with full time waged employment and the ability to financially support a non-wage earning wife and children, while adult competence and success for women became linked with the ability to leave or curtail paid workforce involvement in order to devote primary energies and attention to household and family.¹⁴

Throughout the 20th century, women (primarily white, middle and upper class women) who were able to assume the role of fulltime homemaker enhanced their household’s wage-earning capacity by providing their husbands with the “backstage support” that enabled them to fulfill what feminist legal scholar Joan Williams calls “the ideal worker” role: a persona that exudes complete and undistracted attention to work. The “ideal worker” behaves as if he or she has no responsibilities or outside the workplace, a *tromp d’oeil* accomplished by delegating these duties to paid or unpaid others.

Complementing the masculine-keyed ideal worker role is a feminine-keyed role Williams names “the [economically] marginalized caregiver.” Together these worker-caregiver roles comprise an ideology of “domesticity” that strongly influences the ways people in modern economies see, feel about, and enact their work and family lives.¹⁵ “Domesticity” supports and legitimates economic arrangements that distribute

¹³ Nancy Folbre documents the construction of the “dependent homemaker” in “The Unproductive Housewife: Her Evolution in Nineteenth Century Economic Thought,” *Signs* 16:3 (Spring, 1991) 463-84; Nancy Folbre and Marjorie Abel, “Women’s Work and Women’s Households: Gender Bias in the U.S. Census” *Social Research* 56:3 (Autumn 1989) 549-69.

¹⁴ This historical development is detailed in Arlie Hochschild, with Anne Machung, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Viking Press, 1989); Williams, *Unbending Gender*; Jody Heymann, *The Widening Gap: Why America’s Working Families Are In Jeopardy and What Can Be Done About It* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), inter alia.

¹⁵ So, for instance, the National Opinion Research Center’s 1994-1996 General Social Survey found that 82.1 percent of Americans believed that “women are biologically better-suited to care for children,” while 67.8 percent believed that everyone benefits when “women take the main responsibility for the care of the home, while men take the main responsibility for supporting the family financially.” Albrecht, *Hitting Home*, 71, 93.

chances for financial success and stability according to how closely workers can hew to the “ideal worker” ethos. In this gendered, ideal-worker culture, working class and poor families, particularly women and members of marginalized racial-ethnic groups, are double losers, finding themselves frustrated both in their struggle for economic security, and for the respect that accompanies conformance to societal standards for manhood and womanhood. In a milieu dominated by gender ideals grounded in a breadwinner-homemaker division of labor, working-class and working poor women must act as both breadwinners and homemakers, toiling at low-paying jobs [not coincidentally, often jobs involving work culturally designated as “care” work] for income vital to the economic survival of their families, while struggling to perform homemaking duties. For working-class and poor women, both the abiding importance of the work of the home, and the impossibility of fulfilling well both the ideal-worker and fulltime homemaker roles, are obvious truths confirmed in daily experience. For these working women, therefore, ideologies that support women’s primary role in the home (Catholic social teaching among them) have been likely to strike a responsive chord, often to the dismay of middle-class women’s rights advocates.¹⁶

Late into the 20th century, the prevailing gender norm in western economies like the United States remained some version of the breadwinner-husband primarily oriented to the public workforce, and the homemaker-wife whose priority was work in the familial household. Beginning in the 1970s, however, economic realities, never very congruent with this ideology for non-privileged families, began to alter radically for all families. This era was marked by a crescendo in the entry of married women and mothers into the paid workforce that had begun during the second world war. In the latter part of the century, this influx was further stimulated, in part by a second-wave feminist movement that tied women’s liberation to their participation in the paid workforce on the same terms as men, and in part by the fact that falling real wages after 1973 made it more and more difficult to maintain a middle- or working-class living standard on the wages of only one household member. Now for the first time the struggles of two-earner families (and, thanks to a dramatic increase in middle-class divorce rates, the struggles of single-parent heads of households)

¹⁶ On this sentiment among working-class women and families, see, e.g., John A. Ryan, *Declining Liberty and Other Papers* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), 113-114; Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, *Living In, Living Out: African American Domestic in Washington, D.C., 1900-1940* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institute Press, 1994); Hochschild, *Second Shift*, ch. 5.

previously ignored by the dominant culture, became news. Middle-class women's newfound economic opportunities were celebrated; but they came at the cost of a major transfer of time, presence, and labor away from the household. This one-way transfer was offset partially by substituting commodified care, and partially by women's continuing to pick up the slack at home by working extra hours in what sociologist Arlie Hochschild famously dubbed "the second shift."

What did not occur amid this historic transformation was a comparable reallocation of male wage-earners' time and energy into the work of the home. This lack of change in men's behavior was due in part to gender ideology (home and care-work continued to be designated as women's primary domain; male competence continued to be identified with fulltime engagement in the public workforce) and in part to other social dynamics (the continued cultural and economic devaluation of care-work, and the need for at least one "good job" with ideal-worker salary/benefits in order to make ends meet). As the avenue to middle-class economic sustenance increasingly became the full time salaries of two or more household members, and shifts in globalizing economy led to the loss of high-paying industrial jobs, working class families, the working poor, and single-parent families faced even harder times. With families under increasing pressure to turn time and attention to wage-earning and activities connected with consumption (Juliet Schor calls this "the work-spend cycle"), the multifaceted work of the home, and those who strove to perform it, inevitably suffered.¹⁷

Addressing this situation of economic and cultural flux, modern papal Catholic social teaching, beginning with Pope Leo XIII in 1891, has portrayed women as having a special calling and role in family and home. From the era of Pope John XXIII in the 1960s forward, one also finds women's burgeoning presence in all sectors of society acknowledged and increasingly supported.¹⁸ Both of these emphases are

¹⁷ Juliet Schor, *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), ch. 5.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Pope Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* 1891, 33: "Women . . . are not suited to certain trades; for a woman is by nature fitted for home work, and it is that which is best adapted at once to preserve her modesty, and to promote the good bringing up of children and the well-being of the family." Cf. Pope Pius XI, *Quadragesimo Anno*, 1931, 71: "The wage paid to the working man should be sufficient for the support of himself and of his family. It is indeed proper that the rest of the family contribute according to their power toward the common maintenance, as in the rural home or in the families of many artisans and small shopkeepers. But it is wrong to abuse the tender years of children or the weakness of woman. Mothers especially should devote their energies to the home and the kinds of work connected with it. Most unfortunate, and to be

carried forward by Pope John Paul II, and are reflected in the treatment of women, family, and work in LE.

John Paul's portrayal of women as particularly suited for and needed in the work of home and family is grounded in a particular theological and philosophical understanding of femininity and what he and his successor have called the feminine "genius." We find, for instance, in the pope's 1994 *Letter to Women* the claim that "Womanhood and manhood are complementary not only from the physical and psychological points of view, but also from the ontological. It is only through the duality of the 'masculine' and the 'feminine' that the 'human' finds full realization."¹⁹ Femininity has an ontological and theological meaning, as well as a moral meaning. "Woman" is an embodied symbol of the

remedied energetically, is the abuse whereby mothers of families, because of the insufficiency of the father's salary, are forced to engage in gainful occupations outside the domestic walls to the neglect of their own proper cares and duties, particularly the education of their children." Also, Pope Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* 1930, 75: "... unnatural equality with the husband is to the detriment of the woman herself, for if the woman descends from her truly regal throne to which she has been raised within the walls of the home by means of the Gospel, she will soon be reduced to the old state of slavery (if not in appearance, certainly in reality) and become as amongst the pagans the mere instrument of man." *Casti Connubii* 77: "As, however, the social and economic conditions of the married woman must in some way be altered on account of the changes in social intercourse, it is part of the office of the public authority to adapt the civil rights of the wife to modern needs and requirements, keeping in view what the natural disposition and temperament of the female sex, good morality, and the welfare of the family demands, and provided always that the essential order of the domestic society remain intact, founded as it is on something higher than human authority and wisdom, namely on the authority and wisdom of God, and so not changeable by public laws or at the pleasure of private individuals." John XXIII, *Pacem In Terris* 41: "It is obvious to everyone that women are now taking part in public life. . . . Since women are becoming ever more conscious of their human dignity, they will not tolerate being treated as mere material instruments, but demand rights befitting a human person both in domestic and in public life." PT 19: "Women must be accorded such conditions of work as are consistent with their needs and responsibilities as wives and mothers." Cf. *Gaudium et Spes* 1965, 9; 52: "The active presence of the father is highly beneficial to [children's] formation. The children, especially the younger among them, need the care of their mother at home. This domestic role of hers must be safely preserved, though the legitimate social progress of women should not be underrated on that account." GS 60: "Women now work in almost all spheres. It is fitting that they are able to assume their proper role in accordance with their own nature. It will belong to all to acknowledge and favor the proper and necessary participation of women in the cultural life." GS 67: "The entire process of productive work, therefore, must be adapted to the needs of the person and to his way of life, above all to his domestic life, especially in respect to mothers of families, always with due regard for sex and age." See also Pope Paul VI, *Octogesima Adveniens* 13.

¹⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Women*, 1994, 7.

vocation to receive and return love that all humans share. The fullest symbol of femininity is Mary, who in her complete receptivity to God, most perfectly “reigns” by “serving.”²⁰ Based on analogies drawn from sexual intercourse, impregnation, gestation, and lactation, the “feminine genius” is portrayed as bearing into all parts of the world this particular attunement and sensitivity to receiving and welcoming “the other.” As they engage in public work that reflects the work of the home, particularly jobs that involve the sustenance and nurturing of vulnerable life, the pope writes, women “exhibit a kind of *affective, cultural and spiritual motherhood* which has inestimable value for the development of individuals and the future of society.”²¹

Women’s distinctive capacities account for their primary importance in the work of home and family. The pope affirms the importance of the presence of the father in the family, but maintains, “the woman’s motherhood constitutes a special ‘part’ in this shared parenthood, and the most demanding part. Parenthood—even though it belongs to both - is realized much more fully in the woman, especially in the prenatal period. . . .” It is the woman who “pays” directly for the couple’s shared generation, which “literally absorbs the energies of her body and soul.” A father, therefore, must be “fully aware that in their shared parenthood he owes a special debt to the woman. No program of ‘equal rights’ between women and men is valid unless it takes this fact fully into

²⁰ Ibid., 11. “It is thus my hope, dear sisters, that you will reflect carefully on what it means to speak of the “*genius of women*”, not only in order to be able to see in this phrase a specific part of God’s plan which needs to be accepted and appreciated, but also in order to let this genius be more fully expressed in the life of society as a whole, as well as in the life of the Church. . . . *The Church sees in Mary the highest expression of the “feminine genius”* and she finds in her a source of constant inspiration. Mary called herself the “handmaid of the Lord” (Lk 1:38). Through obedience to the Word of God she accepted her lofty yet not easy vocation as wife and mother in the family of Nazareth. Putting herself at God’s service, she also put herself at the service of others: a *service of love*. Precisely through this service Mary was able to experience in her life a mysterious, but authentic “reign” *For her, ‘to reign’ is “to serve”! Her service is ‘to reign’!*” Ibid., 12.

²¹ Ibid., 9. See also, Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 1988, 29: “When we say that the woman is the one who receives love in order to love in return, this refers not only or above all to the specific spousal relationship of marriage. It means something more universal, based on the very fact of her being a woman within all the interpersonal relationships which, in the most varied ways, shape society and structure the interaction between all persons—men and women. In this broad and diversified context, a woman represents a particular value by the fact that she is a human person, and, at the same time, this particular person, by the fact of her femininity. This concerns each and every woman, independently of the cultural context in which she lives, and independently of her spiritual, psychological and physical characteristics, as for example, age, education, health, work, and whether she is married or single.”

account.” Besides the physical centrality of the woman in the bearing and feeding of the infant, the centrality of women in the work of home springs from women’s special capabilities for care: “It is commonly thought that *women* are more capable than men of paying attention to *another person*, and that motherhood develops this predisposition even more.” Therefore, even though “the child’s upbringing, taken as a whole, should include the contribution of both parents . . . the mother’s contribution is decisive in laying the foundation for a new human.”²²

The “genius of women,” then, refers to a particularly-embodied ability to carry and reflect the universal human and spiritual vocation of self-giving in service of the other. John Paul made a mantra of *Gaudium et Spes* 24’s claim that, “humanity only finds itself through the sincere gift of self.” Women, he proposes, have a natural inclination and appreciation for this humanly-fulfilling destiny of service and self-giving. John Paul sees and praises this “feminine genius” in “*ordinary* women who reveal the gift of their womanhood by placing themselves at the service of others in their everyday lives. For in giving themselves to others each day women fulfill their deepest vocation. Perhaps more than men, women *acknowledge the person*, because they see persons with their hearts.”²³ Feminine genius is

²² *Mulieris Dignitatum*, 18, 19. The pope claims that men in fact “learn fatherhood” from their wives. “The man—even with all his sharing in parenthood—always remains ‘outside’ the process of pregnancy and the baby’s birth; in many ways he has to *learn* his own ‘fatherhood’ from the mother.” Ibid., 19. This theory was echoed in a 2004 document issued by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, and approved by Pope John Paul, “*On the Collaboration of Men and Women in Church and Society*.” Ratzinger attributes to women a special “capacity for the other” evidenced in a “deep intuition of the goodness in their lives of those actions which elicit life, and contribute to the growth and protection of the other.” This intuition is “linked to women’s physical capacity to give life,” which is “a reality that structures the female personality in a profound way.” Ibid, 13. “It allows her to acquire maturity very quickly, and gives a sense of the seriousness of life and of its responsibilities. A sense and a respect for what is concrete develop in her, opposed to abstractions which are so often fatal for the existence of individuals and society. It is women, in the end, who even in very desperate situations, as attested by history past and present, possess a singular capacity to persevere in adversity, to keep life going even in extreme situations, to hold tenaciously to the future, and finally to remember with tears the value of every human life.” Ibid.

²³ *Letter to Women*, 9. “Progress usually tends to be measured according to the criteria of science and technology. Nor from this point of view has the contribution of women been negligible. . . . Much more important is the *social and ethical dimension*, which deals with human relations and spiritual values. In this area, which often develops in an inconspicuous way beginning with the daily relationships between people, especially within the family, society certainly owes much to the ‘*genius of women*.’” Ibid., 10. The pope singles out for special praise women in all areas of education. “Wherever the work of education is called for, we can note that women are ever

regarded as crucially important in home and family, but it is also needed in the culture at large. And so John Paul says, “Thank you, women who work! You are present and active in every area of life—social, economic, cultural, artistic and political. In this way you make an indispensable contribution to the growth of a culture which unites reason and feeling, to a model of life ever open to the sense of ‘mystery’, to the establishment of economic and political structures ever more worthy of humanity.”²⁴

Social Policy Implications

What are the strategies and policies promoted in *LE* and Catholic social teaching for valuing and supporting family and home work? From the outset of the era of modern papal social teaching with Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* in 1891, promotion of the economic well-being of families and support for “a family-supporting living wage” have gone hand in hand. Within an industrialized money economy, economic support for families has been envisaged by the popes as normally requiring the work of *two adults*. An adult wage-earner—conceived of as a male household head—has the right, in return for reasonable amounts of honest labor, to pay and benefits sufficient to support himself and his family “in frugal comfort,” providing “a decent

ready and willing to give themselves generously to others, especially in serving the weakest and most defenseless. In this work they exhibit a kind of *affective, cultural and spiritual motherhood* which has inestimable value for the development of individuals and the future of society.” Ibid, 11.

²⁴ *Letter to Women*, 2. See also, John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 1995, 99: “In transforming culture so that it supports life, women occupy a place, in thought and action, which is unique and decisive. It depends on them to promote a “new feminism” which rejects the temptation of imitating models of “male domination,” in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation. . . . The experience of motherhood makes you acutely aware of the other person and, at the same time, confers on you a particular task: Motherhood involves a special communion with the mystery of life, as it develops in the woman’s womb. . . . This unique contact with the new human being developing within her gives rise to an attitude towards human beings, not only towards her own child, but every human being, which profoundly marks the woman’s personality. . . . A mother welcomes and carries in herself another human being, enabling it to grow inside her, giving it room, respecting it in its otherness. Women first learn and then teach others that human relations are authentic if they are open to accepting the other person: a person who is recognized and loved because of the dignity which comes from being a person and not from other considerations, such as usefulness, strength, intelligence, beauty or health. This is the fundamental contribution which the Church and humanity expect from women. And it is the indispensable prerequisite for any authentic cultural change.”

livelihood” for all members. Within the household, another adult—conceived of as a wife and mother—ought to be enabled, supported by the wages of her partner, to devote her time and energies to unpaid labor of caring for home and family.²⁵

By highlighting the subjective dimension of work, insisting on the priority of labor and the person laboring over work processes or products, and including household and family work within the category of authentic labor that deserves support and recompense, *Laborem Exercens* extends this modern papal tradition of advocating economic support of home and family through a combination of paid and unpaid labor. Pope John Paul goes further than his predecessors to propose that women who do family work exclusively might be supported at certain phases of family life (especially when children are young) through government or employer-funded family allowance programs.²⁶ He also advances the tradition by, on the one hand, following John XXIII in acknowledging the contemporary presence of women in all areas of the paid workforce, and on the other, making an explicit plea for economic arrangements that will enable and protect female-wage earners’ ability to fulfill their “indispensable” duties as mothers and homemakers.

The policy directions implied by *LE* are helpfully summarized by Catholic legal scholar Elizabeth Schiltz. “In *LE*,” she writes, “the church offers three prescriptions for society’s devaluation of care work. First, it calls for economic compensation for this important work, either in the form of a family wage sufficient to support the needs of the entire family, or other forms of financial support for mothers who devote themselves exclusively to their families. Second, it calls for a re-evaluation of the work of mothers in preserving families, to ensure that women who do not work outside the home are not penalized for dedicating their energy to a function so vital for social development. Third, the Church calls for a restructuring of the workplace to ensure that women are not penalized on the job market for the work they do within the family.”²⁷ Donal Dorr notes

²⁵ In the U.S., during the first half of the twentieth century, priest-economist Msgr. John A. Ryan offered the most cogent and influential articulation of this official Catholic view. See John A. Ryan, *A Living Wage* (New York, Macmillan, 1912); *Distributive Justice* (New York: Macmillan, 1916, 1927, 1943).

²⁶ *Laborem Exercens*, 19.

²⁷ Elizabeth Schiltz, “Motherhood and the Mission: What Catholic Law Schools Could Learn from Harvard About Women.” University of St. Thomas MN Law School Legal Studies Research Paper Series, No. 06-11, 2006, 32-33., referring to *LE* 19.

that this tripartite papal agenda also has three, distinguishable, foci: an agenda for supporting families by way of the full time work of one spouse (gender not designated); second, for valuing the work of mothers in the home, and third for ensuring the full participation of women in the public workforce, in ways that respect their particular nature and family roles.²⁸ As both Dorr and Schiltz point out, what the pope says here underscores two things about women's work: it is crucial and necessary in the home; but it is also present, valuable, and carrying of rights within the public workforce. This is not a "send all women back to the home" agenda. It is, however, a gender-keyed interpretation that sees women as especially suited to and needed in the work of home and family, and also having a distinct, feminine contribution to make to culture and society.

LE's treatment of home and family work contains a tension, however, if not a contradiction: an insistence on equality and full access for women in public and domestic life, coupled with an affirmation that women's nature especially suits them for, and makes them preeminently needed in, the work of domesticity and mothering. In practice, this asymmetrical picture of women's work legitimates, or at least fail to challenge, the persistence of a problematically-gendered division between public and domestic economies.²⁹

II. Women and the Family Work in Catholic Social Thought: Expanding the Lens

Feminist critiques of Laborem Exercens's vision of women and the work of the home.

Gregory Baum ends a 1994 encyclopedia essay on *Laborem Exercens* with this abrupt and unembellished statement: "One must suppose that eventually the Catholic Church will come to recognize the massive injustice done to women."³⁰ What does Baum mean by this? Elsewhere,

²⁸ Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: One Hundred Years of Catholic Social Teaching*, 2nd ed (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), ch. 12.

²⁹ As noted above, affirmations of women's full social equality in recent papal social teaching include Pope *Pacem in Terris* (1963) 41; *Gaudium et Spes* 60; *Letter to Women* 2-6, 8. For simultaneous insistence on the distinctive traits of women, which fit them for a distinct and irreplaceable role in home and family life are found in *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971) 13; *Laborem Exercens* 19; *Mulieris Dignitatum* 18, 29, 31; and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "Collaboration of Men and Women."

³⁰ Gregory Baum, "Laborem Exercens," in Judith Dwyer, ed., *New Dictionary of Catholic Social Thought* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press), 1994, 535.

Baum speaks favorably of *LE*'s insistence that women not be penalized in jobs and society for their dedication and work in the home, and he praises the pope's recognition of the toil involved in homework.³¹ But he concludes:

What is missing in the encyclical is the acknowledgment of the institutionalized injustices to which women are exposed in society, culture, and church, an analysis of how this inferiorization affects women at the workplace and at home, and an inquiry into what agents in society derive benefits from these oppressive conditions. The encyclical, which fully supports the labor struggle for justice and declares itself in solidarity with the poor, the marginal, and the powerless does not recognize the women's movement as a liberationist cause, a struggle for justice based on solidarity . . .³²

Here Baum articulates the first difficulty raised by feminist critics: *LE* fails to adequately recognize and address the historical realities and effects of systemic, institutionalized devaluation of women, a devaluation frequently grounded in their so-called exceptional or different status and nature from men; and the role of ideology in maintaining this inferiorization of women in homes and in public.

A second major criticism is voiced by Maria Riley, O.P., who finds that the "romantic difference feminism" upheld by John Paul II in *LE*, whether intentionally or not, continues the church's support for a patriarchal family structure in which male household head supports economically dependent wife and children, and men and women do not share fully mutual responsibility for the work of home and family. A strong indicator of this is that while valorizing the role of mother and asking society to re-evaluate the role and the work attached to it, John Paul does not do the same for fatherhood.³³ Moreover, to the extent that "feminine genius" is praised as serving, above all else,

³¹ Gregory Baum, *The Priority of Labor: A Commentary on Laborem Exercens* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 78.

³² *Ibid.*, 79.

³³ Maria Riley, O.P. *Transforming Feminism*. Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1989, 85. "Riley writes elsewhere: "The church's social teaching continues to be caught on the horns of the dilemma of its dual anthropology: it insists women have full and equal human rights and responsibilities—politically, economically, socially, culturally, and ecclesially—as befits a human person. However, in continuing to insist upon women's proper nature and role as something distinct from human nature, it restricts women's potential for realizing these rights." ". . . to so emphasize that women are primarily responsible for the quality of family life diminishes the social role and value of fatherhood. It disenfranchises men from the full potential of their fatherhood while it disenfranchises women from the full potential of their personhood. Until the church is able to recognize the mutuality of women and men in all dimensions of life, its reflection and teaching will remain inadequate to contemporary realities." "Women," in Judith

home and family, a “masculine genius” is implied, but never described or clarified—to the further unease of feminist critics.³⁴

These two difficulties play into a third: The agenda proffered by *LE* does not address the ways that gender roles operate to uphold that particular relationship between public and household economy that Williams calls “domesticity.” Recall that, as a gender system arranging home and family work, domesticity has two defining characteristics.

The first is its organization of market work around the ideal of a worker who works full time and overtime and takes little or no time off for childbearing or child-rearing. . . . When work is structured in this way, caregivers often cannot perform as ideal workers. Their inability to do so gives rise to domesticity’s second defining characteristic: its system of providing for caregiving by marginalizing the caregivers, thereby cutting them off from most of the social roles that offer responsibility and authority.³⁵

Domesticity so understood comes equipped with claims about naturally-occurring traits in men and women that suit them especially for market or home front, claims reinforced by “norms that identify successful gender performance with character traits suitable for those roles.” This arrangement, Williams contends, hurts “not only women, but also men, children, and emotional life.” For critics like Williams, *LE*’s portrayal of women’s special traits and roles too-uncritically aligns it with the ideology and practices of domesticity. This alignment undercuts the pope’s calls for a reorganized economy and society that would truly value and support family work and those who perform it.

Dwyer, ed., *New Dictionary of Catholic Social Teaching* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1994), 990.

³⁴ German theologian Jutta Burgraff agrees that upholding a “feminine genius” requires a concomitant notion of “masculine genius” in a recent interview. See <http://www.totalcatholic.com/pages/voices/voices013.html>. A critical reflection regarding this implied “masculine genius” is offered by Jane Redmont in an *National Catholic Reporter* column July 28, 1995, published shortly after the *Letter to Women* appeared. Accessed at <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-17365704.html>. David Schindler develops some hints concerning a masculine charisma or genius in *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: Communio Ecclesiology, Liberalism, and Liberation*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1997). Schindler rebuts the criticism that John Paul gave too little attention to the masculine in “‘I thank you.’ ‘Amen.’ The Theological Vision of John Paul II,” *Crisis* Vol. 23. No. 5, May 2005. Accessed at <http://www.crisismagazine.com/may2005/schindler.htm> September, 2006.

³⁵ Williams, *Unbending Gender*, 1, 241.

Revaluing family and home work: Contemporary feminist alternatives

On the question of the proper social valuation of family and home work, one finds two important lines of feminist thought. A first, “difference feminist” position turns on the conviction that women are, indeed, specially equipped for the family and home work they so disproportionately do. In secular feminist literature over the past twenty-five years, proponents of difference feminism have been prominent voices in discussions of women as relational selves who are innately attuned to an “ethic of care.”³⁶ Representatives of this view reject what they see as liberal and radical feminism’s anti-gender or androgynous approaches to justice. What is needed, instead, is a rearrangement of work and economy so that feminine genius can do its irreplaceable work in the home, but also make its humanizing mark on society.

Difference feminism is clearly favored among Catholic scholars calling themselves “papal” or “new” feminists, who have enthusiastically advanced and endorsed John Paul’s proposals concerning women’s anthropological and ontological distinctness. These writers underscore the complementary equality-in-difference between men and women as part of the creative design of God, and regard themselves as taking embodiment and incarnation seriously in ways that non-difference feminists do not.³⁷ As Sara Butler, RSM put it, “The pope offers a positive evaluation of sexual difference in equality and therefore finds it possible to identify and celebrate the specific gifts and contributions women and men make to the human community not only as individuals but also precisely as members of their respective sex. These distinctive

³⁶ See, e.g., the works of Nell Noddings, Carol Gilligan and others. The extent to which these traits are deemed “innate” by difference feminists varies. For a rendition of “the Gilligan effect” as vastly overstating the “natural” side of nature/nurture in treating women’s orientation to care, see Rosalind Barnett & Caryl Rivers, *Same Difference: How Gender Myths Are Hurting Our Relationships, Our Children, and Our Jobs* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), Ch. 1.

³⁷ See, e.g., Monica M. Miller, *Sexuality and Authority in the Catholic Church* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 1995). Miller criticizes mainstream feminist theology, stating that “. . . one of the most basic principles of feminist theology is a horror of any sort of inherent distinction on the level of being that gives rise to role differentiation forming systems of domination and oppression.” (20) “For all of these thinkers feminism is a view of the world in which justice for women is gained by eliminating the significance of sexual difference.” (10) Miller and papal feminists argue that sexual difference has a religiously symbolic significance that bears on the relationship between Christ and the church, and on the complementarity of roles of authority in church. Ultimately, then, “to undo the meaning of sexual symbols is to undo the Christian faith.” (46) This strong theological reading of sexual difference lends a special urgency to these feminists’ gender agenda.

gifts are not associated with one sex or the other in mutually exclusive ways, in his view, but are seen as characteristic feminine and masculine aptitudes or styles which enrich human coexistence in the family and in society. . . . The single human nature comes in double issue: by reason of the body, every person is established as a ‘he’ or a ‘she.’” Sex, therefore, “defines a personal mode of being in the world,” and sexuality involves both “the body-person” and “the realm of personal relationships.” Butler contrasts this with feminist anthropologies that separate sex from gender, and claim that gender is completely socially-constructed mediation of a pre-meaningful biological condition or set of capacities.³⁸ Papal difference feminists are convinced that pursuing social recognition for women’s special qualities and contributions is the best way to assure that women, and the work of home and family, receive the support and resources they need to play their part in contributing to familial and common good.³⁹

Taking a contrasting view is a second, variegated group, whom we might call “universal care feminists.” Universal care feminists wish to uphold the value of family care work and those who perform it, but to do so in a way that does not depend on a theory of women’s different nature or special capacity for nurturing. Most of these feminists acknowledge that under present circumstances, and for the foreseeable future, those providing care will more often be women. However, they argue that attaining justice for care giving and caregivers—in the home and in the job market—requires achieving social consensus around an understanding of caring activities as valuable and necessary practices that respond to universally-shared conditions of human embodiment. Among universal care feminists today, two important voices in discourse concerning family work are secular pragmatic-reconstructivists

³⁸ Sara Butler, RSM, “Embodiment: Women and Men, Equal and Complementary,” in Elizabeth Johnson, ed., *the Church Women Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad/Herder & Herder, 2002), 41. An erudite supporter of papal difference feminism is Sr. Prudence Allen, RSM. See, e.g., her “Man-Woman Complementarity: The Catholic Inspiration” in, *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* - Volume 9, Number 3, Summer 2006, pp. 87-108; “Philosophy of Relation in John Paul II’s New Feminism,” in Michele Schumacher, ed., *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004). See also, Leonie Caldecott, “Sincere Gift: The Pope’s New Feminism,” in C. Curran and R. McCormick, eds, *Pope John Paul II and Moral Theology, Readings in Moral Theology* No. 10 (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 216-34.

³⁹ Michelle Gonzalez offers a lucid comparative analysis of the theological underpinnings of Pope John Paul II’s understanding of gender difference, and feminist theological responses, in “Hans Urs von Balthasar and Contemporary Feminist Theology,” *Theological Studies* 65:3 (September 2004) 566-595.

and Christian liberationists. Each of these groups offers important resources for expanding Catholic social thoughts' analytic lens and strengthening its prescriptive agenda for valuing and supporting the work of the home.

For several years now, feminist legal scholars such as Joan Williams, Robin West, and Christine Littleton have been advancing a pragmatic-reconstructivist approach to gender, work, and family that combines a universal-care agenda with the practical recognition that gender (whatever its relation to nature or nurture) is a complex, identity-mediating reality which will inevitably continue to shape how men and women relate to home, to work, and to one another. These reconstructivists seek practical, policy-oriented ways of improving support for care-work and for women and men who perform it, and seek to build consensus around the value of care work among groups with differing judgments about the relation of gender to nature.⁴⁰

Littleton, for instance, articulates an understanding of justice that seeks not to level differences, but to equalize the social costs attaching to differences that the culture has encoded as gender complements, contending that "all behavioral forms that the culture has encoded as 'male and female counterparts' should be equally rewarded."⁴¹ This approach avoids pitfalls that can result from policies that consistently treat men and women either identically or differently. Too often, social theorist Alison Jaggar notes, "when women are treated identically to

⁴⁰ Pragmatic-reconstructivists differ from another so-called "pragmatic" voice on this subject in popular literature, which regards it as impossible to reconstruct market economy so that good jobs or advancement are not tied to "ideal worker" conditions. According to this "you can't buck the system" view, jobs at the very top, (and one might suspect, for different reasons, the jobs at the very bottom) will by definition remain intractable in their requirement that workers sacrifice major portions of domestic time and energy for the sake of their paid work. (One often finds this vision of "good work" portrayed in the popular media, e.g. in TV series such as "West Wing." Intriguingly, the dynamic of "vocation" in religious communities can feed an ethos concerning the truly meaningful jobs demanding endless time and sacrifice of personal and family life. Academe has its version of this, "work without end" ethos, as well). These status-quo pragmatists conclude that women, who will continue to feel the need to put their families first, face insurmountable limits on their opportunities and advancement in the market. The recent media flap around the so-called "opt out revolution" among well-educated women who have chosen to de-prioritize career in favor of family exemplifies this popular (in my view misguided) trope. Lisa Belkin, "The Opt-Out Revolution," *New York Times*, October 26, 2003.

⁴¹ Christine Littleton, "Reconstructing Sexual Equality," in Alison Jaggar, ed. *Living With Contradictions: Controversies in Feminist Social Ethics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994), 28-34.

men, as some feminists have recommended, we are penalized for our differences because we are measured against a male norm. When we are treated differently from men, are recommended by other feminists, even the provision of so-called special benefits, rights, or protections may often have damaging consequences insofar as it reifies currently perceived sex differences. In opposing ways, therefore, both strategies are doomed to perpetuate women's subordination." Jaggar proposes that "recognizing current differences between the sexes as a consequence as well as a cause of male dominance" encourages feminists to "refuse to accept men's lives as the norm," and "to develop flexible policies designed to change as men and women succeed in changing themselves."⁴² Joan Williams points to the malleability that has attended social mores and practices surrounding gender. This elasticity, she argues, "highlights the open-ended quality and complexity of genderings." To the extent that, while acknowledging the fact of human sexual differentiations, we can recognize gender as "a field of social power with which people establish relationships of great complexity" for a range of different ends, Catholic advocates for work-family justice will be in a better position to address critically, but capaciously, this persistent ingredient in culture and in economy.⁴³

Dovetailing with the pragmatic-reconstructivist approach is Christian liberationist feminism. Liberationist feminists perceive women's lives and practices from the perspective of a biblically-grounded commitment to think and act in light of the needs and aspirations of the poor and marginalized, and with a hermeneutic of suspicion that seeks to unmask structures that maintain injustice and oppression. Armed with a keen sense of social sin and of the need for collective solutions to structural problems, Christian liberationist feminists advance a radical critique of injustice intended to fuel practical action to resist and transform them.

Working in this feminist tradition, theological ethicist Gloria Albrecht offers an analysis of women and work whose centerpiece is a religiously-grounded universal care ethic that reconsiders three familiar goals: the full equality of women, the social significance of

⁴² Jaggar, ed. *Living With Contradictions*, 14. Littleton adds: "There must be choices beyond those of ignoring difference or accepting inequality. So long as difference itself is so expensive in the coin of equality, we approach the variety of human experience with blinders on. Perhaps if difference were not so costly we ... could think about it more clearly. Perhaps if equality did not require uniformity we, as women, could demand it less ambivalently." "Reconstructing Sexual Equality," 32.

⁴³ Williams, *Unbending Gender*, 258, 259.

“feminine” values, and the need to appropriately value families and the work of the home.⁴⁴ The full equality of women, Albrecht notes, requires arrangements that affirm and promote “the self-worth of women as full participatory citizens and moral agents.” But in the prevailing, individualistic political economy, “being a woman, that is, being an actual or potential mother or caregiver, increases economic vulnerability.” In an ideal-worker market arrangement, “where the lack of caregiving responsibilities and dependency is assumed to be the human norm, being an actual or potential mother or caregiver is liability.” Albrecht contends that even if gender and racial disparities in wages were eliminated, neither women nor men could afford to choose equal parenting and caregiving as long as workplace and public policies continue to favor those who do no dependent-care work. What is needed then, is “the elimination of all forms of discrimination against caregivers and the dismantling of all forms of advantage for those who are not caregivers.” Attaining women’s equality requires a radical shift, to a political economy “in which being an actual or potential mother, being in need of care, and being responsible for the care of others, *are* the human norm.”⁴⁵ Notice that Albrecht’s proposal calls for an altered, more accurate, *anthropological* grounding for economic thought and practice, and the roles of family and workplace within it.

Realizing equality for women, then, will require substantial changes in the way contemporary persons tend to think about work and family. It demands, as well, an expanded notion of justice that incorporates *dependency*. Making these changes, Albrecht holds, “is a question of values, not costs.”⁴⁶ Harvard political scientist and epidemiologist Jody Heymann, whose research charts the stunning vulnerability of children and families in poorer countries now undergoing capitalist

⁴⁴ Albrecht, *Hitting Home*, esp. ch. 5, 148-58.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 148.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 149. Papal difference feminist Elizabeth Schiltz has written about Pope John Paul II’s and feminism’s contribution to a fuller, dependency-based understanding of justice. See, e.g., Elizabeth Rose Schiltz, “West, MacIntyre and Wojtyla: Pope John Paul II’s Contribution to the Development of a Dependency-Based Theory of Justice.” U of St. Thomas Legal Studies Research Paper No. 05-27, *Journal of Catholic Legal Studies*, 2006. See also, Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent, Rational Animals* (1999) in which he advocates “a form of political society in which it is taken for granted that disability and dependence on others are something that all of us experience at certain times in our lives and this to unpredictable degrees, and that consequently our interest in how the needs of the disabled [Schiltz adds, and dependent children] are adequately voiced and met is not a special interest, the interest of one particular group rather than of others, but rather the interest of the whole political society, an interest that is integral to their conception of their common good.” (130) Cited by Schiltz in “Should Bearing the Child. . . .?”, 20.

development, strongly concurs. Heymann contends that concrete changes to ensure the ability of poor working parents to care adequately for their children are not only possible; they are desperately necessary, and indeed for the poorest families can be matters of life or death. Heymann draws on extensive empirical work both in the U.S. and in other countries to challenge common myths about why it is impossible to address these unintended but destructive effects on families of present market practices.⁴⁷

Like pragmatic-reconstructivists, Christian liberationist feminists seek an economics that honors and accounts for bodiliness and plurality, and do not see equality as eliding all differences or distinctions. In this vein, theologian Colleen Griffith rejects the sexual equality-complementarity opposition as a false choice. Griffith suggests focusing on human bodiliness, the embodied nature of being human shared by men and women, as the starting point and ground for understanding more clearly and treating justly men's and women's roles and work, including in home and family. A focus on shared conditions of embodiment opens the door for considering both commonality and plurality of experiences grounded in bodiliness, including bodies' natural givenness (both varied and distinct), their cultural malleability (flexibility, not elasticity), and how to honor and accommodate both.⁴⁸ Equity for

⁴⁷ Jody Heymann, *Forgotten Families: Ending the Growing Crisis Confronting Children and Working Parents in the Global Economy* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). In her final chapter Heymann considers and rebuts seven myths feeding inaction: that we don't know what works (we know that paid parental leave, early childhood care and education, and paid leave to meet children [and other family members'] health needs *do* work); that there are no affordable solutions (all available evidence points in the opposite direction: that it is inaction that is unaffordable, and nations, companies, and consumers could be enlisted in needed action); that bad jobs are better than no jobs in poorer countries, and action/regulation threatens bad jobs ("if we ignore bad jobs, the global economy will race to produce more"); that parents can/should solve the problem alone (she offers six chapters of evidence to the contrary); that individual countries, especially poorer ones, have no choice (she offers concrete evidence showing how some countries' exercise of choice has made positive differences for families of workers); that there is no way to move forward globally (H offers a rationale for the necessity and possibility of collective action in a global economy.) (Heymann, 195-211).

⁴⁸ Colleen Griffith "Human Bodiliness: Sameness as Starting Point," in Elizabeth Johnson, ed., *The Church Women Want: Catholic Women in Dialogue* (New York: Crossroad, 2002), 63. Lisa Sowle Cahill takes a similar tack by proposing basic features of bodily potentials and needs as the basis for a renewed natural law ethics in her *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (London/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995). An example of the sort of policy that can flow from a focus on shared human bodiliness is Proposition F, passed in San Francisco in November 2006. Promoted as a "right to be sick" ordinance, the new law requires employers to provide paid sick leave to all full-time, part-time and temporary employees working in San Francisco. Employees will

women *and* the proper valuation of family care-work are most effectively approached by acknowledging that everyone is vulnerable, needy, and dependent in their bodies, and that the work and caring attaching to that fact is the province of all.

Second, Albrecht calls for “the full incorporation into the political economy of the *social* value of the stereotypical virtues of the feminine.” “Socializing the feminine” means that all society members, male and female, acknowledge and take responsibility for so-called feminine characteristics—dependency, bodiliness, vulnerability, a capacity to care and serve—and so-called feminine work: care giving, relationship building and sustaining. To socialize the feminine is, further, to acknowledge that, “the morality needed to sustain family and community life must also shape the nature and practices of the economy.” This involves reframing standard economic thought and practice to account for, and internalize, what are now assumed to be the “external costs” of social reproduction—in particular, the work of household and family that grounds and supports the public economy. As economist Nancy Folbre puts it, “. . . the costs of social reproduction must be paid. . . . One might suggest, following the standard precepts of neoclassical theory, that the private and social rates of return to childbearing [and we might add, eldercare, and other socially-reproductive work contributed by families] should be brought into balance—those who receive the benefits should also pay the costs.”⁴⁹

earn paid sick leave at the rate of 1 hour for every 30 hours worked. New employees begin to earn sick leave after 3 months on the job. Employees who work in businesses with fewer than 10 employees can accumulate up to 40 hours of paid sick leave. All other employees can accumulate up to 72 hours of paid sick leave.

⁴⁹ Albrecht, 150, quoting Nancy Folbre, *Who Pays for the Kids? Gender and the Structures of Constraint*. New York: Routledge, 1994), 12. Mona Harrington adds: “The key idea for a new politics of family care . . . is to add care to the pantheon of national social values. That is, to assure good care to all members of the society should become a primary principle of our common life, along with the assurances of liberty, equality, and justice. We need to elevate care to this level of importance for the basic reason that it is essential to human health and balanced development. It is also crucial to developing human moral potential, to instilling and reinforcing in an individual a sense of positive connection with others. And it is this sense of connection that makes possible the whole range of mutual responsibilities that allow the people of a society to respect and work toward common goals. . . . [T]hinking about care seriously, recognizing that everyone at different times is both a giver and a receiver of care, underscores for people the fact of their personal and social interdependence. . . . [T]his insight can enhance a commitment to the responsibilities of democratic citizenship.” Mona Harrington, *Care and Equality: Inventing a New Family Politics* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 48-49, citing Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993). cf. Elizabeth R. Schiltz, “Should Bearing the Child Mean Bearing All the Cost? A Catholic Perspective on the Sacrifice of Motherhood and the Common Good”

Albrecht's third agenda item is a capacious and ideologically-astute way of valuing families that recognizes family, "in its diverse forms—as an important site in the struggle for gender, racial, and economic justice."⁵⁰ Too often, Albrecht argues following Susan Moller Okin, "within the so-called traditional nuclear family with its gender dichotomy, children have learned to accept a sense of justice that accommodates women's unequal economic vulnerability." "More broadly, children learn that justice is [apparently] satisfied despite the socially constructed inequality they see embedded in gendered, racial, and class relations." But this need not be the case. "[I]n the everyday practices of families, children could also learn the practices and explanations with which to challenge social injustice." Catholic thought affirms that the work of families includes character formation, but, Albrecht stresses, we must ask, what kind of character? Families must be committed to activities that produce "characters capable of sustaining just relationships and practicing that virtues that knit together persons in inclusive, egalitarian communities—practices that orient people toward a common good."⁵¹ Albrecht's contention speaks to the counter-cultural potential of the work of the family, as resister of sinful social dynamics. Understanding families as both schools of injustice but potentially, as well, bearers of culturally-transformative values is consistent with the New Testament's presentation of Jesus as challenging the established family forms of his day, and redefining family's primary meaning in terms of discipleship. "Christians must again recognize that the privileged western form of the family created with the rise of capitalism has been, and is, based on unjust social arrangements." Today as in the past, the New Testament's treatment of family stands as a warning that, "The ideals of the privileged should never be mistaken as Christian ideals."⁵²

From a perspective shaped by reconstructive and liberationist feminism, a Catholic economic ethic that appropriately values the work of home and family must champion ideological and structural transformation. The struggle for the well being of families and their flourishing will require work on both the macroscopic, policy and cultural fronts, and the microscopic, local front of household, of family as "domestic

University of St. Thomas School of Law Legal Research Paper No. 05-07. Downloaded at www.ssrn.com/link/st-thomas-legal-studies.html, Sept 20 2006.

⁵⁰ Albrecht, *Hitting Home*, 151. On U.S. Catholicism's persistent but ambiguous encounters with diversity in families, see Christine Firer Hinze, "Unity and Diversity in the Body of Christ: U.S. Catholic Families, 1945-1990," in Phyllis Airhart and Margaret Bendroth, eds., *Faith Traditions and the Family* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1996) 53-73.

⁵¹ Albrecht, *Hitting Home*, 151, 152.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 153, 154. Cf. Rubio, *A Christian Theology of Marriage and Family*, ch. 10.

church,” and families as part of neighborhoods and local communities. The roots and outcomes of this societal transformation will be intimately formed and concretely enacted with families themselves.

Conclusion

A quarter-century after its promulgation, *Laborem Exercens* bequeaths a vital legacy of appreciation of work and advocacy for workers, including the work of the home and those who perform it. Reconstructivist and liberationist feminists offer important resources for crafting an agenda in support of family and household work that is true to the impulses of Catholic social teaching, and that flexibly upholds “feminine values,” but avoids foundering on essentialist-constructivist debates about sex and gender. Such debates steal precious attention and energy from the urgent task of pursuing 21st-century societal and economic arrangements that will make it possible for the work of families to be authentically cherished, and that will give women, men, and children who give and receive home-based care the support they deserve. I close by mentioning two objections to the Catholic ethical stance I have outlined here, objections which this essay has not fully addressed.

First: Does moral and policy approach that moderately disaggregates gender and the work of the home illegitimately disregard the “difference feminism” promoted in *Laborem Exercens*, and some would argue, in Catholic social teaching as a whole? Further, insofar as Pope John Paul’s particular version of difference feminism is integral to his authoritative teaching on question of work (and more fundamentally, to his theological anthropology) is the position outlined here dissenting, or less than fully Catholic? In my judgment, a careful reading of modern Catholic social thought, including the reflections on gender contributed by the last two popes, reveals space for exactly the sort of capacious treatment I am suggesting here. This space opens up when we recall that John Paul’s portrait of “feminine genius” is firmly joined to an even more fundamental insistence on the common and full humanity of men and women. Both John Paul and Benedict stress that the values and capacities called “feminine” are, in fact, the values and capacities that characterize authentic humanity, a human identity most fully realized in the life of the man, Jesus of Nazareth. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, has stated this plainly:

[F]eminine values . . . are above all human values: the human condition of man and woman created in the image of God is one and indivisible. . . . [I]n the final analysis, every human being, man or woman, is destined to be “for the other.” In this perspective, that which is called ‘femininity’ is more than simply an attribute of

the female sex. The word designates indeed the fundamental human capacity to live for the other and because of the other.⁵³

A second possible objection concerns the practical prospects for realizing the agenda I have proposed. Both the vision of *LE*, and the agendas for valuing care work proposed by feminists, have been criticized as utopian. Yet today there is convincing evidence that moving toward a political economy that better values and supports both care-work and providing-work is both an urgent moral obligation and a realistic goal.⁵⁴ Getting on with this agenda is especially pressing in the face of the egregious offenses against the right to care for families being perpetrated daily against the most vulnerable members of our globalizing economy. Jody Heymann states this poignantly: “Just as it is not too much to dream of a world where all children can eat, it is not too much to dream of a world where preschool children are not left alone, where school-age children’s parents can support their education, where older children are not pulled out of school to act as childcare providers, and where all children have adults who can care for them when they are healthy and when they are sick.”⁵⁵ We owe Pope John Paul a debt of gratitude for serving this cause by promoting the value of the work of family and the home in *LE*. I trust he would agree that Gospel-inspired solidarity and the option for the poor make joining forces across gender-ideological lines legitimate, indeed necessary, in the common cause of valuing and economically supporting the caring work performed in and for families, especially the most vulnerable families.

⁵³ Ibid, 14. A broader agenda concerning family and economy is also suggested in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*: “Family and work, so closely interdependent in the experience of the vast majority of people, deserve finally to be considered in a more realistic light, with an attention that seeks to understand them together, without the limits of a strictly private conception of the family or a strictly economic view of work. In this regard, it is necessary that businesses, professional organizations, labor unions and the State promote policies that, from an employment point of view, do not penalize but rather support the family nucleus.” Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church* (2004), 294.

⁵⁴ A burgeoning “work/family” literature offers empirically-grounded analysis and practical policy proposals for improving conditions for the work of the home. See, e.g., Janet C. Gornick and Marcia K. Meyers, *Families that Work: Policies for Reconciling Parenthood and Employment* (2005). Institutes like the Sloan Work and Family Research Network at Boston College (see <http://wfnetwork.bc.edu/>) and the Project for Global Working Families at Harvard (see <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/globalworking-families/index.html>) sponsor, collect and disseminate the best available studies in these areas, and develop policy proposals based on it. More grassroots coalitions for change include, e.g. TakeCareNet (see <http://www.takecarenet.org/>) and Momsrising.org (see <http://www.momsrising.org/>).

⁵⁵ Heymann, 222.