

# Prosperity Through Timeless Values

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## TOWARD ORGANIC FEMINISM

an address by

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In the time since I gave Matt the title for this talk, I've given talks by this name at six different campuses. I have come to realize that the term feminism is problematic. People have already attached a so many meanings to the term, that it is no longer a useful term. Advocates of feminism believe that the term means the "radical idea that women are human." Opponents of feminism have distilled the social trends surrounding the term and have concluded that feminism means men and women are equal except women are better. I have found that both advocates and opponents of feminism are so attached to the meanings they have already assigned to the term, that it is impossible to shake them loose. I spent far too much time this semester arguing about what counts as feminism.

So, let us bracket the term feminism for the time being. Without casting blame upon any one person, idea or even set of ideas, let me describe a few problems which have developed in the last generation. These problems all concern women, gender roles or sex generally. I aim to show first, that there are some common threads among these problems, and second, that Catholic teaching can play a significant role in resolving these problems.

Recent Developments and The Problems Associated with Them.

1. Women's participation in the labor force on equal terms with men is a great good, which should be encouraged. Yet now, that participation is less a choice, than a demand of economic necessity.

Women compete successfully with men, both in education and in the market. But many women would like more options to stay home while their children are young. Financial pressures, including high housing costs, student loans and high taxes, lead many married couples to conclude that they must both work. In addition, many women fear that their marriages may not survive their children's childhood. The woman may fear that her husband will leave her. Or she may wish to keep her own option to divorce open. And she may correctly perceive that even temporary exits from the labor force will reduce her earning power significantly. Therefore, many women continue working longer than they really want to, simply as a strategic move to protect themselves against divorce.

Thus, what was originally an expansion of personal options for women, has created a new set of necessities that women work throughout most if not all of their adult lives.

2. No-fault divorce is a great expansion of personal liberty. Yet divorce at will has led to an increase in the power of the state over individual private lives.

No-fault divorce frequently means unilateral divorce: one party wants a divorce against the wishes of the other, who wants to stay married. This fact means that the divorce has to be enforced. The coercive machinery of the state is wheeled into action to separate the reluctantly divorced party from the joint assets of the marriage, typically the home

and the children. Family courts tell fathers how much money they have to spend on their children, and how much time they get to spend with them. Courts tell mothers whether they can move away from their children's father. Courts have ruled on whether the family speaks English at home, and whether the father's attendance at a Little League game, a public event that anyone can attend, counts toward his visitation time. Courts rule on which parent gets to spend Christmas Day with the children, down to and including the precise time of day they must turn the child over to the other parent. Involving the family court in the minutiae of family life amounts to an unprecedented blurring of the boundaries between public and private life. People under the jurisdiction of the family courts can have virtually all of their private lives subject to its scrutiny. If the courts are influenced by feminist ideology, or any other ideology, that ideology can extend its reach into every bedroom and kitchen in America. 1

Thus, what was intended as an expansion of personal liberty has resulted in an unprecedented intrusion of the state into the private lives of ordinary, law-abiding citizens.

3. Many women have come to believe the claim of some feminists that marriage is dangerous. But the alternative to marriage, cohabitation, is even worse.

Most women will eventually have some kind of relationships with men. Therefore, the realistic alternative to marriage is not a lifetime of celibacy, but cohabitation. Numerous studies show that cohabitation is much more dangerous to women than marriage. Women in cohabiting relationships are more likely than married women to suffer physical and sexual abuse. Aggression is at least twice as common among cohabitators as it is among married partners. Studies of lethal violence, both in Canada and in the US, found that women in cohabiting relationships are about nine times more likely to be killed by their partner than are women in marital relationships.<sup>2</sup> One researcher summarized the re-

sults this way: "Regardless of methodology, cohabitators engage in more violence than spouses." 3

4. Many feminists championed the slogan "Every child a wanted child," with the idea that preventing unwanted pregnancy would reduce child abuse. Yet child abuse is at least as great a problem today as it was in 1960. More children are born into the situations most likely to place them at risk for child abuse.

We now know that having married parents is one of the best protectors against child abuse. The person most likely to abuse a child is his unmarried mother's boyfriend. This phenomenon is so common that many professionals just refer to it as "The Boyfriend Problem." A recent study of child deaths from inflicted injuries showed that children residing in households with unrelated adults were nearly 50 times as likely to die of inflicted injuries than children residing with both biological parents. Children in households with a single parent and no other adults in residence had no increased risk of inflicted injury deaths. On this telling, the problem with unmarried mothers is not so much that they are not married. It is the fact that they tend to form sexual relationships with men who are not their children's father. And this man is interested only in her, and not her children, who are an interference with his relationship with the mother. 4

The increase in percentage of children born to unmarried mothers occurred at exactly the same time as the rise in the use of contraceptive technology. According to Nobel Prize winning economist, George Akerlof, this is more than a mere coincidence. The availability of contraception and abortion changed the social terms under which all women and men negotiated their sexual activity.

No longer could a woman demand a promise of marriage in the event of pregnancy, as the price of her sexual involvement with a man. Men can insist that a woman use contraception, or that she terminate any pregnancy that might result. For women who want their babies, contraceptive failure means single motherhood. In by-gone eras, these

women would have had the support of the entire society in pressuring the father to marry them. But since having a baby is a “woman’s choice,” the pressure for marriage is greatly attenuated.

So, since the advent of widespread use and promotion of contraceptive technology, the overall birth rate has declined, the proportion of women married has declined and the proportion of babies born outside of wedlock has increased.<sup>5</sup> In short, for women who had non-marital pregnancies, more kept the child to raise themselves. Fewer mothers married the father of the child or placed the child for adoption.<sup>6</sup> The overall result is that fewer children are raised in married couple, two parent households. This is the family form most conducive to the welfare of children generally, and specifically the family form in which children are least likely to be abused.<sup>7</sup>

5. Reproductive self-determination is a great good for women and for society as a whole. Yet we now have a social situation in which people delay marriage and child-bearing for so long that their natural fertility is impaired or compromised.

For many women in the first generation of high powered careers, fertility difficulties came as a rude awakening. They assumed they would be able to “have it all,” literally. But there may be no good solution to a mid-life fertility crisis, particularly if the woman has not invested in finding a partner and maintaining a relationship with him. These women are extremely disappointed.

Economist Sylvia Ann Hewlett conducted a survey of high-achieving women, hoping to assess the factors responsible for their success. In the course of that survey, she noticed that none of these women had children. As she talked more with them, she discovered that none of them had chosen to be childless. That pair of observations led her to the research that resulted in her justly celebrated book, *Creating a Life: Professional Woman and the Quest for Children*.<sup>8</sup>

Women’s fertility is impaired with age,

in that women are less likely to conceive a child. There is now suggestive new evidence that men’s fertility is also impaired with age, but in a different way. Men can still father a child, but the child’s probability of genetic defects increases with the father’s age. The theory is that the DNA replicates less precisely as men age, producing minor genetic defects that are not fatal to the infant. But these defects are implicated in disorders such as: schizophrenia, autism and cancer later in life. Men 40 and older are nearly six times more likely to have offspring with autism than men under age 30.<sup>9</sup>

For women, “reproductive self-determination” means the right to say “no” to a child. It doesn’t mean the right to have a baby exactly when and how you want. For men, waiting for the “perfect time” to become a father may very well increase the probability of having a less than “perfect” child.

6. Child-rearing should be equally the responsibility of mothers and fathers. Among married, educated couples, fathers have taken more child-rearing responsibility than previous generations. Yet many women, particularly lower income and less educated women, now raise children completely on their own, with little or no assistance from the child’s father.

In some countries, the combination of government tax and benefits policies effectively subsidizes unmarried motherhood. According to Patricia Morgan writing for the Institute for Economic Affairs in London, some British government officials hold that “the treatment of a married couple as a single financial unit... is to be discouraged, along with any predisposition in favor of the nuclear family.” The State is presumed responsible for the support of the children of unmarried parents.

The results of this discrimination against marriage is that the number of children being born to unmarried mothers has increased from 8% in 1970 to 42% in 2004, in the UK.<sup>10</sup> In the US, 37% of children are now born to unmarried mothers. Among African Americans, over 70% of chil-

dren are born to unmarried mothers. These mothers receive virtually no assistance from the father.

At the higher end of the educational ladder, there also is a trend toward becoming “Single Mothers by Choice.” These affluent, educated women choose to have no relationship with their child’s father. Numerous studies have established that children of single mothers have poorer life chances than the children of married parents. 11 But the new Single Mothers by Choice discount this evidence, since it is weighted by the large numbers of poor single mothers. The well-educated single mothers by choice may imagine their socioeconomic advantages will surely overcome these well-documented disadvantages.

Not so quick. Much of the research does control for income and education. This means that even children of relatively well-off mothers would do better if their parents were married to each other. For instance, even accounting for income, fatherless boys are more likely to be aggressive<sup>12</sup> and to ultimately become incarcerated. 13 A recent British study offers tantalizing hints about the possibility that the children of single mothers are more likely to become schizophrenic. 14 And an extensive study of family structure in Sweden took account of the mental illness history of the parents, as well as the family’s socio-economic status. Yet even in the most generous welfare state in the world, with very accepting attitudes toward unmarried parenthood, the children of single parents were at significantly higher risk of psychiatric disease, suicide attempts, and substance abuse.<sup>15</sup>

For some affluent women, the choice to become an unmarried mother is more by default than an actual decision. They have taken their career ambitions more seriously than their fertility ambitions. By the time they have achieved enough career success to feel comfortable embarking on motherhood, they find themselves with limited options. Of the smaller pool of available men, many prefer to marry younger women. By the time a woman enters her thirties, her peak fertility is typically past. She feels

the desire for motherhood more urgently, at exactly the moment that her marriage options have become limited.

And so the modern, emancipated woman who spent years trying to avoid having a baby, finds herself in a surprising situation. She wants to have a baby without having sex. Having a baby without having sex might seem a little bit like skipping dessert and going straight for the brussels sprouts. But that is the situation in which we find ourselves. It represents a retreat from human relationships.

I doubt that anyone wanted these negative consequences, in all these areas. Feminism is not the sole culprit. Economic pressures, the media and the rise of Artificial Reproductive Technology have all played a role in shaping attitudes and behaviors. Nevertheless, it would be pointless to deny that feminism, both as a set of ideas and as a set of policies, has played a significant part in all these developments.

But as I said at the outset, my point is not to cast blame. My point is to offer an honest assessment of the current status of women, gender relations and sex itself, and to offer constructive suggestions. In my judgement, the Baby Boom Generation took major wrong turns in three areas: gender relations, sex and finally, social institutions generally. In each case, Catholic teaching offers a realistic and more humane alternative.

#### Major Wrong Turns of the Baby Boom Generation

1. The first wrong turn is the belief that income equality between men and women should be the ultimate goal for personal and public policy alike. This belief is for many people the ultimate objective of the women’s movement. But equal incomes requires identical behavior, and men and women behave significantly differently in the labor force, at home and over the course of their lives. The attempt to create income equality has led to massive amounts of government regulation and litigation in the labor market. And at the personal

level, women have forced their work lives into the mold created for male career paths. Traditional male career trajectories demand the most intense investment early in life. By the time women have accomplished enough in their careers to feel financially prepared for motherhood, their peak fertility is behind them.

This is the bargain women have made with the modern world: we can participate in the labor market on equal terms with men, as long as we agree to chemically neuter ourselves during our peak fertility years. Then, if we can't become pregnant when we eventually want to, we can artificially stimulate our ovaries and submit to other forms of artificial reproductive technology to have a chance, but not a certainty of having a baby.

I claim the right to participate in the labor market as women, not as men in skirts.

I propose that we accept differences in our work lives, and that we embrace our fertility. Women would be better off if we accepted the reality that our fertility peaks during our twenties. Go to college for a liberal, not a vocational, education. Get married. Have kids. Let your husband support you. Maybe go back to school for an advanced degree. Go to work. Help support the kids' college, and your joint retirement. And, since women live longer than men, we could be working longer and let our husbands relax a bit.

Catholic teaching supports the view that the differences between men and women are gifts from a loving God who desires that we collaborate with each other. Gender differences are not necessarily sources of conflict, but rather opportunities for collaboration and complementarity. Our dignity as women does not depend on us being equal, in the sense of identical, with men. Nor does our dignity depend upon our being completely independent of men.

More generally, Catholic teaching has always held that the intrinsic dignity of every human person does not depend on their income, educa-

tion, status or usefulness to others. Think of some of the most celebrated saints of the Catholic tradition, who abandoned every material comfort and source of status. We have the unforgettable image of St. Francis of Assisi, stripping off his clothing, so that he could fully follow Lady Poverty. Who would remember St. Francis, if he had gone into the textile business, like his father wanted him to?

But by now, the participation of women in the market at every time in their adult lives has become entrenched in society. Our higher education system, our labor market, even our housing markets, are built around the premise that high-achieving highly-educated workers will postpone marriage and child-bearing.

Most sex differences in income can be traced to marriage and child-bearing. So, if equality is the goal, then the impact of children must somehow be neutralized. Contraception allows people to have an active sex life without babies interfering with their career ambitions. Abortion on demand allows women to behave like men, participate in the labor force like men, and to be equal with men. Or at least as equal as the woman can stand.

But the legal availability of contraception and abortion are not the whole story. This brings us to the second major wrong turn that the Baby Boomer Generation has taken. We have developed an ideology around sex.

2. We now believe that sex is a private recreational activity that is essentially sterile, with procreation thrown in as an afterthought, if you happen to like that sort of thing. Unlimited sexual activity, without a live baby, is an entitlement. Sex is just for fun. Don't take it too seriously. Just stay safe and don't get pregnant.

In my book *Smart Sex: Finding Life-long Love in a Hook-up World*, I call this, Consumer Sex. When sex is a recreational activity, our sex partners become consumer goods, who please us more or less well, and whom we feel free to discard if they no longer please us.

The alternative vision is that sex is an organic reality, with two natural purposes that are written on the human body. The first purpose is procreation. The second is spousal unity. Sex builds up and solidifies the relationship between the members of the couple. Building a long-term relationship has survival value for a species whose young have a long period of dependency. The offspring of parents who work together are more likely to survive than the offspring of parents who can't or won't cooperate with each other. The fact that sex is fun is along for the evolutionary ride. The fun is nature's way of getting us to keep the species going.

Presumably the procreation part of this equation is self-evident. So let me say more about the bonding part. Science can now show the physiological pathways by which we attach to our sex partners. During sex, women secrete a hormone called oxytocin. This is the same hormone that women experience when we are nursing our babies. Some experts refer to oxytocin as the attachment hormone, because this hormone causes us to both relax and connect with the person we are with. In the aftermath of sex, we relax and commit to our sex partners. While we are nursing, we relax and connect with our babies. 17

In both these situations, oxytocin, the bonding hormone, has survival value. Connecting with our babies helps us to take pleasure in being with them and caring for them, even at times when it wouldn't ordinarily be very pleasant, (like in the middle of the night.) Connecting with our sex partners increases the chances that we will stay together long enough to raise the baby to adulthood.

The oxytocin connection can explain a number of otherwise puzzling features of our modern sexual culture. It can explain why the "hook-up" or the "friends with benefit" style of dating proves to be so disappointing. Many young women end up sitting by the phone, after their hook-ups, wondering whether the guy will call her, whether the encounter meant as much to him as it did to

her, whether she meant anything to him. Oxytocin accounts for the data which shows having multiple casual sexual partners puts teenage girls at risk for depression. 18

Oxytocin helps explain why cohabitation is such poor preparation for marriage, why the divorce rate is higher among couples who cohabited prior to marriage. They imagined themselves making a rational decision by "taking a test drive." They don't realize that their bodies are creating an "involuntary chemical commitment," whether the person is right for them or not.

As it happens, the Catholic Church has been teaching that the natural purposes of sexuality are procreation and spousal unity since the Middle Ages. Science can now show that the Church was onto something. Our attempts to disconnect sex from procreation and from spousal unity are at the heart of many of the disappointments of the sexual revolution. Our hearts really are made for connecting with one another. The hook-up culture has not made people happy.

The vision of women moving in and out of the workplace also involves an alternative vision of marriage and family. Marriage is a life-long institution for mutual cooperation and support, rather than the unenforceable non-contract it has become. I need not say that cooperation between spouses would be far better for children. Nor need I say that this is the exact opposite of the feminist vision, which replaced marital stability with employment stability. This brings me to the final wrong turn I want to discuss.

3. Many in modern times have adopted the belief that social institutions can be decomposed into collections of individuals, without loss to those individuals and that the government can take over the functions of any or all social institutions, without loss to society as a whole. Marriage is one of the most significant of these social institutions that has been deconstructed in the last generation. Marriage is nothing but a pair of individuals. Even the Supreme Court says so.

But this overlooks the reality that creating a child requires two people, one male and one female. The cooperation between parents is the most basic form of social cooperation. When that cooperation breaks down, the substitutes for marriage are ham-fisted and expensive.

Catholic social teaching has been saying for the past hundred years that a good society needs a pluralism of social institutions. These social forms deserve to be respected and protected by the state, not taken over, not replaced, not regulated to death, not decomposed into a mere collection of individuals. In 1891, Pope Leo XIII's masterful encyclical *Rerum Novarum* protested against the tendency of the State to absorb all functions and institutions of society into itself. "It is not right for either the citizens or the family to be absorbed by the State; it is proper that the individual and the family should be permitted to retain their freedom of action."<sup>19</sup>

The modern deconstruction of marriage into a mere collection of individuals has gone hand in hand with the separation of sex from its natural purposes. We no longer consider marriage the preferred social context for either sexual activity or child-bearing. A woman can have sex or a child without being married. She can also have a child without having a relationship with the child's father. She can even have a child without having sex.

But notice that these separations require the woman to compartmentalize aspects of her very self. In one compartment, is my sexual activity; in another compartment is my desire to have a child and my love for that child; in another is my relationship with the father of my child. Perhaps some of these compartments are completely empty.

Marriage allows us to integrate basic parts of the self, our sexual activity, our love for our spouses and our love for our children. Inside marriage, we direct our sexual desire exclusively toward our husbands. Our desire for each other creates a new life, a new child, whom we both love. Our continued sexual activity builds up our love for each other, so we can continue to cooperate in

raising our child. Every one of these separations entails losses. These losses are particularly poignant, the more we value human relationship, connectivity and our own personal integration.

### Conclusion

The modern women's movement began with the promise of increasing the dignity of women. The modern sexual revolution began with the promise of liberating people from unnecessary social controls. Yet it is safe to say that neither of these movements have achieved their objectives and that both have been beset by many unanticipated consequences.

There is an alternative vision. Women and men can view one another as collaborators, rather than as competitors. We women can place our education and our talent at the service of our families and the community, rather than at the service of employers and our egos.

We can embrace our fertility. Rather than squeezing our child-bearing around the periphery of our careers, we can integrate the natural cycles of our bodies into the core of our lives. As the next generation of women builds this integrated vision of natural womanhood, they will find much guidance and assistance from the well-springs of the Catholic natural law tradition.

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