

The Future of Christianity in the West – 5

This is the fifth of nine articles in a series entitled “The Future of Christianity in the West.”

The momentum of hostile secularism seems at this point in time to be irresistible. Christians must prepare for a time of overt opposition and perhaps even persecution by strengthening their institutions, says Rod Dreher in his book, *The Benedict Option*. So far we’ve discussed strengthening the church, the family, and the role of men in marriage. Christians must be pro-fatherhood. What else?

Pro-homemaker

The Christian community must also reaffirm the nobility of the role of mother and homemaker. Second-wave feminism viciously ridiculed the “stay-at-home mom” and the stigma remains. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* advocated laws which would prohibit women from staying home to rear their children. Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* portrayed women as bored out of their minds at home, which she likened to a concentration camp. Midge Decter in *The New Chastity* denigrated the messy, ordinary care of babies. What defines a woman as a woman and not a man is her capacity to conceive life within her womb, carry that child to term, and nourish that child in its infancy. How is it that that which is distinctive to a woman’s design has come to be slighted?

Yet as Anthony Esolen points out, our grandmothers “in a single day did fifty skillful things for people she loved, rather than spending eight hours fielding phone calls in an office or scraping plaque off the teeth of strangers, while wearing goggles and a face mask to guard against dreadful infections from their blood and spittle.”¹ His language is excessive. Medical and dental professionals provide necessary, if often messy and even dangerous services, yet his hyperbole has a rhetorical point: to shock us into recognizing the comparative beauty as well as comparative importance of the work of the homemaker.

It is a good thing, a positive development that women have more economic and professional opportunities than they did in the past. Yet these “opportunities” are often about money and prestige, not the health and prosperity of the family. Esolen claims:

Even the phrase “stay-at-home mom” is patronizing and faintly derogatory, like “stick-in-the-mud mom” or “sit-in-the-corner mom.” Do we talk about a “chained-to-a-desk mom” or a “stuck-in-traffic mom” or a “languishing-in-meetings mom”? To do fifty things in one day for which you alone are responsible, for the immediate good of the people you love, is deemed easy, trivial, beneath the dignity of a rational person, but to push memoranda written in legal patois from one bureaucratic office to another, at great public expense and for no clear benefit to the common good, now *that* is the life.²

Unquestionably, he describes the outlook of our society today. We celebrate diversity except the choice to stay home and rear children. Polls indicate that two-thirds of women who have children at home would prefer not to work full-time. Progressives don’t like to hear that statistic, yet it

¹ Esolen, *Out of the Ashes*, 10.

² *Ibid.*, 124-125.

really is not unusual for mothers to prefer children, home, family, and community relationships over work outside of the home. “Women have been emancipated from the freedom of the home and chained to salaried work and lives of relative loneliness,” Esolen claims.³

The role of homemaker has much to commend if even by modern criteria. A homemaker quietly may develop any number of skills and interests. Rather than splitting her time and focus between work and home – eight hours at the office and another hour perhaps on the road, the other half of her waking hours at home – she is able to spend all of her time focused on the home. This is a great privilege and a great advantage. She is able to work at her own pace. She takes breaks when she wants. She tackles whatever task she wants. She determines her own timetable. Her calendar is not dictated to by her bosses or the marketplace. She establishes her own schedule and her own priorities. If she tires of one activity, she may move on to another.

A homemaker may focus her talents on setting a beautiful table and preparing delicious and nutritious meals. She may use her aesthetic sense in decorating and organizing a household. She may use her financial sense in maintaining a family budget. She may spend time cultivating a garden and landscaping her yard. She may knit or sew or crochet beautiful things. She has time to read deeply, thereby developing her mind. She has time to pray and nourish her soul. She may use her gifts to promote the ministry of the church. Most importantly, she has unhurried time to spend with her children. She may watch them grow, teach them, and care for their bumps and bruises.

Some of her skills might have been rewarded by the market. She might have opened a restaurant rather than cooking for her family. She might have run a daycare business instead of caring only for her children. She might sell her handwork. She could work at a plant nursery or go into landscaping. One might pay dearly for her range of services if one were to hire outsiders. Yet why should she prefer commercial activity to domestic? Do we really believe that the marketplace is more important than the home? Do we really believe that it is better for a mother to expend her energies for strangers rather than her loved ones in her home? These are all questions worth asking.

Over the Thanksgiving holiday our son Sam devised a game modeled on the March Madness college basketball brackets. He identified 32 of his and his siblings’ favorite home-cooked dishes according to four categories of eight each: main courses, desserts, soups and sides, and breakfast. They then voted, argued, and sometimes vehemently debated which was *the* favorite. In the end it was Key West shrimp vs. apple crisp. Apple crisp won. Think of it. Thirty-two dishes. They even had to limit the number to 32 with some tough omissions. Why were there so many? Why were the debates so sharp? Because Emily gave her full attention to the quality of their home life throughout their childhood and youth. She made our mealtimes special. She set beautiful tables and cooked delicious meals. Often it is the little things that determine the quality of life, things overlooked when both parents are, by choice or necessity, pursuing commercial gain outside of the home.

Financial necessity calls some into the workforce. Opportunity calls others. Our point is not to criticize work outside of the home by mothers, or fathers for that matter. We do not mean to imply that those in the workplace fail to decorate their homes beautifully, or landscape their yards attractively, or prepare delicious meals. We are not in a position to judge the decisions that

³ Ibid., 185.

each family makes about work. We recognize that various factors have to be taken into consideration. Rather, we merely wish to elevate the status of the homemaker within the Christian community. As we do so, as we elevate the status of homemaker, more women may feel the liberty to devote their full time to their families. As the home receives focused attention, the health of our families may improve. Our homes have the potential to become more attractive places. When the brave new world of the secular left collapses, Esolen hopes our homes will be seen as

havens of sanity and health, of reverence and wisdom, of good work and cheerful play, of marriages according to nature and nature's God, rich with children, and *knowing things*, the (wonders of) ordinary things.⁴

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⁴ Ibid., 191.