



# The Holy See

---

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday 12 March 1980*

### The Mystery of Woman Is Revealed in Motherhood

In the preceding meditation, we analyzed the sentence of Genesis 4:1 and, in particular, the term "knew." The original text used this word to define conjugal union. We also pointed out that this biblical knowledge establishes a kind of personal archetype of corporality and human sexuality. That seems absolutely fundamental in order to understand man, who, from the beginning, searches for the meaning of his own body. This meaning is at the basis of the theology of the body itself. The term "knew" (cf. *Gn* 4:1-2) synthesizes the whole density of the biblical text analyzed so far.

According to Genesis 4:1, the man "knows" the woman, his wife, for the first time in the act of conjugal union. He is that same man who, by imposing names, that is, also by "knowing," differentiated himself from the whole world of living beings or *animalia*, affirming himself as a person and subject. The knowledge of which Genesis 4:1 speaks does not and cannot take him away from the level of that original and fundamental self-awareness. Whatever a one-sidedly "naturalistic" mentality might say about it, in Genesis 4:1 it cannot be a question of passive acceptance of one's own determination by the body and by sex, precisely because it is a question of knowledge.

On the contrary, it is a further discovery of the meaning of one's own body. It is a common and reciprocal discovery, just as the existence of man, whom "God created male and female," is common and reciprocal from the beginning. Knowledge, which was at the basis of man's original solitude, is now at the basis of this unity of the man and the woman. The Creator enclosed the clear perspective of this in the mystery of creation (cf. *Gn* 1:27; 2:23). In this knowledge, man confirms the meaning of the name "Eve," given to his wife, "because she was the mother of all the living" (*Gn* 3:20).

According to Genesis 4:1, the one who knows is the man, and the one who is known is the woman-wife. It is as if the specific determination of the woman, through her own body and sex, hid what constitutes the depth of her femininity. On the other hand, after the sin, the man was the first to feel the shame of his nakedness. He was the first to say: "I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself" (Gn 3:10). It will be necessary to return separately to the state of mind of them both after the loss of original innocence.

However, in the knowledge which Genesis 4:1 speaks of, the mystery of femininity is manifested and revealed completely by means of motherhood, as the text says: "She conceived and bore...." The woman stands before the man as a mother, the subject of the new human life that is conceived and develops in her, and from her is born into the world. Likewise, the mystery of man's masculinity, that is, the generative and fatherly meaning of his body, is also thoroughly revealed.

The theology of the body contained in Genesis is concise and sparing of words. At the same time, fundamental contents, in a certain sense primary and definitive, find expression in it. Everyone finds himself again in his own way, in that biblical knowledge. The constitution of the woman is different, as compared with the man. We know today that it is different even in the deepest bio-physiological determinants. It is manifested externally only to a certain extent, in the construction and form of her body. Maternity manifests this constitution internally, as the particular potentiality of the female organism. With creative peculiarity it serves for the conception and begetting of the human being, with the help of man. Knowledge conditions begetting.

Begetting is a perspective, which man and woman insert in their mutual knowledge. The latter goes beyond the limits of subject-object, such as man and woman seem to be mutually. Knowledge indicates on the one side him who knows and on the other side her who is known or vice versa. The consummation of marriage, the specific *consummatum*, is also enclosed in this knowledge. In this way the reaching of the "objectivity" of the body, hidden in the somatic potentialities of the man and of the woman, is obtained, and at the same time the reaching of the objectivity of the man who "is" this body. By means of the body, the human person is husband and wife. At the same time, in this particular act of knowledge, mediated by personal femininity and masculinity, the discovery of the pure subjectivity of the gift - that is, mutual self-fulfillment in the gift - seems to be reached.

Procreation brings it about that the man and the woman (his wife) know each other reciprocally in the "third," sprung from them both. Therefore, this knowledge becomes a discovery. In a way it is a revelation of the new man, in whom both of them, man and woman, again recognize themselves, their humanity, their living image. In everything that is determined by both of them through the body and sex, knowledge inscribes a living and real content. So knowledge in the biblical sense means that the biological determination of man, by his body and sex, stops being something passive. It reaches the specific level and content of self-conscious and self-determinant persons. Therefore, it involves a particular consciousness of the meaning of the human body, bound up with

fatherhood and motherhood.

The whole exterior constitution of woman's body, its particular aspect, the qualities which, with the power of perennial attractiveness, are at the beginning of the knowledge, which Genesis 4:1-2 speaks of ("Adam knew Eve his wife"), are in close union with motherhood. The Bible (and subsequently the liturgy), with its characteristic simplicity, honors and praises throughout the centuries "the womb that bore you and the breasts that you sucked" (*Lk 11:27*). These words constitute a eulogy of motherhood, of femininity, of the female body in its typical expression of creative love. In the Gospel these words are referred to the Mother of Christ, Mary, the second Eve. The first woman, on the other hand, at the moment when the maternal maturity of her body was revealed for the first time, when she conceived and bore, said: "I have begotten a man with the help of the Lord" (*Gn 4:1*).

These words express the whole theological depth of the function of begetting-procreating. The woman's body becomes the place of the conception of the new man. In her womb, the conceived man assumes his specific human aspect before being born. The somatic homogeneousness of man and woman, which found its first expression in the words: "This is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (*Gn 2:23*), is confirmed in turn by the words of the first woman-mother: "I have begotten a man!" In giving birth, the first woman is fully aware of the mystery of creation, which is renewed in human generation. She is also fully aware of the creative participation that God has in human generation, his work and that of her husband, since she says: "I have begotten a man with the help of the Lord."

There cannot be any confusion between the spheres of action of the causes. The first parents transmit to all human parents the fundamental truth about the birth of man in the image of God, according to natural laws. They transmit this even after sin, together with the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil and almost at the threshold of all historical experiences. In this new man - born of the woman-parent thanks to the man-parent - there is reproduced every time the "image of God," of that God who constituted the humanity of the first man: "God created man in his own image; male and female he created them" (*Gn 1:27*).

There are deep differences between man's state of original innocence and his state of hereditary sinfulness. However, that "image of God" constitutes a basis of continuity and unity. The "knowledge" which Genesis 4:1 speaks of is the act which originates being. Rather, in union with the Creator, it establishes a new man in his existence. In his transcendental solitude, the first man took possession of the visible world, created for him, knowing and imposing names on living beings (*animalia*). The same "man," as male and female, knowing each other in this specific community-communion of persons, in which they are united so closely with each other as to become "one flesh," constitutes humanity. That is, they confirm and renew the existence of man as the 'image of God. This happens every time both of them, man and woman, take up again, so to speak, this image from the mystery of creation and transmit it "with the help of the Lord God."

The words of Genesis are a testimony of the first birth of man on earth. They enclose within them at the same time everything that can and must be said of the dignity of human generation.

---

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana