

25th July 2024

Work

"The smooth current of domestic joy."

Oliver Goldsmith, *The Traveller* (1764)

My quotation yesterday from Pope Paul VI, "The family is, so to speak, the domestic church", got me thinking. "Domestic" is familiar to us: domestic harmony; gross domestic product; domestic violence; domesticated animals; domestic chores. The concept is one of tranquillity, an idyllic set of circumstances, disturbed when things go wrong, and valued all the more when domestic bliss is restored after a turmoil. However ...

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was an American poet, lecturer and social reformer, from the end of the 19th and start of the 20th centuries. Her best-known work was *The Yellow Wallpaper* from in 1891. In 1913, she offered this critique of her work in an interview in *The Forerunner* magazine:

For many years I suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown ... During about the third year of this trouble I went, in devout faith ... to a noted specialist in nervous diseases ... This wise man put me to bed and applied the rest cure, to which a still-good physique responded so promptly that he concluded there was nothing much the matter with me, and sent me home with solemn advice to "live as domestic a life as far as possible," to "have but two hours' intellectual life a day," and "never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again" as long as I lived. This was in 1887. I went home and obeyed those directions for some three months and came near the borderline of utter mental ruin ... Then, using the remnants of intelligence that remained, and helped by a wise friend, I cast the noted specialist's advice to the winds and went to work again – work, the normal life of every human being; work, in which is joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper and a parasite ... Naturally moved to rejoicing by this narrow escape, I wrote "The Yellow Wallpaper" ... to carry out the ideal ... and sent a copy to the physician who so nearly drove me mad. He never acknowledged it.

I quote Gilman's words in full because her story holds an important truth. Domesticity – an idealised family life, or, indeed, an idealised concept of the Church – isn't about lazing around, doing nothing, taking things for granted. Family life has to be worked at. Church life needs work too – "the normal life of every human being." In our "domestic" world, it isn't enough to sit with our feet up when action is needed.

Unlike Gilman's "noted specialist", I'm more than happy to acknowledge the worth of the "joy and growth and service" of *her* work.

A prayer for today

Pauper or parasite? No thank you. Servant of God in my work? That's more like it! Amen

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