



# The Holy See

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## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday 6 February 1980*

Man and Woman: A Gift for Each Other.

Let us continue the examination of that beginning, which Jesus referred to in his talk with the Pharisees on the subject of marriage. This reflection requires us to go beyond the threshold of man's history and arrive at the state of original innocence. To grasp the meaning of this innocence, we take as our basis, in a way, the experience of historical man, the testimony of his heart and conscience.

Following the historical *a posteriori* line, let us try to reconstruct the peculiarity of original innocence enclosed within the mutual experience of the body and its nuptial meaning, according to Genesis 2:23-25. The situation described here reveals the beatifying experience of the meaning of the body. Within the mystery of creation, man attains this in the complementarity of what is male and female in him. However, at the root of this experience there must be the interior freedom of the gift, united above all with innocence. The human will is originally innocent. In this way, the reciprocity and the exchange of the gift of the body, according to its masculinity and femininity, as the gift of the person, is facilitated. Consequently, the innocence to which Genesis 2:25 bears witness can be defined as innocence of the mutual experience of the body.

The sentence: "The man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed," expresses this innocence in the reciprocal experience of the body. This innocence inspires the interior exchange of the gift of the person. In the mutual relationship, this actualizes concretely the nuptial meaning of masculinity and femininity. To understand the innocence of the mutual experience of the body, we must try to clarify what the interior innocence in the exchange of the gift of the person consists of. This exchange constitutes the real source of the experience of innocence.

Interior innocence (that is, righteousness of intention) in the exchange of the gift consists in

reciprocal "acceptance" of the other, such as to correspond to the essence of the gift. In this way, mutual donation creates the communion of persons. It is a question of "receiving" the other human being and "accepting" him. This is because in this mutual relationship, which Genesis 2:23-25 speaks of, the man and the woman become a gift for each other, through the whole truth and evidence of their own body in its masculinity and femininity. It is a question, then, of an "acceptance" or "welcome" that expresses and sustains, in mutual nakedness, the meaning of the gift. Therefore, it deepens the mutual dignity of it. This dignity corresponds profoundly to the fact that the Creator willed (and continually wills) man, male and female, "for his own sake." The innocence "of the heart," and consequently, the innocence of the experience, means a moral participation in the eternal and permanent act of God's will.

The opposite of this "welcoming" or "acceptance" of the other human being as a gift would be a privation of the gift itself. Therefore, it would be a changing and even a reduction of the other to an "object for myself" (an object of lust, of misappropriation, etc.).

We will not deal in detail now with this multiform, presumable antithesis of the gift. However, in the context of Genesis 2:23-25, we can note that this extorting of the gift from the other human being (from the woman by the man and vice versa) and reducing him or her interiorly to a mere "object for me," should mark the beginning of shame. The latter corresponds to a threat inflicted on the gift in its personal intimacy and bears witness to the interior collapse of innocence in the mutual experience.

According to Genesis 2:25, "The man and his wife were not ashamed." We can conclude that the exchange of the gift, in which the whole of their humanity participated, body and soul, femininity and masculinity, was actualized by preserving the interior characteristic (that is, precisely, innocence) of the donation of oneself and of the acceptance of the other as a gift. These two functions of mutual exchange are deeply connected in the whole process of the gift of oneself. The giving and the accepting of the gift interpenetrate, so that the giving itself becomes accepting, and the acceptance is transformed into giving.

Genesis 2:23-25 enables us to deduce that woman, who in the mystery of creation "is given" to man by the Creator, is "received," thanks to original innocence. That is, she is accepted by man as a gift. The Bible text is quite clear and limpid at this point. At the same time, the acceptance of the woman by the man and the very way of accepting her, become, as it were, a first donation. In giving herself (from the very first moment in which, in the mystery of creation, she was "given" to the man by the Creator), the woman "rediscovers herself" at the same time. This is because she has been accepted and welcomed, and because of the way in which she has been received by the man.

So she finds herself again in the very fact of giving herself "through a sincere gift of herself," (cf. GS 24), when she is accepted in the way in which the Creator wished her to be, that is, "for her

own sake," through her humanity and femininity. When the whole dignity of the gift is ensured in this acceptance, through the offer of what she is in the whole truth of her humanity and in the whole reality of her body and sex, of her femininity, she reaches the inner depth of her person and full possession of herself.

Let us add that this finding of oneself in giving oneself becomes the source of a new giving of oneself. This grows by virtue of the interior disposition to the exchange of the gift and to the extent to which it meets with the same and even deeper acceptance and welcome as the fruit of a more and more intense awareness of the gift itself.

It seems that the second narrative of creation has assigned to man "from the beginning" the function of the one who, above all, receives the gift (cf, especially *Gn 2:23*). "From the beginning" the woman is entrusted to his eyes, to his consciousness, to his sensitivity, to his heart. On the other hand, he must, in a way, ensure the same process of the exchange of the gift, the mutual interpenetration of giving and receiving as a gift. Precisely through its reciprocity, it creates a real communion of persons.

In the mystery of creation, the woman was "given" to the man. On his part, in receiving her as a gift in the full truth of her person and femininity, man thereby enriches her. At the same time, he too is enriched in this mutual relationship. The man is enriched not only through her, who gives him her own person and femininity, but also through the gift of himself. The man's giving of himself, in response to that of the woman, enriches himself. It manifests the specific essence of his masculinity which, through the reality of the body and of sex, reaches the deep recesses of the "possession of self." Thanks to this he is capable both of giving himself and of receiving the other's gift.

Therefore, the man not only accepts the gift. At the same time he is received as a gift by the woman, in the revelation of the interior spiritual essence of his masculinity, together with the whole truth of his body and sex. Accepted in this way, he is enriched through this acceptance and welcoming of the gift of his own masculinity. Subsequently, this acceptance, in which the man finds himself again through the sincere gift of himself, becomes in him the source of a new and deeper enrichment of the woman. The exchange is mutual. In it the reciprocal effects of the sincere gift and of the finding oneself again are revealed and grow.

In this way, following the trail of the historical *a posteriori* - and above all, following the trail of human hearts - we can reproduce and, as it were, reconstruct that mutual exchange of the gift of the person, which was described in the ancient text of Genesis, so rich and deep.

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