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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MALE/FEMALE IDENTITIES ALONG THE BIBLICAL-CHRISTIAN TRADITION: GUIDELINES FOR TODAY'S EDUCATION

Nowadays it is not so clear how to put in relation male and female identities. On one side, the so called “Gender approach” seems to destroy their difference; on the other side, there are ideological tendencies aiming to deal with male and female identities as if they were self-sufficient. Neither the first nor the second point of view are true because male and female identities concern each other structurally (Kongregacja Nauki Wiary, 2004).

Obviously, it is no possible to avoid the issue. In fact, it is a matter of fact that all human life is referred to male and female identities since the very beginning when everyone is born from man and woman's mutual union. From the anthropological point of view, it is no possible to neglect both the meaning of the male/female difference and the meaning of the male/female likeness. Actually, other references are involved: the ethical one related to the relationship between man and woman as good or bad; the political one concerning the same thing but as matter of justice; the social one because from men and women's mutual relations is born also society, not only the individual citizen.

The educational issue is involved in the subject too. How to recognize the male/female identity from the pedagogical point of view? Are there peculiarities that we must take care of? In which way is it possible to put in evidence the same dignity proper both to man and to woman? I think that it is necessary to identify a strong conceptual reference to face that questions and I think that it is possible to recognize it starting from the nodal point regarding the cultural contribution offered by the Biblical-Christian tradition. It is the category of *reciprocity*.

1. THE PRIMARY RECIPROCITY IN GEN 1-2

One of the most important documents by John Paul II is the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem*. The subject is the identity and dignity of woman. Starting from a strong anthropological, philosophical and theological foundation, the Pope pays attention to the relation between man and woman: “By reflecting on the whole account found in *Gen* 2:18-25, and by interpreting it in light of the truth about the image and likeness of God (cf. *Gen* 1:26-27), we can understand even more fully what constitutes the personal character of the human being, thanks to which both man and woman are like God. For every individual is made in the image of God, insofar as he or she is a rational and free creature capable of knowing God and loving him. Moreover, we read that man cannot exist ‘alone’ (cf. *Gen* 2:18); he can exist only as a ‘unity of the two’, and therefore in relation to another human person. It is a question here of a *mutual relationship*: man to woman and woman to man. Being a person in the image and likeness of God thus also involves existing in a relationship, in relation to the other ‘I’. This is a prelude to the definitive self-revelation of the Triune God: a living unity in the communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (John Paul II, 1988). The reference to the “mutual relationship” is the reference to reciprocity: it is very important to focus the issue.

In the Bible two different tales describe man’s and woman’s origin: the more ancient is the second one (the so-called “Yahwist” tale: *Gen* 2); the less ancient is the so-called “Priestly” tale (*Gen* 1). The “Priestly” story dates from the VIth century BC, around the Babylonian exile. It is a refined telling, highly theological, no anthropomorphism involving. Far different is the other (“Yahwist”), coming from the Xth century BC. It is clear the influence from the ancient Mesopotamian myths. In fact, the tale is strongly anthropomorphic: God’s actions seem like artisan’s works – the man is created by working clay, the woman by modelling man’s rib – In the more ancient tale, God works as a demiurge. The main track of difference is linguistic. While in the less ancient tale God’s action is related to the word *bārā*, “to create” (whose reference is always and only God), in the more ancient story it is used the word *yāšar* (“to mould” as the potter does) describing God’s work as artisan’s work. Only as time went on, the original God’s way of acting was clearly recognised. I underline differences between the two Biblical tales because I want to stress their convergence around a very important topic.

Both in the more ancient and in the less ancient story, *man and woman face each other as two original people, being on the same level*. In fact, according to the “Priestly” tale they both are created “in God’s image” (*Gen* 1:27); but the

same happens also according to the “Yahwist” tale because the word *šēlā* (“rib”) is “hip” too: that’s why the statement means that they both – man and woman – exist side by side, at the same level. Both in the “Yahwist” and in the “Priestly” tale, the very meaning of God’s human creation is – at the same time – *affinity and difference* between man and woman. It is expressed by the concept of reciprocity.

Man and woman are at the same level because they both come from God, but they also are different because they are two, not one like God is. Centuries later, a strong confirmation comes from the *Syrach*, written at the beginning of IIth century BC. Speaking about the wife, it is told that “she is a pillar”, *anapaúseos* to her husband (36,24). Usually, the Greek adjective (obviously I’m quoting from *Septuagint*, the Greek version of the Bible coming from Alexandria) is translated as “rest”. It is correct, but it could be misunderstood as related to a passive attitude, totally subdued to man’s will. Actually, the verb *anapaúo* doesn’t mean only “to rest”. It is also used to describe the final situation, when someone finds what he/she is looking for. From this point of view, the woman is what gives accomplishment to man’s life. She gives “rest” not as subdued (i.e., someone not necessary), but as essential. This is the meaning of the first “love song” by Adam: “This is now bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh: let her name be Woman because she was taken out of Man” (Gen 2:23). Obviously, the same concerns woman’s life. In fact, we find the corresponding female “love song” at the beginning of *Song of Songs*: “Let him give me the kisses of his mouth: for his love is better than wine. Sweet is the smell of your perfumes; your name is as perfume running out; so, the young girls give you their love. Take me to you, and we will go after you: the king has taken me into his house. We will be glad and full of joy in you, we will give more thought to your love than to wine: rightly are they your lovers” (1:2-4). This is the key to interpret the heavy curse after the “original sin”, referred to the well-known statement: “still your desire will be for your husband, but he will be your master” (Gen 3:16). Woman’s desire toward man comes *before* man’s dominion on woman. This last situation (reflecting the customs belonging to ancient societies) is produced by the sin. At the beginning (blessed by God), everything was different: Bible connects males’ dominion to the situation *after* the first sin, i.e., after the corruption of the perfect original condition. The female song at the beginning of *Song of Songs* tells in which way the situation was at the starting point: man was to woman not as a master, but as a life companion. The statement of man and woman’s reciprocal essentiality is so strong that Catholic doctrine about celibacy related to priests and religious people isn’t against the original mutual destination of men and women in the marriage,

but it is another way to be together as a spiritual nuptiality. It is related to the “nuptiality of the body” as it was well described by John Paul II.

2. MALE-FEMALE RECIPROCITY ACCORDING TO THE “THEOLOGY OF THE BODY” BY JOHN PAUL II

Along five years, starting from the beginning of his Pontificate, John Paul II gave catechesis about the meaning of the body. Before never anything comparable had been done. On one side, it happened because of Wojtyła’s peculiar personality (always he was interested in sexuality, marriage and male-female relationship); on the other side, the reason was the necessity to face the change of sexual customs after the “60’s protest” (involving the moral deregulation of habits evaluated only from the private point of view). John Paul II aimed to put together both the subjective and the objective features of the issue: on one hand, human freedom as a mean to the end related to the dignity of the person; on the other hand, God’s truth about the deep meaning of married life.

That’s why Polish Pope’s catechesis is, at the beginning, a commentary to the starting chapters by *Genesis*. Wojtyła deals with the “nuptial meaning of the body” in the catechesis given on 9th January 1980. Before, he had spoken about: unity and indissolubility of marriage, male-female relation as deeply rooted in anthropology, originality of man’s and woman’s unity. About the last topic, it is useful to quote directly from Pope’s teaching: “Following the narrative of *Genesis*, we have seen that the ‘definitive’ creation of man consists in the creation of the unity of two beings. Their *unity denotes above all the identity of human nature; their duality, on the other hand, manifests what, on the basis of this identity, constitutes the masculinity and femininity* of created man. This ontological dimension of unity and duality has, at the same time, an axiological meaning” (John Paul II, 1979). Unity and duality respectively refer: to man and woman’s same dignity coming from the creation – they both – “in God’s image”; to man and woman’s originality related to masculinity and femininity.

The adjective “sponsal” comes from the Latin words *sponsus* and *sponsa*, respectively “husband” and “wife”. At the root of them both there is the Latin verb *spondeo* whose meaning is “to promise”. The etymologic explanation puts in evidence the same idea expressed by John Paul II. By getting married, man and woman are on the same level (that’s why they can make a promise each other), but they take the new identity related to be husband and to be wife as different

subjects (for this reason their promise must be not forced). Man and woman become partners by exchanging their promise freely (if no freedom, no wedding takes place). To be “partner” means to share *partitio* (it is a Latin word whose meaning is to share something before divided): so, husband and wife are not only “one in two”, but also “two in one”.

It’s clear that we are facing a topic full of tension because in marriage similarity and difference are both involved. The first track is related to the body, deeply marked by sexual difference existing as something not auto-sufficient, but in need of completion. Here is the depth of the “nuptial meaning of the body”. “That beatifying ‘beginning’ of man’s being and existing, as male and female, is connected to the revelation and discovery of the meaning of the body, which can be called ‘nuptial’. If we speak of revelation and at the same time of discovery, we do so in relation to the specificity of the Yahwist text. In it, the theological thread is also anthropological, appearing as a certain reality consciously lived by man. We have already observed that the words which express the first joy of man’s coming to existence as ‘male and female’ (Gen 2:23) are followed by the verse which establishes their conjugal unity (cf. Gen 2:24). Then follows the verse which testifies to the nakedness of both, without mutual shame (Gen 2:25). This significant confrontation enables us to speak of the revelation and at the same time the discovery of the ‘nuptial’ meaning of the body in the mystery of creation. This meaning (as much as it is revealed and also conscious, ‘lived’ by man) confirms completely that the creative giving, which springs from Love, has reached the original consciousness of man. It becomes an experience of mutual giving, as can already be seen in the ancient text. That nakedness of both progenitors, free from shame, seems also to bear witness to that – perhaps even specifically” (John Paul II, 1980).

The “nuptial meaning of the body” is related to the structural sexual difference between male and female bodies fit for the mutual sharing. Obviously, also animal bodies are marked by the sexual difference, but there is a qualitative peculiarity proper only to the human body: to be called to the mutual gift, intentionally offered, going beyond the instinctive compulsion: “freedom lies at the basis of the nuptial meaning of the body. The human body, with its sex, and its masculinity and femininity seen in the very mystery of creation, is not only a source of fruitfulness and procreation, as in the whole natural order. It includes right from the beginning the nuptial attribute, that is, *the capacity of expressing love, that love in which the person becomes a gift* and – by means of this gift – fulfils the meaning of his being and existence” (John Paul II, 1980a).

At the root of humanity there is freedom and the same happens when we approach the human body, but freedom is related to education because the human being is born not only free, but also called to become fully free. That's why now the issue becomes pedagogical and puts the question: how to educate man and woman to become able to live the nuptiality of their bodies?

3. EDUCATIONAL TASKS ACCORDING TO THE NUPTIALITY OF HUMAN BODY

Old Testament references and Wojtyła's theological statements about the nuptiality of human body are remarkable not only from the theological, but also from the anthropological point of view. In fact, religious meanings are involved in human cultural framework because religious meanings are peculiar to human identity. That's why Christian-Biblical references about male/female identities are fully suitable from the cultural point of view and they must be taken into consideration by everyone – both believer and non-believer.

The main issue, I aim to stress, is the idea of reciprocity, involving – at the same time – the likeness and the difference between men and women. They are the same from the point of view of their dignity, but they are different with regards to their identity. Consequently, from the pedagogical point of view, it is necessary to fit education to the proper male or female identity, because the boy is called to become man, the girl is called to become woman and it isn't the same task. If we don't take into consideration the difference, we practice an ideological care; the same happens if we don't recognize that male/female difference doesn't deny the same dignity of them both. It isn't a matter of natural development, because the body follows spontaneously its proper growth. In fact, education, being related to human morality, deals with the ethical direction chosen by the educator in favour of both boys and girls. The challenge is always the same: how to avoid the ideological mistake by leading the child to become adult? The anthropological statements (religious ones included) are necessary to achieve the goal. The task is to recognise what is common and peculiar at the same time.

Along Western tradition there is a concept suitable to that task: the idea of *lógos*. When it was recognised by Heraclitus as the pillar of anthropology, it was immediately clear that to have *lógos* means *to share* something. I quote from his well-known *Fragments*: "Therefore one needs to surrender oneself to the common. But although the *lógos* is common, the majority live as if they owned

their thinking” (Heraclitus, n. 2). The ancient sentence by Heraclitus is also the complaint about the misunderstanding of *lógos* as the “common” way of approaching the world. Since then the true way of thinking (according to the real situation) and the wrong way of thinking (according to the ideologization of reality) stand side by side. From the pedagogical point of view, it is necessary not to surrender to ideological reductionism.

I think that a good way to achieve the goal is to adopt the concept of “personalization” as it is described by García Hoz: “Personalization [...] ennobles because [...] someone who before was considered ‘any one’ in anonymous way, now becomes the ‘focal point’ with reference to personalization. Personalized education is as it must be only if it corresponds to the original identity of someone and, at the same time, recognizes the nobility of each person as such” (García Hoz, 2005, p. 28). The Spanish scholar underlines the ethical meaning of personalization, so that it is related to human singularity. At the same time, to recognise the “nobility” of each human being as such, means to share the idea of common human dignity. The idea of *lógos* is directly involved. In fact, through the *lógos* as “word”, the human being is able to put a judgment on reality as it is clearly noted by Aristotle’s comparison between animal and human communication: “man alone of the animals has speech. The mere voice, it is true, can indicate pain and pleasure, and therefore is possessed by the other animals as well (for their nature has been developed so far as to have sensations of what is painful and pleasant and to indicate those sensations to one another), but speech is designed to indicate the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore also the right and the wrong; for it is the special property of man in distinction from the other animals that he alone has perception of good and bad and right and wrong and the other moral qualities, and it is partnership in these things that makes a household and a city-state” (Aristotle, 1253a).

In which way can we put in practise those ideas in education? First of all, it is necessary to recognize how we can achieve, at the same time, the goal to promote male and female identities according to their difference and to their common dignity. I think that we must reconsider coeducation on this matter. In fact, I agree with the idea that coeducation is useful to promote the mutual relationship between boys and girls, but consequently I wonder when and how our education promotes the boy’s identification with masculinity and the girl’s identification with femininity. In my opinion, the best way to reach the goal is the “single sex” group with the leader of the same sex. I don’t reject coeducation in and out of the school, but I think that it is necessary to have planned moments in which boys and

girls are divided and introduced in “single sex” education. Today’s research is devoted to focus male/female peculiarities from the relational and from the learning points of view (Mullola, 2012; Voyer, 2014; Pahlke, 2014; Eshghinejad, 2016; Akman, 2018). Actually, I’m not interested only in that topic; I want also to promote male/female identity from the anthropological point of view. I think that it is necessary to focus the symbolic interpretation of human dimorphism.

Ernst Cassirer, describing the human being as *animal symbolicum*, speaks about the symbol in such a way: “no animal progresses to the characteristic transformation of the grasping movement into the indicative gesture. Even among the most highly developed animals, ‘clutching at the distance’, as the pointing with the hand has been called, has never gone beyond the first, incomplete beginnings. This simple genetic fact suggests that ‘clutching at the distance’ involves a factor of general spiritual significance. It is one of the first steps by which the perceiving and desiring I removes a perceived and desired content from himself and so forms it into a ‘object’, an ‘object’ content. [...] Sensory-physical grasping becomes sensory interpretation, which in turn conceals within it the first impulse toward the higher functions of signification manifested in language and thought” (Cassirer, 1953, p. 181). To recognize a symbol, means to recognise a meaning going beyond the descriptive and functional level of knowledge. It means to focus the anthropological and ethical meanings of human life as Wojtyła does in his catechesis. From this point of view, to recognize the deepest human meanings, it is useful to go back to the most ancient cultural tracks.

In my opinion, an important document is the myth of “Sky Father” and “Earth Mother”, shared by many ancient cultures around the world. It is a common tale from Europe to Asia until America. It deals with the beginning of human civilization. According to the tale, all creatures are born from the sexual union between Sky and Earth. Actually, it is a symbolic interpretation of human copulation because, from the descriptive/functional point of view, nothing is common to man’s and woman’s coitus and to the “relation” between sky and earth. Obviously, our ancestors put attention to the birth of their children from their sexual union and they interpreted the world as the child produced by Sky as father and Earth as mother. The point is that, being the myth common to many cultures, not communicating each other, it directly appears from the deepest human identity: that’s why the involved meaning is common – like the *lógos* – to mankind. From the ancient symbolic interpretation related to “Sky Father” and “Earth Mother”, I think that it is possible to deduce the essential ethical guidelines useful to us nowadays too:

1) Sky and Earth give birth to everything in equal terms, consequently masculinity and femininity share the same dignity – they are exactly alike;

2) Sky and Earth give life to everything, being different elements, consequently masculinity and femininity have different identities – they aren't the same thing.

This is the anthropological foundation of reciprocity between man and woman. If education aims to correspond to the truth, it must act in a coherent way. Starting from the Biblical story related to human creation and from the Christian interpretation of the tale as it was illustrated by the reference to Pope John Paul II's speeches, it is possible to offer to everyone (not only to believers) a true pedagogical vision.

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S u m m a r y

The article presents anthropological, philosophical and theological foundation of the relationship between male/female identities in the light of the biblical-christian tradition. The first part introduces the concept of the primary reciprocity in Gen 1-2 focusing on affinity and difference between man and woman as well as man and woman's reciprocal essentiality. The second part pertains to male/female reciprocity according to the "theology of the body" by John Paul II which includes a broad notion of freedom. Lastly, the article describes educational tasks including the nuptiality of human body with regards to Christian personalization. Proposed pedagogical vision involves promoting male and female identities according to their difference and to their common dignity.

Key words: male-female reciprocity; male-female identities; theology of the body; personalization.

RELACJA MIĘDZY MĘSKĄ I ŻEŃSKĄ TOŻSAMOŚCIĄ
WEDŁUG TRADYCJI BIBLIJNO-CHRZEŚCIJAŃSKIEJ
WYTYCZNE DLA WSPÓŁCZESNEJ PEDAGOGIKI

S t r e s z c z e n i e

W artykule przedstawiono antropologiczne, filozoficzne i teologiczne podstawy relacji między tożsamością męską/żeńską w świetle tradycji biblijno-chrześcijańskiej. Pierwsza część wprowadza pojęcie wzajemności pierwotnej w Rdz 1-2, skupiając się na powinowactwie i różnicy między mężczyzną i kobietą oraz wzajemnej niezbędności. Druga część dotyczy wzajemności męsko-żeńskiej zgodnie z „teologią ciała” Jana Pawła II, która zawiera szeroko rozumiane pojęcie wolności. W części końcowej artykuł ukazuje zadania edukacyjne uwzględniające naturę ludzkiego ciała w odniesieniu do personalizmu chrześcijańskiego. Proponowana wizja pedagogiczna opiera się na promowaniu tożsamości męskiej i żeńskiej zgodnie z ich różnicą i wspólną godnością.

Słowa kluczowe: wzajemność męsko-żeńską; tożsamość męska/żeńską; teologia ciała; personalizm chrześcijański.