



# The Holy See

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## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday 26 March 1980*

### The Knowledge-Generation Cycle and the Perspective of Death

We are drawing to the end of the cycle of reflections wherein we have tried to follow Christ's appeal handed down to us by Matthew 19:3-9 and by Mark 10:1-12: "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?'" (*Mt* 19:4-5). In Genesis, conjugal union is defined as knowledge. "Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore...saying, 'I have begotten a man with the help of the Lord'" (*Gn* 4:1). In our preceding meditations, we have tried to throw light on the content of that biblical knowledge. With it man, male-female, not only gives his own name, as he did when he gave names to the other living beings (*animalia*), thus taking possession of them, but he knows in the sense of Genesis 4:1 (and other passages of the Bible). That is, he realizes what the name "man" expresses. He realizes humanity in the new man generated. In a sense, therefore, he realizes himself, that is, the man-person.

In this way, the biblical cycle of "knowledge-generation" closes. This cycle of knowledge is constituted by the union of persons in love, which enables them to unite so closely that they become one flesh. Genesis reveals to us fully the truth of this cycle. By means of the knowledge of which the Bible speaks, man - male and female - conceives and generates a new being, like himself, to whom he can give the name of man ("I have begotten a man"). Thus man takes possession of his humanity, or rather retakes possession of it. However, that happens in a different way from the manner in which he had taken possession of all other living beings when he had given them their names. On that occasion, he had become their master. He had begun to carry out the content of the Creator's mandate: "Subdue the earth and have dominion over it" (cf. *Gn* 1:28).

However, the first part of the same command: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (*Gn* 1:28), conceals another content and indicates another element. In this knowledge, the man and the woman give rise to a being similar to them. They can say of it: "This is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (*Gn* 2:24). In this knowledge they are almost "carried off " together. They are both taken possession of by the humanity which they, in union and in mutual knowledge, wish to express again. They wish to take possession of it again, deriving it from themselves, from their own humanity. They derive it from the marvelous male and female maturity of their bodies. Finally, through the whole sequence of human conceptions and generations right from the beginning, they derive it from the mystery of creation.

In this sense, biblical knowledge can be explained as "possession." Is it possible to see in it some biblical equivalent of *eros*? It is a question here of two conceptual spheres, of two languages, biblical and Platonic. Only with great caution can they be used to interpret each other. However, it seems that in the original revelation the idea of man's possession of the woman, or vice versa, as of an object, is not present. On the other hand, it is well known that as a result of the sinfulness contracted after original sin, man and woman must reconstruct, with great effort, the meaning of the disinterested mutual gift. This will be the subject of our further analyses.

The revelation of the body, contained in Genesis, especially in chapter 3, shows with impressive clearness the cycle of "knowledge-generation." It shows that this cycle, so deeply rooted in the potentiality of the human body, was subjected, after sin, to the law of suffering and death. God-Yahweh says to the woman: "I will greatly multiply your pain in child-bearing; in pain you shall bring forth children" (*Gn* 3:16). The horizon of death opens up before man, together with revelation of the generative meaning of the body in the spouses' act of mutual knowledge. The first man gives his wife the name Eve, "because she was the mother of all living" (*Gn* 3:20), when he had already heard the words of the sentence which determined the whole perspective of human existence "within" the knowledge of good and evil. This perspective is confirmed by the words: "You shall return to the ground, for out of it you were taken. You are dust, and to dust you shall return" (*Gn* 3:19).

The radical character of this sentence is confirmed by the evidence of the experiences of man's whole earthly history. The horizon of death extends over the whole perspective of human life on earth, life that was inserted in that original biblical cycle of "knowledge-generation." Man has broken the covenant with his Creator by picking the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He is detached by God-Yahweh from the tree of life: "Now, let him not put forth his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live forever" (*Gn* 3:21 ). In this way, the life given to man in the mystery of creation has not been taken away. But it is restricted by the limit of conceptions, births and deaths, and further aggravated by the perspective of hereditary sinfulness. But it is given to him again, in a way, as a task in the same ever-recurring cycle.

The sentence: "Adam knew his wife, and she conceived and bore..." (*Gn* 4:1 ) is like a seal

impressed on the original revelation of the body at the very beginning of man's history on earth. This history is always formed anew in its most fundamental dimension as if from the beginning, by means of the same "knowledge-generation" which Genesis speaks of.

Thus, each person bears within him the mystery of his beginning, closely bound up with awareness of the generative meaning of the body. Genesis 4:1-2 seems to be silent on the subject of the relationship between the generative and the nuptial meaning of the body. Perhaps it is not yet the time or the place to clarify this relationship, even though it seems indispensable in the further analysis. It will be necessary, then, to raise again the questions connected with the appearance of shame in man, shame of his masculinity and femininity, not experienced before. However, for now this is in the background.

In the foreground there remains, however, the fact that "Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore..." This is precisely the threshold of man's history. It is his beginning on the earth. On this threshold man, as male and female, stands with the awareness of the generative meaning of his own body. Masculinity conceals within it the meaning of fatherhood, and femininity that of motherhood. In the name of this meaning, Christ will one day give a categorical answer to the question that the Pharisees will ask him (cf. *Mt* 19; *Mk* 10). On the other hand, penetrating the simple content of this answer, we are trying at the same time to shed light on the context of that beginning to which Christ referred. The theology of the body has its roots in it.

Awareness of the meaning of the body and awareness of its generative meaning come into contact, in man, with awareness of death, the inevitable horizon of which they bear within them. Yet the "knowledge-generation" cycle always returns in human history. In it, life struggles ever anew with the inexorable perspective of death, and always overcomes it. It is as if the reason for this refusal of life to surrender, which is manifested in generation, were always the same knowledge. With that knowledge, man goes beyond the solitude of his own being, and decides again to affirm this being in an "other." Both of them, man and woman, affirm it in the new person generated.

In this affirmation, biblical knowledge seems to acquire an even greater dimension. It seems to take its place in that "vision" of God himself, which the first narrative of the creation of man ends with. The narrative is about the male and the female made in the image of God. "God saw everything that he had made and...it was very good" (*Gn* 1:31). In spite of all the experiences of his life, in spite of suffering, disappointment with himself, his sinfulness, and, finally, in spite of the inevitable prospect of death, man always continues to put knowledge at the beginning of generation. In this way, he seems to participate in that first "vision" of God himself: God the Creator "saw...and behold, it was very good." He confirms the truth of these words ever anew.

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