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The Catholic Perspective on Marriage and Family

God is a good father, and Our Lady is a good mother. Human families are much messier, and the Catholic Church provides valuable insight into understanding how men and women are to be related to one another in marriage and families. Through marriage, husbands and wives devote themselves fully to the good of the other, accomplished through total union with each other. This union is ordered towards procreation, and in raising children, both fathers and mothers make vital contributions, but they do so in different ways.

The first end of marriage is that husbands and wives enter into a complete union. When mankind is first created, he is acutely aware of the fact that he is alone, existing in a state called original solitude. The creation of woman enables man to engage in a communion of persons; this reciprocal relationship allows humankind to image God more fully, as God is a communion of persons (*Theology of the Body* 163). This union culminates physically in the sexual act, in which spouses make total gifts of themselves (*Theology of the Body* 186). Through this shared life and communion of persons, spouses seek to perfect one another in virtue and ultimately help one another in going to heaven (*Casti Connubii* 24). This first aim of marriage seeks to build a good that is intrinsic to the couple: their mutual love, care, and support.

The second aim of marriage looks toward an extrinsic good, which is the raising and educating of children. Just as the love of God is creative—espousing the Holy Spirit and producing all of creation—spousal love is also procreative. This results in children, and spouses

are to adopt different roles in raising them. When man and woman are first created (Genesis 1:27–28), they are distinct yet given the same threefold vocation: “to be the image of God, bring forth posterity, and be masters over the earth” (Stein 61). After the Fall, the punishments for man and woman affect these vocations differently. Woman has increased pain in childbirth, and man has increased difficulty in cultivating the land (Genesis 3:16–19). The Fall shattered relationality, including the relationships between husbands and wives and those between parents and children. Therefore, spouses are going to face difficulties in raising and caring for their children. In a fallen order, women may want to neglect children in an attempt at masculinization, seeking to be viewed as successful ‘on male terms’ (*Mulieris Dignitatem* 10). They also may let their children consume their lives, eventually becoming a burden on the family (Stein 77). Likewise, men may shirk their duties as a provider, preferring worldly pleasures, or they may let their work take priority over their families (Stein 73). Families should strive for a restored order, where there is still a division of labor in caring for the household, but the allotment of roles is made based on what femininity and masculinity are best suited for.

The rearing of children lies equally on men and women. However, women are foremost responsible for the caring and nurturing of the child. Women have a “capacity for the other” which is linked to their physical capacity to produce life and structures their personalities (*Casti Connubii* 13). These abstract and physical capacities are what make it vital for women to be very present and involved in caring for children, especially young children. The Catholic Church highly values the work of women within the home, and while this work should come first for a wife, the Church does not mandate that a wife pursues nothing else outside of the household (“On the Collaboration of Men and Women” 13). In an ideal society, women should never be forced to take up external work due to financial stress on the family (a situation which Pope Pius

XI calls “an intolerable abuse” in *Quadragesimo Anno* 71) nor should they prioritize a career to the detriment of their families. (*Laborem Exercens* 9). Women should not be confined to the home, as that will likely have a deleterious impact on their own flourishing and the flourishing of their families. However, they are able to care for their children in unique ways, and the household should not be deprived of the mother’s presence. Physically, this may look like breastfeeding, but on an emotional level, women, with their “capacity for the other,” are likely more sensitive to their children’s needs. Mothers take the primary role of caregiving.

Men, on the other hand, are responsible for providing for but also for encouraging their families. The Catholic Church supports a framework where fathers earn a family wage, which is enough money to support their wives and children (*Casti Connubii* 117–122). This should not come at the expense of the father being able to be involved in family life, as his presence is invaluable. Just as Christ helps the members of the Church develop their gifts, so too should a father help the members of his family to cultivate their talents (Stein 68). The absence of a father, as well as the presence of a father exhibiting toxic masculinity, hinders healthy family relationships and development (*Familiaris Consortio* 25).

Ultimately, both spouses are responsible for raising their children to be good Christians with a strong understanding of the Catholic faith (*Casti Connubii* 113). They demonstrate to their children how to live as Christians and how to be members of a family. How a husband cherishes and honors his wife teaches his children how to treat their mother. How a wife loves and respects her husband teaches her children how to treat their father. Additionally, parents should provide a quality education such that their children are able to successfully discern and pursue their vocation, whether it be secular or religious (*Gaudium et Spes* 52). The responsibility of education falls equally to the mother and father, and they should determine what method of education will

be best for their children and their current family situation. Additionally, parents should care attentively for the physical health of their children, especially if their children are sick, chronically ill, or disabled (*Familiaris Consortio* 26).

Both fathers and mothers should be involved within and outside of the family. Just because the sphere of wage earning falls primarily to the father does not mean that wives cannot participate. If anything, having involvement and personal development not solely revolving around children is good for the health of the mother and family. Likewise, just because caregiving is primarily the sphere of the mother does not mean the father should be absent. The opposite is true, and present, loving fathers promote the flourishing of their children. Spouses work towards the good of their children by mutually loving and caring for them.

The second aim of marriage, the raising and educating of children, falls equally to mothers and fathers, but their contributions look different. According to the Catholic Church, the woman takes the primary role of caregiving, and the man takes the primary role of wage earning. However, these are not their sole occupations, as men must also be emotionally and spiritually involved in their families, and women are encouraged to find some fulfillment in a task outside of caregiving, which may be a form of wage earning. Individual couples should discern what exact division of labor is best for them based on the personalities and skills of the mother and father (Stein 68). Every person and every couple is different, but the guidance of the Catholic Church can instruct them on how to begin structuring their roles in child rearing.