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Theology of the body and the role of diversity of sexes in the Catholic notion of diversity

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Abstract

The rapidly Expanding Diversity, Equity (DEI), and Inclusion initiatives present a unique challenge to moral theology today. Not only do the three concepts appear loosely defined by the broader culture, but they are also largely missing from the Christian intellectual tradition. The way forward requires a more precise understanding of each of the concepts in their proper theological context. Appropriately, this work is currently underway. As an example, it was recently argued that the Catholic notion of diversity can be constructed on the basis of the Thomistic Creation-centered approach to reality. A more careful analysis, however, reveals that such an account must be expanded to give more adequate attention to the most fundamental diversity existing at the level of human persons: the diversity of sexes. Using John Paul II's "Theology of the body" as a reference, it will be shown that the culmination of human participation in the beauty of the Creator lies in conjugal union, made possible by the diversity of the sexual constitution.

Keywords

diversity, DEI, Thomas Aquinas, John Paul II, moral theology

1. Introduction

As diversity, equity, and inclusion committees proliferate around the world, affecting policies and practices in a wide variety of societal structures, Catholic thinkers are just beginning to formulate their understanding of the three concepts. This delayed engagement could be explained by a variety of factors and circumstances, of which one seems rather evident: Values such as diversity, equity, or inclusion are nothing new for Catholics—in the sense that they have always been implied by the teaching of Jesus as expressed through the Gospels. Thus, all three values—if we can call them such—form part of the more familiar concepts, such as communion, justice, or simply charity. It should not surprise then that when the language of diversity, equity, and inclusion began to gain traction and effectively penetrate every level of daily living, many Catholics, including Catholic theologians, were caught off-guard.

Thankfully, the shift is taking place, and a more critical reflection is on the way.

An excellent example of this emerging engagement with DEI issues is the recent publication of Justin Anderson on the question of diversity, which he believes is not as foreign to the Catholic tradition as many would like to assume.¹ Anderson argues that “unearthing the deeper roots of a notion such as diversity” requires careful analysis of theological sources, such as, in his case, the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas can render the concept more fruitful and more easily adaptable at the institutional level.² Since I share this opinion and consider it overall a worthwhile project, I would like to propose in this brief work not so much a critique of Anderson’s position but rather a necessary expansion by which a more complete understanding of diversity can be achieved.

This expansion seems necessary, as any Catholic notion of diversity cannot fail to recognize the diversity that exists *at the level of persons*, and among these, the most fundamental diversity: the diversity of sexes. It is striking that as Anderson carefully crafts his “Creator-centered account” of diversity, he seems to overlook this important aspect of our humanity. The oversight is easily forgivable, as it is impossible to articulate an exhaustive account of the Catholic notion of diversity in a single article. From the standpoint of contemporary culture, however, failure to mention the diversity of sexes might represent a significant

¹ J. Anderson, *Diversity: A Catholic understanding*, “Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture” 25 (2022) no. 3, pp. 27–60.

² J. Anderson, *Diversity*, p. 28.

omission in a Catholic way of thinking about the concept. In fact, it seems that the multiplicity of genders and one's right to determine one's own sexual identity constitute one of the very loci of today's debates surrounding the DEI initiatives.³

Therefore, in this article, I intend to amend this gap by showing how human persons reflect the beauty of the Creator by entering the community of persons made possible by and experienced through the diversity of their sexual constitution. While it would make sense to draw from the same sources used by Anderson, I will intentionally defer from consulting St. Thomas Aquinas and turn to the work of one of his most devoted students, Pope St. John Paul II. The reason for this preference is motivated by the fact that the latter offers a more robust account of human experience at the level of one's consciousness, which is important to the proper articulation of the meaning of the diversity of sexes.⁴ And since the Polish Pope never abandoned the realist outlook of St. Thomas Aquinas, he seems to be a perfect fit for the present purposes.⁵

Finally, and before proceeding, it is necessary to note that my main objective is not to offer any extensive account of sexual differences. This work is currently under way and can be easily located.⁶ In fact, I will intentionally refrain from using the language of sexual difference to distinguish it from the "diversity of sexes" to highlight not so much the peculiarity of each sex as how being sexually different facilitates the unique mode of reflecting God's beauty in the world.

2. The diversity of sexes in the thought of John Paul II

John Paul II was well-acquainted with the term diversity. He frequently uses the word in many of his writings and speeches, most notably in his pastoral

³ Not to exclude other important issues, such as racism or other forms of unjust discrimination.

⁴ According to Mary Shivanandan, the greatest contribution of Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II is that he "posits reflexive consciousness at the core of the human person, based on St. Thomas' philosophy of potency and act" (M. Shivanandan, *Crossing the threshold of love: A new vision of marriage in the light of John Paul II's anthropology*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington (DC) 1999, p. 147).

⁵ Cf. T. Petri, *Aquinas and the theology of the body: The Thomistic foundations of John Paul II's anthropology*, Catholic University of America Press, Washington (DC) 2016, p. 272.

⁶ See, for example, J. Grabowski, *Unraveling Gender: The battle over sexual difference*, TAN Books, Gastonia (NC) 2022; T. Fortin, *On the nature of human sexual difference: A symposium*, Springer, Cham (Switzerland) 2024.

addresses and homilies. In fact, the references, though scattered, are numerous enough to merit their own analysis, especially in light of the virtue of solidarity, which tends to accompany the term quite regularly.⁷ For the purposes of this article, however, I will focus on the particular notion of diversity—the diversity of sexes, that is, the reality of being male or female.

For the Polish Pope, masculinity and femininity are more than accidental features; they constitute a *fundamental* dimension of being a person. Other aspects are significant too, such as race or language, but none seem to carry as much weight as the diversity of sexes. This is because, when we think about it, every experience, every thought, every gesture, or every deed is *deeply embedded* in the overall structure of the person who *cannot be anything but sexed* from the moment of conception. When one thinks or feels, one does not think or feel like a generic person, but concretely and specifically as a woman or as a man, or better yet, as a particular individual:

Precisely the function of sex [that is, being male or female], which in some way is “constitutive for the person” (not only “an attribute of the person”), shows how deeply man, with all his spiritual solitude, with the uniqueness and unrepeatability proper to the person, is constituted by the body as “he” or “she.”⁸

Therefore, the diversity of sexes, though firmly rooted in biological structure, is at the same time not reducible to it. Bodiliness and sexuality are not identical precisely because “the fact that man is a ‘body’ belongs *more deeply to the structure of the personal subject* than the fact that in his somatic constitution he is also male or female.”⁹ Our daily experience confirms this. When parents wait for the baby to be born, the first thing they want to know is the sex of the baby. This is not purely accidental, and it represents more than the desire to know about

⁷ See, for example, the Pope’s address to the United Nations in New York from Thursday, October 5, 1995, or his message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace from 1989. John Paul II, *Adress to the United Nations*, New York 05.10.1995, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1995/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_05101995_address-to-uno.html (01.02.2025); John Paul II, *Message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace*, 01.01.1989, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19881208_xxii-world-day-for-peace.html (01.02.2025).

⁸ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them: A theology of the body*, trans. M. Waldstein, Pauline Books and Media Boston 2006, 10:1.

⁹ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 8:1. Emphasis mine.

a certain biological feature, similar to weight or skin color. They instinctively ask for the baby's sex because, whether explicitly or not, they realize it is essential for the baby's identity as a person, which in turn is reflected by the subsequent choice of an appropriate name.

Of course, being constituted as a male or a female in the depth of one's personhood does not mean that men and women represent two different species, two different kinds of beings. While the two sexes are not *merely* attributes, do they constitute the *essence* of our common humanity. Instead, masculinity and femininity should be seen more as:

...two reciprocally completing ways of "being a body" and at the same time of being human—as two complementary dimensions of self-knowledge and self-determination and, at the same time, two complementary ways of being conscious of the meaning of the body.¹⁰

I shall return to the concept of complementarity in a moment. For now, it is important to emphasize that the diversity of sexes represents an *ontological* category. In the simplest of terms, masculinity and femininity are two distinct ways of *being* human. The observation is significant in that it serves as our first point of contact with the "Creator-centered account" of diversity as presented by Anderson. If our mode of being as persons is necessarily sexual, then the diversity of sexes must somehow share in this wider diversity of beings. If the diversity of beings serves the primary purpose of reflecting God's goodness, then in some fashion, the diversity of sexes must also participate in this process. To explain how it happens, it is necessary to return for a moment to Anderson's article.

In Thomistic cosmology, the diversity of the created world is directly willed by the Creator himself, which means that it is not a product of mere chance. It is not even the result of sin, as argued by Origen.¹¹ Rather, "the diversity of things," explains Anderson, "is tied to the very perfection of the universe."¹² God desired for beings to be different *from the beginning*, which shows that the multiplicity of created forms is fundamentally good. Why would God intend

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 10:1.

¹¹ J. Anderson, *Diversity*, 31. See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, New York 1948, Benzinger, I, q. 47, a. 2.

¹² J. Anderson, *Diversity*, p. 31.

diversity in the first place? The short answer is that His goodness might be made manifest in the world. As Anderson explains,

...God brought things into being in order that his goodness might be communicated to creatures and be represented to them [...] However, due to God's infinity and simplicity, his goodness could not be adequately represented by any single creature alone [...] and so, at the root of the cause of diversity of things lies an acknowledgement of both God's ultimate, ineffable goodness, and the finitude of every creature.¹³

What is important to note here is that various creatures reflect this goodness of the Creator in various ways, or better yet, in ways corresponding to their natures. For all beings, participation in the process of divine *communicatio* rests on the sheer fact of their existence. For animate creatures, such as plants or animals, it means, additionally, the preservation of the species. Still, for human beings, it's both *and more*. Since, unlike the rest of creation, human beings are rational, they reflect God's beauty in a unique way: by discovering the truth and pursuing what is good. In doing so, they reflect the image of God within themselves while also actualizing and perfecting their own nature.¹⁴

John Paul II would undoubtedly agree with Aquinas on all these points, though he would probably want to add that the diversity of sexes permeates all three levels of this communication *qua* persons. The first level—that of existence in the world—is easy to prove and does not require much explanation. It is clear that even in cases of physiological deformity, each person coming into existence is biologically male or female.¹⁵ This is confirmed not only by the pres-

¹³ J. Anderson, *Diversity*, p. 33.

¹⁴ Though, of course, the fullness of perfection is achievable only in the state of beatitude. Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I, q. 65, a. 2.

¹⁵ "Every human being is by nature a sexual being and belongs from birth to one of the two sexes. This fact is not contradicted by the phenomenon of so-called hermaphroditism—any more than any other sickness or deformity militates against the fact that there is such a thing as human nature and that every human being, even the deformed or sick human being, has the same nature and is human being precisely because of it." (K. Wojtyła, *Love and responsibility*, San Ignatius Press, San Francisco 1993, p. 47).

ence of specific reproductive organs but also by the differences existing in the genetic structure of every zygote.¹⁶

At the second level, concerned with the preservation of species, human beings reflect God's beauty by fulfilling his command to "be fruitful and multiply."¹⁷ Of course, the main difference between human beings and animals is that procreation is a rational and free act; however, it is not something completely undetermined. In fact, it is appropriate to speak of a certain *natural complementarity*, which,

...is not referring merely to acting, but also to being. Womanhood and manhood are complementary not only from the physical and psychological points of view, but also from the ontological. It is only through the duality of the "masculine" and the "feminine" that the "human" finds full realization.¹⁸

Earlier in his career, writing as Karol Wojtyla, John Paul II would show how this complementarity confirms and expresses the "natural predilection for, a tendency to seek, the other sex," which is dynamic and characteristic of all persons.¹⁹

Finally, the diversity of sexes also influences the third level of uniquely human ways of communicating divine goodness in the world. Though it is evident that the rational exercise of the will extends to all human acts—and not only those who have a sexual good as their object, like learning about astronomy or building a ship—the *sexual union of a man and a woman in marriage represents a privileged way of manifesting God's glory in the world*. This point is of tremendous importance to the proper articulation of the Catholic concept of diversity. Here, in the conjugal union expressed in a conjugal act made possible by sexually differentiated bodies, human beings place their rationality and freedom at the service of love, which has the potential to reflect the very love—the essence—of

¹⁶ Though it is true that the process of sexual development is subject to subsequent modifications. Cf. P. A. Aatsha, T. Arbor; K. Krishan, *Embryology, sexual development*, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK557601/> (7.10.2023).

¹⁷ Gen 1:28.

¹⁸ John Paul II, Apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*, 22.11.1981, 7, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html (01.02.2025).

¹⁹ Wojtyła is not afraid to say that a sexual urge oriented at the person of the same sex represents a deviation frustrating the "natural direction of the sexual urge" (K. Wojtyła, *Love and responsibility*, pp. 48–49).

the Creator Himself. Since this point is at the heart of the present argument, I shall now proceed to explain it in more depth.

2.1. The diversity of sexes and *communio personarum*

Just as the diversity of things in the universe was never a result of chance or sin but was positively willed by the Creator, the same positive intentionality must be affirmed for the diversity of sexes. Despite some mistaken interpretations of the Genesis story, Eve was not an afterthought; rather, “from the beginning and *directly*, man was created in the image of God inasmuch as he is male and female.”²⁰ The biblical rib was never intended to convey a sense of male superiority; it was and continues to be the symbol of the common humanity in which both the male and the female participate fully.²¹ The question thus emerges: why did God intend *this* diversity in such a direct manner? The answer is because the diversity of sexes is intimately linked with the deeper reality of the community of persons. As John Paul II explains,

...the unity that is realized through the body indicates from the beginning not only the “body,” but also the “incarnate” communion of persons—*communio personarum*—and requires this communion from the beginning. Masculinity and femininity express the *twofold aspect of man's somatic constitution* (“this time she is flesh from my flesh and bone from my bones”) and *indicate*, in addition, through the same words of Genesis 2:23, *the new consciousness of the meaning of one's body*. This meaning, one can say, consists in *reciprocal enrichment*.²²

The body then communicates, or more simply, manifests the person. When the original man leapt from joy upon seeing the first woman, his excitement could not be explained by the presence of biological differences alone. The femininity of the woman was truly “something unique and unrepeatable”²³ for

²⁰ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 9:2. Emphasis mine.

²¹ “In the theology of the Yahwist author, the torpor into which God lets the man fall underlines *exclusives of God's action* in the creation of the woman. The man had no conscious part in it. God makes use of his ‘rib’ only to emphasize the common nature of man and woman” (John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 8:2, footnote 13).

²² John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 9:5.

²³ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 9:1.

the man, as it allowed him to experience for the first time the company of another “I,” another *person* outside of himself. Masculinity and femininity always point to the presence of the personal subject.²⁴ In fact, John Paul II insists that “if we dealt with sex without the person, this would destroy the whole adequacy of the anthropology that we find in Genesis.”²⁵ The body is therefore a *witness* to the person; “it expresses the person in his or her ontological and essential concreteness,” ordained from the beginning for communion.²⁶

The importance of the diversity of sexes is therefore directly tied to the ability of human beings to enter the community of persons—the community, which was “willed for them in particular by the Creator.”²⁷ The last part is significant. For God did not intend for the diversity of sexes to merely exist or serve only the propagation of the species, as discussed earlier, but so that, made in His own image and likeness, human beings might love one another and, in doing so, reflect the very love that unites the Divine Persons of the Trinity. Accordingly, every person, from the beginning, carries within himself what John Paul II describes as “the inner dimension of the gift.”²⁸ The dimension that has sacramental meaning—which enables human beings to make visible through their sexually differentiated bodies what remains invisible—is the mystery of divine life:

In man, created in the image of God, the very sacramentality of creation—the sacramentality of the world—was thus in some way revealed. In fact, through his bodilyness, his masculinity, and femininity, man becomes a visible sign of the economy of Truth and Love, which has its source in God himself and was revealed already in the mystery of creation.²⁹

Moreover, we could argue, following John Paul II’s reflections, that it is precisely in the communion of persons that human beings reflect most fully the image of God in themselves. As he writes in his *Theology of the body*,

²⁴ Even though after the Original Sin, human beings are subject to concupiscence and have lost the purity of the “interior gaze,” by which the body communicated the full value of the person in a direct and intuitive way. See the Holy Father’s discussion on shame in: John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 27:4–28:6.

²⁵ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 14:2.

²⁶ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 12:4.

²⁷ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 12:4.

²⁸ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 19:5.

²⁹ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 19:5.

Man becomes an image of God not so much in the moment of solitude as in the moment of communion. He is, in fact, “from the beginning” not only an image in which the solitude of one Person, who rules the world, mirrors itself, but also and essentially the image of an inscrutable divine communion of Persons.³⁰

If for Thomas, the human person reflects God’s glory primarily through an act of knowing, for John Paul II, the emphasis rests on belonging to the other “I”: on the reciprocal giving and receiving of persons. The reason for one’s existence, the “beatifying” dimension of one’s life, is more than possession of the truth; it is the possession of another person by means of self-donation in accordance with the deep ontological longing inscribed in every human being who “cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.”³¹ Here, the Pope’s words should not be read in contradiction to the more established view proposed by Thomas. The Holy Father does not seek to degrade the significance of human rationality or strip its corresponding powers from their usual association with *Imago Dei*. Instead, as others have observed, he simply “supplements the tradition by incorporating a biblical anthropology that he has drawn from a reading of the Genesis narrative.”³² After all, it is only on the basis of being rational that a person can become a gift for another. Still, it is in this becoming that the beauty of humanity shines most brightly with the splendor of God’s own life.³³

2.2. Conjugal love: The imaging of God’s essence

Up to this point, I established that the diversity of sexes was directly willed by God from the beginning and that masculinity and femininity are more than

³⁰ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 9:3. Some scholars believe this emphasis is unique to the thought of John Paul II. Cf. M. Shivanandan, *Crossing the threshold of love*, pp. 72–80.

³¹ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 24, as quoted by the Holy Father in: John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 14:2 and 15:5.

³² T. Petri, *Aquinas and the theology of the body*, p. 168. For a more extensive discussion on this point, see M. Waldstein, *The glory of the Logos in the flesh: Saint John Paul’s theology of the body*, Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, Ave Maria (FL) 2021, pp. 595–67.

³³ One is reminded of the other two experiences of the original man reflective of his rational nature: self-possession and self-determination, without which it is impossible to become a gift for the other. Cf. John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 15:1–2.

biological categories, which permeate all levels of human existence as persons. I then situated the diversity of sexes in the context of the larger diversity of things using Anderson's analysis and showed how masculinity and femininity play a pivotal role in reflecting God's beauty by enabling human beings to form an authentic community of persons. What remains to be shown is how this *community of persons finds its deepest expression in conjugal love*, as expressed by conjugal act made possible through the diversity of sexes. If we understand this point, we will understand why I insist that any Catholic account of diversity, which seeks to speak to the diversity among persons, cannot ignore the diversity of sexes.

While all persons are made for interpersonal communion, or, as John Paul II writes, "living in a reciprocal 'for', in a relationship of reciprocal gift,"³⁴ the conjugal love of marriage represents a unique mode of realizing *communio personarum* in the world. Not only does "this partnership of man and woman constitute the first form of communion between persons,"³⁵ but it is also its deepest expression:

[Spousal] love makes the other "I" in a certain sense one's own "I." Through love, the wife's "I" becomes, so to speak, the husband's "I." [...] Love not only unites the two subjects, but it allows them to penetrate each other so mutually, thereby belonging spiritually to each other, that the author of Ephesians can affirm, "The one who loves his wife loves himself" (Eph 5:28). The "I" becomes, in a certain sense, "you," and the "you" becomes "I."³⁶

"A man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one flesh"³⁷ precisely because of the depth of the personal union characteristic of spousal love. Nowhere else does a person give *so much* to the other "I" than in matrimony:

³⁴ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 14:2. See also Second Vatican Council, Pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et spes*, 7.12.1965, 12, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (04.02.2025).

³⁵ K. Wojtyla, *Sources of renewal: The implementation of the Second Vatican Council*, trans. P. S. Falla, Harper & Row, San Francisco 1980, pp. 114–115.

³⁶ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 17:4.

³⁷ Gen 2:24.

The only “place” in which this self-giving *in its whole truth* is made possible is marriage, the covenant of conjugal love freely and consciously chosen, whereby man and woman accept the intimate community of life and love willed by God Himself, which only in this light manifests its true meaning.³⁸

The words “in its whole truth” are emphasized because the mystery of conjugal love does not admit any compromises; it is not a partial commitment or a contractual agreement subject to change. If it is to be authentic, or better yet, reflective of God’s original intention, a man and a woman must commit themselves totally to each other until death. In fact, “if the person [in marriage] were to withhold something or reserve the possibility of deciding otherwise in the future, by this very fact he or she would not be giving totally.”³⁹ The totality of self-donation corresponds to the totality of the person, who is not only a personal soul but also, at the same time, a sexually defined body. Consequently, if spousal love is truly about giving oneself *completely* to the other person, then it must also involve the person’s body. In fact, what is distinctive to the disinterested gift of self in marriage is precisely the sexual dimension: “it is through the body that the communion of persons in marriage is brought about.”⁴⁰

Since male and female bodies carry within themselves the potential for procreation, the sexual union in marriage is naturally ordained toward children: “the conjugal act means not only love but also potential fruitfulness.”⁴¹ The two realities are deeply interwoven: “the one is realized together with the other and, in a certain way, the one through the other.”⁴² Denying this is not only to violate the natural end of sexual appetite but also, and more importantly, to negate the fullness of the meaning of *communio personarum* intended by marriage:

³⁸ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 11. Emphasis mine.

³⁹ John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, 11.

⁴⁰ Distinguishing it, for example, from the personal love that exists between a mother and a child. Cf. M. Shivanandan, *Crossing the threshold of love*, p. 82.

⁴¹ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 123:3. Of course, the totality of self-gift does not demand that each conjugal act result necessarily in conception, but only that it remain open to it. In fact, seeking only procreation can be considered a form of utilitarianism. Cf. K. Wojtyła, *Love and responsibility*, 233.

⁴² John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 124:6. See also Paul VI, Encyclical letter on the regulation of birth *Humanae vitae*, 25.07.1968, 12, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html (01.02.2025).

One can say that in the case of an artificial separation of these two meanings in the conjugal act, a real bodily union is brought about, but it does not correspond to the inner truth and dignity of personal communion, *communio personarum*. This communion demands, in fact, that the “language of the body” be expressed reciprocally in the integral truth of its meaning. If this truth is lacking, one can speak neither of the truth of the reciprocal gift of self nor of the reciprocal acceptance of oneself by the person.⁴³

In other words, a marital relationship is not just the union of minds or hearts; it is the union of *whole persons* who, in their bodily constitutions, are objectively affected by the possibility of procreation. To become a total gift of self to the other in marriage requires, therefore, that nothing is withheld and that nothing is intentionally claimed for oneself, whether psychologically or biologically. Otherwise, “marital intercourse cannot be said to be a realization of the personal order.”⁴⁴ Only when the two sincerely seek to become “one” in flesh, with everything that it entails, can spousal love become what it is meant to be: a profound personal union rooted in freedom.

There is no denying that such love is difficult to achieve, which is why John Paul II frequently speaks of spousal love in terms of a task.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, if strengthened by the grace of God, spouses who remain faithful to their marriage vows and embrace the life of total self-donation form an *exceptional sign* of God’s love in the world.⁴⁶ By placing their hearts and bodies at the service of personal love, they express “the whole depth of the mystery of creation and

⁴³ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 124:7.

⁴⁴ K. Wojtyla, *Love and responsibility*, p. 228.

⁴⁵ See, for example, John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 19:2 and 117b:3.

⁴⁶ By emphasizing the uniqueness of marriage, I do not wish to ignore or disparage other vocations. As argued before, all persons are called to *communio personarum*, and all are able to manifest God’s beauty in the world by becoming a gift of self. Commenting on the gift of celibacy, for example, John Paul II argues that “continence for the kingdom of heaven, the choice of virginity or celibacy for one’s whole life, has become in the experience of the disciples and followers of Christ an act of *particular response to the love* of the Divine Bridegroom, and therefore *acquired the meaning of an act of spousal love*, that is, of a spousal gift of self with the end of answering in a particular way the Redeemer’s spousal love” (John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 80:1). Hence, at the beginning of this article, I intentionally said that marriage represents a *privileged way*—not the *only way* of manifesting God’s glory in the world.

of redemption.”⁴⁷ Not only do they communicate their own love to the world, but they also reflect the very love of God, made manifest in the love with which Christ loved the Church:

The analogy of the love of spouses (or spousal love) seems to emphasize above all the aspect of God’s gift of himself to man who is chosen “from ages” in Christ (literally, his gift of self to “Israel,” to the “Church”); a gift that is in its essential character, or as gift, total (or rather “radical”) and irrevocable [...] which is precisely what the analogy of spousal love indicates: it is in some sense “all” that God “could” give of himself to man, considering the limited faculties of man as a creature.⁴⁸

Because of this resemblance to Christ’s sacrificial love for the Church, spousal love possesses a unique dignity. By their mutual love, by their generous fruitfulness, by their solidarity and faithfulness, and by the loving way in which all members of the family assist one another, “the Christian family, which springs from marriage as a reflection of the loving covenant uniting Christ with the Church [...] manifests to all men Christ’s living presence in the world, and the genuine nature of the Church.”⁴⁹ In the words of John Paul II, marriage lived well is “an efficacious expression of the saving power of God, who realizes his eternal plan [...] in the heart of every man, male and female.”⁵⁰

If so, spousal love should be treated with *reverence*. If conjugal love indeed reflects the love with which God loved the world—the kind of love that did not hold back the Father from sending His own Son to die on the cross—then reverence is precisely the attitude needed by every married couple. It is a gift that sustains and develops a *singular sensibility* for all that in marriage vocation and shared life carries within itself “the sign of the mystery of creation and redemption.”⁵¹ In other words, reverence guarantees that the prophetic symbolism inscribed in the covenantal relationship of marriage does not dim or fade away with time. It is the gift by which spouses resist the temptation of seeing their love as less than what it really is; it is what nurtures their commitment, the

⁴⁷ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 105:4.

⁴⁸ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 95:4.

⁴⁹ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, 48.

⁵⁰ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 101:1.

⁵¹ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 131:4.

sense of awe and veneration for the sacred in their relationship, and keeps them from falling into sin, which threatens their own dignity as persons and the even greater dignity of their union as spouses.

All of it—to return to our overarching argument—can be realized “only through a deep understanding of the personal dignity of both the *feminine* and the *masculine* “I,”⁵² which means that everything I have said so far—the awesome capacity of spouses to communicate the radicalness and totality of God’s love to the world—is *wholly dependent on how one understands* the diversity of sexes. Since the sexualized body is at the root of the personal communion of spouses, proper attention and education must be given to masculinity and femininity in their ontological and ethical dimensions. One’s sexuality thus becomes one’s responsibility: one must strive to rediscover its true meaning or, as John Paul II says, “re-read the language of the body in truth.”⁵³

3. Casting the doubt: the challenge of concupiscence

Why does the Polish Pope insist on reclaiming the original meaning of the body? After the first sin, human beings lost their ability to intuitively relate to each other in the fullness of dignity corresponding to them as persons. The beatifying experience of mutual self-donation is now impaired and threatened by lust and the desire to use rather than to love. Moreover, that which in the beginning used to be completely at the service of building and strengthening *communio personarum* suddenly became an obstacle to it: “the diversity, or the difference between the male and female sexes, was abruptly sensed and understood as an element of the mutual opposition of persons.”⁵⁴ Masculinity and femininity, though retaining their ontological directionality in terms of a sexual urge, lost their power to reliably direct one to the interior value of another person. Due to concupiscence, the personal “I” is no longer seen in the totality of the gift and becomes an object of manipulation and selfish gratification. Love was detached

⁵² John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 132:4. Emphasis mine.

⁵³ On the need to rediscover the correct meaning of the body in conjugal love, see John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 105–107.

⁵⁴ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 29:2.

from the person, and the human heart had been “cast into a state of continual suspicion.”⁵⁵

While it remains beyond the scope of this article to offer an exhaustive analysis of concupiscence, it might be helpful to note that concupiscence does not represent some mysterious force lurking in the shadows of one’s being, but more precisely a certain “lack” or “limitation” of God’s vision implanted in the mind of the original man at the moment of the first temptation: “*you shall not die at all*. Rather, God knows that when you eat of it, your eyes will be opened, and you will become like God, knowing good and evil.”⁵⁶ According to John Paul II,

...this motivation clearly implies casting doubt on the Gift and on Love, from which creation takes its origin as gift. [...] By casting doubt in his heart on the deepest meaning of the gift, that is, on love as the specific motive of creation and of the original covenant, man turns his back on God-Love, on the “father.” He detaches his heart and cuts it off, as it were, from that which “comes from the Father.” in this way, what is left in him is what “comes from the world.”⁵⁷

The doubting and hesitation experienced by the first man eventually materialize in his decision to taste the forbidden fruit, and as a consequence, he loses “the original certainty of the ‘image of God’ expressed in his body.”⁵⁸ In other words, man loses his sight. He is no longer able to perceive with clarity that he was made to be an icon of divinity in the world, that he was made for *communio personarum*. He is lost in himself. That is why he first hides in the bushes and then rebels against God throughout history. Instead of becoming a total gift of self to the other, he prefers to *hide* from the other or use the other for his own pleasure. Even his own body now presents a dilemma; “man experiences shame,” argues John Paul II, which “reveals a specific difficulty in sensing the human essentiality of one’s own body, a difficulty man had not experienced in the state of original innocence.”⁵⁹

⁵⁵ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 46:4.

⁵⁶ Gen 3:5. Emphasis mine.

⁵⁷ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 26:4.

⁵⁸ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 27:5.

⁵⁹ John Paul II, *Man and woman he created them*, 28:2.

4. Conclusion: in the pursuit of the authentic diversity of sexes

Unfortunately, these words do not refer to some distant theological reality but mirror closely what is happening in our society today. Whether we are in favor of the DEI movement or not, the fact remains that more and more people are confused about the issues related to human sexuality. The diversity of sexes is but one of many examples of the difficult challenges confronting our generation. This article has shown, however, that for Catholics, the problem is not diversity itself but the correct *discernment* of what constitutes an authentic diversity.

The *authentic* diversity of sexes is deeply embedded in the wider diversity of things. Sharing the same purpose of communicating divine goodness to the world, it serves as the foundation of the uniquely human way of reflecting God's beauty. Precisely because of its fundamental character, it is the first and most important diversity in the world of persons. Since humans are embodied spirits, their sexuality permeates every part of their being. Not only that, their masculinity and femininity are more than a matter of differentiated modes of thinking or existing, as their bodies are truly *complementary*, which means that their unique sexual composition as male and female is characterized by a certain intrinsic directionality meant for mature love between persons. Diversity of sexes, therefore, is something beautiful, something necessary, as it is the vehicle by which "the two become one flesh" and, in doing so, become a total gift to each other. This union, if lived in the domain of reverence, represents the pinnacle of human *imaging of God*. While every person individually manifests the divine likeness through knowing the truth and pursuing what is good, it is by coming together and loving each other with the kind of disinterested and radical love with which Christ loved the Church that human beings communicate the love and goodness of the Creator in the most efficacious and beautiful way.

The contemporary problem seems to be precisely this: that there are so few who accept this vision; who believe that the way of total self-donation is desirable and possible; that men and women of today can raise above their instincts, doubts, and pride and rediscover the true meaning of their sexuality; and that through their diversity of sexes, they might form the union that has the capacity to manifest to the world that which all too often remains hidden—the infinite love of the benevolent Creator.

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