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From a young age, many little girls and boys are told to dream big, to pursue to the fullest whichever career they may find fulfilling and profitable. However, as these kids grow up, these dreams start to look different for the girls compared to the boys. For the man, there are no questions asked about his desire to work a 9-to-5 job in conjunction with being married and having children. For the woman, she quickly realizes that the reality of children has a very different impact on her life than on that of her male counterpart. This is the core of sexual asymmetry, the idea that pregnancy, childbearing, and childrearing impact women differently and to a greater extent than they impact men. A simple effect of this is that work life for women who have children becomes much more complicated. In the *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World*, Ratzinger identifies this dilemma and recognizes that a solution is only possible through support from a host of different spheres. Given that women experience unique responsibilities in childbearing and early childrearing and that most women seek to balance work with family life, the government should implement policies such as generous parental leave, support in reentering the workforce, and initiatives that recognize the importance of family with the goal of promoting flourishing while preserving an individual's freedom to choose what parenting arrangement best suits them.¹

¹ Sociologist Catherine Hakim cites 60% of women wanting to balance work and the home, 20% wanting to work full time, and 20% wanting to be full time homemakers (from Brown, Patrick T., and Serena Sigillito, "Moving Past the Mommy Wars: Pro-Family Policy for the Rest of Us.")

My approach to these questions is grounded in Catholic anthropology with respect to the nature of humanity, sexuality, and the purpose of society. The Church states in *Gaudium et Spes* that man “cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.”² Humans do not exist for themselves; they exist to serve and love God, which can be made manifest not only through active worship but through caring for others and using their talents with purpose. This is in agreement with what Pinckaers terms “freedom for excellence,” that free choice should be used to lead humans toward truth, goodness, and becoming more like God.³ This is a sharp contrast to “freedom of indifference,” which is simply freedom to choose, regardless of the morality of the decision.⁴ The prior is a higher level of freedom because when we choose excellence, the decision is made without being tainted by any temptation that may guide our actions. Jesus highlights this point by saying that “everyone who commits sin is a slave of sin,”⁵ and Paul expresses this further, “For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want. Now if [I] do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells in me.”⁶ We are the most free when we choose to do good. While my preference for freedom for excellence is grounded in Christianity, secular thought can (but does not always) lead to a similar conclusion. A philosophy that recognizes objective goodness and beauty as well as a teleological purpose to humanity would agree that freedom for excellence is higher than freedom for indifference.

As for the nature of human sexuality, the Bible provides key insights here as well. Primarily, men and women are created equal, as they are both created in God’s image and declared good.⁷ However, they are created to be different as well, evidenced by the fact that God does create male and female instead of one generic human. Timothy Fortin defines sex as a mode

² *Gaudium et Spes*, 24.

³ Pinckaers, *Ethics and the Image of God*, 138.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁵ John 8:34

⁶ Romans 7:19–20

⁷ Genesis 1:26–31

of possessing the power of generation, and therefore, it follows that the core of sexual difference lies in this divided power.⁸ Males are ordered to produce small gametes (sperm) while females are ordered to produce large gametes (ova).⁹ Any trait beyond this is a secondary sex characteristic, and these can be biological, such as the development of breast tissue; psychological, such as being more emotional; socialized, such as wearing one's hair long; or a combination of these factors. Reason allows one to conclude that both men and women are equal in dignity and have differing biological realities, but my personal Christian beliefs would expound upon this to say that our gender informs other aspects of our lives, such as shaping one's vocation, life within marriage, and how one comes to know and understand God. In my own prayer life, I have spent so much time talking with God about what it means for me specifically to be a woman and how He wants me to live in regard to that reality.

When man and woman unite in marriage (even before children are had), they form a true society, as outlined by Russel Hittinger. A true society possesses a unity of order in which each member contributes to something greater than the parts, but that individual is not lost within the whole.¹⁰ This true society of the family possesses an intrinsic common good which cannot be distributed: in this case, the flourishing of the members of the family. The external common good would be the generation of children. Because marriages and families are true societies, they should survive the failure of their goal, which could look like fertility issues. According to Hittinger, the family is one of the three key societies needed for human flourishing—the other two being the Church and the state. He advocates for a principle of subsidiarity, in which the government (a larger society) must not interfere with what should be handled on the level of the

⁸ Fortin, *Finding Form: Defining Human Sexual Difference*, 401.

⁹ Favale, *Genesis of Gender*, "Sex."

¹⁰ Hittinger, *The Coherence of the Four Basic Principles of Catholic Social Doctrine*, 80–83.

family (a smaller society).¹¹ Rather, the larger society should support the smaller society in achieving its ends, as the smaller society knows what it needs and is able to more efficiently act. My faith strengthens my emphasis on families being the base unit of society, but reason also leads to concluding the importance of family, as numerous studies have shown the benefits for children to grow up with their two parents.¹² While my faith guides my core beliefs about humanity, they are not separate from reason. Rather, trust in God and His Church has provided guidance about what philosophy and science would later validate.

Having established a foundation of faith and reason, I now look to address the conflicts that parents face when attempting to balance participation within the home and the workforce. Life solely as a homemaker is often unfulfilling for women, but that does not mean that they should, or even want to, abandon the home altogether. Writing in the 1960s, Betty Friedan astutely identifies “the problem that has no name,” which she defines as the fact that “our culture does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfill their potentialities as human beings, a need which is not solely defined by their sexual role.”¹³ Housework alone was not enough of a challenge for women, leaving them feeling unsatisfied, unfulfilled, and unhappy. However, Friedan paints a rather narrow picture, one that does not encompass the full range of women’s desires, as she looks at economic work as more valuable than homemaking, children as an inconvenience, and the home itself as a “concentration camp.” Some women want to go back to work as soon as possible after having their child, but this may not be feasible due to the cost, quality, or location of daycare. Some women may want to take an extended leave and then return to their job, but this may not be feasible due to their employer’s policies. Some

¹¹ Ibid., 112.

¹² Brown, Susan L. “Marriage and Child Well-Being: Research and Policy Perspectives.” *Journal of marriage and the family* vol. 72,5 (2010): 1059-1077. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3737.2010.00750.x

¹³ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, Chapter 3.

women may want to take off for many years and then reenter the workforce, but this may not be feasible due to struggles of getting rehired. Some women may want to withdraw from work completely to be a stay-at-home mom for the foreseeable future, but this may not be feasible because their household needs two incomes to remain afloat. These are just a few of the many different scenarios a family may face when trying to balance work and children, and women are often assumed (both within a marriage and by society at large) to be the ones who are most responsible for their children.

This type of thinking is encouraged by the rhetoric around birth control and abortion. With birth control, the burden is on women to take the pill rather than a joint burden of men and women to regulate their sexual desires. In the case of abortion, pregnancy is viewed as solely the woman's problem (with fathers having no voice to advocate for the lives of their children). This line of thinking allowed employers to treat pregnancy as "voluntary" and not subject to coverage under disability insurance, as in the case of *Geduldig v. Aiello* in 1974.¹⁴ While this has been overturned, it demonstrates that a culture emphasizing individualism and autonomy, which is the current culture of mainstream feminism, is not a culture conducive to motherhood.

A culture where motherhood thrives is one that starts with the family, rather than the individual, as the base unit of society. To start, both mothers and fathers should take responsibility for the upbringing of their children. Bachiochi articulates, "Domestic affections ought to take priority over professional responsibilities in the lives of both women and men, for their own flourishing, their children's, and that of the society at large. Society is properly ordered only when it enables, and encourages, such a prioritization."¹⁵ Going back to Hittinger, the larger society of government should support the smaller society of the family in caring for its members.

¹⁴ Bachiochi, *Sexual Asymmetry, American Law, and Renewed Family Ecology*, 263.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.

While Ratzinger correctly notes that “the interrelationship between...family and work...has, for women, characteristics different from those in the case of men,” apart from the sexual asymmetry of the physical task of childbearing, this interrelationship does not have to.¹⁶ Babies need a primary attachment figure to regulate the world for them, and the production of oxytocin throughout pregnancy, breastfeeding, and being near their newborn, promotes women to be more soothing and comforting and naturally fall into this role. However, when men act as the primary caregiver, the extended release of oxytocin they undergo lowers their testosterone levels, causing them to become more nurturing.¹⁷ While women may be more predisposed to become the nurturing figure for their child, fathers can do it as well. When families decide if one parent is going to stay home and the other work, it should not be based on sex, but on that person as an individual. There is too much beautiful variation in humanity to make claims about the personalities of all men or all women. Therefore, policy should accommodate what is considered normative but protect the freedom of families to depart from it if it would be best for their flourishing.

Currently, I propose a parental leave system that models that of Scandinavian countries, in that it is generous and state funded.¹⁸ The mother (some may use the term “birthing parent”) is given a set amount of time off (around four weeks) before and after the birth of her child, addressing the physical burden she will undergo in childbirth. After this period of time, parental leave should no longer be gender specific. The two parents are given an allotment of weeks off, say 24 total weeks off. Each parent is entitled to three of their twelve weeks but could allot their other nine to their partner. A single parent would have the entirety of the time for their own

¹⁶ Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World, 13

¹⁷ Komisar, “Are Mothers and Fathers Interchangeable? It’s Complicated.”

¹⁸ <https://www.norden.org/en/info-norden/parental-benefits-finland>.

leave. Wages during this time will be based off of the family's tax bracket and not exceed a certain amount. A policy such as this recognizes sexual asymmetry (women need more time off due to pregnancy) but does not perpetuate sex stereotypes (women are the default primary caregivers). This policy also follows a subsidiarity model in that the higher society of the government is helping the lower society of the family to address its own needs more personally. Every couple is going to have different needs and wants when it comes to parenting, and this system follows the subsidiarity model and lets them figure it out instead of forcing them into a situation out of necessity. Families can make decisions that exercise their freedom for excellence, choosing a parenting plan that plays into their personal strengths and relationship dynamic. This system helps ease the worries new parents will have when they should be prioritizing the wellbeing of their child and themselves.

If a parent does not want to return to the workforce and wants to stay at home for a significant period of time, their return to the workforce should be encouraged. Friedan proposes something similar to the GI bill but for women looking to continue their education.¹⁹ I propose a system for any parent, regardless of gender, who has taken a certain amount of time off to care for their child, say five years or more, to receive state-funded credit for furthering their education (whether that means obtaining a certificate, bachelor's degree, or master's degree) at a public institution. This would make taking time away from the workforce to be less intimidating to a parent, knowing that they will easily be able to build credentials and momentum when the time comes to enter back in. After losing time advancing one's career, a boost would help offset any way the parent may have fallen behind compared to peers who did not take time off.

Additionally, this policy may reduce the pressure couples feel to delay pregnancy to focus on

¹⁹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, Chapter 14.

their careers, which is problematic as older individuals are more likely to face fertility issues.²⁰ Instead of going to school first, it may be a good choice to have kids and later take advantage of the subsidized education one then qualifies for instead of paying for it upfront. Both of these policies would also help shift the mindset around having kids from them being viewed as an impediment to one's career to being viewed as an encouraged, integral, and protected part of one's life. How the government treats families trying to have children will influence the larger cultural view of children—are they a nuisance or are they a gift?

Finally, all of the questions of balancing parenthood, children, and finances should be issues a family faces together. Before marrying, spouses need to determine clearly how they feel about having and raising children because a partner who is willing to support your desires can do so most immediately and on a day-to-day basis. The state has a real investment in supporting healthy marriages and should offer incentivized premarital counseling. For example, the Twogether in Texas program offers couples a significant discount on their marriage license if they complete a premarital course.²¹ While it is hard to quantify the impact of this type of counseling, almost every study done has found a positive link between premarital counseling and better relationship skills.²² Offering these types of programs would help the smaller society of the family function better.

My philosophical framework and proposals may draw criticism from a few corners. Proponents of very progressive feminism would likely disagree with my analysis of freedom, saying that autonomy is the highest good, regardless of what one chooses to do with it; that market labor is more important than homemaking; and that the sexes are interchangeable if sex is

²⁰ <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/infertility/conditioninfo/causes/age>.

²¹ <https://twogetherintexas.com/UI/index.aspx>.

²² Carroll, Jason S., and William J. Doherty, "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Premarital Prevention Programs: A Meta-Analytic Review of Outcome Research." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Science* vol 52,2 (2004): 105–118. doi:10.1111/j.1741-3729.2003.00105.x.

even recognized at all. They may object to the increased allotment of time given to women for childbirth, saying it reinforces her role as primary caregiver. This stance ignores biological reality and the toll pregnancy takes on women, which would ultimately hurt women. While we may disagree fundamentally, the policies I propose are gender neutral in every way except for addressing sexual asymmetry, supporting women in the unique way they need to be.

Additionally, my framework makes parental benefits accessible to people in non-heterosexual marriages who may be having or adopting a baby. The question of social gender roles is left completely up to the couple. Pregnancy is not a private choice only existing in the family sphere; it is a huge reality that needs support from many facets.

Staunch conservatives may disagree with funneling government money into supporting women's ability to work, emphasizing that they should strive to stay in the home. This does not honor the very diverse wishes of all women, but my policies do allow for the individual couple to make decisions best for them. A husband could give his maximum allotment of paternity leave days to his wife if that is what they individually decided. Worried about falling birth rates, some conservatives may say there needs to be public policy to turn it around, such as baby bonuses. While baby bonuses would be beneficial to couples, they are not actually effective at raising the birth rate because, as Catherine Pakaluk points out, choosing to be a mother (especially one of many children) is a selfless act, and one cannot be bribed into being selfless.²³ Instead, promoting a culture of family and relieving the conflict between having kids and having a career would perhaps make women more open to children.

Those who advocate for limited government involvement may say that it is not the duty of the government to provide maternity leave, and employers should be able to decide what types of benefits to offer. If someone intends to have children, only work at a place that offers good

²³ Pakaluk, *Hannah's Children*, Chapter 22.

parental leave. This type of thinking ultimately disadvantages both women and men who want to have children, depriving them of their opportunities and reinforcing a conflict between work and family. It also may result in discrimination during the hiring process, specifically against women. A company may offer good maternity leave on paper, and then that fact would discourage them from hiring a married woman or mothers. This same scenario would result if the government mandates that companies bear the brunt of increased paternal leave policies. The government, which should promote the flourishing of and protect the freedom of its people, should take responsibility for supporting its families, no matter what they look like.

After years of focusing on school and work, many women will realize that they want children, and society simply expects them to give up so much for that to happen. Some women are not particularly infatuated with their current career paths and are more than willing to make the sacrifices. Others have found something they love and do not understand why they are suddenly being asked to let it go. The policies I have advocated for would allow the government to fulfill its role in supporting families to make their own decisions, many of which will result in women having a primary caregiving role. However, that role is chosen, not expected or enforced.