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Women in the Workplace: Professional Pursuits as an Expression of the Image of God

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My thanks to all the organizers of the event, the funders, and each of you for coming. It's been a wonderful weekend so far, and I'm honored to be witness to such an important topic—the understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God—discussed with such diversity and wisdom.

The topic I've been asked to take up is one that's near to my heart. But I've got to say, many, many other women could be standing up here delivering remarks perhaps much more profound—and with more experience than me. But here I am, and so I hope I do it justice.

I've had the great privilege in my short professional life to work for and with some truly remarkable professional women. Most recently I am the executive director of a small non-profit working on projects related to the reconnection of sex, marriage, and children in communication and legal efforts—most especially for the working class demographic. My current boss and colleague is Helen Alvare, who many of you might know from her work as a law professor, founder of the religious freedom movement WSFT, and member of a pontifical council to the laity and Catholic commentator. I've interacted closely with other great women in health care, business, journalism, and education; And I can't leave out my own mother, who growing up may have appeared to be a stay at home mother but really had her gifts applied in numerous committees and pro-life political campaigns in my home state of Kansas. It is with each of their examples in mind that I have drafted this talk.

I want to start with a story that I think illustrates a great need for more discussion on this topic of the professional pursuits of women as an expression of image of God.

I live in Washington DC and that city is really a mecca for passionate and intelligent Catholic women and men driven at very high levels of thought and activity. Not too long ago, I witnessed two of my friends talking about their state in life—and particularly the fact they're not currently dating or married. These women are no exception to the DC norm—they're smart, have advanced degrees, full of personality, beautiful, and doing absolutely amazing things in their jobs for people and for their professional fields. As they were talking about their current jobs and hopes for life one of them said, "I like what I do professionally and it's good work, but let's be serious, it's really just a placeholder until I get married." My other friend nodded profusely in agreement.

I disagreed. And what I want to do here today is tell you why I disagree with my friends' statement-- that because we are women we should view our jobs as placeholders until

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we get married or enter the religious life and why I think we need to talk more intentionally about women applying our gifts to the world—whether we're in our sacramental vocation or not. I'm going to make the case that our expression of image of God is dependent not just on our entrance into marriage or religious life, but also on our application of our unique gifts and talents in the world. In fact, if we follow God's will carefully, our vocation to marriage and religious life will be intertwined with as my boss Helen describes it "your gifts and the world's unfulfilled needs."

My talk is geared most for the case of women because this is the Edith Stein conference, but also because it is women are more likely seeing entrance into married life or religious life as an escape from the professional world or "work in the world". I challenge you to find me a man who would make such a statement as to say their job is a placeholder until they're a husband and father!

In particular, I think many of our Catholic communities could do a better job at encouraging women to pursue their gifts professionally. It's not that the Church herself doesn't encourage or allow women to pursue her professional gifts, but rather it's often what is NOT being said in our communities that creates this culture where women see their jobs as "placeholders."

I want to be clear up front that there are practical and biological reasons why women are more likely to be at home with children. And I'm not making a case AGAINST a woman choosing to leave the professional world to raise her children. I think the most important work that can be done today is work for the family in the home. BUT, mothering or religious life are not meant to be an escape from our gifts and talents. The two should go together and while there will be seasons where one is more prominent than the other, neither should be seen as a "placeholder." In fact, more often than not, you'll see women who are "at home" but actively applying their gifts in their communities and culture around them. But I think there are a lot of women like me, who more aimlessly wandered into their pursuit of their passions and gifts in the world, rather than actively discerned them, like they actively discern their sacramental vocation.

And so I have 3 questions I want to explore today:

- 1) What does it look like to have our sacramental vocation and our gifts and talents for the world intertwined
- 2) How particularly women applying their gifts in the professional arena and the world aid in our understanding of what it means to be made in the image of God
- 3) What I mean when I say Catholic communities could do a better job of encouraging this pursuit of application of gifts

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- 1) So my first point—what does it look like to have one’s vocation and their gifts and talents intertwined? Someone who is a terrific and accessible model of this is St. Gianna Molla. Many of you are probably familiar with her story—she is most famously known for her decision to carry her fourth pregnancy to term, which because of a tumor found on her uterus led to her death but the birth of her daughter. But I want to give a brief synopsis of her biography because there are some lesser-known details of her life that I think shed light on this idea of distinct vocation.

I’ll start with what the Society of Gianna Beretta Molla leads with on their webpage. They say:

Gianna Beretta Molla made a heroic choice, but it was something her family members and friends testified she prepared for every day of her life. Her heroic virtue, genuine holiness of life, selflessness, and quiet joy remind all of us that God entrusts us with a personal vocation. Each and every day presents us with choices that have the power to prepare us to take heroic action whenever it will be called for. We can do that, however, only if we surrender ourselves and what we desire to God and His will for us. REPEAT LINE

This is what those closest to St. Gianna and her story would like us to glean from her witness—that she first and foremost followed God’s will for her in her daily surroundings and that, THAT is what gave her the courage and selflessness to make her final act for which she is so well known.

We have one vocation—to be holy in this life so that we can be with God eternally in Heaven. That’s it. It’s a great paradox that that one vocation is both profoundly simple and profoundly difficult—sometimes at the same time. Gianna knew and lived this reality so well. Yet, She was attentive and persistent in her passions and talents, believing always that her work as a doctor and her roles as wife and mother were at the service of God.

Gianna’s faith was shaped by her suffering and the suffering of her family. An older sister she was close to died at a young age, her parents died within months of each other when Gianna was in her early 20s, one of her brothers was imprisoned in a concentration camp and another was drafted in Italy’s army (as a medical student).

Gianna herself started medical school at the height of World War II in Milan. At the time, the war was so tumultuous and Milan itself dangerous that Gianna often could not leave her house to attend classes due to bombings and frequent destruction of buildings. Gianna persisted in her schooling in Milan, and eventually completed her degree in Pavia once the war had ended.

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According to the Society Gianna *“she considered [becoming a doctor] more of a mission than work and therefore felt it and lived it as a service”*

When you stop to consider the threats and suffering Gianna faced while in medical school, it HAD to be a sense of mission and purpose that drove her to persist in her schooling. What else than sheer belief that God needed her service would keep her in difficult schooling in a city where her life was threatened?!

Following medical school, Gianna hoped to follow her brother who was a priest in Brazil, where she could serve as a lay medical missionary. Obstacles stood in her way to fulfilling this desire—including finding a person to fill her position in her Italy practice and eventually her health and inability to thrive in the tropic climate of Brazil. This desire to join her brother in Brazil burned in her heart and when she eventually discerned that she was not equipped and therefore not called, Gianna no doubt was saddened but not despairing. She accepted her call to marriage and waited and prayed to enter that life.

Gianna didn't marry Pietro until age 32, and that was something that caused a great deal of unsettledness in her life. But when they married, they created a happy home while juggling their professions—Gianna in private pediatric practice and Pietro a successful engineer who was often called on trips to other countries, including a lengthy trip to America. When her fourth pregnancy came, Gianna learned of a benign tumor that threatened her life and the baby's. According to Catholic ethics, Gianna could have had the tumor treated and spared her own life. The baby would have most certainly died, but that would have been only an effect of the surgery not a direct abortion. Gianna chose another route, a riskier route that protected the baby more but likely meant suffering for Gianna.

And this is where I think Gianna's sacramental vocation and professional vocation intersect with such clarity. Gianna, BECAUSE she was a doctor—which she was able to pursue undistracted since she was not yet married or had children, and BECAUSE Gianna worked with pregnant women on occasion in her practice-- understood unequivocally that continuing her pregnancy would likely result in her death, unless God would perform a miracle. She understood precisely what her suffering would be and She prepared her family for the suffering, telling them there would likely be a choice to choose her or the baby and that the doctors' should choose the baby. She held hope for a miracle, saying to her husband in the weeks before birth that he should get her fashion magazines from France because if she survived this birth, she would need to get caught up on the latest fashion trends. (that's my type of woman) But it was her knowledge of this tumor and consequences that made her decision for her child all the more selfless and heroic.

And so, I want to return to my friends' comments for a minute---for Gianna, there was nothing in her life, most especially in her job, that was a placeholder until she became a

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wife or mother. All that she experienced prior to marriage and even in marriage—where she remained a doctor—prepared her for the heroic act that called her to Heaven. For Gianna, being a doctor was not a placeholder until she became a mother. It intimately prepared her for her most sanctifying action AS MOTHER...her role as doctor and as wife and mother were intertwined. To me, this is such a clear and model example of what a unique vocation looks like.

Gianna is such an accessible saint. There is a lot about her life that is relevant to so many of us in this room. True, for most of us, we will likely not have a moment where our professional vocation and our sacramental vocation intersect in such a dramatic fashion. But sainthood is made in daily actions, and Gianna's ordinary life—full of joy, tragedy, perseverance, and humility is witness to that. She could not have known how integral her pursuit of medicine would ultimately be to her family and her sainthood. Yet she knew her role as doctor was in service to God. The heroic virtue needed for sanctity demands all of us—our body, our mind and talents, and our service to others and God.

I think can be a temptation of Catholics to think entering our sacramental vocation as wife and mother or religious sister is the beginning of our adult contribution to the sanctification of the world. And it's a very important contribution—our commitment to another person, people, or a religious community. I'm not denying it. But we need also the mom who sees the obscene t-shirt display in the store window and becomes an activist to get it removed. Or the woman who is a writer and writes letters to the editor or local editorials on religious freedom or some other important topic so that locals are aware of the alternative voice out there. We need the parent who volunteers to make the costumes for the school play (and makes sure they're appropriate). Or the lawyer-trained mom who works through the local ordinance to shut down the strip club down the street.

We have to be attentive to what our "our gifts and the worlds unfulfilled needs are" and when it might be time for us to step out into the world with our gifts. Further, our children need to be aware there is a world that is in great need of our Christian witness and our application of gifts and talents. They will learn that by observing those closest to them, their mom and dad. And they need to see that the world needs both the male and female witness. But first, we have to know our gifts and have fostered them so that we CAN step out confidentially with them.

Here I think of the parable of the talents in the Gospel of Matthew and it's clear message to all Christians—to whom much is given much more will be expected. There is no command to use your talents as a placeholder until marriage or religious life. Our sainthood and our children's sainthood depend on what we're doing for other people and the world—both in and outside the home.

2) This brings me to my second point, how applying our gifts aids in our expression in the image of God.

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The Catholic faith teaches that man was made with the purpose to love and serve God and with the command to lead all of creation to the glory of God. “Male and Female” he created them in his image. It’s the in the complementarity of the two sexes that we can understand and reflect the fullness of God. Quite simply, there are things that men and women each bring to the table that help the other understand the whole of human race and God.

On the topic of women in the professional world, Edith Stein explains that because women have a natural propensity to work for the good of a person or people, the female presence in the work place she says “can become a blessed counterbalance precisely here where everyone is in danger of becoming mechanized and losing his humanity.” She explains that when everything “inanimate finally serves the living” even the dulllest of jobs can become more exciting and therefore that employee who feels their small job is boring and unimportant can feel even more empowered to do their job and do it well when they see how they’re in irreplaceable part of the team aimed for a greater good.

We have seen this consistently at Women Speak For Themselves (which by the way any of you are invited to join at www.womenspeakforthemselves.com). I was involved since the beginning and something that women were telling Helen regularly they wanted to speak out on religious freedom and women, but they didn’t feel they had a voice. WSFT gave them confidence they weren’t alone and should speak out and in their “lanes”. Recently, we hosted our first spokeswoman training, where we are trained 21 women from various places and backgrounds. We had teachers, doctors, lawyers, women in their 20s, moms of 6 kids, and women who have been in their fields for 20 years. We trained them in radio, writing, community activism, television training, and social media. For these women, the invitation to be trained and giving them tools and answers to their questions energized and empowered them to speak out on religious freedom and women, pro life issues and the importance of religious institutions witness. And it gave them encouragement that we want them to speak out in their communities and their spheres—as doctors, lawyers, teachers, etc.

In the work place, complementarity is necessary and preferred for success—for the flourishing of a workplace and for the flourishing of humanity. In fact, according to studies, companies with more collaboration between men and women at all levels, and especially with more women in leadership, perform better.

Again, I’m not arguing that all women need to the professional world, but I do think more of us would find a place in the professional world if we were encouraged to see our gifts and talents clearly and understood the importance of both women and men collaborating in the workplace and the world—not just in the home.

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3) Which brings me to my third point, why Catholic communities should do more to encourage women to apply their gifts in the professional world.

Here, I want to tell you the story of a good friend of mine from college, I'll call her Emily. Several months ago, Emily called me rather unexpectedly. She had given birth to her third child a few months prior and she and her husband were living in small town America, where he was working and she was at home with their kids. Emily was calling to pick my brain about grad school and specifically law school—given that I work for a prominent Catholic lawyer. To say this shift into the professional world surprised me would be an understatement.

You see, Emily and her husband dated all through college. By junior year, they had decided they'd marry after graduation.

For Emily, she hadn't really considered whether she'd be at home or working until it became clear that she would be getting married after college. Then it just seemed like being at home was a given, she said. And while no one in our community explicitly said a woman should or shouldn't work outside the home, the emphasis in our community really was discerning ones sacramental vocation and embracing it, and for women, our natural capacity to have and raise children was emphasized too. For Emily, and for a lot of our classmates, we wanted marriage and family (or religious life) and so we didn't give much thought to the rest of the matter—especially women like Emily, who saw that marriage was imminently near.

Something nagged at Emily, as she started having children and her and her husband tried to navigate their family life. It's not that she's not happy being a mom. It's that she felt called to do more for God and for her children. She's now interviewing at Harvard, Georgetown, Northwestern, and U Chicago law schools. "I didn't push the envelope (on fostering my gifts and talents) in college and right after," Emily told me just the other day, "but thank God I married a man who did. I feel liberated." She described her and her husband's decision as the right one for her family because pursuing law is a part of who she is. It's not for everyone, she said, but it is for her. One can't predict fully how Emily receiving a law degree and working as a lawyer might work in harmony with her roles as wife and mother (her Gianna moment, if you will), but as doors keep opening she keeps feeling the nudge that her personal call is to follow this path. As she said to me "if my kids were born to someone else they might have had a mother who was at home and maybe homeschooling, and that would be great, but it wouldn't be me." I'd argue what her children need as they grow is the witness of Emily applying her talents, not burying them. Never at the cost of the family life, but in harmony with—as St. Gianna did.

I can relate to Emily's experience of "professional wandering", as I like to call it. I was 25 when I realized that writing was something I had a knack for and was something I wanted to pursue for the good humanity and for God. Interestingly enough, I was

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considering religious life at the time and in regular spiritual direction with a priest. At the same time, I needed a little extra cash and so I started freelance writing for a local Catholic publication. As my freelancing expanded and my prayer and spiritual direction progressed I had a clear epiphany—I had a passion and gift for journalism, storytelling, and writing. This gift was clearly a gift that is applied to the secular world in the spirit of service to God’s truth. But since I had this gift that distinctly lay in the secular world, I had a lay vocation and not a religious vocation. My spiritual director and the peace I felt in prayer confirmed this revelation.

I’ve had to check the decision I made many times in prayer, due mostly to lack of trust and faith on my own part, but it’s clear, like the model of St. Gianna, that my gifts and talents are intertwined with my sacramental vocation. And looking back, I can see where my talent and passion for writing was there all along, but my focus was more on discerning marriage or religious life, per my community’s focus.

I don’t think my friend’s experience or mine are isolated as far as Catholic communities are concerned. I’ve witnessed many women stumble into their gifts, talents and passions professionally, rather than actively discern them and pursue them. I know women who stay in “placeholder” jobs until they meet their husbands. And I’ve talked with many friends who are married but discovering they have gifts or talents that they feel compelled, even obligated by conscience, to apply outside their home—in their schools, in their communities, and in society at large.

Because women are relational, and so much of genius is wrapped up in our natural desire and abilities to care for the people entrusted to us, there is a natural desire for us women to feel called to be primary caretakers of the home while the men in our lives are primary caretakers monetarily. On the offset, because men appear more ambitious for the pursuit of concrete goals, it seems the right balance.

Further, women tend to need an invitation to lead. True to gender stereotypes, men tend to have higher confidence and are more likely to see themselves as a leader, where a woman is more likely to be unsure, though an invitation to lead may be just the confidence boost she needs.

But perhaps Catholics have overcorrected the feminist push for women to delay or avoid childbearing in order to participate in the professional world. In a world of delayed marriage, emerging adulthood (or prolonged adolescence), and with an unusually non-committal generation, emphasis on discernment of sacramental vocation seems to take precedence in traditional Catholic circles. But our sacramental vocation is not the only way we can be faithful, committed Christians in society. (as my friend observed in my life, THANK God I didn’t wait until I was married to begin really living my call to Christian service.)

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The great thing about being Catholic is that we're "Both/And" people. Women can be wives and mothers and professionals. It takes flexibility, clear boundaries, and juggling on the part of a family and a workplace. But in fact, as Catholics, and just people in general, we should demand more of society—better family leave, just wages and better work schedules for family life. Not just for us either, but especially when considering the working poor.

I run a website and outreach program called I Believe in love.com. In our program, we work with working class young adults who have aspirations for marriage and stable family life but often fail to achieve them. Something we have seen is the reality that for MANY of them, 2 parent working homes is or will be the only way they will make it work with children. Their wages simply will not make ends meet otherwise. But the work environments and the family leave policies for jobs in the working class are often awful.

For example, there was a New York Times article not too long ago that talked about a single woman who went through several buses and walking commutes to make it to her job at Starbucks. To top it off, Starbucks has this scheduling system that is computer managed and assigns shifts based on store numbers that week. So, there is no predictability in her schedule because of the unpredictability of store numbers. This means she can't budget for a month or even know ahead of time when she'll need childcare and when she won't. This system works for the BIG COMPANY but NOT for the employee and NOT for the family. It is unjust, and as Catholics concerned with the dignity of work and the care of women, men and their children, we should ask for more.

Another example, we know a young man in a community where we work, and his favorite job was "Footlocker" type store. Not because the job was anything glamorous—retrieving shoe sizes from a warehouse isn't glamorous no matter how you view it. But, his manager formed a team and each employee understood their role as part of a team and therefore took it more seriously. Each employee and their hospitality mattered to the store's success.

For young adults in the working class, their work patterns are often inconsistent and many are frequently switching jobs or are unnecessarily unemployed. Largely they are citing poor management, inability to have a schedule that works for them, or a feeling they weren't really needed in a workplace. But their responsibilities as spouse and children depend on work too. I do think, based on my interaction with young adults in our programs, that if we help young adults—whether college educated or not—to see how their gifts, talents abilities matter to the work place and also to their children's flourishing, we could help young adults in this struggling demographic stay in the work place. If a young woman is encouraged by her hospitality to shoppers in the check out line, or a young man commended for his efficiency in getting orders out at a fast food restaurant or in moving inventory in the back room, they likely will like Edith Stein notes—understand their "boring job" as an important part of the whole, and teach their

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children the same. And remember, Stein argues that it's often women who help us find how the "inanimate finally serves the living."

Of course you know as Catholics have a duty to promote the dignity of work, to create good work environments, and to work to accommodate the family life. But what I hope you glean here is our shared desires with the working poor—just like I want my writing and work to have a positive influence on the world, to give my effort meaning, so too does the young adult at the checkout counter or on the store floor want to feel like they are doing something meaningful. Our talents are not the same, but they are all necessary for a greater whole—a civil society that encourages dignity for everyone.

And so, I come full circle and say here that I think this emphasis on fostering and applying gifts can benefit not only the college educated crowds, but the non-college educated crowds too. We can help ALL women and men to see what they do not just inside but also outside the home to be a significant contribution to their sanctity and their children's sanctity.

Our call to sanctity may not always look how we want or think it should. Gianna knew this well when her life was threatened while studying, she could not become a lay missionary, and then had to wait for marriage. But, like Gianna, we should never stop trusting that every step in the journey is a step toward the ultimate beauty we're hoping for. When Gianna was asked in amazement at how she abandoned the desire for missionary life in Brazil, she said:

"All the Lord's ways are beautiful because their end is one and the same: to save our own soul and to succeed in leading many other souls to heaven, to give glory to God."

It's a beautiful thing, the Catholic faith's emphasis on uniqueness. As Pope Emeritus Benedict reminds us "each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary." ALL of us—our mind, our abilities, and our willingness to put ourselves at the service of other people and God are necessary for the sanctification of our own lives and the world. As Gianna said ""Our task is to make the truth visible and lovable in ourselves, offering ourselves as an attractive and, if possible, heroic example." So, how are you, INDIVIDUALLY being called to make the truth of God visible? Think about it. Pray about it. And then do it. It's your obligation. For yourself, your children or future children, and our world. Don't leave your talent buried. Your sainthood depends on it.

Thank you very much.