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Catholic Teaching Changes: Women in the Workplace

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When women work outside their own homes, is it good for them and for society, or harmful for them, their children and a society built on families? Women and men continue to debate this question, but fortunately, official Catholic teaching is clear. The Catholic magisterium supports women working outside their own homes—but it has not always done so. In just a century magisterial Catholic teaching evolved from understanding women’s work outside the home as bad for women, children and the family, to regarding it as acceptable, normal and good for society. Since claims about women’s roles in society are grounded in assertions about human nature, evolving magisterial teaching on women’s work undermines assertions that the natural law reveals a set of defined teachings that never change.[i]

Of course, women have always worked in their own homes. Not only the reproductive labor of caring for children and the sick and feeding the family, but also the productive labor of creating goods for trade or sale was, until very recently, done in one’s own home. Equally as long, some poor women have worked in the homes of those who could afford to pay them. The Industrial Revolution brought seismic change. Productive labor moved out of homes into factories, and women followed. In unprecedented ways, women now moved through public spheres and interacted with men not known to them or their families. As family economies shifted from production-based to cash-based, women could earn their own cash income and potentially secure financial independence from fathers or husbands. Pope Leo XIII was inspired to address this profound change in the structures of traditional economies, communities and even families, catalyzing the tradition that would become known as Catholic social thought (CST). The tradition of Catholic leaders commenting on economic and social structures, and the tradition of problematizing women’s work outside their own homes, grew up together.[ii]

            Leo XIII and Pius XI understood women’s work outside their own homes as the product of economic pressure. They did not frame it as an individual failing of women workers but as the problem of an unjustly structured economy—and yes, women working was a problem. Leo XIII believed working outside the home harmed women physically and morally, threatening their children’s well-being and their male coworkers’ virtue.[iii]Women’s work outside the home violates the natural law: “a most sacred law of nature” assigns women to the home and fathers as primary breadwinners.[iv]

In his social encyclical *Quadrigesimo Anno*(1931), Pius XI echoed Leo XIII’s censure of women working. If anything, he worded it more strongly:

Mothers, concentrating on household duties, should work primarily in the home or in its immediate vicinity. It is an intolerable abuse, and to be abolished at all cost, for mothers on account of the father’s low wage to be forced to engage in gainful occupations outside the home to the neglect of their proper cares and duties.[v]

In *Casti Connubii*(1930), Pius XI also called on “the public authority” to help support families “if even the mother of the family to the great harm of the home, is compelled to go forth and seek a living by her own labor.”[vi]Before the mid-20thcentury, magisterial teaching was clear: women belonged in the home, not in the workplace. Working outside the home harmed women, men, children, and the broader society.

            Pope John XXIII steered magisterial teaching toward an acceptance of women working that continues to this day. In *Pacem in Terris*(1963), he commented “Women must be accorded such conditions of work as are consistent with their needs and responsibilities as wives and mothers”[vii]—calling for something his predecessors viewed as an impossibility. *Gaudium et Spes*(1965), the constitution on the world from Vatican Council II, approves of women working outside their own homes much more explicitly than any previous teaching. It insists that every type of discrimination, whether social or cultural, whether based on sex, race, color, social condition, language or religion, is to be overcome and eradicated as contrary to God’s intent.[viii]

For women “to embrace a state of life or to acquire an education or cultural benefits equal to those recognized for men” was named a “fundamental personal right.”[ix]

            In slightly more than 30 years, the magisterial view of women’s work ricocheted from “an intolerable abuse” and “a great harm” to a fundamental right to be promoted and celebrated. This posed a challenge to the claim that Catholic magisterial teaching never changes. Pope Paul VI found a solution upon which his successor, John Paul II, would build a complex theological edifice—the assertion that even when they occupy similar spheres as men, women have and exercise a significantly different nature.

Paul VI’s “Address to Women” (1965), at the close of the Second Vatican Council, is a good example of his simultaneous acceptance of women’s changed *roles*and insistence on women’s different and unique *nature.*He proclaimed “the hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness.”[x]However, his description of women’s vocation is limited and essentialist. For example, women“know how to make truth sweet, tender and accessible” and are called upon to “aid [men] to retain courage in their great undertakings.”[xi]When magisterial teaching retained separate social duties for women and men, there was no need to prescribe a particular way of performing the duties of either sex. Now that the Church welcomed women into public life, the growing insistence on distinct gendered natures gave the impression of continuity even as a clear and distinct teaching had radically changed.

            In the many writings of his long papacy, John Paul II emphasized, developed and thickened Paul VI’s theme of women’s “unique nature” apparent even in their actions in the public sphere. A typical example:

With due respect to the different vocations of men and women, the Church must in her own life promote as far as possible their equality of rights and dignity […] But clearly all of this does not mean for women a renunciation of their femininity or an imitation of the male role, but the fullness of true feminine humanity which should be expressed in their activity, whether in the family or outside of it.[xii]

Leo XIII would have agreed that men and women had different vocations, but would have seen them as clearly expressed in different social roles. For John Paul II, a woman could fulfill her vocation in the workplace, but did so by working in a “feminine” way.

As the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI) issued “On the Collaboration of Men and Women” (2004) on behalf of then-Pope John Paul II. This document expresses the wish that “women should be present in the world of work and in the organization of society, and that women should have access to positions of responsibility which allow them to inspire the policies of nations and to promote innovative solutions to economic and social problems.”[xiii]To borrow the language John T. Noonan, Jr. used to describe other instances of change in church teaching, here is another example where in a very short historical period what was forbidden (women working) became required.

While then-Pope Benedict XVI presented his teaching as in continuity with that of his predecessor, in fact, his social documents are void of John Paul II’s insistence on women’s exercise of gendered nature in the workplace. In *Caritas in Veritate*(2009), Pope Benedict said that “decent” work is that which

expresses the essential dignity of every man and woman in the context of their particular society: work that is freely chosen, effectively associating workers, both men and women, with the development of their community … [xiv]

“Workers, both men and women,” a simple phrase that appears in the official Latin text, enacts a significant step forward for the Church’s social doctrine by treating women simply as workers, not as problems or as special privileged cases.[xv]

            Pope Francis again depicts his teaching on economy and family as consistent with that of his predecessors, even as *Amoris Laetitia*(2016) drags the notion of intrinsic gendered nature to the backyard and sets it on fire with statements like this:

Masculinity and femininity are not rigid categories. It is possible, for example, that a husband’s way of being masculine can be flexibly adapted to the wife’s work schedule … [Rigid definitions of masculinity and femininity] can hinder the development of an individual’s abilities, to the point of leading him or her to think, for example, that it is not really masculine to cultivate art or dance, or not very feminine to exercise leadership.[xvi]

Magisterial teaching on women’s public role evolved from claiming separate spheres, to clearly distinct natures in the same spheres, to the outright denial of rigidly gendered nature, in less than 150 years.

            I am a Catholic mother who works outside my own home, as my own mother and grandmothers did after having their children. My great-grandmother earned wages as a house cleaner around the same time Pius XI saw her situation as a “great harm to the home.” Because my family’s long experience with women working outside their own homes is so widely shared, we could easily make the mistake of thinking that the goodness of women working is a settled question. But in an August 14, 2019 essay, Catholic podcaster Matt Fradd seriously considers whether a mother working outside the home is a sin. Fradd and his commenters visibly struggle to square earlier magisterial prohibitions of women working with more recent papal celebrations of women’s presence in the public sphere. They would have less difficulty—and no need for ahistorical claims, like saying physically difficult factory work is a thing of the past—if they could simply acknowledge that magisterial teaching on this matter has changed.

My modest goal for this essay has been to show that on the matter of women working outside their own homes, magisterial teaching, as expressed in papal encyclicals and conciliar constitutions, completely reversed itself in the course of the 20thcentury. Leo XIII believed that men’s and women’s roles in society were as natural and predetermined as gendered human nature itself.  The seismic shift in women’s roles that took place globally in the 20thcentury made it clear that roles, at least, can change. As Catholic teaching came to reflect this truth, we saw a stronger and more vehement insistence that women’s nature would remain distinct from that of men even while occupying a similar role. Benedict XVI and Francis insist that Catholic social teaching is based on the unchanging nature of the human person, even as their own teaching reflects profound changes in the roles that Leo XIII read as written in the natural law. This growing acceptance is welcome news to women who work outside their own homes, and it illustrates the fact that the official teachings of the Catholic Church can and do change.

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# Notes

[i]This view was promulgated recently in John Paul II’s encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, which spoke of “universal and unchanging moral norms” (96).August 6, 1993. Vatican.va. Web. Accessed 12/12/12. See Keenan, James F., *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences.*New York: Continuum, 2010.128-134.

[ii]This summary is indebted to Christine Firer Hinze, *Glass Ceilings and Dirt Floors: Women, Work, and the Global Economy*, 2014 Madeleva Lecture in Spirituality (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 2015).

[iii]Pope Leo XIII, “Rerum Novarum: On Capital and Labor,” May 15, 1891, paras. 20, 36, 42, http://www.vatican.va/holy\_father/leo\_xiii/encyclicals/documents/hf\_l-xiii\_enc\_15051891\_rerum-novarum\_en.html.

[iv]Pope Leo XIII, “Rerum Novarum: On Capital and Labor,” paras. 13, 42.

[v]Pope Pius XI. *Quadrigesimo Anno: Encyclical of Pope Pius XI on Reconstruction of the Social Order*. 1931. Vatican.va. Web. Accessed 12/1/12. 71.

[vi]Pius XI, “Casti Connubii (On Christian Marriage),” December 31, 1930, para. 120, https://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\_p-xi\_enc\_19301231\_casti-connubii.html.

[vii]Ibid., 19.

[viii]Ibid., 29.

[ix]Ibid.

[x]Pope Paul VI. “Address of Pope Paul VI to Women.” 8 December 1965. Vatican.va. Web. Accessed 12/1/12. (No paragraph numbers.)

[xi]Paul VI, “Address to Women,” December 8, 1965, http://www.vatican.va/holy\_father/paul\_vi/speeches/1965/documents/hf\_p-vi\_spe\_19651208\_epilogo-concilio-donne\_en.html.

[xii]Ibid., 23.

[xiii]Ibid., 13.

[xiv]Pope Benedict XVI. *Caritas in Veritate: Encyclical Letter on Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth*. June 29, 2009. Vatican.va. Web. Accessed 12/12/12. 63.

[xv]Occasionally official English translations of Vatican documents use inclusive gendered language that is absent in the Latin: for example, in *Caritas in Veritate*71, the sentence that begins “Development is impossible without upright men and women . . . “ is only translating the Latin “homines.” However, the text cited above translates “operarios, viros et mulieres.”

[xvi]Pope Francis, “Amoris Laetitia: On Love in the Family” (Vatican Press, March 19, 2016), para. 286, http://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\_esortazione-ap\_20160319\_amoris-laetitia\_en.pdf.