

Summary of the Discussion

It must be emphasised that the Church's teaching in this context has always been founded upon natural law, which is biologically based where the sexes are concerned. The Church has relied upon human rationality to recognise biological and sexual differences, as they are given in nature. However, current thought renders such differences as matters of subjectivity and thus alienates both male and female from their grounding in biology. Social teaching must both reaffirm natural law and confront the present situation where demands for "equity" are detrimental to family stability. A useful starting point would be a proper recognition of the role of fatherhood (not motherhood), because within the economy fathers no longer fulfil their moral duty of providing for the family, but have come to accept the participation of women in the workforce.

(Dr Matlary). The core problem has just been correctly identified and concerns the abounding confusion over what is natural, and therefore about the importance of biological differences. This confusion is manifest in two current approaches. On the one hand, "equity feminism", lacking any anthropological base, presents the issue as a power struggle for women to become equal on male terms. On the other hand, "gender feminism", based on social constructivism, also denies natural differences between the sexes. Indeed what is needed is a rediscovery of these natural differences and of the complementarity between the sexes. Then it can be seen how historical structures have discriminated against women, preventing their talents from being used, politically and professionally.

The paper said little about the Third World, yet Australian studies on sub-Saharan Africa have found that the cheapest and most effective form of intervention is by improving elementary education, which gives women more autonomy to choose. However, affirmative action at higher levels of education confuses equality of access with equality of outcome. Although we must do our best to ensure equality of access, trying to engineer equality of outcome in this way is counterproductive.

Continuing to talk about the Third World, feminist movements in the Philippines have been strong and many have embraced the "equity model".

However, there is now a reaction against it and a revindication of "fatherhood" and "motherhood", whilst not denying that women should also have the fulfilment deriving from employment. Now, in the context of globalization and the spread of information technology, could this represent a new opportunity for reconciling the two? Information technology can generate jobs for women in the home and their children may become apprentices. As Alvin Toffler argued, the Third Wave is something of a synthesis between the agricultural and the industrial stages. Could electronic cottage industries be a means of reconciling paid and unpaid work in a way which does not undermine the roles of motherhood and fatherhood?

(Dr Matlary). Both the changes towards greater employment in the service sector, where work is more compatible with women's traditional expertise, and changes in information technology, making it possible to have the office at home, certainly present new opportunities. The latter is also economically rational; currently some of the largest oil companies are supplying computers to enable a greater number of employees to work from home, several days a week. This saves money and entails defining production in ways other than the sheer number of hours spent in the office.

Somewhat changing the topic, the Colombian experience shows a dramatic change from the 1980s when very few women had high posts in government, compared with today when they compete for the Presidency, become Senators and Chief Executives, without sacrificing their motherhood or family. In fact, when corruption is one of the greatest evils in government and administration, women have been an example of rectitude in public life. However, this advancement of women has been accompanied by discriminatory practices, particularly in terms of remuneration where there is not the same pay for the same job.

It has been repeated here that the social teaching of the Church remains largely centred on the male breadwinner earning a family wage. Should this teaching respond to the current trend by now favouring individual social security rights or is there, in the paper just given, an alternative in the form of a social reorganization which favours the values enshrined in the family wage theory? The latter would re-endorse the fundamental link between work and family and also that the human person can only be understood in the context of a series of social relationships, the primary one of which is the family.

Returning to the central argument of the paper, it is possible to agree with its starting point, the desire to avoid discrimination against women,

and with its finishing point, the desirability of flexible work and employment for both men and women, without accepting the contestable biological premisses which were used to link the two. Firstly, the “equity model” need not be presented negatively, as merely inducing women to imitate men, but rather as promoting freedom of choice for women and of shared responsibility between both parents for child-care. Secondly, the “difference model”, as advocated, does not appear to be “radical” but rather reactionary in its essentialist assumptions — that all women naturally make good mothers (or humanistic politicians) and that men too are homogeneous, being held generally less capable of undertaking child-care. If one rejects the questionable essentialism, and allows for the existence of considerable diversity amongst males and females, then each human being’s talents can make differential contributions to child-rearing, rather than these being stereotyped by gender. Of course this would also reinforce the ultimate desirability of flexible arrangements which are conducive to good parenting.

(Dr Matlary). This is the key question. Certainly the “equity model” has many positive effects, including placing the role of men as fathers on the agenda, in practical ways. However, the use of the term “radical” was intended to distinguish between the practical and the anthropological levels, which indeed raises the issue of essentialism. I would defend motherhood as being first physical, but secondly something which fulfils women in a non-physical sense. The latter is undoubtedly contested and is something I cannot substantiate scientifically. However, drawing on my experience of becoming a mother rather late, it now rings intuitively true that much of our strength and identity comes from maternity and that these qualities can be brought to our professional activities. Clearly we are equal to men in terms of intellectual and professional capacities, but we have not brought our maternal qualities into the public or political spheres. Nevertheless, Christianity is more about self-giving which I associate with motherhood (although unable to substantiate this with scientific evidence). Hypothetically, when there are more female politicians and women have greater structural power, they could perhaps develop a different agenda for public life.