



# The Holy See

---

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday 19 December 1979*

### The Fullness of Interpersonal Communication

What is shame and how can we explain its absence in the state of original innocence, in the depth of the mystery of the creation of man as male and female? From contemporary analyses of shame - and in particular of sexual modesty - we can deduce the complexity of this fundamental experience, in which man expresses himself as a person according to his own specific structure. In the experience of shame, the human being experiences fear with regard to his "second self," (for example, woman before man). This is substantially fear for one's own "self." With shame, the human being manifests almost instinctively the need of affirmation and acceptance of this "self," according to its rightful value. He experiences it at the same time both within himself, and externally, before the "other." Shame is a complex experience. Almost keeping one human being away from the other (woman from man), it seeks at the same time to draw them closer personally, creating a suitable basis and level to do so.

For the same reason, it has a fundamental significance as regards the formation of ethos in human society, and especially in the man-woman relationship. The analysis of shame clearly indicates how deeply it is rooted precisely in mutual relations, how exactly it expresses the essential rules for the "communion of persons," and likewise how deeply it touches the dimension of man's original "solitude." The appearance of shame in the subsequent biblical narration of chapter 3 of Genesis has a pluri-dimensional significance. It will be opportune to resume the analysis in due time.

the meaning of original nakedness, this dimension absolutely cannot be disregarded. This participating in perception of the world - in its "exterior" aspect - is a direct and almost spontaneous fact. It is prior to any "critical" complication of knowledge and of human experience and is seen as closely connected with the experience of the meaning of the human body. The

original innocence of "knowledge" could already be perceived in this way.

However, it is not possible to determine the meaning of original nakedness considering only man's participation in exterior perception of the world. It is not possible to establish it without going into the depths of man. Genesis 2:25 introduces us specifically to this level and wants us to seek there the original innocence of knowing. The dimension of human interiority is necessary to explain and measure that particular fullness of interpersonal communication, thanks to which man and woman were naked and were not ashamed.

In our conventional language, the concept of communication has been practically alienated from its deepest, original semantic matrix. It is connected mainly with the sphere of the media, that is, for the most part, products that serve for understanding, exchange, and bringing closer together. On the other hand, it can be supposed that, in its original and deeper meaning, communication was and is directly connected with subjects. They communicate precisely on the basis of the common union that exists between them, both to reach and to express a reality that is peculiar and pertinent only to the sphere of person-subjects.

In this way, the human body acquires a completely new meaning, which cannot be placed on the plane of the remaining "external" perception of the world. It expresses the person in his ontological and existential concreteness, which is something more than the individual. Therefore the body expresses the personal human "self," which derives its exterior perception from within.

The whole biblical narrative, and in particular the Yahwist text, shows that the body through its own visibility manifests man. In manifesting him, it acts as intermediary, that is, it enables man and woman, right from the beginning, to communicate with each other according to that *communio personarum* willed by the Creator precisely for them. It seems that only this dimension enables us to rightly understand the meaning of original nakedness. In this connection, any "naturalistic" criterion is bound to fail, while, on the contrary, the "personalistic" criterion can be of great help. Genesis 2:25 certainly speaks of something extraordinary, which is outside the limits of the shame known through human experience. At the same time it decides the particular fullness of interpersonal communication, rooted at the very heart of that *communio*, which is thus revealed and developed. In this connection, the words "they were not ashamed" can mean *in sensu obliquo* only an original depth in affirming what is inherent in the person, what is "visibly" female and male, through which the personal intimacy of mutual communication in all its radical simplicity and purity is constituted. To this fullness of exterior perception, expressed by means of physical nakedness, there corresponds the interior fullness of man's vision in God, that is, according to the measure of the "image of God" (cf. *Gn 1:17*). According to this measure, man "is" really naked ("They were naked" - *Gn 2:25*), even before realizing it (cf. *Gn 3:7-10*).

We shall still have to complete the analysis of this important text during the meditations that follow.

---

©Copyright - Libreria Editrice Vaticana