

THE DUAL VOCATION OF CHRISTIAN PARENTS

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[The author argues that Christian parents have a dual vocation: to care for their children and to contribute to the larger society. Recent theology on the family shows that most writers emphasize only one part of that dual vocation. The author argues that this tendency diminishes family ethics. She roots the obligation to care for one's own in natural inclinations and the experience of Christian parents. The obligation to serve society is rooted in Catholic teaching on work and family.]

FLANNERY O'CONNOR's short story "The Lame Shall Enter First" is not often read by literary critics as a "family values" story, but ordinary readers often hear it as a warning to parents who sacrifice their children for the sake of important work. In their view, this story calls for a reexamination of what it means to be a parent. Sheppard, the father in the story, is a respectable middle-class widower who works as a city recreational director and volunteers as a counselor at a reform school for boys on the weekends. He has a burning desire to help disadvantaged children to improve themselves and he eventually invites a difficult boy named Rufus to come and live with him and his eleven-year-old son. Gradually it becomes clear that Sheppard is entranced with his own good mission to Rufus, so entranced that he allows his son to grieve his dead mother alone. One morning at breakfast, in an attempt to inspire some compassion in his son Norton, Sheppard tells him that he is lucky his mother is not in the state penitentiary like Rufus's mother. Norton dissolves into tears, saying, "If she was in the penitentiary, I could go to seeeeee her."¹ His father tells him to stop being selfish and to grow up. Throughout the story, Sheppard puts a great deal of effort into saving Rufus, while ignoring the silent grieving of his

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¹ Flannery O'Connor, "The Lame Shall Enter First," in her *The Complete Stories* (New York: Noonday, 1946) 445-82, at 447.

own son. Near the end of the story, when faced with Rufus's ultimate rejection, he claims: "I have nothing to reproach myself with . . . I did more for him than I did for my own child,"² and fails to see the irony. For most readers, the failure of a father to care for his own son is obvious. Norton is left alone to make sense of his mother's death, Rufus is brought into the house to take away what is left of Shepherd's attention, and, at the end of the story, Shepherd finds Norton hanging in his room. This story of an ordinary, fallen, or lame human being is a perfect illustration of Flannery O'Connor's famous pessimism about human nature.³

Students in my classes read the story and find it easy to see parallels with their own lives. Many speak of parents who put their children second and their work first. The anguish in their voices is unmistakable. They know well the failures of parents to love their children. Suicide may be an extreme response, but the pain that inspires it is apparently widespread. Perhaps then it is legitimate to take O'Connor's story as a prophetic word about the duties of parenthood.

However, it seems to me that the story is not really about the importance of sacrificing social responsibilities for one's family. Rather, O'Connor is telling a story about a man who fails to connect with two boys—one, his own, and one whom he tries to adopt. Ultimately, he can save neither boy. Like most of O'Connor's tragic characters, Sheppard is not a good Christian. Sheppard's sin is not failing to put his family first, it is failing to be Christ-like. He ignores Rufus's concern with the state of his soul, forfeiting his trust, *and* fails to comfort his suffering son, forfeiting his life. He does not meet Christ or put on Christ at home or in the world.

If this interpretation is correct, why do my students so often read the story as a cautionary tale for parents who fail their children? Something in American culture makes it easy to see Sheppard's failings as a parent in the home but difficult to see his failings as a parent in the world. In America today, "family first" is nearly a sacred value. Most people agree that prioritizing family is the moral thing to do. One often hears the adage: "Nobody on his deathbed wished he had spent more time at the office." Media accounts of executives leaving corporate life to be with young children receive a great deal of attention. Ordinary families mourn their business and long for the time to put their own families first. Even in the presidential campaign of 2000, both Al Gore and George W. Bush were lauded as good fathers who put their families first. In fact, those who gave their nomination speeches emphasized the fatherly qualities of the nominees over and above

² Ibid. 480–81.

³ In the story, Rufus is physically lame, but it is clearly Sheppard, who lacks faith and compassion, who is truly lame. The story's title refers to the biblical idea that the last shall be first.

their political positions, accomplishments, and goals. More recently, a popular billboard reads: “There’s a reason most people don’t have pictures of the office at home.” That the sign is part of a “values” campaign by a large corporation apparently is an irony lost on most admirers. At any rate, the idea that family first is a claimed American value seems reasonable enough.

More comprehensive evidence for the prevalence of the “family first” ideal is available in the recent book *Ask the Children: What America’s Children Really Think about Working Parents*. Ellen Galinsky of the Families and Work Institute published there the results of a national survey of over 1000 third to twelfth graders and 600 parents. Galinsky reports that most working parents whom she and her colleagues interviewed claim to put their families first. A small percentage of parents admit that they do not, but Galinsky suggests that children of these parents are more likely to be dissatisfied.⁴ According to her study, parents can avoid problems by prioritizing family.

What does this mean? It is not always clear, for the value “family first” is not connected to a specific practice. Certainly, for most Americans, prioritizing family does not mean quitting work. Galinsky argues: “It is not *that* we work, but *how* we work.” In other words, the problem is not that parents have commitments other than their children, it is that children are not their top priority. Children, according to Galinsky, need to feel that their parents’ work is not more important than they are. As one girl interviewed by Galinsky wrote: “I think the thing that goes on with kids is: ‘Wouldn’t you rather be with me than do this other thing?’ I want my mother to like her job, but not more than she loves me.”⁵ According to Galinsky, children are more likely to give their mothers high grades when they feel that they are managing the work-family balance successfully and putting their families before their jobs most of the time.⁶ Sacrificing everything for the sake of one’s children is not necessary. One simply has to put them first.

On the other hand, one could argue that Americans do not seem to put family first in any meaningful way, for they spend much of their most precious commodity—their time—away from their children. Even when parents are around, they are often not fully present. The image of a family trying to eat dinner while cell phones and beepers compete for attention has become a cliché. This image is a powerful illustration of how much Americans have allowed work to invade their family lives. Despite the near universal acceptance of family first as a value, clearly, families do not

⁴ Ellen Galinsky, *Ask the Children: What America’s Children Really Think about Working Parents* (New York: William Morrow, 1999) 251.

⁵ *Ibid.* xviii.

⁶ *Ibid.* 251.

always come first in the lives of most Americans, and most parents are aware of this inconsistency. The Flannery O'Connor story works as a guilt-inducer because it taps into both the "family first" value and the justifiable parental fear that they are selling their kids short.

As a Christian theologian, I am interested both in the vigor and frequency with which Americans claim this value (even those who work long hours rarely say they put family second) and in widespread parental worries that they are not doing enough (even parents who profess confidence in their choices often fear that they have not sacrificed enough for children). Most American parents want to work, yet they also want to have the kind of strong emotional ties to their children that will ensure enduring relationships. They do not want to end up like Sheppard.

Part of the problem may be the lack of a language to express the pull of dual responsibilities that most parents feel. It seems there is a choice. One may take the moral high ground and value "family first," or one may join the undistinguished ranks of inattentive parents glued to their offices and cell phones by valuing work first and family second. I would argue that the Christian tradition, exemplified by O'Connor correctly read, offers a different way of talking and thinking about parenting. The tradition points toward the ideal of a dual vocation for Christian parents that calls parents to be Christians at home and in the world. In this article I will (1) show that the concept of dual vocation is implicit in the work of contemporary theology but in need of explication; (2) explore both sides of the dual vocation (nurture of children and work for the common good); (3) ask whether the idea of a split vocation is more compelling; and (4) conclude with cautious advocacy of dual vocation.

DUAL VOCATION IN THE WORK OF PRESENT-DAY THEOLOGIANS

While the concept of dual vocation is assumed in much of contemporary Christian theology, a full articulation remains necessary because theologians tend to emphasize one aspect of the dual vocation at the expense of the other, thereby impoverishing their family ethics. Methodist theologian Stephen Post is a good example of a theologian who focuses his energy on calling parents back to their nurturing role. In response to what he characterizes as a current crisis of the family, he asserts that parents must own their vocation to parenting. Implying that men and women will play different roles, he writes; "My own parental experience tells me that the relationship that my daughter and son have with their mother is qualitatively different from their relationship with me."⁷ While affirming the ex-

⁷ Stephen Post, *More Lasting Unions: Christianity, the Family, and Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 108.

istence of differences, Post does not give them a central place in his parenting ethic. Rather, his emphasis is on the need for parents to care for their children and in arguing for “models of co-parenting, in which both mother and father are deeply bonded with their children.”⁸ Post’s ideal of co-parenting with different but significant roles for men and women is a key part of his attempt to restore family to its proper place in society.⁹

In choosing this emphasis on the nurturing half of the parenting vocation, Post leaves himself vulnerable on two counts. First, although he obviously wants to argue for a progressive family model, his stress on parenting and his acknowledgment of gender differences can be read as advocacy of a more traditional family model. Without the idea of dual vocation for both parents, a parent’s (especially a mother’s) choice to take up socially important work seems harder to justify. Second, the stress on nurture of one’s own over service to others has the effect of making parenting more of a private vocation. Although Post does write also of the Christian family’s responsibilities to those outside the family circle, he is more concerned with the right ordering of loves. Citing his own failure to put second his work with Alzheimer’s patients when his young son needed him, and discussing the problems of other overcommitted parents, he seeks to reemphasize the duty to care for kin.¹⁰ The overall effect is to minimize the responsibilities of parents (especially mothers) to non-family members.

Women theologians writing on parenting tend to question the idea of role differences more deeply than Post and to devote more energy to arguing for dual-career marriages in which both spouses have significant commitments outside the family. In her book *Family: A Christian Social Perspective*, Catholic ethicist Lisa Sowle Cahill does this in a subtle way by focusing less on parenting and more on the social responsibilities of the family, the other half of the dual vocation. While acknowledging the Catholic tradition’s emphasis on “permanent marriage and the two-parent family nurturing children,” she insists that families become domestic churches by carrying out “the social mission of compassion and service in spirit of Christian love.”¹¹ She holds up African American families as role models for more privileged families, calling attention to their concern for each other across family lines.¹² Because her primary concern is calling parents and children to embrace key roles in society, beyond a brief acknowledgment that the tradition focuses on parental responsibility for

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid. 196.

¹⁰ Ibid. 177-96. Post acknowledges that the Christian tradition today must necessarily focus here because parents are not committed enough to children.

¹¹ Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000) 129.

¹² Ibid.

children's character formation, she gives less attention to parental nurture.¹³

This reluctance to talk more fully about parenting limits Cahill's work, in my view, because the responsibilities of parents to care for their own can seem unimportant in comparison to weighty social duties attributed to families. In the context of Cahill's work, it would seem difficult to justify a choice to forgo a socially important job in order to spend more time with young children. Moreover, it is unclear how families themselves can live out the social justice Church's teachings at home. Even the idea of domestic church, which is central to her book, is primarily discussed in terms of social policy rather than in terms of what families might do together.¹⁴ Although this is obviously not Cahill's intention to devalue parenting, her emphasis on social commitment seems implicitly to diminish the weight of the parental vocation to nurture.

Thus, while both Post and Cahill assume that parenting involves work inside and outside the home for both men and women, Cahill sees the family differently than Post (as including the stranger rather than reaching out to the stranger) and thus she places the social mission of the family at the center of its existence. While not dismissive of parental duties, unlike Post (who places permanent marriage and care for children at the center of his project) Cahill is more focused on opening Christian families to the fullness of their social responsibilities. She claims that while care for one's own may be a universal family ethic, "the ultimate tests of a distinctively *Christian* ethics of family life go beyond the well-being of family members and the successful accomplishment of family roles. The Christian family defines *family values* as care for others, especially the poor."¹⁵ Thus primary care for children by parents is not the primary mission of the Christian family; care for others is. Post argues, in contrast, that in the Christian biblical family ethic: "familial love is placed at the very center of the entire spiritual universe, and thereby sets the example for universal solicitude. Only secondarily is the family focused outward."¹⁶ He seems far more aware of the limitations of human beings and of the neglected children of well-meaning, but over-committed parents.

Post and Cahill are representative of two important strains of contemporary Christian thought on parenting. Post believes the contemporary family crisis is a crisis of values which leads to diminished parental investment in children. He sees in the Christian tradition a strong valuing of family and concludes that today's Christian parents must retrieve a sense of

¹³ Ibid. 81.

¹⁴ Ibid. 95-110.

¹⁵ Ibid. 135. My own earlier work on family is similar in emphasis; see "Does Family Conflict with Community?" *Theological Studies* 58 (1997) 597-617.

¹⁶ Post, *More Lasting Unions* 62.

the centrality of family commitment. Cahill roots the contemporary crisis in the insularity of families and in their diminished investment in the poor. She sees in the Christian tradition a strong emphasis on social concern and calls today's families to reach outward. Both assume that parenting involves work and nurture for men and women, but each emphasizes one part of the dual vocation and unwittingly diminishes the fullness of the call to parent.

Catholic and Protestant feminist theologians also assume that parenting involves responsibilities to others as well as one's own, but they, too, often fail to reckon with the full meaning of dual vocation. Methodist theologian Bonnie Miller-McLemore, for instance, develops psychologist Erik Erickson's concept of generativity and argues that this should not be seen as a stage of life during which an adult is productive or creative, but rather as an ongoing dimension of adult life involving both productivity in the world of work and nurturing children at home.¹⁷ Contending that the first chapter of the Book of Genesis gives to both men and women the responsibilities to fill the earth (have and care for children) and to subdue it (work), she believes that living in a fully human way means being creative in both tasks.¹⁸ Miller-McLemore carefully distinguishes herself from radical feminists who seem to diminish the work of parenting, though she clearly seeks to respond to their writings. As well, she writes out of her own experience as a mother who struggles to balance teaching and writing with caring for her family.¹⁹ She argues quite powerfully that women and men need assistance from the Church and society as they strive to be "good enough" parents and workers.²⁰

The limitation of Miller-McLemore's work is that despite her interpretation of Genesis as a call to two kinds of work early on in her book, and despite her own obviously socially important work as a theologian, minister, and teacher, she spends most of book speaking about work as fulfillment rather than duty. While she appropriately describes care for children both as gift and task, she speaks of work as that which a mother must do *for herself* in order to be capable of giving to her children.²¹ While the emphasis on the self is significant and has been important in feminist work, it is not sufficient to ground a Christian ethic of work. The dual vocation

¹⁷ Bonnie Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother: Work and Family as Theological Dilemma* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994) 49.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 36–37.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 109–30.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 185–95.

²¹ *Ibid.* esp. 121–25. In this section, Miller-McLemore describes the book's cover image of a mother reaching up for her work of her own in order to be capable of reaching down to her child. The concept of generativity which grounds the book's central argument is discussed in terms of fulfillment (realizing desires to work and to parent) or authentic self-development rather than obligation. See also 175–85.

idea allows for the recognition of dual responsibilities that avoids stereotyping work as pleasurable escape from the gratifying but demanding work of childcare. One can find echoes of Miller-McLemore's argument in many other feminist writers.²² All share an interest in defending women's right to work and underlining their need to work. Like Post and Cahill, these Christian feminists do not ignore the importance of parenting. In fact, many are among the strongest voices calling for a renewed attention to children in a world that often ignores them. Yet, few make explicit the idea that Christian women and men are called (not just entitled) to serve both at home and the world. The following section aims to do just this.

A CHRISTIAN PARENT AT HOME: NURTURING ONE'S CHILDREN

Sacrificing one's own needs in order to nurture one's children is a large part of parenting. Pregnancy in particular is in some ways a paradigmatic experience of sacrificial love, for the mother's body is taken over by her child, who eats from her food, drinks from her drink, moves within her, causes her pain and discomfort, and distorts the shape of her body. In some important sense, pregnancy requires sacrifice of mothers whether or not they consciously choose it. Pregnancy itself pulls women into the sacrifices of parenting, readying them for (or at least warning them of) what is to come. In addition, all parents know that sacrifice is a necessary part of raising children. Believing this allows parents to go without sleep and change diapers in the early years, to give up the leisurely weekends of their prechild existence in exchange for weekends spent watching youth athletic games and cleaning the house, to give up relative tranquility for teenage years of rebellion and challenge. Those who are not willing to engage in significant sacrifice are not ready for parenting.

²² See Jule DeJager Ward, *La Leche League: At the Crossroads of Medicine, Feminism, and Religion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2000); Maria Riley, *Transforming Feminism* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1989); Carol Coston, "Women's Ways of Working," in *One Hundred Years of Catholic Social Thought: Celebration and Challenge*, ed. John A. Coleman (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1991); Christine Gudorf, "Western Religion and the Patriarchal Family," in *Perspectives on Marriage: A Reader*, ed. Kieran Scott and Michael Warren (New York: Oxford University, 2000) and "Parenting, Mutual Love and Sacrifice," in *Women's Consciousness Women's Conscience: A Reader in Feminist Ethics*, ed. Barbara H. Andersson, Christine E. Gudorf, and Mary D. Pellauer (Minneapolis: Winston/Seabury, 1985); Rosemary Radford Reuther, "Christian Understandings of Human Nature and Gender," in *Religion, Feminism, and the Family*, ed. Anne Carr and May Stewart Van Leeuwen (Louisville: Westminster, 1996); and Christina Traina, "Papal Ideals and Marital Realities: One View from the Ground," in *Sexual Diversity and Catholicism: Toward the Development of Moral Theology*, ed. Patricia Beattie Jung with Joseph Andrew Coray (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2001).

Moreover, most Christian parents feel that their children are worth all the time, energy, and love they have to give; nurture is what parents are called to do. This parental instinct can be justified in ethical terms by exploring the implications of natural connections between parents and children. It seems intuitively correct to say that children deserve parental care because of their physical connection to their parents. One Catholic theologian argues that:

If we really believe bodies matter, and are prepared to follow this insight where it takes us, we cannot help but acknowledge the fact that a child is produced by the bodily union of its mother and father, that the mother carries it in her body for nine months, that the child usually shares many of its parents' bodily features and bears their genetic inheritance, is of enormous significance and provides a uniquely firm foundation for a relationship of love.²³

This is not simply a concern for today. Vigen Guroian, an Armenian Oriental Orthodox theologian who teaches in the United States, has shown that fourth-century theologian John Chrysostom would call today's parents back to their primary duty to care for their children because they are connected. Guroian shows how Chrysostom puts the souls of children in parents' hands, and argues that "whether a child inherits the kingdom of heaven relies upon the care he or she receives from parents."²⁴ This strong sense of parents' ultimate responsibility comes from Chrysostom's belief that a child is intimately linked to her or his parents as is stated in *On Marriage and Family*:

The child is a bridge connecting mother to father, so the three become one flesh. . . . And here the bridge is formed from the substance of each! Just as the head and the body are one, so it is with the child. That is why Scripture does not say, 'They shall be one flesh.' But they shall be joined together 'into one flesh,' namely the child.²⁵

Chrysostom's belief that one-fleshness connects parents and children and links their lives and destinies together is echoed in the writings of Thomas Aquinas who uses natural law to connect children and parents. He posits that, because the child comes from the parents, they are best able to care for him. As Christina Traina puts it, for Aquinas: "the affective love of parent for child is appropriately among the most intense, intimate, long-lasting human attachments. No one is nearer to us than our children, whom

²³ Linda Woodhead, "Faith, Feminism, and the Family," in *The Family*, ed. Lisa Sowle Cahill and Dietmar Mieth, *Concilium* 1995/4 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1995) 45.

²⁴ Vigen Guroian, "The Ecclesial Family: John Chrysostom on Parenthood and Children," in *The Child in Christian Thought*, ed. Marcia Bunge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001) 69.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 67.

we love ‘as being part of ourselves.’²⁶ Given this assumption, Aquinas’s insistence that “[n]urture by the family—specifically the mother—is appropriate for children at [the] pre-rational stage” makes sense.²⁷ Biological ties weigh heavily in the writings of Aquinas and Chrysostom on childhood. Both of these key historical figures believe that because children and parents are bodily connected, they have special commitments to each other. Most contemporary parents would readily agree that this commitment is simply there when a child is born, thus it seems a natural, and good thing to fulfill it.²⁸

However, physical connection does not always lead to emotional connection. Stories of young women leaving newborn babies they never wanted in trashcans or hospitals are but one indication that pregnancy is not always a bonding experience for women. Stories of the many men who leave women when they are pregnant are one indication that genes are not enough to hold parents and children together. Writings by feminist mothers have revealed the un-naturalness of the parental bond for many women. In Adrienne Rich’s seminal text *Of Woman Born*, she writes of how she broke out in a rash several days before her first son was to be born. The rash was diagnosed as “an allergic reaction to pregnancy.”²⁹ A mother allergic to having children! Here, and throughout the book, Rich gives testimony to the difficulty she had embracing her role as mother, for to be a mother she had to give up her vocation as a poet. Though she struggled to complete the sacrifice she knew that she was supposed to make, she found herself incapable. This profound discomfort with the sacrifices of parenting compels Rich to begin and end her book with reflections on the true story of a mother “who had recently murdered and decapitated her two youngest two [of eight] on her suburban front lawn.”³⁰

One can take this seriously as a warning that parental love is not always natural and still affirm that though many parents would acknowledge experiencing moments of extreme anger with their children, for most, love and a profound desire to care for children in their vulnerable, dependent state win out. Theologian Sally Purvis speaks for many parents when she writes of how “the most sustained and trustworthy embodiment of agape in

²⁶ Traina, “A Person in the Making: Thomas Aquinas on Children and Childhood,” in *The Child in Christian Thought* 121.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 115.

²⁸ Stephen Post affirms this insight in his book *Spheres of Love: Toward a New Ethics of the Family* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University, 1994). He argues that “the first sphere of love is the one where our natural sympathies lie” (146).

²⁹ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood As Experience and Institution*, tenth anniversary ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986; orig. ed. 1976) 26.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 24.

my life is my experience of being a mother to my two sons.”³¹ Like many, Purvis is overwhelmed by how much she is capable of giving to her children. Over and against Kierkegaard’s claim that love for the dead is the criterion for universal, disinterested Christian love, or agape, Purvis suggests the model of a mother, who loves within an intense special relationship with her children.³² She argues that mother-love is inclusive in that it extends to all of her children, no matter who they are as individuals, that it is connected and focused on the needs of others, and that it is unconditional.³³ She then contends that her model better fits the scriptural stories from which Christians are supposed to take their understanding of love. Jesus told the Parable of the Good Samaritan and this story, Purvis argues, is about love that does not have limits, about a man who behaved not like a neighbor, but like a lover.³⁴ Mothers, too, are like lovers in that they care intensely for others, regardless of what is given back. It is this intensity to which Christians are both drawn and called.

Popular Christian writing also testifies to the importance of the parent-child bond in the lives of Christian families.³⁵ For instance, many journals for pregnant women ask women to use their pregnancy as a way to deepen their understanding of divine sacrifice and of the sacrifices they will make as parents. As mother and author Carrie Heiman writes:

I’m giving up my old body; I’m giving up my old world. My world seems to revolve more and more around this child. When I bring this child into my life, my life will not be the same again. There is so much I’m giving up so I can receive this new life. But maybe I shouldn’t be so surprised; that’s what Jesus did for me, isn’t it? He gave and gave until his body was changed almost beyond recognition—as it hung on the Cross. And finally he gave his very body and blood in order to bring me to spiritual birth.”³⁶

For Heiman, the giving or self-sacrifice is very physical, and yet also spiritual. Her physical transformation has spiritual import. As she becomes a mother, she is learning to give and thus becoming more Christ-like. Like Sally Purvis, who came to understand agape by reflecting on her mothering, Heiman comes to understand the Cross by reflecting on her pregnancy. Both women affirm the power of the experience of mothering, the connection between mother and child, and the importance of sacrifice. As

³¹ Sally Purvis, “Mothers, Neighbors and Strangers: Another Look at Agape,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 7 (Spring 1991) 19.

³² Ibid. 21. Purvis, like Post, questions the agape tradition of Kierkegaard, Gene Outka, and others.

³³ Ibid. 26–27.

³⁴ Ibid. 30.

³⁵ See, for instance, Mitch Finley, *Your Family in Focus: Appreciating What You Have, Making It Even Better* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria, 1993).

³⁶ Carrie J. Heiman, *The Nine-Month Miracle: A Journal for the Mother-to-Be* (Liguori, Mo.: Liguori, 1986) week 24.

Miller-McLemore points out, pregnancy is but one part of being/becoming a parent. Men, too, can experience profound connections to their children. Still, the experience of pregnancy is unique and revelatory, for, “In the pregnant body, the self and the other coexist. The other is both myself and not my self, hourly, daily becoming more separate, until that which was mine becomes irrevocably another. In the pregnancy moment, I am one but two.”³⁷

According to Miller-McLemore, the knowledge women gain from carrying and nursing babies is not “privileged knowledge. It is knowledge that must be shared.”³⁸ Moreover, it can be shared and appropriated by others who have not become mothers. It is also not learned or appropriated by all who do become mothers. Because human beings are not determined by biology, they experience things differently and learn in unique ways. If not all biological mothers learn connection and empathy from pregnancy, many fathers can and do. They, too, experience the pull of their children upon their energies. They want to sacrifice for them and nurture them.

The experience of Christian parents affirms that the duty to nurture one’s children is rooted in the physical connections between parent and child. The Christian tradition testifies to the experience of Christian parents when it recognizes that children deserve parents’ time and attention. This claim reflects the ongoing discernment of the Christian community as its members reflect on their experiences and come to understand their intense love for those closest to them. Clearly, care for one’s own is a crucial part of the Christian moral life.³⁹

BEING A CHRISTIAN PARENT OUTSIDE THE HOME: PUBLIC WORK

The value of nurturing one’s own children does not provide an adequate basis for a full discussion of the Christian calling to parenthood. Historically, the Christian tradition has had more to say about the family than this. In the Gospels, what stands out is a suspicion of the family, a concern that it will be difficult to live a truly Christian life if one stays within the traditional family structure. Ambivalence about the family continues throughout the Christian tradition. All of this suggests the necessity of rethinking the centrality of nurturing one’s own children and considering the importance of caring for those outside one’s own family.

³⁷ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Also a Mother* 143.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ See also, Karen Peterson-Iyer and Bridget Burke Ravizza, “The Price of Christian Motherhood: Are Christian Universities Willing to Pay It?” unpublished paper, presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics, Vancouver, Canada, January 13, 2002. Peterson-Iyer and Ravizza root the obligation to care in the dignity of the child and in magisterial teaching upholding the “lofty calling of parenthood” (*The Church and the Modern World* no. 47).

Jesus and the Early Christians as Models

It is not possible here to give a full account of the scriptural witness on families, but it should be possible to show that discipleship in the Gospels requires going beyond love of one's family. The Gospel of Mark provides a good example of a conflict between family and discipleship in Jesus' own life. Jesus is teaching a large crowd that follows him everywhere he goes. His mother and brothers hear about this and go to find and "seize" him (Mark 3:20–22). When the crowd tells him that his family has come to see him, he asks: "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking around on those who sat about him, he said: 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother' " (Mark 3:33–35). Jesus rejects his family's attempt to take him away from his disciples. He might have simply told his family that he had pressing work to do. Instead, he uses his rejection of their request to call the whole nature of the kinship bond into question. He says very plainly that those he has gathered around him are his new family, and he seems to deny loyalty or duty to his family of origin. The author of the Anchor Bible commentary claims that this statement "exemplifies the radical demand of Jesus upon those who are set in a new framework in which bonds of fellowship in a common obedience to God are placed above the bonds of kinship."⁴⁰ Another commentator simply says that Jesus tells his disciples here that "spiritual kinship surpasses the accidents of birth."⁴¹ When confronted with the demands of his family, Jesus proposes a new radical moral standard that threatens the most basic family loyalties and engenders the most difficult conflicts between family and religious commitment.

In a related story in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells a man who wants to follow him that he must not stop to bury his dead father. "Leave the dead to bury their own dead," Jesus says, "but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (Luke 9:60, parallel in Matthew 8:21–22). Luke shows Jesus asking for devotion to the work of kingdom of God, understanding that his command will call into question even ordinary family affection. According to Joseph Fitzmyer, Jesus "knows . . . that the demands of the kingdom are bound to rupture even ordinary family life."⁴²

As in the Markan story, Jesus' words grate against the most basic moral sensibilities. What can Jesus possibly have meant by this? It seems that he

⁴⁰ C. S. Mann, *The Gospel according to Mark*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 27 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1986) 259. See also relevant commentary on parallel passages (Luke 8:19–21, Matthew 12:46–50).

⁴¹ Ezra P. Gould, *Mark*, International Critical Commentary (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 68.

⁴² Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke*, The Anchor Bible, vol. 28 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1986) 834.

cannot have been speaking literally. Still even a figurative interpretation leaves one with an extreme family-denying ethic. Perhaps, some have argued, Jesus is speaking only to those with a special calling to leave everything for him. Or perhaps this and other similar passages date from early strains of the oral traditions (“Q” and “proto-Mark”) that were gathered and edited by the wandering charismatics who made up the core of the Jesus movement.⁴³ However, it is more likely that this saying of Jesus is not a literal command addressed to a special group (there is no indication that it is), but rather a command pregnant with symbolism that is intended to address a general need for disciples of Jesus to place their commitment to Jesus above their commitments to their families. Richard Horsley makes this point precisely and further claims that Jesus’ radical anti-family message was rooted in his commitment to his mission: “the revitalization of local community life.”⁴⁴ This mission required some to leave their families and spread the word, while others opened and restructured their families at home. The goal, according to Horsley, was a society in which people treated each other with compassion, forgave each other’s debts, shared their property, and refused to lord power over each other. Some rejection of the traditional family was necessary in order to move toward the goal of a renewed and restructured family and community life in which discipleship had priority for all.

Yet, Jesus does not altogether reject marriage. Rather, in his refusal to sanction divorce, he reaffirms the importance of the marital commitment in the lives of the people he has gathered around him. He recalls the Genesis account, and claims that “from the beginning of creation, ‘God made them male and female.’ ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ . . . What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder” (Mark 10:6–9). This saying is widely viewed as support for marriage as a holy union. It should allay any fears that “marriage or the nuclear family (was) rejected or even devalued.”⁴⁵

So if marriage is not rejected altogether, what is? Certainly, the patriarchal structure of the family—both the absence of fathers in the new kingdom and Jesus’ admonition to “Call no man father” (Mt. 23:9) attest to this. But it is difficult to deny a more far-reaching anti-kinship message in this crucial set of Jesus’ sayings, for he does not simply target fathers. Mothers, children, and siblings are implicated as well. It is the bond of kinship itself and all the ethical priority that comes with it which is being called into

⁴³ Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989), makes this claim about the makeup of the early Church.

⁴⁴ Richard Horsley, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement* (New York: Crossroad, 1989) 117.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 123.

question, because the Jesus of the Gospels preaches that family, like money and power, can be dangerous to the person who is trying to live a holy life. He taught that those who would serve God must resist the temptation to make care of their own their only mission in life.

This emphasis on going beyond family makes sense if one understands the historical context. In the Greco-Roman world in which Jesus lived, family was a weightier matter. It was the primary reality, more important than individuals certainly, and significant in its relation to the state because through the family, more citizens for the Roman Empire were produced.⁴⁶ For this reason, the early Christians were derided, and even persecuted for their anti-family views.⁴⁷ Greco-Roman ideals of marriage in Jesus' time emphasized the ethical duty to marry. Marriages came into existence via private compacts between two persons who intended to become husband and wife.⁴⁸ However, children were a crucial part of marriage. In fact, "[p]rocreation was regarded as a civic duty, and all citizens of marriageable age were expected to contribute."⁴⁹ Because life expectancies were so short and the survival of the society was so crucial, through law and social pressure, "young men and women were discreetly mobilized to use their bodies for reproduction."⁵⁰

Historical sources are replete with examples of cultural and ethical conflict between the Romans, who believed the family to be the prime sacred duty, and the early Christians, who affirmed other priorities. Stories of women who sneak out of their husbands' beds at night to join in Christian worship in other rooms, or stories of disciples of Christ who come together despite diverse backgrounds, or of women who give up their high status as wives to "slaves of God" are common in Christian literature of the time.⁵¹ Moreover, the early Christian text *The Acts of Paul and Thecla* portrays Thecla as a heroine because she leaves her fiancé to preach the gospel with Paul.⁵² She and other early Christian celibates contributed to the Christians' reputation in Palestine as "homewreckers," initiators of a message not of household order but disorder.⁵³

This is all the more shocking because among the Palestinian Jews, mar-

⁴⁶ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University, 1988) 5–7.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ David Hunter, *Marriage in the Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992) 6.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 7. Hunter notes, however, that around the time Christianity was developing, there was in Roman thought a move toward seeing marriage more as a friendship. This trend influenced early Christian writers. See 7–8.

⁵⁰ Brown, *The Body and Society* 6.

⁵¹ Andrew Jacobs, "A Family Affair: Marriage, Class, and Ethics in the Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 7 (1999) 105–38.

⁵² Ibid. 106.

⁵³ Ibid. 107.

riage was expected as a matter of course.⁵⁴ The Hebrew Bible presents us with “a religious community built upon the patriarchal family.”⁵⁵ Unlike Roman society, in which family loyalty is linked to state and cult, the family in Jewish culture is directly tied to the faith. The Jews as a people have a covenant with God, and each Jew becomes a part of the covenant in and through the family. Marriage went largely unquestioned in the lives of Palestinian Jews, until Jesus of Nazareth came onto the scene.⁵⁶

The marriage ideals of both Jewish and Roman cultures were sweeping in scope and demanding in expectations. It is not difficult to understand that Jesus of Nazareth, who, like other radicals of his time, wanted to give himself totally to God, questioned the marital ethos of the time. The demand for so much loyalty to family seemed to him idolatrous. He did not want family to function as an idol in his life, or in the lives of his followers, so he asked them to go against the cultural mores of their time and put God first. The early Christians heard this message, as is evident in New Testament and early Christian texts.

Of course, the New Testament also contains affirmations of marriage like the well-known words from Ephesians 5:22–23 (“Wives submit to your husbands as to the Lord. . . . Husbands love your wives as your own bodies.”). There are two strains in the Christian tradition, both of which strive to be true to Jesus’ message. One, represented by Paul and his followers, represents an attempt to build upon Jesus’ affirmation of marriage and the experience of married Christian men and women that marriage is good and even godly. This is the strain that eventually triumphed, and it is the one that is most often preached today. However, even today, there are echoes of the more radical early strain which questions the possibility of harmoniously combining love for God (and its accompanying public vocation to spread the gospel) with the more private vocation of giving oneself in marriage. Historian Peter Brown notes that this strain is rooted in the ancient belief that a good person must achieve “singleness of heart,” or total commitment to one god. He argues that this vision “is the great hope

⁵⁴ See Horsley, *Sociology and the Jesus Movement* 113.

⁵⁵ Cahill, *Family* 142.

⁵⁶ The exceptions here are radical groups like the Essenes and Therapeutae who did live in celibate communities, before the advent of Jesus’ ministry. However, though these groups were well-respected, they do not represent mainstream Jewish or Greek thought or practice. See Stephen C. Barton, “The Relativisation of Family Ties” in *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*, ed. Halvor Moxnes (New York: Routledge, 1997). Barton claims that the evidence of alternatives and the praise of these groups indicate that Jesus is continuing a tradition rather than breaking it. However, his evidence centers largely on elite groups, while the early Jesus movement is a broad-based family-questioning movement. Thus, in my view, Jesus does begin something quite new, though it does have some roots in radical strains of his tradition.

which, in all future centuries, would continue to flicker disquietingly along the edges of the Christian Church.”⁵⁷ It can be heard today in the Catholic Church’s assertion that celibacy is a higher calling than marriage.⁵⁸ It is also heard in the quiet lives of priests, monks, and women religious that say to married Christians: “There is more to life than family. God may sometimes be more deeply known and loved by those who are free from other passions.” The higher valuing of the non-married life is a constant challenge to Christian families.

If this tradition is taken seriously, the idea that parental sacrifice for children must take precedence over the public vocations of men and women must be brought into question. Jesus’ followers are called first and foremost to discipleship in community. He tells them that discipleship with him means *not* putting their families first. He asks them to break out of traditional roles, especially traditional family roles, in order to realize the radical meaning of his message. The Christian tradition, at least in its early stages, is no more encouraging. Contemporary Christians who want to be true to Scripture and tradition have to reckon with the centrality of the Christian’s public vocation as it is attested to by these sources.

If discipleship is the fundamental calling of Christians, discipleship to Jesus of Nazareth presumes a public vocation. Certainly one can practice Christian virtue, keep the many of the commandments, and obey God’s will at home in one’s family. Perhaps the Gospels and early tradition were insufficiently attentive to this reality, which contemporary Christians know so well. However, I would argue that one cannot fully realize the demands of discipleship to Jesus unless one also has a public vocation. The public nature of discipleship is evident in the life of Jesus. Jesus himself acknowledges the conflict between serving God (in his public preaching) and serving his family. Jesus’ mission is primarily public, so public that he is eventually crucified (given the death of a political criminal). Those who were his earliest followers sought to continue his mission by traveling to spread his message, forming new kinds of families that were radically inclusive, and refusing to participate in many mainstream political practices and institutions. Discipleship to Jesus must involve some form of public vocation.

Work in the Present-Day Catholic Tradition

The Catholic tradition affirms the importance of a public vocation and presumes that work is an important aspect of that vocation. Pope John Paul

⁵⁷ Brown, *The Body and Society* 36, 53.

⁵⁸ John Paul II *On the Family* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1981) no. 16. The pope argues that uplifting celibacy confirms the goodness of marriage, because it is the sacrifice of something that is very good. I would argue that the celibacy tradition paradoxically affirms and questions the goodness of marriage.

II writes in *Laborem exercens* that “work is a fundamental dimension of man’s existence on earth.”⁵⁹ Work is not simply something that one does to fill a day, or what one has to do in order to eat. According to the pope, work is commanded by God in Genesis 1:28 (“Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.”), and therefore it must be fundamental to humanity. The subject of work is the human person.⁶⁰ Work is something persons choose. The work a person does must “serve to realize his humanity, to fulfill his calling to be a person that is his by reason of his very humanity.”⁶¹ A person’s work is her vocation. In her work, she realizes herself as a person. Work is both an obligation and a right of all persons.⁶² It is a share in the work of the Creator.⁶³

Two important ethical implications can be drawn from John Paul II’s theology of work. First, all persons have a calling that must be answered, an invitation to share in the shaping and molding of the world. Work is a right, not simply because all persons have a right to the basic necessities of life, but because all persons have something important to do in this world by which they will realize themselves. Second, the work that persons do is crucially important. It is not something to be thought of lightly, or not thought of at all in relation to one’s Christian vocation. Work is a fundamental part of the moral life. The Fathers of Vatican II stated that Christians must not separate faith and life.⁶⁴ What people do is an important part of who they are. A Christian cannot choose to engage in work in a less than fully human way.

Nevertheless, no specific kind of work is ruled out. The pope claims that it is the person who works, not the work itself that is crucial.⁶⁵ This qualification is important in that it affirms that people can work in a variety of jobs while living out their Christian vocation. However, it is also important to acknowledge that people are easily persuaded not to look closely at what kind of work they do. Clearly, too, not all work can be considered Christian work.⁶⁶

Dorothy Day’s insistence that work is prayer is a helpful qualifier to the pope’s general vision. Day values work that truly benefits needy human beings. In her book *Loaves and Fishes* Day writes about the quiet com-

⁵⁹ John Paul II, *On Human Labor* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1981) no. 4.

⁶⁰ Ibid. no. 6.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid. no. 16.

⁶³ Ibid. no. 25.

⁶⁴ *Gaudium et spes*, no. 43; translation by Austin Flannery, O.P., *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, rev. ed. (Northport, N.Y.: Costello, 1988).

⁶⁵ *On Human Labor* no. 6.

⁶⁶ This pope’s recent statement denying the legitimacy of Catholic lawyers’ work on divorce cases is a case in point.

mitment of a woman named Marie who each night sweeps the floor of the Catholic Worker house and sees her work as a prayer.⁶⁷ The sweeping of the floor allows life to go on in a shelter for some of the most disadvantaged in the city. Surely it is important to Day that she sweeps this floor and not another. Day herself struggled until she found meaningful work that was in accord with her faith. Writing was not enough; she wanted to be a part of a Christian community committed to the poor. In this context, writing, cooking, and sweeping the floor are important work. Day's example is a reminder that Christians are called to find significant work; only this work constitutes prayer.

For Christian parents who are trying to live as disciples of Christ, this means that work ought to be seen as more than a means to an end, more than a way to support a family. It makes little sense to spend ten to fourteen hours a day getting ready for, driving to, doing, and driving home from something less than meaningful in order that the other, more meaningful two to six hours of a day are possible. It makes little sense to spend the majority of our time doing something unrelated to who we really are. For if work is not a part of what we are, what are we? In his theology of work, the pope forces this question, because he affirms that work is fundamental to the development and fulfillment of human beings and insists that human beings can and must choose humanizing work.

If work is all this, it does not seem that Christian parents can avoid the fulfillment of a public vocation or work during their parenting years. Work is a part of a Christian's commitment to live an ethical life. It cannot be put aside when children arrive, nor can the needs of children be allowed to completely shift the focus of work from humanity to providing the best for one's own.

Family in the Contemporary Catholic Tradition

The same Catholic tradition that sees work as a part of one's public vocation also claims that family life is, in part, public. It views the family not simply as a private haven, but as a community with a mission that goes beyond itself. In the Catholic tradition, family life is a part of the public vocation of parents.

In John Paul II's 1981 postsynodal apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio* (*On the Family*) he defines the family as "a community of life and love" that has four major tasks. Each of these tasks has public dimensions. The first task is the most obvious. The family must "guard, reveal and communicate love."⁶⁸ He distinguishes himself from earlier popes by the

⁶⁷ Dorothy Day, *Loaves and Fishes* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963) 221.

⁶⁸ *On the Family* no. 17.

inspired way in which he describes married love and demands that it rise to the heights for which it is destined. His personalist language represents an attempt to take seriously the importance that modern men and women give to spousal relationships. Love among family members is primary not because it is most important, but because it is the foundation for the rest of what the family does. This is the beginning, not the end.

The second task is that of “serving life.” According to the pope, this means that parents have a responsibility to serve life by nurturing children *and* by bringing life to the world.⁶⁹ Having children is only the first step. Education is an important responsibility, and it includes the task of instilling in children, “the essential values of human life,” especially the idea that possessions do not make human beings who they are and the responsibility to adopt a simple lifestyle.⁷⁰ The pope also affirms that when mothers and fathers teach their children about the gospel, “they become fully parents, in that they are begetters not only of bodily life but also of the life that through the Spirit’s renewal flows from the cross and resurrection of Christ.”⁷¹ This seems to indicate that passing on the Christian faith is even more important than the admittedly awesome process of passing on life. Here, as in the gospel itself, the spiritual and public duty is placed above (but in relation to) the private duty. This emphasis on the spiritual is made clear when the pope claims that families have a “spiritual fecundity” by which they share with others the self-giving love they nurture within.⁷² Families are called to respond especially to all of God’s children with compassion. Serving life is much more than having babies.

The third task to which the pope calls families further indicates that families are not oriented simply toward their own good. Families are called to participate in the development of society, for “far from being closed in on itself, the family is by its nature and vocation open to other families and to society and undertakes its social role.”⁷³ This means that families “cannot stop short at procreation and education;”⁷⁴ they have distinct and fundamental social and political duties.⁷⁵ Specifically, the pope asks families first, to practice hospitality, opening their table and their home to those who are not as fortunate as they are, second, to become politically involved, assisting in the transformation of society, and third, to practice preferential option for the poor, manifesting a “special concern for the hungry, the poor, the old, the sick, drug victims and those with no family.”⁷⁶ All of this is part of the social mission of the family. It is not optional, nor is it an add-on that families are to do after the really important tasks

⁶⁹ Ibid. no. 28.

⁷¹ Ibid. no. 39.

⁷³ Ibid. no. 42.

⁷⁵ Ibid. nos. 44, 47.

⁷⁰ Ibid. no. 37.

⁷² Ibid. no. 41.

⁷⁴ Ibid. no. 44.

⁷⁶ Ibid. no. 47.

are done. It is, according to John Paul II, a fundamental part of a family's identity and calling. This activity might be described as a crucial part of a family's public vocation. It is what it does, as a community of love, in the world.

Finally, to describe the fourth task the pope uses the "domestic church" imagery which received renewed attention at Vatican II to suggest that families must serve the Church as well as one another.⁷⁷ As a "church in miniature," the family evangelizes its members, witnesses to the world, uses its home as a sanctuary (for rituals of prayer, sacrament, and sacramentals) and serves the broader community—for like the Church, the family is a servant of humanity.⁷⁸ Here again, the emphasis is on the public role of the family.

At each point in his description of the ideal family, the pope implies that families are about more than themselves. They are communities of love, but they are not inwardly focused. They serve life by giving birth, physically and spiritually. They serve society, especially the poorest members. They are the church in their home, and as such contribute to its ecclesial mission. John Paul II's emphasis on the social responsibilities of the family implies that Christian parenting requires something different of parents than focusing on the family. The genius of Catholic teaching on the family is that it refuses to limit families by telling them just to take care of their own. It calls into question the ethic of parenting in American culture that centers on the duty of parents to sacrifice for their children. His definition of family seems to require instead that parents serve their children and the world.

Both the earliest strains of the Christian tradition and contemporary Catholic teaching indicate that all Christians have a duty to engage in public work. While neither full-time work nor work for pay is obligatory, some kind of commitment to the good of others or the common good seems required. In the Gospels and the papal teaching on work, this obligation extends to all Christians, including parents, but it is specifically linked to parents as family members in John Paul II's prophetic teaching on the family.

A SPLIT VOCATION?

While the papal teaching stresses that families have private and public vocations and calls all persons to humanizing work, it continues to call women to full-time motherhood. One might ask whether this teaching advocates a split vocation for families, with women covering the "private" realm and men taking care of "public" dimensions.

⁷⁷ Ibid. no. 21.

⁷⁸ Ibid. nos. 49–64. Lisa Cahill also attests to this emphasis in recent Catholic teaching on the family; see her *Family* 89–91.

Papal teaching clearly states that women are the primary parents who bear the cross of parenting most directly. In *On the Family*, John Paul II claims that women's work in the home ought to be celebrated and made more possible by society. If women must work outside the home, the pope asks that they make sure that their family life comes first.⁷⁹ In his 1994 *Letter to Families* written for the International Year of the Family, he calls raising children "a genuine apostolate," but differentiates between the primary role of mother, and the secondary role of father, who must "become willingly involved as a husband and father in the motherhood of his wife."⁸⁰ The nuclear family is presumed to be the ideal place for childcare. Recent writings have included more acknowledgment that women have the right to work and bring distinct gifts to public life.⁸¹ Still, the current plurality of family situations in the contemporary world is not viewed positively. For example, in a recent speech, the acknowledgment of women's gifts is followed by a prayer to entrust the Virgin Mary with the challenge that working women present. The Holy Family, in which "Mary, like any good housewife, was busy with domestic tasks while Joseph, with Jesus beside him, worked as a carpenter," is still the ideal.⁸² More significantly, the idea that parents might struggle to balance nurture for children with a vocation in society is not taken up as a moral dilemma. All of this seems to indicate that the Catholic tradition sees men and women as responsible for only half of the dual vocation of the family.

On the other hand, the pope claims that women's care for their families *is* work and has social import because it is crucial to society that children are loved and nurtured.⁸³ He rightly acknowledges that the work of parenting contributes to the good of society and is in that sense public work.⁸⁴ He also acknowledges that fathers care for their families by working, and are (secondarily) directly responsible for their children.⁸⁵ It seems that the papal teaching advocates dual vocation, but with an imbalance. Mothers fulfill private and public vocations by mothering, with an emphasis on the private, while fathers fulfill private and public vocations by working, with

⁷⁹ *On the Family* no. 23.

⁸⁰ *Letter to Families* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1994) no. 16.

⁸¹ See especially his *Letter to Women* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1995) nos. 2, 5, 6, and 8. Throughout the letter, the pope lauds the contributions of women to public life while reiterating the idea that men and women have complementary roles in society, the family, and the Church.

⁸² "Equal Opportunity in the World of Work" [August 20, 1995] in *The Genius of Women* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1997) 32–33.

⁸³ *On the Dignity and Vocation of Woman* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1988) no. 19.

⁸⁴ See Peterson-Iyer and Ravizza 12 (see above n. 39)

⁸⁵ *On the Family* no. 25.

an emphasis on the public. Does this division of vocation square with contemporary experience?

Feminist Mothers

Feminist writing of the last three decades reveals that those who do caring work often experience this work as isolating and they long to participate in the larger society. Many women who are very committed to parenting nonetheless speak about the need for work that involves them in the lives of individuals who are not their own. Many feminist mothers have expressed their frustration with the limitations of work that is concentrated in the home and involves a great many tasks that are necessary and valuable, but also mundane, repetitive, and seemingly unconnected to the larger world. Feminist writers claim that many women need public work in order to be fulfilled as persons, and this claim fits nicely with Catholic teaching on the right and duty of public participation. Both Catholic thought and feminist thought affirm the importance of public vocation, while still upholding the importance of the work of parenting.⁸⁶

Feminist literature on mothering is different from the idealistic portraits of motherhood which appear in popular culture and even in academic writing. This literature is unintelligible to many who are new to it. For instance, in Stephen Post's discussion of parental love, he criticizes a feminist essay entitled, "Motherhood: The Annihilation of Women," claiming that although in some extreme cases, motherhood is seriously problematic for women, "were most mothers asked whether motherhood has 'annihilated' them, they would find the question extreme and even peculiar."⁸⁷ However, feminist mothering literature gives voice to the very real feeling of many mothers that parenting, while exhilarating and fulfilling in many ways, is not enough to fill a life.

In 1969, Betty Friedan called it "the problem with no name," and chronicled a generation of women's feelings of emptiness, lack of self-worth, and incompleteness.⁸⁸ Since then, feminist writers have struggled to explain the ambivalence of their experience of motherhood. Adrienne Rich is perhaps the best known and most articulate. Rich writes in *Of Woman Born* that when she thought back upon her early mothering years, she "could remember little except anxiety, physical weariness, anger, self-blame, boredom, and division within myself: a division made more acute by the moments of passionate love, delight in my children's spirited bodies

⁸⁶ When Catholic thought addresses the worker or the parent generally, this is true. This insight gets lost when women or men are specifically addressed as is evident above.

⁸⁷ Post, *More Lasting Unions* 59.

⁸⁸ Betty Friedan *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963) 15–17.

and minds, amazement at how they went on loving me in spite of my failures to love them wholly and selflessly.”⁸⁹ Rich gave up her vocation as a writer in order to be with her children full-time. She writes that she struggled to have some life of her own, and recalls that she “was fighting for my life through, against, and with the lives of my children.”⁹⁰ She longed for more time for her work, for the realm of poetry, “where I lived as no one’s mother, where I existed as myself.”⁹¹ Out of this experience of suffering, Rich wrote a book examining the roots of motherhood as an institution. In the book she takes pains to establish she has great hope for motherhood as an experience, but she believes that it must be freed from the trappings of the institution that make it women’s whole identity. Rich’s poignant writing is a testimony to women’s need to be something other than mothers. It is testimony to women’s need for public vocations.

Current feminist writing has often given voice to the reality that working women long for more time to fulfill the responsibilities of their private vocation to their children. They do not see their financial support of their family as fulfilling their duty to care for their own. Instead, they want more time to play with, teach, and care for their children. As Peterson Izer and Ravizza put it, “children and parents can benefit enormously from more time spent together—reading stories, playing games, kissing and hugging, talking to one another; most children and parents alike long for more of this kind of presence.”⁹² Unsatisfied with the way men have embraced public work, contemporary feminists struggle to define new ways of working that allow for the fulfillment of both public and private vocations.

Modern Fathers

Feminist literature indicates that parenthood is a not fully a public vocation for women. Some of the new popular work on fatherhood parallels this literature in its support for the notion that public work is crucial to men’s self-fulfillment. Pioneers in the field of fathering argue that men should not feel guilty about their work outside the home because work gives them a sense of accomplishment, emotional fulfillment, and a chance to make a difference.⁹³ Despite the fact that they encourage men to spend at least a little more time at home, the authors are careful to affirm men’s efforts to care for their children by providing for them, and to let men know that their own happiness at work contributes to their children’s quest to be

⁸⁹ Rich, *Of Woman Born* 15.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 29.

⁹² *Ibid.* 30.

⁹³ Mitch and Susan Golant, *Finding Time for Fathering* (New York: Ballantine, 1993) 28–29.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 31.

independent and successful persons.⁹⁴ New writers on fatherhood advocate more interaction with children for men, while affirming the important, even crucial, place of public work in men's lives.

Even writers such as Robert Griswold, author of *Fatherhood in America*, who question the dominance of work in men's lives, do not suggest that men abandon work altogether. Griswold argues that women's entry into the labor force has changed all the rules for men. He asserts that: "Nothing has posed a greater challenge to the ideology of male breadwinning and traditional male prerogatives than this transformation in the household economy."⁹⁵ Griswold welcomes this challenge because he sees breadwinning as an inadequate platform around which to build a whole definition of fatherhood, let alone a whole identity. On the other hand, he speaks at several points about the "boring, repetitious, and vexing work of child care."⁹⁶ He closes his book with the hopeful claim that one day mothers and fathers will be both workers and caregivers.⁹⁷

Perhaps it seems unremarkable that no one is urging men to become full-time parents. When the average man spends so little time per day with his children, it may be ridiculous to ask for more than additional "quality time" or, at most, a sharing of roles. Still, it is significant that most people are aware enough of the limitations of parenting work to know that asking men to embrace that work full-time is not the best option. Men are not asked to become fathers in the same way that women have been mothers. On the other hand, men are being asked to extend their conception of fathering beyond breadwinning, and a growing number of coparenting fathers are coming to rejoice in the delights of child rearing.

Thus fathering literature, in its insistence that men's public work is valuable for men, is the flipside of the feminist mothering literature which insists that women's total investment in work in the home may be detrimental to women. Both sets of writings point toward the idea that persons have a need to participate in work which is in some important sense larger or more far-reaching than the work of parenting, even as they affirm the duties and joys of caring for children.

Serving in Two Realms

The need to engage in public work is sometimes characterized as a need for fulfillment, in opposition to the duty to sacrifice that the work of parenting is founded upon. However, this kind of dichotomizing is inaccu-

⁹⁴ Ibid. 61–62.

⁹⁵ Robert Griswold, *Fatherhood in America: A History* (New York: Basic, 1993) 220.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 2.

⁹⁷ Ibid. 269.

rate and unhelpful. Many parents speak with intensity about the joy of being with their children or with guilt about how much fun they are having at home. Studies of stay-home mothers indicate that when women want to stay home, their experiences can be quite positive.⁹⁸ Thus, parenting is not wholly self-sacrificial, but the desire to work is not wholly self-serving either. Most working parents speak of their work at least in part as a calling, a way to use their talents in service to society. Perhaps what women long for and what men refuse to give up is the very connection to the world, the very same vocation to serve that the pope writes about. Perhaps what parents are saying is that they want to serve and enjoy life both at home and in the world. They want to be a central part of both realms of life—the private and the public.

DUAL VOCATION WITH CAUTION: LAME PARENTS SLOUCHING FORWARD

I have argued that Christian parents are called to balance nurture of children with a willingness to take up the work of Christ in the world. Both the Christian tradition and the experience of Christian parents testify to importance of rearing one's own offspring and to the desire to serve others. The Gospels and the early Christian tradition witness both to the importance of care for children and to the primary obligation of adult Christians to discipleship, which presumes a public vocation. The contemporary Catholic tradition speaks to the importance of work and family as dimensions of one's public vocation and of the importance of parental nurturance. Thus a fully Christian discussion of parenting will emphasize ethical obligations of men and women to realize their Christian calling both at home and in the world. Christian parents have important public responsibilities inside and outside the boundaries of their families.

However, the idea of public vocation is not meant to be a justification for high-power jobs that do not allow for adequate time with children. Galinsky's *Ask the Children* provides powerful testimony from children themselves that some parents take their work commitment far too seriously. When children are asked what they want to tell the working parents of America, many talk about time. They say: "You don't know how it hurts when you think your parents love their job more than you," or "I wish you would stop working so much and spend more time with us," or "Spend time with your children, because when you're gone, there is a big hole in our hearts that makes some or most of us want to cry."⁹⁹ A Christian under-

⁹⁸ Galinsky, *Ask the Children* 49, 54. She notes that the mother's feelings about what she is doing, whether it is working or staying home, make the difference.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.* 343–44.

standing of the dual vocation of parenting must not contribute to the rationalizing of parents who do not spend enough time with their children.

Still, the Christian tradition does point toward the notion that parenting is both a public and a private calling. Implied in the notion of public vocation is the idea that the full self-realization of a Christian requires involvement in private and public life. This understanding of the human person, is assumed both in Catholic teaching on work and in Catholic teaching on the family. It implies that focusing on one's family is not enough for Christian parents.

Flannery O'Connor's short story "The Lame Shall Enter First" can be read as a portrait of a man who fails as a Christian in both his public and private vocations. In private, he ignores his son's feelings and is crassly ignorant of his son's needs. He attempts to make his family life "public," but ends up failing to convince his son of the importance of unselfishness because he does not truly model it at home. He fails in his public life because he tries to remake Rufus in his own image instead of listening to what the boy truly needs. He is more in love with the idea of himself as savior than with the work and worker of salvation. He does not fully comprehend the scope and limits of his dual vocation as a parent.

All of these failings should give parents pause, but should not send them back to "focus on the family." Sheppard sins, finally, not because he fails to put family first, but because he, like all of Flannery O'Connor's characters, is finite or lame, limited by his very humanity in his quest to be a good parent and a good citizen, or, in Christian terms, a good disciple. However, O'Connor did not write her gloomy stories to convince her readers to give up the struggle to go beyond their limits. Instead, she hoped that those whom she called "lame beasts slouching toward Bethlehem"¹⁰⁰ would not fail to take up humbly the challenge of being Christ for others. Her story suggests, as any good Christian story would, that this must be done at home and in the world.

¹⁰⁰ Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, edited and with an introduction by Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Noonday, 1979) 90. The original phrase is from W. B. Yeats's poem, "The Second Coming."