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Unity – Sex and Fertility in the Teachings of Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis

Abstract: This article addresses the questions of the unity of man and woman in marriage as well as sex and sexuality in the views of Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis. The first point raised in the text concerns the portrayal of marriage as an image of the Holy Trinity. The next section discusses the unity that is created in the mutual relationship between a man and a woman: a relationship that guides the two people to better understand each other. Its aim is mutual enrichment, that is, the discovery of the man's identity as a man and the woman's identity as a woman in their relationship with each other. The concluding section explores the importance of sex and sexuality as the constitutive elements of the human nature that is found in God.

Keywords: anthropology of marriage and family, communion, fertility, image, Pope Francis, sex, sin, unity

Jedność – płęć i płodność w nauczaniu papieży Jana Pawła II i Franciszka

Streszczenie: Artykuł podejmuje problematykę jedności małżeństwa mężczyzny i kobiety, płci i płciowości w ujęciu Jana Pawła II i Franciszka. Pierwszym elementem, który zostaje poruszony, jest ukazanie małżeństwa jako obrazu Trójcy Świętej. W kolejnym punkcie zostaje omówiona jedność, która powstaje we wzajemnej relacji mężczyzny i kobiety. Relacja ma to do siebie, że prowadzi do wzajemnego poznania mężczyzny i kobiety. Ma na celu wzajemne ubogacenie, czyli odkrycie tożsamości mężczyzny jako mężczyzny i kobiety jako kobiety we wzajemnej relacji do siebie. W ostatnim punkcie omówiono znaczenie płci i płciowości jako elementów konstytutywnych ludzkiej natury znajdującej się w Bogu.

Słowa kluczowe: antropologia małżeństwa i rodziny, grzech, jedność, obraz, płęć, płodność, papież Franciszek, wspólnota

Introduction

In the contemporary anthropological reflection on marriage and family, which has been prompted by the trends emerging in the last few decades, one is confronted by questions concerning the sources of the correct understanding of these two institutions. This paper aims to explore the theological (and therefore natural) foundation of marriage and family in the teachings of Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis by addressing the unity of man and woman, who together comprise the communion of one life: a communion of body and spirit that combines the characteristics of the two sexes. The complementary nature of these characteristics contributes to the harmonious realization of the larger whole. The second issue – related to unity and in a way arising from it – is the notion of sex as the element that establishes the woman as a woman and the man as a man. Sexuality, in turn, carries with itself the notion of fertility as the vehicle through which the man and the woman can procreate. The paper is structured around the issues outlined above and draws from a variety of sources that are relevant to its theological and semantic subject matter.

1. The Holy Trinity as the Image of the Marital Relationship

The first and most important foundation in the lives of a man and a woman – and further on in the lives of their children – is love as an expression of the mutual relationship between the two; a love that “echoes the mystery of the infinite love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Cantalamessa 2017, 114). Both John Paul II and Francis point to the fact that in the human love – being a reflection of the love which prevails between the Persons of the Holy Trinity and in their mutual relations – a communion of life is born and continues to grow. This mutual nature of the relationship becomes a recreation of the relationship that exists in the Holy Trinity, where the Three Persons love one another in the mystery of the one Divine life (John Paul II 1988, n. 7; Francis 2016, n. 29). God is the communion of the three Persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit – who “live eternally in perfect unity” (Francis 2014a, n. 1; Francis 2016, n. 161; John Paul II 1988, n. 7; Spencer 2011, 16; Boff 2000) and above all, in the perfect and highest form of love, although derived from a different source. As Richard of Saint Victor teaches us, “supreme charity-love has to be absolutely perfect; in order to be supremely perfect, it must be so great that it could not be greater” (Angelici 2011, 43). It becomes evident that “God himself is a ‘we’: the God professed in the Christian Creed is not a lonely self-reflection of thought or an absolutely and indivisibly self-contained ‘I,’ but rather he is unity in the trinitarian relation of I–you–we, so that being ‘we,’ as the fundamental form of divinity, precedes all worldly instances of ‘we,’ and the image and likeness of God necessarily refers to such being ‘we’ from the very beginning” (Ratzinger 2014, 114).

Therefore, one can say with reference to the unity of the Holy Trinity – as John Paul II has done – that “the meaning of man’s original unity through masculinity and femininity expresses itself as an overcoming of the frontier of solitude and at the same time as an affirmation – for both human beings – of everything in solitude that constitutes ‘man.’ In the biblical account, solitude is the way that leads to the unity” (John Paul II 2006, 162). This is a process in which man achieves personal awareness by “becoming separate” from other created beings and, at the same time, orients himself towards a person who is similar to him and becomes his helper¹ (cf. Genesis 2:18, 20; John Paul II 2006, 163). In that sense, man becomes like God because he does not shut himself away and does not nullify his essence in himself. This demonstrates that there exists a dynamic process of going beyond one’s own “I” towards another person, the “thou,” or – in the words of Pope John Paul II – “another ‘I’” (John Paul II 1988, n. 6).² It becomes apparent that the “I” is capable of meeting the “thou,” and this also includes the ability to gift one’s own “I” to that other “thou.” Thus, the “I” may only find itself in its fullness by existing in relation to the “thou.” In other words, only in the meeting and the gift of the “I” to the “thou” does the full dimension of the union of man and woman become apparent, a union in which the “I” and the “thou” create a close communion, the “we” of the two bodies (Ratzinger 2006, 53–54). So, man and woman are called not only to exist “side by side” or “together,” but also – and above all – to be “one for the other” (John Paul II 1988, n. 7).

2. Unity as the Mystery of Matrimony

In the biblical depiction of the unity of man and woman, the word used to describe the action that brings the two people together is *dabaq*, which means “to cling to,” “to stay together” or “to cleave to.” This shows that the union of man and woman has a higher and stronger dimension than ties of blood, a dimension of a mutual relationship (affection)

¹ In the original biblical text, the notion of “helper” was expressed using the word *ezer ke-negdo*, which means “‘a helper fit for him, a companion opposite him.’ The Hebrew word *ezer*, ‘helper,’ comes from the root *oz*, meaning ‘strength’: to help means to lend one’s strength to another. [...] The term *ke-negdo*, ‘face-to-face with someone,’ stems from the root *nagad*, ‘to tell.’ To be face-to-face with someone means to be within reach, within speaking distance” (Haddad 2012, 79). Analysing Genesis 2:18, Enrico Solmi notes that “woman is a companion to man (in a literal meaning: ‘facing man’), a helper who is similar to him and fit to meet him. [...] This notion of ‘helper’ has deep biblical roots. In a broader sense, the word is sometimes used in reference to God, who is ‘our help’ (Ps 33:20 and 46:2). In that spirit, a wife is to her husband ‘a helper fit for him and a pillar of support’ (cf. Sir 36:24–26)” (Solmi 2009, 23). The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith makes the following remark with regard to the Hebrew word *ezer*: “The Hebrew word *ezer* which is translated as ‘helpmate’ indicates the assistance which only a person can render to another. It carries no implication of inferiority or exploitation if we remember that God too is at times called *ezer* with regard to human beings (cf. Ex 18:4; Ps 10:14)” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004, footnote 5).

² The concept of “I” has been broadly analyzed by philosophers of dialogue, such as Emmanuel Lévinas (2000; 2002).

whereby the two become one (Lemański 2013, 236; Łanoszka 2014, 13; Stagliano 2014, 48) and “build a ‘unity of two’” (Sarmiento 2002, 68), and thus “become one flesh, [...] a new and unique reality with a new and unique name” (Benedict XVI 2012). In the words of Pope Francis, “this is precisely the mystery of Matrimony: God makes of the two spouses one single life. The Bible uses a powerful expression and says ‘one flesh,’ so intimate is the union between man and woman in marriage. And this is precisely the mystery of marriage: the love of God which is reflected in the couple that decides to live together. Therefore a man leaves his home, the home of his parents, and goes to live with his wife and unites himself so strongly to her that the two become – the Bible says – one flesh” (Francis 2014, n. 1). During his meeting with young people in the square in front of the Basilica of Saint Mary of the Angels in Assisi, the Holy Father also noted that the union of man and woman is a response to God’s calling to create one life and one flesh out of the two people, and thus to live together and for each other. As the pope said, “two Christians who marry have recognized the call of the Lord in their own love story, the vocation to form one flesh and one life from two, male and female” (Francis 2013; see also Falque 2017, 531), and thus have chosen the shared existence of two independent beings, each of them having the unique ability to create one communion despite their diversity.

3. Relationship as Mutual Discovery

Pope Francis teaches us that the relationship between a man and a woman is conducive to the development of a mutual bond in knowledge, and above all, to the development of harmony. As he points out, “in order to know oneself well and develop harmoniously, a human being needs the reciprocity of man and woman. When that is lacking, one can see the consequences. We are made to listen to one another and help one another. We can say that without the mutual enrichment of this relationship – in thought and in action, in affection and in work, as well as in faith – the two cannot even understand the depth of what it means to be man and woman” (Francis 2015a). In the same manner as Adam did in relation to Eve, every man “discovers himself in relation to the one that God gave him as help in being human” (Kotecki 2012, 128), a “vital helper” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004, n. 6; see also Draper 2010, 117). Similarly, we can discover ourselves in the mutual discovery of our identities: the identity of man and the identity of woman.

God did not create man to be alone, but rather to share his journey with another person, someone who complements him (Francis 2015b), and to “live the wondrous experience of love” (Francis 2015b, 16) that binds the two bodies together so closely that they become one flesh (cf. Genesis 2:24). As a consequence, the two people render help and service to each other and experience the meaning of oneness to which they attain with growing perfection (Second Vatican Council 1965, n. 48). This rendering of help and service in oneness is a process that develops with the time spent together: it is different in the early days and

different a few decades later, and is thus a movement towards the attainment of fullness and depth (Balthasar 2005, 27). This form of striving for ever greater mutual understanding produces the *communio personarum* (Second Vatican Council 1965, n. 12) that manifests itself in three dimensions: in the union of humanity, in the union of spirit and in the union of flesh (Ozorowski 2009, 68–76; Pollini 2011). Therefore, one may conclude that “the reality of the Divine image ‘takes place’ in the space of the mutual interaction between two people: a man and a woman. A person is the image of God in a relationship, as if ‘by virtue of a relationship’” (Kunka 2013, 104). Being in a relationship, as Pope Francis emphasizes, becomes a worldly manifestation of the “divine plan to make of the family a special community of life and love” (Francis 2015c), a life which is in God’s heart and becomes His desire.

Here, as Pope Francis points out, begins “God’s dream for his beloved creation: to see it fulfilled in the loving union between a man and a woman, rejoicing in their shared journey, fruitful in their mutual gift of self” (Francis 2015b; see also Francis 2018). Similar references can also be found in John Paul II, who points to the fulfillment of marriage through fertility: “the biblical account speaks of God’s *instituting marriage* as an indispensable condition for the transmission of life to new generations, the transmission of life to which marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordered: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it’ (*Gen 1:28*)” (John Paul II 1988, n. 6; see also Francis 2014b).

4. Sex and Fertility in the Theology of Marriage and Family

As a being created by God, man reveals God’s beauty in the many features inscribed by the Divine wisdom within the human form. The features that make a human person similar to God in the relationship between man and woman (Hebr. *’iš–’iššā³*), or husband and wife, include sex as a certain difference between the male and female elements that exist

³ The words *’iš* and *’iššā* “have a common etymology, sound similar and are mutually complementary. [...] This is because the words *’iš–’iššā* have two shared sounds that form the term *’ēsh* (‘fire’). Importantly, the word *’iš* contains *yodh*, the first letter of the Tetragrammaton, and the word *’iššā* contains *he*, its last letter. Man and woman are therefore two fires, two flames, two Divine energies.

The beginning belongs to *’iš*, while the future belongs to *’iššā*. These two directions were already hinted at in the names ‘Adam’ and ‘Eve.’ Was Adam not created ‘in the likeness’ of his Creator and, at the same time, born from the earth (*adama*)? Is Chava (Eve) not the ‘mother of all the living,’ the one who brings life, transforms the sperm – which is, incidentally, amazingly similar in shape to the letter *yodh* – into a child who develops in her womb, symbolised in the language of the Kabbalah by the letter *he*?

The man’s responsibility is remembrance – achieved with the action of the *zachar*, the ‘chisel’ that writes in stone so that nothing is forgotten and that the categorical biblical imperative of *zachor*, ‘remember,’ can be adhered to. The woman’s responsibility, in turn, is to orient that remembrance, to show the right direction. An allusion to the feminine ability to point the way can be found in the Hebrew grammar. When one wants to say that they are headed to a certain city or country, the name of that city or country takes the feminine suffix *he*, as a result of which it resembles feminine gender forms” (Haddad 2012, 79–80; Vidal 2014, 240).

in the world, one that is embedded in the core of the beingness of creatures and has its place in the DNA – both in humans and in beings that stand lower in the hierarchy of creation.

In contrast to other living beings, from the very first pages of the Bible, humanity is “described as articulated in the male-female relationship. This is the humanity, sexually differentiated, which is explicitly declared ‘the image of God’” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 2004, n. 6; see also Eldredge 2019, 25). In that context, it is important to emphasize that if “one fails to notice the wealth of anthropological meaning inherent in the difference between the sexes, then one will not understand what it means to a man and a woman to be the image of their Maker” (Kunka 2013, 103). Furthermore, as John Paul II observes, one must note that “sexuality is an enrichment of the whole person – body, emotions and soul – and it manifests its inmost meaning in leading the person to the gift of self in love” (John Paul II 1981, n. 37).

The term “sex” itself does not occur in the Bible. However, starting from the first pages of the Scripture, a distinction is made between the sexes: male (*zachar*) and female (*nekeva*). This difference is portrayed solely to emphasise the mutual relationship between a man and a woman (Léon-Dufour 1973, 679; Kotecki 2012, 126; Wencel 2007, 101). Thus, the notion of sex is “a self-complementing and self-enriching good” (Ozorowski 2009, 67; see also John Paul II 1999). The French rabbi Philippe Haddad puts forward the question “How to understand the difference in the description of the emergence of the two sexes?” and provides an immediate answer: “So, in the first chapter [of the Book of Genesis] the differentiation between the ‘masculine’ element of *zachar* and the ‘feminine’ element of *nekeva* emphasizes their physiological complementarity, since *zachar* etymologically means ‘a burin, a chisel,’ whereas *nekeva* means ‘a hole, an opening, a breach’” (Haddad 2012, 77).

The second key term in this section of the paper is “fertility,” a concept that refers to the fulfilment of the mystery of God’s fertility in the human person that manifests itself in the creation of Adam and Eve in His likeness. In this portrayal of God’s fertility in human fertility, life is passed on, the “image of the parents” is passed on in time to their children and to the generations that will follow (Léon-Dufour 1973, 684; Jankowski 2008, 26; Miras and Bañares 2009, 104). As Wencel (2007, 100) notes, “a matter of key importance to the understanding of whether this is a ‘reflection’ in the context of human sexuality on the grounds of biblical anthropology is the fact that when referring to God, the Bible uses metaphors of fatherhood and motherhood (cf. Is 49:14–15; 66:13) and His lover-like relationship with Israel.” Furthermore, an integral part of sexuality is man’s calling to be a father and woman’s calling to be a mother (Jankowski 2008, 26; Ozorowski 2009, 83; Francis 2014c), that is, parenthood. While biologically similar to the procreation of other created beings, it bears in its essence a unique likeness to God, as John Paul II has taught (1994, n. 6). In the words of Saint Augustine, one needs to conclude that “sexuality, sexual differentiation are the fruits of the act of creation, hence no evil can be spoken of here. Therefore, marriage is a good as well. Furthermore, the good of marriage also derives from the bond of friendship between man and woman” (Wygralak 2016, 28).

The views of the Polish pope and the Argentinian pope seem to converge when it comes to the portrayal of the image of God in man that has been discussed above. Commenting on a passage from Genesis 1:27 in his exhortation *Amoris laetitia*, Pope Francis notes that “it is striking that the ‘image of God’ here refers to the couple, ‘male and female.’ Does this mean that sex is a property of God himself, or that God has a divine female companion, as some ancient religions held? Naturally, the answer is no. We know how clearly the Bible rejects as idolatrous such beliefs, found among the Canaanites of the Holy Land. God’s transcendence is preserved, yet inasmuch as he is also the Creator, the fruitfulness of the human couple is a living and effective ‘image,’ a visible sign of his creative act” (Francis 2016, n. 10). In addition, during one of his general audiences, the pope observed that “as we all know, sexual difference is present in so many forms of life [...]. But man and woman alone are made in the image and likeness of God: the biblical text repeats it three times in two passages (26–27): man and woman are the image and likeness of God. This tells us that it is not man alone who is the image of God or woman alone who is the image of God, but man and woman as a couple who are the image of God. The difference between man and woman is not meant to stand in opposition, or to subordinate, but is for the sake of communion and generation, always in the image and likeness of God” (Francis 2015a; see also Francis 2014a; Góralski 1995, 102; Balthasar 2003, 270).

And thus, “sexuality, in which man’s belonging to the bodily and biological world is expressed, becomes personal and truly human when it is integrated into the relationship of one person to another, in the complete and lifelong mutual gift of a man and a woman” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2337). At the same time, it is important to note that “the sexuality of a man or the sexuality of a woman is always the sexuality of a human being created in the image of God” (Kunka 2012, 96). In addition, sexuality is “part of that created gift which God saw as being ‘very good,’ when he created the human person in his image and likeness, and ‘male and female he created them’ (Genesis 1:27)” (Pontifical Council for the Family 1995, n. 11).

Conclusion

In summary, it can be argued that in the reflections of both John Paul II and Francis, the marriage portrayed in the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis has a natural character and is presented as an institution in itself, characterized by two important features. The first of these features is the unity depicted in the Bible through the story of a single couple, Adam and Eve, and the second one is the permanence of marriage as the bond between the first man and the first woman. This permanence is affirmed by the biblical author himself when he says: *Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh* (Genesis 2:24). Such oneness and permanence of the bond between

man and woman is based on the principles of complementarity and subsidiarity in the unity, love and fertility of the two (Jankowski 2015, 97–99). As noted above, based on the narrative of creation, marriage has a natural character. Therefore, according to God's conception, it is also monogamous (Solmi 2009, 26).

The second issue is the reflection of the image and likeness of God in marriage through sex and fertility. By virtue of these two features, God's richness is portrayed as He mutually complements and, at the same time, enriches Himself in the Persons of the Holy Trinity. In fertility, one can see the richness of life thanks to which the husband and wife – through mutual devotion – become instruments of God (who is the fullness of life) as they pass life to the next generations. As a result of their participation in God's abundance, man and woman are called to become father and mother. This can already be seen in the act of creation, where God as the Father brings man and woman into being, entrusting them with the task of populating the earth, and at the same time, making them “collaborators” in the act of continuous creation (*creatio continua*). The sexuality of man and woman reflects the characteristics of God, who possesses the attributes of father and mother at the same time. Man's sexuality and woman's sexuality are complementary elements that form a complete image and likeness of God in the world.

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