

Man and Woman: Designed as Part of the Grandeur of God

Fifth Pastoral Letter of
Bishop Gregory John Mansour
Bishop of the Eparchy of Saint Maron

Introduction

The LORD God said: It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suited to him. So the LORD God formed out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each living creature was then its name. The man gave names to all the tame animals, all the birds of the air, and all the wild animals; but none proved to be a helper suited to the man. So, the LORD God cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. The LORD God then built the rib that he had taken from the man into a woman. When he brought her to the man, the man said:

“This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; This one shall be called ‘woman’: for out of man this one has been taken, that is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body”. The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame. (Genesis 2:18-25)

This profoundly human passage from Sacred Scriptures describes how we are created, male and female, in the likeness of God, and created with love and intention. In fact, there was so much “intention” on God’s part that God himself was there to notice that “it was not good for man to be alone”. In other words, God had noticed what was wrong with man, even before man himself did!

When one considers the great love that God has for man, and the grandeur in which he has been placed in the universe, the poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins comes to mind:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed.

Why do men then now not reckon his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with
toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell:
the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent World broods
with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

God's Grandeur

Hopkins describes this “grand” world as bearing “man’s smudge” referring to the man-made troubles in the world. It is hard to believe that we, who were made so great, with so much love, with such a great plan, even made similar to God, have drifted so far from that noble calling!

God’s Grandeur, Man’s Imperfection

God created man and woman in his likeness, to care for and protect creation, and to live in harmony. In Psalm 8 we read: “When I see your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars that you set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of the man that you care for him?” The awesome role that man plays, a harmony with his creator depends on man, not to do as he pleased, but to do as he is needed: to protect, cultivate and care. In *Gaudium et Spes* the Church Fathers of Vatican II understood well this profound mystery of man’s great calling, and yet of his great need, and summarized it in this way: “man cannot fully find himself, except through a sincere gift of self” (GS 24).

Our Lord, God and Savior Jesus Christ invites us to see just how beautifully we were created, and yet how far we have strayed from that noble state.

This imperfection is nowhere more sadly obvious than in the area of pornography and human trafficking. In the past, the horrific slave trade was one race oppressing and enslaving another. In our time, a new slave trade, equally horrific, has emerged: the shameless trade which consists of those who exploit the most vulnerable: girls, boys and women into prostitution.

In one study in South East Asia, the assumption was that poverty was the motive. This theory was proven wrong when it became clear that many poor families did **not** sell their girls when faced with dire poverty, rather, only in families where the husband and father did **not** work, did **not** care, and did **not** protect the family. The father, along with other men, spent his days smoking and drinking, and their daughters were seen as commodities to be traded. Moreover, to the further shame of men, the men were the ones making the profit and men were the ones “buying”. What a sad and disordered

world man created for himself, having fallen so far from the original intent of the Creator.

If we truly understand that we were made in the likeness of God, and that we are his sons, well loved by the Heavenly Father, we will naturally assume the role of a caring father, a faithful son, a protector and guide to our families. Tragically, if we do not understand how much we are loved, nor our proper role as God's protector and cultivator in the world, we can easily be lost to our own sinful and even criminal inclinations. Thus, by acknowledging our own true identity, even in the midst of our brokenness and self-destructive nature, we can, by God's grace, become the person God intended us to be.

The Noble Purpose of Sex

On this hopeful note, I begin this reflection on manhood, sexuality, and how we are invited to follow our Lord, God and Savior, Jesus Christ, with a quote from the prophetic encyclical of Saint Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, written in 1968 at the height of the sexual revolution:

“Another effect that gives cause for alarm is that a man who grows accustomed to the use of contraceptive methods may forget the reverence due to a woman, and, disregarding her physical and emotional equilibrium, reduce her to being a mere instrument for the satisfaction of his own desires, no longer considering her as his partner whom he should surround with care and affection”.

The Holy Father's profound insight into the dangers of sex “without limits”, and how a man can easily lose his true, natural and profound respect for his spouse, and vice versa, is at the heart of what we are suffering today. Sex, for some, means personal pleasure, and is pursued at any cost, even to the serious harm and disrespect of the other person. Likewise, it is also unfortunate that for some, sex is just for personal gain or benefit, and no longer the wonderful self-giving love, in imitation of the Creator, made for noble purposes.

How We Define Ourselves

Too often we define ourselves based on how we look, our sexual orientation, or our sexual preferences. Granted, God himself created sex, and it is an awesome and important part of life, however, one's personal identity is much more profound than this, and should never be based solely on sexual desires, experiences, or lack of them. Rather, our identity should be based on something deeper: our spirituality, philosophy of life, and the firm belief that God created us good, even with all of our tendencies. From Christian tradition, and especially from the teachings of John Paul II, we know that God created us out of love, for love, and we are called to love and to be loved.

When a man truly loves his spouse, he places her first, before himself, as Christ placed the Church, his Bride, before himself. This kind of love invites a man to a sacrificial self-giving, and invites his spouse to make a similar gift of self. By her very nature a woman invites a man to bond with her for life in a union that enables her to feel secure so that she is at peace in this marital embrace, and by God's grace, she is able to conceive children, and raise them with her husband's support.

According to the Catholic understanding of marriage, a man's love for his spouse is meant to be a covenant, which means "until death do us part", not a contract, which means "I promise to do this as long as you do that". A covenant is a complete gift of self, without conditions, and a love that is unitive, exclusive, and pro-creative, giving a man and his wife a safe and nurturing place in which to raise children.

How We Treat the Gift of Children

God intended children to come into this world by means of this covenantal love which a man and a woman offer to each other. God intended that a man, committed to his wife for life, and by means of an intimate and personal act, honored best in marriage, gives his wife the gift of life. This new life, the preborn child, then lives in the womb of the mother, just under her heart, for nine months. Thus, the dignity and worth of every child

is based on the fact that God created man and woman with an amazing ability to make the world new again by bringing children into the world in this awesome way.

Thus, children should never be seen as a “means to an end”, that is, for the benefit of adults, but rather as an “end in themselves”. The inherent dignity of a child is not something given him or her by parents, or by anyone else, but by God himself. Based on this truth, children have rights and adults have all the responsibilities.

A child has the right to come into this world through this kind of love, and with the complementarity of a mother and a father, who love and care for the child, and love each other, in a stable and permanent relationship. Nonetheless, even if a child does not come into the world in this way, adults are still responsible to honor, love, respect, and protect this child, no matter how the child was conceived.

The objective truth about the sacred rights of children affirms that the place of sexual expression is most fitting in marriage, and marriage is the best context to welcome children and to guarantee they are respected, protected, and cared for.

Complementarity of Man and Woman

Sexual expression must have limits and involve some self-sacrifice for the good of the spouses, and for the good of a child. For this reason, a man and woman need to develop within themselves the virtues necessary to ensure that they can be faithful to each other and be chaste, that is, their sexual love for one another must be appropriately expressed in fidelity. Saint Pope John Paul II, in his now famous “Theology of the Body”, said that we know, from our very nature, that our bodies are made for love. Thus, a man and woman, gifts from the Creator to the world, also make gifts of themselves to one another in love.

A man and woman should therefore have a sense of self that is good, loved by the Heavenly Father and created in his image. Man and woman are equal to one another in

dignity, and complimentary to one another. Man completes woman, and woman completes man, as two halves make a whole.

Pope Francis urges us to honor this God given difference, and also to cherish one's own manhood or womanhood as a gift from the Creator. The Holy Father cautions us not to re-define or change gender, or to view it as "fluid" or unimportant, lest we betray the natural truth into which we were conceived, each of us are created a man or a woman by God's design. This natural God given identity is a profound reality, seeing our gender as anything less waters down the profound meaning and beauty of our nature of being created in the likeness of God.

Remaining Faithful

According to the law of our nature, and "how it was in the beginning", (Matthew 19:4) Jesus reminds us that what God has brought together, "let no man separate". The bond of marriage is so important to our Lord that he told the men of his day that even though Moses allowed divorce, because of the hardness of men's hearts, God did not intend this from the beginning. This is therefore a great challenge to both men and to women to be sure one marries for the right reasons, motivated by true love and respect for the spouse. A true love thus means that one is willing to give oneself fully to the other in a shared life, "until death do us part", even without knowing all the joys, as well as sorrows, that a shared life may bring.

This tells us that a man who is truly masculine must love, not by using the other, taking advantage of the other, dominating the other, demanding his way from the other, or absenting himself from his family responsibilities, but by protecting, guiding, caring and serving. Man is not created to grab, possess, or control, but rather to support, defend, and protect. He is not made to subdue others, but to lift them up, to sacrifice for them and to show them God's love. Adam was thus charged by God, not to dominate, but "in the beginning", before his sin, to "guard" and "cultivate" the garden, and to protect what is entrusted to him. (Gen 2:15)

The Objective Good of Marriage

We know from Sacred Scripture that there are only two communities on earth directly willed by God: the Church and the family. The Church continues the Divine Son's plan of salvation and the family continues God's unique plan for our happiness. Thus, we can affirm once again the objective good of marriage and family, as well as the Church's timeless teachings with regard to marriage, and we are reminded that there is something (in fact, Someone), greater than ourselves in the equation of life, and that we are answerable to our Creator.

The way we live helps us to know who we are, and to cultivate inner freedom, so that we may offer ourselves as a gift to others. Saint Paul exhorted us in.

I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourself to this age, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good, pleasing and perfect. (*Romans 12:1-2*)

Sex: Something Beautiful, But Easily Misused

Unfortunately, whatever is most beautiful in life can also be most readily misused and abused. We can easily enslave ourselves to our own desires, passions, compulsions, addictions and whims. The use of pornography, masturbation, and sexual promiscuity are always sinful, as is criminal sexual harassment or abuse. If one falls into such sins, temptations, or crimes, he/she should repent of these quickly, and "flee" from such, as Saint Paul says. (1 Cor 6:18) One may need spiritual and professional help to overcome such sins, and should work with others to rid the culture of such ills, so as to make our culture, and ourselves, more holy, chaste and respectful, especially for the sake of woman, girls and boys.

Chastity, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, is an "apprenticeship in self-mastery" (CCC 2339), a "long and exacting work". (CCC 2342) Chastity means that one

intentionally chooses not to enter into a sexual or a romantic relationship with someone other than one's spouse. Thus, a masculine chastity is, by nature, built on self-control, limits, sacrifice, and faithfulness. The image most clear is that of Christ emptying himself, fulfilling Adam's responsibility to guard and to protect, to "till and to keep". (Gen 2:15)

It may seem counter-intuitive in today's culture, but it is true: limits bring freedom! Saint Pope Paul VI said it well in *Humanae Vitae* when he urged men to never "forget the reverence due to a woman".

Natural Family Planning

This freedom to love is the secret behind the practice of Natural Family Planning. All forms of artificial contraception introduce something unnatural between husband and wife. Saint Pope John Paul II describes this dissonance as loving, yet holding back, giving oneself to the spouse, but not trusting completely enough the spouse or God to be open and fully one with both. Thus, all contraception is sinful, that is, it "misses the mark", of the profound meaning of sexual union.

Likewise, with regards to hormonal contraception, as well as other medical contraception, it seems odd today that in a world that loves natural foods and homeopathic remedies, women turn to artificial contraception, which changes and easily upsets her healthy equilibrium. In our health-conscious world, Natural Family Planning is proposed by the Church as a healthy well-ordered and natural means to space the number of children a couple can reasonably bring into this world. Likewise, Natural Family Planning is the best way a couple has to cooperate with God, respect the natural reproductive cycle of the woman, and protect and honor the natural two-fold purpose of marriage: union of the spouses and pro-creation. In sum, Natural Family Planning helps couples stay healthy by respecting the bodily integrity and dignity of the woman.

What About Our Sinful Past?

The Gospel's call to self-control and sacrifice invites us to live lives that are happy and productive, even though that seems almost impossible today in our highly sexualized society. However, by the grace of God, it is not only possible, but achievable, no matter what one's past has been. Even if we have made mistakes, we can still begin anew with the Church's discipline and sacramental grace. Jesus said "He who loses his life for my sake will find it". (Matt 16:25) By letting go of our past sins by the grace of a good confession, we can find ourselves again. True sexual freedom, unhinged by sin, leads to a flourishing and fulfillment of the human person.

Whether we have done well throughout our lives to live chastely, or not, there is always a new day and a way forward, and there is no greater self-mastery than a wholesome chastity. The chaste man is humbly aware of his limitations and failings, and thus can easily find his way to God.

The Nuptial Meaning of the Body

For a married man, a true masculine sexuality thus embraces sacrifice, and at times, self-denial, yet brings much joy and a priceless communion with one's spouse. Likewise, for a single man, consecrated or lay, no matter what one's sexual orientation may be, a chaste masculine sexuality can also bring a true joy if one embraces what is called the "nuptial meaning" of the body.

This profound concept, as taught by Saint Pope John Paul II, describes us as living in a spiritual union with God, who as our Maronite Liturgy describes, is our "True Spouse" (Hoosoyo of Morning Prayer for Sundays). By our own intentional desire we can make a generous, chaste, and sacrificial gift of our self to God in spousal union. This gift, in imitation of the chaste and celibate Christ, depends on and deepens one's own communion with God, and sets one free to embrace a profound and life-giving love for others. Mary, and Joseph, her chaste spouse, lived this way. We can too.

One Last Thought

Jesus chose twelve men, all very different, to be his apostles; they were far from perfect, but Our Lord made them – slowly but surely, and not without trials, perfectly one with him and his Father. He thus prepared them to make a positive impact on the world and gave them an identity like his own: loved by the Heavenly Father and called to be men with a mission of love and service. He made them, by grace, to be like Adam, called to cultivate and care, to “till and to keep” (Genesis 2:14)

Unlike the men I previously mentioned, who cared little for their families and thus exposed their daughters to traffickers, men who seek to be sons of the Heavenly Father, and therefore good sons, brothers and fathers to those close to them, can and do make a positive impact in the world around them. Although the “grandeur of God” in which we live may bear “man’s smudge”, yet still “the Holy Ghost over the bent world broods”.

Following our chaste Lord Jesus Christ, may we too bring joy, along with our small sufferings and loneliness, into this world. For a close following Christ, for married, single, or consecrated men, can also bear fruit, as our Lord Jesus promised: “I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly” (John 10:10).

A Word of Gratitude

In gratitude to you, my brothers in Christ, for reading this reflection, and in gratitude to the God who noticed, even before we did, that “it is not good for man to be alone”, I pray that we may each advance to maturity to “full stature in Christ” (Eph 4:13). And, may we face our hardships, as well as our joys willingly, like our Lord Jesus did, and be filled with the same fullness of joy and love that Christ has promised us.

O Mary, Joseph, and the Saints, pray for us!