



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Analysis of Knowledge and of Procreation

To our analyses dedicated to the biblical beginning, we wish to add another short passage, taken from chapter 4 of Genesis. For this purpose, however, we must refer first of all to the words spoken by Jesus Christ in the talk with the Pharisees (cf. *Mt 19* and *Mk 10*), in the compass of which our reflections take place. They concern the context of human existence, according to which death and the destruction of the body connected with it have become the common fate of man (according to the words, "to dust you shall return" of Genesis 3:19). Christ referred to "the beginning," to the original dimension of the mystery of creation, when this dimension had already been shattered by the *mysterium iniquitatis*, that is, by sin and, together with it, by death, *mysterium mortis*.

Sin and death entered man's history, in a way, through the very heart of that unity which, from the beginning, was formed by man and woman, created and called to become "one flesh" (*Gn 2:24*). Already at the beginning of our meditations we saw that in referring to "the beginning," Christ leads us, in a certain way, beyond the limit of man's hereditary sinfulness to his original innocence. In this way he enables us to find the continuity and the connection existing between these two situations. By means of them, the drama of the origins was produced, as well as the revelation of the mystery of man to historical man.

This authorizes us to pass, after the analyses concerning the state of original innocence, to the last of them, that is, to the analysis of "knowledge and of procreation." Thematically, it is closely bound up with the blessing of fertility, which is inserted in the first narrative of man's creation as male and female (cf. *Gn 1:27-28*). Historically, on the other hand, it is already inserted in that horizon of sin and death. As Genesis teaches (cf. *Gn 3*), this has weighed on the consciousness of the meaning of the human body, together with the breaking of the first covenant with the Creator.

In Genesis 4, and therefore still within the scope of the Yahwist text, we read: "Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, 'I have begotten a man with the help of the Lord.' And again, she bore his brother Abel" (*Gn* 4:1-2). If we connect with knowledge that first fact of the birth of a man on earth, we do so on the basis of the literal translation of the text. According to it, the conjugal union is defined as knowledge. "Adam knew Eve his wife," which is a translation of the Semitic term *jadac*.

We can see in this a sign of the poverty of the archaic language, which lacked varied expressions to define differentiated facts. Nevertheless, it is significant that the situation in which husband and wife unite so closely as to become one flesh has been defined as knowledge. In this way, from the very poverty of the language a specific depth of meaning seems to emerge. It derives precisely from all the meanings hitherto analyzed.

Evidently, this is also important as regards the "archetype" of our way of conceiving corporeal man, his masculinity and his femininity, and therefore his sex. In this way, through the term knowledge used in Genesis 4:1-2 and often in the Bible, the conjugal relationship of man and woman - that they become, through the duality of sex, "one flesh" - was raised and introduced into the specific dimension of persons. Genesis 4:1-2 speaks only of knowledge of the woman by the man, as if to stress above all the activity of the latter. It is also possible, however, to speak of the reciprocity of this knowledge, in which man and woman participate by means of their body and their sex. Let us add that a series of subsequent biblical texts, as, moreover, the same chapter of Genesis (cf. *Gn* 4:17, 4:25), speak with the same language. This goes up to the words Mary of Nazareth spoke in the annunciation: "How shall this be, since I know not man?" (*Lk* 1:34).

That biblical "knew" appears for the first time in Genesis 4:1-2. With it, we find ourselves in the presence of both the direct expression of human intentionality (because it is characteristic of knowledge), and of the whole reality of conjugal life and union. In it, man and woman become "one flesh."

Even though due to the poverty of the language, in speaking here of knowledge, the Bible indicates the deepest essence of the reality of married life. This essence appears as an element and at the same time a result of those meanings, the trace of which we have been trying to follow from the beginning of our study. It is part of the awareness of the meaning of one's own body. In Genesis 4:1, becoming "one flesh," the man and the woman experience in a particular way the meaning of their body. In this way, together they become almost the one subject of that act and that experience, while remaining, in this unity, two really different subjects. In a way, this authorizes the statement that "the husband knows his wife" or that both "know" each other. Then they reveal themselves to each other, with that specific depth of their own human self. Precisely this self is revealed also by means of their sex, their masculinity and femininity. Then, in a unique way, the woman "is given" to the man to be known, and he to her.

To maintain continuity with regard to the analyses made up to the present (especially the last ones, which interpret man in the dimension of a gift), it should be pointed out that, according to Genesis, *datum* and *donum* are equivalent.

However, Genesis 4:1-2 stresses *datum* above all. In conjugal knowledge, the woman is given to the man and he to her, since the body and sex directly enter the structure and the content of this knowledge. In this way, the reality of the conjugal union, in which the man and the woman become one flesh, contains a new and, in a way, definitive discovery of the meaning of the human body in its masculinity and femininity. But in connection with this discovery, is it right to speak only of "sexual life together"? We must consider that each of them, man and woman, is not just a passive object, defined by his or her own body and sex, and in this way determined "by nature." On the contrary, because they are a man and a woman, each of them is "given" to the other as a unique and unrepeatable subject, as "self," as a person.

Sex decides not only the somatic individuality of man, but defines at the same time his personal identity and concreteness. Precisely in this personal identity and concreteness, as an unrepeatable female-male "self," man is "known" when the words of Genesis 2:24 come true: "A man... cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh." The knowledge which Genesis 4:1-2 and all the following biblical texts speak of, arrives at the deepest roots of this identity and concreteness, which man and woman owe to their sex. This concreteness means both the uniqueness and the unrepeatability of the person.

It was worthwhile, therefore, to reflect on the eloquence of the biblical text quoted and of the word "knew." In spite of the apparent lack of terminological precision, it allows us to dwell on the depth and dimension of a concept, which our contemporary language, precise though it is, often deprives us of.