

What's missing in the discussion of the role of women in the Church

Since the recent Amazon Synod, there has been much discussion of the role of women in the Catholic Church. It is surely no understatement to claim that certain factions have arisen. We have, on the one hand, those who claim that women have already been given great power within the Church (perhaps even in excess). On the other, we see individuals who remain dissatisfied with the lack of specifically hierarchical authority afforded women.

At the risk of gross oversimplification, the former group often stresses the importance of motherhood and homemaking, defined in opposition to work outside of the home, while the latter group emphasizes the need for women to occupy more positions of influence within both the economic and clerical spheres in order for the goal of true egalitarianism to be fulfilled. For such individuals, motherhood and career need not be mutually exclusive.

As a new mother working part-time for the Church, I would argue that both ways of thinking miss the mark insofar as they betray a certain illiteracy of authentic femininity. They fail to resonate with many of us young women occupying positions within the Church who take seriously the Church's teachings and our primary call to motherhood while we also enjoy placing our gifts and talents at the service of the Church in a formal way.

In order to facilitate a much-needed discussion, I offer the following reflections for consideration. At the outset, I must mention that I am aware that I may be charged by some as trying to have it all and by others as opposing female

advancement. However, it is my firm belief that if we, as Church, desire for women to flourish, we must first listen to the forgotten voices of the faithful women around us before we hasten to deduce either that a female diaconate or a certain domestic ideal will solve all ills. For my part, I am greatly blessed by the flexibility in my own work schedule, but I have heard many stories from discontented women working inside and outside the Church. There is a growing contingent of women who remain dissatisfied and yearn for something better, and it is for this reason that I write.

In Pope St. Paul VI's closing address to women from the Second Vatican Council, he states: "The hour is coming, in fact has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which woman acquires in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women impregnated with the spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid mankind in not falling."

The image of women "impregnated with the spirit of the Gospel" is indeed a powerful reminder of the high calling of women in which motherhood and mission are perfectly united. It is a reminder that the Marian spirit must not only enter, but inform, the public sphere such that mankind may not "fall." Embracing authentic femininity ultimately means that we must work to humanize the wider culture rather than allowing it to barbarize us. For the working mother, there is a difficulty in abiding by the terms dictated by the secular culture, terms inextricably linked to the philosophies of the sexual revolution where masculinity is the standard by which women are measured.

As Mary Eberstadt brilliantly observes in ["Primal Screams: How the Sexual Revolution Created Identity Politics"](#) (Templeton Press, \$24.95), "Women are continually given the message that they must perform like men ... women who 'lean in' toward the masculine are substantially more likely to be rewarded in the

postrevolutionary order than women who do not." This most often means that women are forced to conform to a masculine ideal in terms of working hours, time spent in an office, etc. Thus women must frequently choose between work outside the home with its consequences for family life, especially in terms of childcare, or no work at all. We may therefore rightly ask, is this the best that we can do for women as a society?

The difficulty seems to lie in our understanding of equality and sexual difference. If we define equality between the sexes as sameness, then women will continue to fare worse than men in the public sphere. Their pleas for change will be met with a plethora of responses that pay homage to the notions of fairness, impartiality and the like. Making certain allowances for women that allow them to raise their own children by working from home, leaving work earlier than others, etc., may potentially lead to a degree of angst among male co-workers or even other women who adhere to a more typical work schedule.

Interestingly, however, even within the secular world, there is evidence suggesting that greater flexibility for women is of the utmost importance. In a 2018 Forbes article entitled ["Intentional Flexibility Keeps Women In The Workforce,"](#) author Erica Keswin cites a study where "70% of women who dropped out of the workplace said that they would still be working if they had flexibility." She also references a study mentioned in the Harvard Business Review in which "employees who are given the autonomy to work flexibly are happier, more productive and less likely to quit." Sadly, corporate culture (barring a few examples) has failed to adapt to such findings due, in part, perhaps, to its own lack of framework for discussing the issue and adequate language with which to do so. Furthermore, corporations have undoubtedly benefited from women willing to uphold the status quo. If the number of women issuing a challenge to current practices remains relatively small, there is no need to sacrifice the many for the few, especially where

profits are at stake.

This is precisely where the Church must serve as the beacon of light that it is. The Church has a powerful opportunity to set terms rather than succumb to those laid out by our wider culture. If we truly believe that the sexual revolution has proven deleterious for women, then we, as Church, must cease acting as though its philosophies are normative, as though the motherhood resulting from the sexual act is a choice rather than a given, and as though women's style of work is not any different from that of men. Countless women working within the Church may benefit far more by practices that facilitate a greater quality of family life than by changes enabling them to achieve hierarchical status. The Church must be the harbinger of the dignity of women by adapting its business culture to reflect its values.

I am reminded of the words of two great saints: Pope John Paul II and Catherine of Siena. In his encyclical *Familiaris Consortio*, John Paul II urges, "Family, become what you are." We could easily exhort the Church in the same manner. In so doing, as Catherine of Siena reminds us, we will "set the world on fire."

It is time for the Church to reclaim confidence in its expertise on humanity and to speak words of truth to the world first through the refinement of its own house, thereby igniting the flame that grows until all of mankind is enveloped in its warmth.

Cristina D'Averso-Collins, M.T.S., M.S.P., is director of the Office of Family Life in the Diocese of Metuchen, New Jersey.