



# The Holy See

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## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

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### The Alternative between Death and Immortality Enters the Definition of Man

Today it is opportune to return to the meaning of man's original solitude, which emerges above all from the analysis of the so-called Yahwist text of Genesis 2. As we have seen in the preceding reflections, the biblical text enables us to stress not only consciousness of the human body (man is created in the visible world as a "body among bodies"), but also that of its meaning.

In view of the great conciseness of the biblical text, it is admittedly not possible to amplify this implication too much. It is certain, however, that here we touch upon the central problem of anthropology. Consciousness of the body seems to be identified in this case with the discovery of the complexity of one's own structure. On the basis of philosophical anthropology, this discovery consists, in short, in the relationship between soul and body. The Yahwist narrative with its own language (that is, with its own terminology), expresses it by saying: "The Lord God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being" (*Gn 2:7*). Precisely this man, "a living being," distinguishes himself continually from all other living beings in the visible world.

The premise of man's distinguishing himself in this way is precisely the fact that only he is capable of "tilling the earth" (cf. *Gn 2:5*) and "subduing it" (cf. *Gn 1:28*). It can be said that the consciousness of "superiority" contained in the definition of humanity is born right from the beginning on the basis of a typically human praxis or behavior. This consciousness brings with it a particular perception of the meaning of one's own body, emerging precisely from the fact that it falls to man to "till the earth" and "subdue it." All that would be impossible without a typically human intuition of the meaning of one's own body.

It seems necessary, then, to speak in the first place of this aspect, rather than of the problem of

anthropological complexity in the metaphysical sense. The original description of human consciousness, given by the Yahwist text, comprises also the body in the narrative as a whole. It contains the first testimony of the discovery of one's corporeality and even, as has been said, the perception of the meaning of one's own body. All this is revealed not on the basis of any primordial metaphysical analysis, but on the basis of a concrete subjectivity of man that is quite clear.

Man is a subject not only because of his self-awareness and self-determination, but also on the basis of his own body. The structure of this body permits him to be the author of a truly human activity. In this activity the body expresses the person. Therefore, in all its materiality ("God formed man of dust from the ground"), it is almost penetrable and transparent, in such a way as to make it clear who man is (and who he should be), thanks to the structure of his consciousness and of his self-determination. On this rests the fundamental perception of the meaning of one's own body, which can be discovered when analyzing man's original solitude.

Here, with this fundamental understanding of the meaning of his own body, man, as subject of the ancient covenant with the Creator, is placed before the mystery of the tree of knowledge. "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (*Gn 2:16-17*). The original meaning of man's solitude is based on experience of the existence obtained from the Creator. This human existence is characterized precisely by subjectivity, which includes also the meaning of the body.

But could man - who in his original consciousness, knew exclusively the experience of existing and therefore of life - have understood the meaning of the words, "You shall die"? Would he have been able to arrive at understanding the meaning of these words through the complex structure of life, given to him when "the Lord God...breathed into his nostrils the breath of life"? It must be admitted that the word "die," a completely new one, appeared on the horizon of man's consciousness without his having ever experienced its reality. At the same time this word appeared before him as a radical antithesis of all that man had been endowed with.

For the first time, man heard the words "You shall die," without having any familiarity with them in his experience up to then. On the other hand, he could not but associate the meaning of death with that dimension of life which he had enjoyed up to then. The words of God-Yahweh addressed to man confirmed a dependence in existing, such as to make man a limited being and, by his very nature, liable to nonexistence.

These words raised the problem of death in a conditional way: "In the day that you eat of it you shall die." Man, who had heard these words, had to find their truth in the interior structure of his own solitude. In short, it depended on him, on his decision and free choice, if, with solitude, he was to enter also the circle of the antithesis revealed to him by the Creator, together with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and thereby to make his own the experience of dying and death.

Listening to the words of God-Yahweh, man should have understood that the tree of knowledge had roots not only in the garden of Eden, but also in his humanity. Furthermore, he should have understood that that mysterious tree concealed within it a dimension of loneliness, hitherto

unknown, with which the Creator had endowed him in the midst of the world of living beings. In the presence of the Creator himself, man had given names to them, in order to understand that none of them was similar to him.

The fundamental meaning of his body had already been established through its distinction from all other creatures. It had thereby become clear that the "invisible" determines man more than the "visible." Then, there was presented to him the alternative closely and directly connected by God with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The alternative between death and immortality, which emerges from Genesis 2:17, goes beyond the essential meaning of man's body. It grasps the eschatological meaning not only of the body, but of humanity itself, distinguished from all living beings, from "bodies." However, this alternative concerns in a quite particular way, the body created from "dust from the ground."

Not to prolong this analysis, we will merely note that right from the outset the alternative between death and immortality enters the definition of man. It belongs "from the beginning" to the meaning of his solitude before God himself. This original meaning of solitude, permeated by the alternative between death and immortality, also has a fundamental meaning for the whole theology of the body.

With this observation we conclude for the present our reflections on the meaning of man's original solitude. This observation, which emerges in a clear and penetrating way from the texts of Genesis, induces reflection both on the texts and on man. Perhaps he is too little conscious of the truth that concerns him, which is already contained in the first chapters of the Bible.