

## THE GRAMMAR OF DIFFERENCE: SEXUALITY IN THE HORIZON OF LOVE

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### Abstract

It is in light of the original experience of the body, and its vocation to communion, that the sexual difference is revealed as the constitutive dimension of the grammar of love. In the present offering, this thesis is based on three successive moments: First, sexuality is considered as an experience that needs to be interpreted, in a critical comparison with the difficulties of our day, to understand the man/woman difference. Second, we propose the horizon of the “nuptial mystery” (difference, unity, fecundity) as the perspective for an adequate hermeneutic of the sexual event, able to explain it in proper language, in the tension of the affections, and in view of the praxis of a good life. Finally, we show how the sexual difference offers the key to access the meaning of corporality as a call to communion of persons, according to the specific requirements of its truth: interpersonal polarity, transcendence and fertility.

**Key words:** *sexuality; sexual difference; erotic perception; fecundity; homosexuality; love; romantic love*

“Every age has one thing to think about. One thing only. The sexual difference is probably that of our time.”<sup>1</sup> Thus the French psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray points out the decisive task of contemporary thought. Surely the problem of the meaning of the sexual difference, which originally characterizes the human body as masculine and feminine, is central for an adequate understanding of the question of homosexuality or, to be more precise, of the “homoerotic” question<sup>2</sup>. It is a question of understanding whether, as

the gender theory asserts<sup>3</sup>, the relevance of this difference to our identity can be denied, and therefore reduced to a merely biological dimension, and consequently nullified in its anthropological, ethical, and juridical scope; or whether, instead, it belongs intrinsically to the definition of the common human good implied by sexuality. This is the subject that this essay will address. The hypothesis that I intend to argue is that, precisely in the horizon of the experience of love, the sexual difference appears as the constitutive

1 L. Irigaray, *Éthique de la différencesexuelle*, Minuti, Paris 1984, 13.

2 As Tony Anatrella justly observes, following Ferenczi (Congressodi Weimar, 1911), the terminology of “homosexuality” is self-contradictory and leads to a confusion of language, because sexuality (from *sexus* – *secare*) always means “difference”. Therefore it would be more appropriate to speak of “homoeroticism”; in this regard: T. Anatrella, *Le règne de Narcisse. Les enjeux du déni de la différencesexuelle*, Presses de la Renaissance, Paris 2005; in the same vein: X. Lacroix, *In principio la differenza. Omosessualità, matrimonio, adozione, Vita e pensiero*, Milano 2006, 45–47 (original: Bayard, Paris 2005). Nevertheless we will maintain the terminology of “homosexuality” already in use.

3 Cf. J. Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, New York-London 1990. In this regard: J. Burggraf, “Genere” (Gender), in Pontifical Council For The Family (ed.) *Lexicon. Termini ambigui e discussi su famiglia vita e questioni etiche*, Ed. Dehoniane, Bologna 2003, 421–429.

dimension of the grammar that regulates the language of our bodies and the affective life of persons.

I must make a preliminary methodological clarification. My reflection will try to explore the question of the sexual difference in the horizon of practical reason, that is, that dimension of reason that illuminates action from within, in search of the human good. It is therefore a reflection that does not begin from metaphysical presuppositions, but from our practical experience of action. It certainly does not for this reason exclude metaphysics; rather, it stimulates it and needs it as its ultimate foundation, while being epistemologically autonomous from it<sup>4</sup>.

Therefore, I will follow the following steps: First, sexuality will be considered as an experience that demands to be interpreted, exploring the roots of today's difficulties in understanding the sexual difference. Second, I will analyze the experience of love as the horizon for an adequate hermeneutic of sexual experience. Finally, it will then be possible to clarify the meaning of the sexual difference for the grammar of love. The theme of homosexuality is not here explicitly treated; rather the fundamentals of sexual morality are explored, which will allow an adequate treatment of homosexuality.

### **Sexuality: an experience that demands to be interpreted**

In the post-modern cultural climate, the meaning of the sexual difference, in guiding action to the human good, is no longer immediately evident. What was, until a few decades ago, obvious, and therefore not examined in the context that characterized our societies, is no longer taken for granted; therefore we must examine its pertinence, and try to rediscover its foundation.

Western culture has long been marked, and remains conditioned, by a dualistic vision, which, above all in the Cartesian conception, has reduced the body to a *res extensa*, a subject available to the manipulation of a liberty conceived as an arbitrary and absolute affirmation of self, a dimension that recognizes only what is characteristic of the person and concerns his dignity<sup>5</sup>. Held to be only a sub-personal dimension, the body is no longer a carrier of meaning, but rather a subject in which to experience unbound possibilities of pleasure. Thus liberty becomes mere spontaneity, claiming to be emancipated from the biological determinations of the body, from the inclinations written in its morphology and in its physiology. In the absence of determinations bound to any meaning besides the mere pursuit of pleasure, such a liberty pretends to creativity, while in reality it becomes arbitrary<sup>6</sup>. The body comes to be considered a potential obstacle to the personal dignity of love, and liberty consists in the ability to overcome culturally even the "natural" relationship between man and woman.

Then, in a paradoxical reversal, this view tries to base the overcoming of the sexual difference on an innate tendency in the individual corporality; liberty submits to this tendency, not in the name of any perceived meaning, but in that of the inevitable necessity of nature. Between the arbitrary dominion of liberty over the body, and its unconditional surrender to dynamisms beyond its control and comprehension, lies the view of a human liberty rooted in corporality, that is a corporality open to an intimate meaning that must be recognized.

Here lies the indispensable context of this interpretation: sexuality needs to be interpreted, to find evidence of its meaning<sup>7</sup>. It is surely our customs and culture that

4 In this regard I presuppose the studies on the rediscovery of the Aristotelian and Thomistic concept of the practical reason, in particular those by E. Anscombe, W. Kluxen, G. Abbà, M. Rhonheimer, E. Schockenhoff. I refer to my volume: *L. Melina, La conoscenza morale, Linee di riflessione sul Commento di san Tommaso all'Etica Nicomachea*, Città Nuova, Rome 1987 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. ISU Università Cattolica, Milan 2005).

5 By way of documentation, see two recent collective works in the Italian sphere: V. Cesarone (ed.), *Libertà: reason and body*, Maggero, Padua 2006; Italian Theological Association (edited by R. Repole), *Il corpo alla prova dell'antropologia cristiana*, Glossa, Milan 2007.

6 Cf. A. Guindon, *The Sexual Creators: An Ethical Proposal for Concerned Christians*, University Press of America, Lanham-New York-London 1986.

7 For a rereading of the Freudian interpretation of sexuality in the horizon of love, see: J. Lear, *Love and its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis*, Noonday Press Farrar, Straus & Giroux, New York 1991, 120–155.

mediate this interpretation. Access to the significance of the sexual difference is made possible by considering the experience of the love event of the encounter between man and woman, with its ability to provoke our liberty, and with the configurations in which it is historically determined.

*Some partial hermeneutics*

Thus it is evident that of some hermeneutics of sexuality are insufficient; because of their one-sidedness, and their separation from experience, they do not succeed in offering a convincing argument for the significance of the sexual difference, even if they do not go so far as to deny it. I briefly mention here some of these limited conceptions:

The first is what we can define as “naturalistic”, since it begins from an objectivistic consideration of human nature, such as we gain from simple observation or from the empirical sciences. It is a perspective that looks at the sexual difference from without, as an empirical datum of a biological and physiological nature, taking our impulses as blind natural forces that inevitably determine the destiny of living beings. While opening lines to interpretation, ultimately such an approach remains structurally unable to establish the human significance of the sexual difference, which remains confined to the factual. The human sciences offer necessary elements for understanding the meaning of sexuality, but they remain extraneous to a complete interpretation of it.

To be mentioned in the second place is the intellectualist explanation of the Scholastic matrix, which has prevailed in ecclesiastic tradition, and which reduces the meaning of the sexual difference to the exercise of the specific functions of the genital organs<sup>8</sup>. Sexuality is interpreted from its objective finality, identified in its generative capacity, and put in service of the species. Sex is therefore reduced to the exercise of the reproductive faculty: the man-woman difference is thus certainly

justified, but inevitably understood according to a modality that is rather utilitarian, which objectively stifles the personalistic dimensions of sexuality.

In the third place, the romantic vision of love absolutizes *passion love* [*l'amour passion*], considering it as the very essence of the erotic phenomenon: an irrational event that in itself eludes any possibility of control by the will and by institutions<sup>9</sup>. In this view the sexual dimension is subordinated to the sentimental: the body is absorbed into the turbulent experience of passion. The measure of love is thus the subjective intensity of the feelings that are experienced. The affective experience is enjoyed aesthetically in the instant that it takes place, but without opening up to the reality of a relationship with the other, and to the building of a common path in the public space and in a certain time of history. The sexual difference, presupposed but not justified in this romanticism, does not play any essential role in the interpretation of love, and thus is dissolved into the self-referentiality of the affective experience. Thus sexuality is privatized: the goods at stake in its sphere have no social value, becoming only individual goods. This is the precondition for understanding the inability of today's culture to perceive the public relevance of love between man and woman, the generation of children, and the family.

The appearance of that social form of relationship called the “pure relationship” must be understood as a successor to this romanticism<sup>10</sup>. It is a way of experiencing intimacy based on complete sexual, sentimental, and emotional equality, understood as an encounter between equal and autonomous persons. They negotiate the modes and times of a relationship, which is therefore established on a deliberate equality in the balance of giving and taking: such relationships are defined as “pure”, precisely because they prescind from any form previously given by nature or culture.

<sup>8</sup> For an approach to the ecclesiastical tradition and to the recent debates the wisdom of G. Angelini is useful, “La teologia morale e la questione sessuale. Per intendere la situazione presente”, in AA.VV., *Uomo-donna. Progetto di vita* (edited by C.I.F.) Ueci, Roma 1985, 47–102; for the debate on personalism: G. Mozzicato, “Il dibattito tra Doms e neotomisti sull'indirizzo personalista”, in *Teologia* (2006), 249–275.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. K. S. Pope, *On Love and Loving: Psychological Perspectives on the Nature and Experience of Romantic Love*, Jossyey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco-Washington DC-London 1980.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. A. Giddens, *La trasformazione dell'intimità. Sessualità, amore ed erotismo nelle società moderne*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2005.

This development implies the idea of a malleable sexuality, made possible by the complete separation of sex from the demands of reproduction. The body assumes a total plasticity, depending on one's subjective desires, without the natural data of its biological configuration constituting any normative reference that can be established by the customs or laws of society. In this case the sexual difference appears as a mere exterior datum of fact, of which the subjects can autonomously dispose, to establish forms of relationship that they judge to be favorable. What at one time was considered a perversion can today be reduced to a legitimate pluralism.

*The original experience and the body*

The way to hermeneutical clarity must begin from the concrete experience of love, which is not primarily a thought or decision, but an event that happens in life. To speak of love between man and woman as an event means referring to the appearance in love of a new light, involving the person, opening up to him a totality of meaning for his whole existence, which, inasmuch as it happens between persons, has the form of an encounter, i.e. an unpredictable and irreducible fact involving two liberties. It takes shape in different ways in the diverse moments of life, beginning from the primitive form in the event of filiation, which already in its origin implies the sexual difference as an occasion of communion, until it acquires a wholly singular existential depth in the spousal event between man and woman, in which soul and body concur inseparably to make a unity, which by its intrinsic connection with procreation opens beyond itself, entering into the history of generations and the society of men.

In the case of sexuality it is an event that is never totally tamed and that always leads beyond, to a sacred and unknown world, toward a greater and more mysterious encounter. This involves soul and body, liberty and affections, in the concreteness of a new

and deliberate tension that orients the lover towards the beloved. Love moves us to search for the completion, in a real unity between the persons, of the promise that the encounter made from the beginning, illuminating in the heart a perspective that is certainly welcome and fascinating, but also mysterious and terrible because unknown. Paul Ricoeur noted that "sexuality remains, at its base, impermeable to reflection and inaccessible to human control... Ultimately, when two beings embrace, they do not know what they do; they do not know what they want; they do not know what they seek; they do not know what they find. What does it mean, this desire that drives them to each other"?<sup>11</sup> Therefore sexuality cannot be fully absorbed conceptually nor resolved adequately by the study of ethics; it implies in itself something sacred, and can only be represented symbolically. It reveals something of the very mystery of being and introduces us to it. Of what does it speak to us, this erotic tension? To what does it lead?

The body itself, in its living openness to the body of another person, testifies to that mystery of love that constitutes the foundation and the destiny from which we come and towards which we are called to find our completion. It is precisely in the body that the original structure of love is revealed, i.e. that transcendental dimension present in every form of love, from the low and vulgar, to the more elevated and noble<sup>12</sup>.

In the search for the original experience of love, what first emerges is the attention to the reality of the body, which John Paul II, in his great Catechesis on human love in the divine plan, called the "primordial sacrament", or even the "sacrament of the person"<sup>13</sup>, a visible sign of the invisible reality of the person. However, this is not an approach to this reality with the methods of empirical science, nor with those of metaphysics, but rather with the attitude that understands the body from the lived experience of the subject<sup>14</sup>. The contributions that the sciences and

<sup>11</sup> P. Ricoeur, "La merveille, l'errance, l'énigme", in *Esprit* n. 289 (1960) 1665–1676.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. A. Scola, "Il misteronuziale. Originarietà e fecondità", in *Anthropotes* XXIII/2 (2007). For a more systematic treatment by the same author, see: *Il misteronuziale. 1: Uomo-Donna*, Pul-Mursia, Rome 1998; *Il misteronuziale: un'aprospektiva di teologia sistematica*, Lateran University Press, Rome 2003.

<sup>13</sup> John Paul II, *Uomo e donna: creò. Catechesi sull'amore umano*, Cittànuova – Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Rome 1985: XIX, 90; LXXXVII, 345; on the same topic: J. Merecki, "Il corpo, sacramento della persona", in L. Melina – S. Grygiel (Editor), *Amare l'amore umano. L'eredità di Giovanni Paolo II sul Matrimonio e la Famiglia*, Cantagalli, Siena 2007, 173–185.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, XVIII, 87.

metaphysics offer for understanding human corporality are certainly not denied, but it is affirmed that at the base of an adequate “theology of the body” must be the perspective of subjectivity and of intersubjectivity; this is the only view that can grasp all the richness of lived experience, avoiding a reductive objectification of the body.

John Paul II’s thought in this area is a treasure trove, and it intersects with the analyses of the phenomenology of the body developed above all in French circles<sup>15</sup>. The body must be seen not only from without, but grasped from within as live and living flesh, not only sentient, but sensing itself as sentient, as Merleau-Ponty would say. What is peculiar to the human body is the fact that it not only perceives reality, but also perceives itself as the source of that perception: “It sees itself seeing; it feels itself touching; it is visible and sensible to itself”<sup>16</sup>. Thus, at the same time, experience and self-awareness are opened, in which emerges the subject, and contact with the reality of the other. Subjectivity is always in polar tension toward a reality to which it is intentionally oriented, and which presents itself as other than itself. Paul Ricoeur, in the book *Oneself as Another*, speaks of three areas of passivity or of otherness, through which the subject grows in access to his own identity: the experience of the body, the encounter with the other person, and the presence of the voice of conscience as the voice of the Other in me<sup>17</sup>.

The body is, above all, the place of opening to reality, even the place of welcoming reality, which challenges and provokes the person it touches. This primordial encounter with the world testifies that man belongs, through the body, to the realm of the visible, though later he is seen to surpass this realm with his sentient consciousness. John Paul II says in this regard that this original relationship with the world demonstrates that “the fact that man is body pertains to the structure of the personal subject more profoundly than the

fact that he is in his bodily constitution also male and female”<sup>18</sup>. Corporality does not totally coincide with sexuality, though it is essentially characterized by it.

Indeed, the experience that, based on the book of Genesis, is called that of “original solitude”, shows the superiority of the human being as subject, both with respect to the visible world which he rules through his work, and with respect to the animals with which he cannot establish a reciprocity of communion<sup>19</sup>. Now it is through the body, and not simply through his self-awareness, that man experiences his solitude; this therefore expresses the subjectivity of that same body, which is not reducible to a mere material element of the visible world.

Here we must point out two other very important elements: first, that it is through praxis that man becomes conscious of his body as subjectivity<sup>20</sup>; second, that the foundation of this solitude is shown by the fact that man, through what he is, and therefore also through his corporality, is created in a unique, exclusive, and unrepeatable relationship with God himself; man is a “partner of the Absolute”, inasmuch as he is created “in the image of God”<sup>21</sup>. Therefore, if this solitude in the world expresses, on the one hand, the experience of a wanting, of a lack of satisfaction, of an inability to integrate himself adequately into the visible reality in which he merely participates; it also manifests, on the other hand, the transcendence of a call to go beyond, toward a sphere that remains for the moment hidden and disquieting.

The enigma of this solitude, however, is revealed only in the encounter with the woman, and precisely in this encounter is the significance of the body revealed, with the possibility of an authentic experience of intimacy. It is a relationship with another, but a relationship through the flesh and seen in the flesh. “This at last is flesh of my flesh and bone of my bone” (Gen 2:23). Here arises,

<sup>15</sup> On this topic it is enough to mention the names of G. Marcel, M. Merleau-Ponty, J. P. Sartre, and M. Henry.

<sup>16</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *L’occhi e lo spirito*, Studio editoriale, Milan 1989, n. 12, 18; cf. also M. Henry, *Incarnazione. Una filosofia della carne*, Sei, Milan 2001, 183–190.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. P. Ricoeur, *Sé come unaltro*, Jaca Book, Milan 2000, 431–474.

<sup>18</sup> John Paul II, *Uomo e donna*, op. cit., VIII, 54.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, VI, 48–50.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, 51–53.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, VI, 48–49.

says the pope, a second and definitive creation of man, in the unity of two beings<sup>22</sup>. This is where the complete subjectivity of man, in the true sense, emerges: in the encounter with the other person of the opposite sex, and therefore through the mediation of the body.

But what happens in this unique encounter, qualitatively different from the simple encounter with the visible world? Here body and person, nature and subjectivity, are truly intertwined. John Paul II offers a unique analysis of the “conjugal consciousness”, i.e. of two becoming “only one flesh”, that deserves special attention<sup>23</sup>. He says that in this encounter man and woman are not given to each other merely as definite objects of the proper body and sex, and therefore determined “by nature”; rather, they are given to each other as unique and unrepeatable subjects, that is, as persons. Thus it is in relationship with the woman that the man’s body manifests all its subjectivity, and vice versa. The man-woman relationship is revealed as the place where identity emerges. The inter-corporality is not simply the inter-subjectivity of consciousness; it is the context in which personal identity is manifested.

#### *The erotic perception and the sexual difference*

To illuminate these remarks, it may be useful to analyze the erotic perception, which Maurice Merleau-Ponty has made in his *Phenomenology of Perception*<sup>24</sup>. The erotic perception awakens the subject to himself, precisely because it opens his eyes to the other in a specific way: not as a thing that is alien to me, but as an otherness that, in its reciprocity, pertains to me, because it is connatural with me – an otherness that is “for me”. It is not so much the perception of the sexual characteristics of the other as such, that is of his/her genital organs, but a global perception of the body as subjectivity, that by its difference challenges and awakens the

subjectivity of one’s own body. The sexual dimension is never reducible to the genital dimension. Explaining this, the French philosopher proposes the case of the boy who has not yet had sexual experience, and who sees from without a scene of sexual activity, not feeling involved in it, but rather being disgusted by it. It is therefore evident that, in the erotic perception, the body of the other is taken as attractive not simply for its sexual characteristics, but for the personal encounter that it promotes. The consciousness that is given here overcomes the simple objective perception (*cogitatio*) of a given content (*cogitatum*); it shows the intentional openness of the sexed body to the other sexed body, tending toward completion, which Merleau-Ponty defines as the confirmation of themselves.

The phenomenological analysis highlights the existence of a specific way of relating to one’s own body and to the body of the other, revealing a new form of intimacy. Between the mere automatic reaction of the biological-physiological sphere of sexuality, constituted by the instincts, and the objective intellectual view, determined by detached rational consideration, we find what Merleau-Ponty calls the “vital immanent zone”<sup>25</sup>. In it the proper intentionality of the body comes into play, which responds to the presence of the other felt as meaningful in the affective sphere, inasmuch as it awakens the subjectivity of the body in its perceived correspondence with desire. The presence of the body of the other is perceived by the subject as enriching and full of promise, therefore capable of moving us towards a fuller union. This intimacy is no longer empty, but inhabited by the welcome presence of the body-person of the other, in which the sexual difference is shown as a specific good, inasmuch as it conditions a new reciprocity that allows communion.

The masculine/feminine sexual difference is revealed as irreducible. It is not simply

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., IX, 58–61.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., XX, 93–95.

<sup>24</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Fenomenologia della percezione*, Bompiani, Milan 2003, 222–261. I owe my awareness of these texts to the paper of D. Donegà, *Il corpo e la sessualità in Maurice Merleau-Ponty. L'intenzionalità del corpo umano*, prepared under the direction of Prof. J. Noriega and presented to obtain the degree of Licentiate in June 2007 in Rome, at the Pontifical Institute of John Paul II for Studies on Marriage and the Family.

<sup>25</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Fenomenologia della percezione*, op. cit., 222.

a diversity on the biological plane of the natural configuration of bodies<sup>26</sup>, but a complimentary reciprocity, in which the same bodily subjectivity is found to be transferred (*dif-ferre*) into another form, which precisely in its difference allows a specific possibility of unity in the flesh. It is within the erotic perception, in the reciprocal attraction between the sexed bodies, that this diversity appears as a good and promising difference, signifying an encounter that acquires a specific existential value because it promotes a communion of persons. And yet the fulfillment of such a promise is entrusted to our free responsibility through action. Therefore it is in practical experience that this difference acquires its ultimate significance, in the moral form of existence<sup>27</sup>.

The body itself, in its living openness to the body of the other person, testifies to the mystery of love, which constitutes the foundation and the destiny from which we come and towards which we are called to find our fulfillment. It is precisely in the body that the original structure of love is revealed, i.e. the transcendental dimension present in every form of love, from the lower and more vulgar, to the more elevated and noble<sup>28</sup>. Angelo Scola, reflecting on John Paul II's theology of the body and on the thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar, described this original structure with the expression "nuptial mystery". To describe its characteristics he traces it etymologically to the ancient Roman custom of veiling the women, who from simple promised spouses became wives (*nuptae*), and were then conducted into the conjugal home in view of becoming mothers. Nuptiality therefore implies, not only the spousal relationship between man and woman, but also the orientation to the family, through fatherhood and motherhood. It is also thought-provoking that the word "nuptial" is related to *nubes*, clouds, which veil, but

also reveal, the sky, filtering its light. In the nuptial mystery, therefore, something of the transcendent mystery of love shines through, dwelling in heaven and reflected in the love between man and woman. As pope Benedict says: "There is a relationship between love and the Divine. Love promotes infinity, eternity – a greater and totally other reality with respect to our daily existence" (*DCE* 5).

Thus the nuptial mystery, seen in the man-woman archetype, inevitably shows the unity of the following three constitutive factors, which produce the fullness of that mystery only when they are simultaneously present. These factors are: the sexual difference, the reciprocal gift of self, and fecundity. The body, as experienced, is always situated and oriented by the sexual difference in reference to the person of the other sex; indeed, the difference (*di-ferre*) indicates that the same humanity is transferred from elsewhere into a new and complimentary form. With me and for me there is another way of being human, a way that is inaccessible to me, but complimentary, unknown because of its difference, and fascinating because of the reciprocity that it promotes.

Therefore the difference written in the body is a vocation, a call to openness and to a communion of persons in the unity of the bodies, since the body always implies the totality of the person and of the persons<sup>29</sup>. John Paul II, in his Catechesis on human love in the divine plan, coined a powerful expression, saying that the body is the "sacrament of the person", a visible sign of the interior and invisible reality.

The sexual characteristic is not only a datum of nature gotten by observation, and as such open to a plurality of anthropological interpretations; rather, it is a sign that takes on a specific meaning in the erotic perception, in reference to the person. John Paul II calls it a "spousal meaning"<sup>30</sup>, thus indicating the

<sup>26</sup> Cf. A. Scola, *Il misteronuziale. I: Uomo-donna, Pul-Mursia*, Rome 2006, 98–104; M. Chiodi, "La relazione uomo/donna come forma fondamentale della differenza", in *Teologia* 32 (2007) 11–35.

<sup>27</sup> See: G. Angelini, "Corpo proprio e forma morale", in *Aa.Vv., L'io e il corpo*, Glossa, Milan 1997, 205–237, which highlights the limits of Merleau-Ponty's approach, judging him to be still prisoner of a theoretic, if not intellectualistic prejudice.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. A. Scola, "Il misteronuziale. Originarietà e fecondità", *op. cit.* For a more systematic treatment by the same author, see: *Il misteronuziale. 1: Uomo-Donna, Pul-Mursia*, Rome 1998; *Il misteronuziale: una prospettiva di teologiasistemica*, Lateran University Press, Rome 2003.

<sup>29</sup> It is well here to go back to the "theology of the body" elaborated by John Paul II, *Uomo e donna lo creò. Catechesi sull'amore umano*, Cittànuova – Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Rome 1985.

<sup>30</sup> John Paul II, *Uomo e donna*, *cit.*, XIV-XVIII, 74–89.

call to express one's love for the other in the body and through the body, i.e. the gift of self. This meaning is rooted in the passivity of the body, and thus implies as its foundation an ontological openness to the other given by the Creator, which can be called the original vocation to communion<sup>31</sup>. The experience of this original communion discloses, at the same time, the anticipation of a more complete unity of persons in the flesh, a unity that must be put into practice; it is precisely through this experience that the sexual difference assumes such relevance for liberty. The body ceases to be a subject that is malleable for our pleasure; and sexuality no longer appears as a neutral and pliable form, an object of manipulation at the disposition of the arbitrary liberty of the individual. In the encounter with the sexed body of the other, one's own body is revealed as nuptial and called to love.

### Love as the adequate hermeneutic of the sexual event

In the area of liberty, and in the call to action, the sexual difference appears as a good; even as a good that is unique for its promise of felicity, and for its ability to involve the person in a new way of life. Again, Merleau-Ponty observes: since sexuality involves the body as the "way of being oneself", it implies the development of a general way of life<sup>32</sup>. Therefore, what results is a "drama, since we commit our whole personal life to it"<sup>33</sup>, risking the overall meaning of it. What does the experience of love mean for the sexual event? What is the good inherent in human sexuality that is revealed in the horizon of interpersonal love?

#### *The call to love in sexual experience*

First of all, in the experience of love there is the irreducible presence of personal liberty. The welcome event of the encounter with the other does not involve the parties merely on the passive level of their natural dynamics. Rather "by the fact of being man and woman,

each is 'given' to the other as a unique and unrepeatable subject, as an 'I', as a person"<sup>34</sup>. This is because sex not only determines the bodily individuality of man, but at the same time defines his personal identity and concreteness, which is called to complete itself in a communion of persons. In this way *eros* acquires a destiny: the *telos* that constitutes the fundamental axis of action is given within the same affective dynamic, avoiding an extrinsically intellectualist understanding<sup>35</sup>. If the body reveals the person, the meeting of bodies challenges the persons in their radical capacity to receive each other.

Liberty emerges precisely in the encounter with the person, and as a response to the person of the other, who is present in our intimate space, activating the bodily and affective dynamisms toward him/her, and provoking that communion which is the profound motive of fascination in the sexual encounter. This is not opposed to, nor does it diminish, the natural dynamic of the instinct towards the body's sexual qualities, but rather it orients them to the completion of the person, of whom the sexed body is the sacrament. From the point of view of the interior dynamic, liberty is not therefore born from a void, but presupposes the instinctual dynamisms of the body and, through the affections, places them in the context of an adequate rapport with the person of the other. Ontologically, liberty is a response to the gift of the prior presence of the other, a consent to the being which precedes and challenges it.

Thus in the experience of love, the presence of an original love comes to light; this original love precedes the persons involved, and gives them to each other, revealing itself as the ultimate foundation of their goodness and the guarantor of the promise that their encounter makes. At the end of his volume on the erotic phenomenon, J.-L. Marion recognizes the same thing: "In order that I may enter into the erotic reduction, another lover must precede me; and, preceding me, silently makes his

<sup>31</sup> Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter. *Mulieris dignitatem*, 7; M. Nédoncelle, *La réciprocité des consciences. Essai sur la nature de la personne*, Aubier-Montaigne, Paris 1942, 10–47.

<sup>32</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Fenomenologia*, op. cit., 232–234.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>34</sup> John Paul II, *Uomo e donna*, op. cit., XX, 95.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. J. Noriega, *Il destino dell'eros. Prospettive di morale sessuale*, EDB, Bologne 2006.



appeal to me.”<sup>36</sup> Therefore the logic of human love, to be realistically situated with respect to the original love of God, can neither be equivocal, nor simply univocal with it; rather, it must be described by the fundamental analogy that derives from the fact that it is inherently responsive, and can subsist only by recognizing, at least implicitly, the primacy of that original love.

*The good of the person, and the goods for the person, in sexuality*

Reflecting on the good proper to practical reason, we understand the goods implicit in sexuality in view of a totality, i.e. of a way of life that is good for the person as such<sup>37</sup>. In the horizon of praxis, the acting subject does not find himself before a good given solely as a preconstituted object; rather, he finds himself before a series of dynamisms in which the good is always to be considered. The discernment of the good, then, is not indeterminate, but always pertains to the view of one’s life as a whole. The human good and the fullness of human life are terms that are always mutually implied.

The “good of the person”, in the singular, highlights the original and unique value of that good which defines the moral identity of the person. Since the person can fulfill his life only in the free gift of himself<sup>38</sup>, which generates communion, the horizon of love indicates the precise content of the good of the person in action. The communion of persons, which will find a vocational form precisely in relationship with each person, is announced as the initial gift and as an attractive promise in the affections (*unio affectiva*), but it must then be fulfilled freely through the choice of the operative human goods adequate to

effectively achieve such communion (*unio realis*)<sup>39</sup>.

The plurality of “goods for the person” indicates the dimensions of goodness that are the object of choice in action. They do not yet represent the moral good of the person as such, but they acquire such value when they are taken in view of the good of the person. The diversity of these goods manifests the richness of being created and the multiformity of human nature, poor and in need of many goods: goods diverse among themselves, each with a proper specific content. The fact that these goods are called “for the person” indicates that they are not goods in themselves, as physical data already defined, but that such goods are considered within a communicative dynamic, which has the person himself as its end. St. Thomas Aquinas says that nothing has for us the aspect of good, unless in relation to a person whom we love<sup>40</sup>. The moral good of the person, which is the object of moral action, cannot be fulfilled without the mediation of these concrete contents of goodness proper to the goods for the person. The goal of practical reason is to integrate the goods that present themselves as meaningful in the sphere of sexuality into the perspective of building that communion of life, in which the good of the person as such is fulfilled.

In view of the “nuptial mystery”, we can identify the goods for the person that come into question in the sexual act. They involve: (a) the corporality assumed in love, based on the sexual difference that characterizes it and qualifies it as a “nuptial body”; (b) unity with the other, which in the affective encounter is anticipated as the promise of fullness in the gift of self and in the reception of the other; (c) the possible fruitfulness of the encounter,

<sup>36</sup> J.-L. Marion, *Le phénomène érotique Six méditations*, Grasset, Paris 2003, 331. Actually Marion does not recognize the analogic character of love: cf. J.-J. Pérez-Soba, “La logica, analogicadell’amore”, in N. Reali (a cura di), *L’amore, tra filosofia e teologia*. In dialogo con Jean-Luc Marion, Lup, Rome 2007, 155–170.

<sup>37</sup> On this topic, see: L. Melina – J.-J. Pérez-Soba (ed.), *Il bene e la persona nell’agire*, Lateran University Press, Rome 2002, and in particular the wise introduction to this volume: J.-J. Pérez-Soba, “Il bene e la persona: chiavi per un colloquio morale”, 19–39. On the same theme: L. Melina – J. Noriega – J.-J. Pérez-Soba, *Camminare nella luce dell’amore. I fondamenti della morale cristiana*, Cantagalli, Siena 2008, 220–231.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 24.

<sup>39</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, I, 91, praeterea (n. 760): “Affectus amantis sit quodammodo unitus amato, tendit appetitus in perfectionem unionis, ut scilicet unio quae iam inchoata est in affectu, compleatur in actu.” For a detailed study, see: J.-J. Pérez-Soba *Diez del Corra I, Amor es nombre de persona* (I, q. 37, a. 1). *Estudio de la interpersonalidad en el amor en Santo Tomás de Aquino*, Pul-Mursia, Rome 2001, 42–69.

<sup>40</sup> Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, q. 28, a. 4 ad 2; III, q. 18, a. 5, ad 2; cf. D. M. Gallagher, “Person and Ethics in Thomas Aquinas”, in *Acta Philosophica* 4/1 (1995), 51–71.

in openness to the communication of life to another person.

Reflecting on these goods, in view of love, we can illuminate how the sexual difference, far from constituting a limit to love, guarantees its possibility and characterizes its authenticity, in the sphere of the exercise of genital sexuality.

Indeed, sexual otherness, in its irreducibility, expresses the extreme case of personal otherness. It certainly indicates a constitutive limit: in the case of a man, it will never be possible for me to put myself in the place of a woman, and a woman can never take my place. I can never know what the other is: the one who is sexually different will always remain a mystery unknown to me. In this regard, Luce Irigaray mentions “admiration” as the primary passion that keeps the two sexes irreplaceable in the structure of their irreducible difference<sup>41</sup>. But it is precisely this difference that maintains the personal polarity, the place of attraction and liberty, which allows separation and cooperation, the condition of an authentic communion of persons.

The rejection of the sexual difference, as a good necessary to the relationship of sexual love, becomes in fact a rejection of the other in his irreducible otherness, in search of an illusory fusion of bodies, a game of mirrors that in the end condemns its players to narcissistic solitude. Without this difference, bodily union is a pretense of intimacy, which in reality reflects only the narcissistic identity, without real openness to the other. The exercise of the sexual dynamic outside a relationship marked by sexual difference implies confusion about what kind of love it is, and the negation of the otherness and of the fecundity proper to love as such. Only the acceptance of the finitude of the sexed body, which is therefore delimited and oriented, allows transcendence toward the other in the sexual relationship. The sexual difference is a vocation to welcome the other to oneself, precisely in his/her irreducible otherness. The sexual difference

therefore is shown to be good, inasmuch as it makes possible a communion of persons in the sexual encounter.

### *Sexual difference and transcendence*

The fruitful openness to the generation of a child is a distinctive sign of the transcendence of love rendered possible by the sexual difference. Also, and precisely by its nuptiality, the body speaks of its origin and possible fruitfulness, that is of the generational integration of existence, and of its place in the cycle of life and death. Thus the sexed body invites the person to recognize himself as “son”/“daughter” and to embrace the vocation to become “father” or “mother”. This evidently implies the integration of intimacy into the area of social life. Therefore we prefer to speak of the “nuptial” body, rather than the “spousal” body. Indeed, nuptiality is a richer and more complete concept, inasmuch as, referring etymologically to the definitive integration of the spouses in the family home, it implies not only orientation to the spouse, but also to the father, mother, and child<sup>42</sup>.

Following from this is the inherent asymmetry of the sexual reciprocity between man and woman, which is never resolved in the illusion of a definitive and rewarding union, but is inherently open to a third<sup>43</sup>. The generation of a child is essential to understanding the meaning of the sexual difference written in the spousal relationship between man and woman. The theological tradition has indicated the primary end of matrimony in the *bonum prolis*, which justified conjugal sexuality: a justification that is in fact extrinsic to it, ultimately understanding the exercise of sexuality in a utilitarian way. The subsequent personalistic revision hastily expunged the value of it, describing procreation merely as a biological end, that could be separated, and eventually sacrificed, with respect to the personalistic end identified unilaterally in a couple’s relationship. The view here taken of conjugal love and its goods, grasps that it is intrinsic to the logic of nuptial love between man and woman.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. L. Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence*, op. cit., 19–20.

<sup>42</sup> For this distinction, see: A. Scola, “Il misteronuziale. Originarietà e fecondità”, op. cit. For the etymological references of “sposo” and “nozze”, see: M. Cortellazzo – M. A. Cortellazzo (ed.), *Il nuovo etimologico*. Deli Dizionario Etimologico della Lingua Italiana, Zanichelli, Bologna, 1999, on pages 1594 and 1050, respectively.

<sup>43</sup> On this topic: M. Chiodi, “La relazione uomo/donna”, op. cit.

The child, generated by the sexual union, gives objective testimony to the event of a gift effectively realized in the body. The real presence of the child with the two spouses produces a qualitative change in their relationship. The dimension of procreation, made possible by the sexual difference, puts the relationship between man and woman in the objective sphere of a history, making it a moment in the continuance of the human species and the building up of society. Thus it inherently pertains to the common good. The generation of the child refers to the gift of life previously received, and therefore to the original filial identity of each human being; it expresses the continuance of the logic of the gift, which, received in gratitude, is transmitted to the other. Memory, expressing itself in the present, makes possible the future.

The sexual difference written in the body, through otherness and generation, opens sexuality to the family, integrating the relationship of love between man and woman, in time and in human history. The rejection of the sexual difference implies instead, by its consequent logic, the inversion of the dimension of temporality. It has been rightly argued that homosexuality negates time in favor of the passing moment, qualifying itself as the “*pointillisme esthétique*”, into which neither death nor reproduction can be integrated<sup>44</sup>.

This reference to paternity and filiation allows us to understand how sexuality, because of its inherent openness to transcendence, is not reducible to mere desire, to subjective sentiment, or to what society itself might determine in its regard<sup>45</sup>. Openness to a child, who is never simply desired, willed, and produced, but is always like a guest who “comes from afar”<sup>46</sup>, refers to God in a new way, as the original source of love, from which all fatherhood in the heavens and on earth takes its name (cf. *Eph* 3:14). Thus it becomes clear how human love, lived in the fullness of its dimensions, is united to the original love of God, collaborating with it and continuing its creative work.

The sexual difference therefore signifies a still more original ontological difference. The other, sexually different from me, is the “signpost” of God in my life. The difference written in the body is an appeal to openness to the Other, recognizing the contingency proper to creatures, and the vocation to love, which can only find completion in God. The experience of love allows us to understand not only that God is the origin of love, but also that communion with Him is the ultimate end that it seeks. Only He can fulfill the life of the one we love; only He can fulfill our life. Thus we observe that the *eros* seeks something that it cannot achieve alone. The man-woman difference is revealed as a sign of the more radical difference between man and God; it refers to it and only in it can it find its configuration. The nuptial mystery between man and woman on earth is a trace of the mystery that orients us to heaven. Therefore only in the shadow of God do the sexual difference and procreation, written in human love, find their completion and their ultimate meaning.

Therefore the rejection of the sexual difference also takes on a theological relevance, in reference to the rapport of the creature with the Creator. The philosopher Gaston Fessard offers an illuminating interpretation of it, commenting on the first chapter of the letter to the Romans (cf. *Rm* 1, 20–29), where the Apostle links impiety, idolatry, and homosexual behaviors<sup>47</sup>. Refusing to recognize the Creator, the pagans pretended to exercise a merely arbitrary liberty upon creation, and a merely brute force, perverting the original receptive position of the creature before God. In Fessard’s interpretation, sexual inversion is ultimately an expression of spiritual pride, a sign of aspiring to an asexual angelism or androgynism. At the heart of this idolatrous attitude, homosexuality, not only as a style of life, but above all as a spiritual attitude, is revealed as a paradigmatic sin that negates the order of nature and the existence of a *cosmos*, and tries to act as the principle of an alternative culture without transcendental references.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. A. Chapelle, *Sexualité et sainteté*, op. cit., 146–148.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. J. Noriega, *Eros e agape nella vita coniugale*, Cantagalli, Siena 2008, 30–31.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. G. Angelini, *Il figlio. Una bene dizione, un compito, Vita e pensiero*, Milan 1991.

<sup>47</sup> G. Fessard, *De l’actualité historique*, t. I : *À la recherche d’une méthode*, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1960, 186–197.

Thanks to love, the sexual difference assumes the meaning of a call to personal fullness in a communion of persons, and in openness to God; it is therefore relevant in the definition of a good life. Where difference, gift of self, and openness to life are absent, there is not, properly speaking, nuptial love; there is not human love.

### **The significance of the sexual difference for the grammar of love**

The sexual difference is the living symbol that offers the key to access the meaning of corporality, as a call to a communion of persons in love. It opens us to the other, and ultimately to God, who is the keystone in the order of the architecture of meaning and language. The sexual difference is part of the grammar of love, i.e. that system of rules that allows communication between men. "I fear that as long as we believe in grammar, we will continue to believe in God", said Friedrich Nietzsche<sup>48</sup>. But certainly, as Robert Spaemann recently quipped<sup>49</sup>, a grammar was necessary even to Nietzsche to be able to write all that he wanted and also to state his very denial of God. Truth is the inescapable context that embraces all our speech, even if we try to deny it; and this truth is ultimately founded on God.

#### *The language of the body and its grammar*

Thus also for the language of the body it is necessary to refer to a grammar that is rooted in truth. This reference to truth, however, must not be interpreted as a return to an intellectualist presupposition, prior to any experience of love, as asserted by the Neo-Scholastic hermeneutics. Indeed, the truth of sexuality is announced in the affections, and becomes accessible to reason through action, in the horizon of love. It is illuminating in this regard, to return to the Catechesis of John Paul II, where he introduces the novel

idea of the "language of the body"<sup>50</sup>, which he defines as the substrate and content of the sacramental sign of the communion between the spouses. We are therefore in the context of the anthropological presuppositions of sacramental action, specifically, the issue of its truth and efficacy. To understand the significance of the language of the body, we must first locate it in the sphere of communication between subjects, who "communicate precisely on the basis of a 'common union' existing between them, whether to reach, or to express, a reality that is proper and pertinent only in the sphere of the subject-persons"<sup>51</sup>.

Here we find two levels of meaning: one perennial, and another unique and unrepeatable. The first regards the "objective sense", of which the body is not its own author; that which has been "pronounced by the word of the living God"<sup>52</sup>. The second, "subjective" in character, is that of which the man himself is the author, through the necessary and continuous "rereading" of the original truth. The pope observes that in this rereading we are actually introduced to a "something more"; in the language of the body, man becomes "co-author" with God, assuming and consenting to the original meanings that are proper to creation. Therefore not everything in the language of love can be creative. In the experience of love there are bodily gestures that have intrinsic meaning that cannot be manipulated<sup>53</sup>. In this sense, to say that "the body speaks" expresses an *analogia attributionis*; the subject of this expression is man himself, who, as male and female, "allows the body to speak for him"<sup>54</sup>. Therefore, from the ability given to man to be co-author, there follows also the possibility of speaking truly or to lie.

However, the reference to objective and permanent meanings, written in the *cosmos* and associated with creation, must not

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in L. Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence*, cit., 109; the famous Nietzschean claim is found in *Die "Vernunft" in der Philosophie*, 5. In the same sense also Jacques Derrida had said that the era of meanings is essentially theological and presupposes God (*De la grammatologie*, Minuit, Paris 1967, 41).

<sup>49</sup> R. Spaemann, *Der letzte Gottesbeweis*, Pattloch, Munich 2007.

<sup>50</sup> John Paul II, *Uomo e donna*, cit., CIII, 397–399.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, XII, 70.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, CIV and CV, 400–405.

<sup>53</sup> This amounts to a fundamental criticism of the work of A. Guindon, *The Sexual Creators*, op. cit.

<sup>54</sup> John Paul II, *Uomo e donna*, op. cit., CVI, 406.

necessarily be interpreted as a falling back into the claim of a conceptualist understanding of the truth, prior to experience. On the contrary, it points to corporality precisely as the *carrier* of a prior knowledge, irreducible to consciousness<sup>55</sup>. The body attests to the subject through memory and desire, that beginning and end that man does not give himself, so that he cannot define it, but to which he must remain open; these attest to the permanence of the meaning of gestures, and the criterion of the truth of language.

On the other hand, through the body one's actions connect the person who performs them, not only within himself, configuring him ethically, but also towards the outside; i.e. they are intransitive, but also transitive. Therefore every appreciation of the good arises in a context of communication between men, through language that implies a certain objectivity, based on the rational content of the good. In this way the wills of those who love each other find themselves united in a new and particular bond, in recognizing what is truly good for each of them as a "common good"<sup>56</sup>.

On the topic of the language of the body, there are two emphases that it is worthwhile to discuss. The first regards the "prophesy of the body"<sup>57</sup>. A prophet is one who expresses, with human words, a truth that comes from God. Therefore we must listen to the body with respect, in order to catch the divine voice in it<sup>58</sup>. But here it is interesting to observe how this voice makes itself heard, not in the objective consideration of the physical qualities of the body, nor in the metaphysical interpretation of its ontological finality,

but rather in the sphere of communication between the subject-persons. It is in this context that our biological functions, desires, and impulses, the affective orientations that characterize human sexuality, take on their relevance.

The second emphasis regards the practical character of the acts of language. It is not simply to express something, but to pronounce words that have a performative value, because they make real what they say; they change the personal reality, and the relationship between the persons involved. The sacramental context, which is the background to the reflection on the language of the body, suggests a similar reflection upon action. The significance of the body, in fact, is not only something conceptual, but is realized in concrete ways of life, which determine the history of man. "In these analyses", says John Paul II, "we must always keep in mind the historicity of man"<sup>59</sup>.

Thus it becomes evident that it is impossible to interpret the acts of sexual love reductively, simply as gestures expressing the consciousness with which each one experiences them<sup>60</sup>. Actions not only manifest implicit meaning, but also signify the realization of that meaning. Further, only when it becomes real do we become aware of the meaning that has sprung into act. It is in the interplay between action and consciousness that the identity of the subject is constituted<sup>61</sup>. In this consists the primacy of the practical, which Maurice Blondel has shown so forcefully<sup>62</sup>. And still the mystery of action cannot find its definitive hermeneutic only in reference to the dialectic between *volonté voulante* and

55 Cf. P. Beauchamp, *L'uno e l'altro Testamento. 2. Compiere le Scritture*, Glossa, Milan 2001, 9-11; on this topic, also see: D. Albarello, "La trascendenza della carne. Per una fenomenologia teologica della corporeità umana", in V. Cesarone (ed.), *Libertà: ragione e corpo*, op. cit., 75-94.

56 Cf. K. Wojtyła, *Amore e responsabilità. Morale sessuale e vita interpersonale*, Marietti, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Milan 1980, 19-21.

57 John Paul II, *Uomo e donna*, op. cit., CIV, 400-402.

58 In reference to St. Thomas' metaphor about the political and not despotic dominion of reason over the sensible appetites (Summa Theologiae, I-II, q. 17, a. 6c), G. Angelini observes also the comparison of the metaphor which comes from the father-son relationship: "In this sense reason must simply listen to the wordless voice of the sensible appetites in a political, and not despotic, manner." (G. Angelini, *Eros e agape*, op. cit., 21-22).

59 John Paul II, *Uomo e donna*, op. cit., XXXI, 138-141.

60 In this regard, see: G. Mazzocato, "L'indirizzopersonalista", op. cit., 177-179, which refers to X. Lacroix, *Il corpo di carne. La dimensione etica, estetica e spirituale dell'amore*, EDB, Bologne 1996, 111-128.

61 Cf. F. G. Brambilla, "Il corpo alla prova dei manuali di antropologia teologica", in Associazione Teologica Italiana, *Il corpo alla prova dell'antropologia cristiana*, R. Repole (ed.), Glossa, Milan 2007, 147-185.

62 Cf. M. Blondel, *L'Action* (1893). *Essai d'une critique de la vie et d'une science de la pratique*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1973.

*volonté voulue*, and to the dynamic of desire. The Catechesis of John Paul II shows how the meaning of action is constituted in the context of love, that is in the concrete dynamic of the nuptial body, which through the affections is oriented towards the reality of the other, and in the personal relationship recognizes it to be based on the original love.

In the perspective of love the sexual difference between man and woman appears as the constitutive factor in its own grammar, i.e. of the basic meanings that allow communication. Its negation, as in the case of homosexuality, renders such meanings incomprehensible and falsifies communication. Language naturally requires not only grammar, but also syntax, i.e. rules about the dynamic order among the basic meanings. Here, however, the possible errors are less destructive of the truth of love. For this reason, cultural acceptance of polygamy or divorce in a certain society do not have a relevance as grave as that which gives full institutional recognition to homosexuality, equal in standing to so-called “heterosexuality”<sup>63</sup>.

#### *Nature, culture, and virtue*

The human being, and in particular sexual experience, so relevant in shaping the meaning of his existence, cannot be resolved into the social dimension of language, and thus absorbed into the relativism of history’s ever-changing interpretations. Through the body man is open to the reality of other subjects, and to the world of objects, which constitute the irreducible polarity of his action.

Rooted in the body, language overcomes the self-referentiality of consciousness, to include a shared social consciousness, and is directed towards reality. As Margaret S. Archer says, between the partial explanation of neurobiology and the interpretative

understanding of sociology, lies “the ‘middle ground’ of practical life, in which our emerging properties and powers distance us from our biological origins and prepare us to become social”<sup>64</sup>. Language is not born in a vacuum of consciousness, but is rooted in, and reflects, the ontological structure of the person; it is in affective tension with the person, and in the perspective of a good life, that the gesture acquires its meaning, and can be evaluated in its capacity to express love adequately.

This interpretation of human praxis makes it possible to describe the nexus of reciprocal correlation between nature and culture<sup>65</sup>. Culture is the inescapable context in which the acts and the words, even of the language of bodies, that intend to express and realize love, come to be. Culture offers a first interpretation of nature, helping us to humanize the act, interpreting the meaning of it. Still it must, at the same time, be referred to the original and elementary experiences, in which the truth of love is manifested. Again Merleau-Ponty, in asserting that the body, as experienced, transcends the biological body, beautifully affirms the connection between “natural” and “cultural”: “Our behaviors create meanings that transcend our anatomical disposition; but these meanings are nevertheless intrinsic to our behavior as such, because it is communicated and understood.”<sup>66</sup>

At this point we can address the theme of “purity”, so old-fashioned today, especially in the sphere of sexual morality. John Paul II, however, had the wisdom and courage to treat it fully in his Catechesis<sup>67</sup>. It is a practical capacity, which renders a man apt to act in a certain way; and, at the same time, it is a special gift of the Spirit. That is, it is a virtue and a charismatic gift in the cooperation between human liberty and grace. The theme of virtue is entirely fitting when we speak of culture. Since culture signifies that which

<sup>63</sup> This is obviously not to deny the possibility of tolerance or full respect of the rights of persons, prescindendo from their sexual orientations and practices. To the distinction between grammar and syntax we can bring back the classical distinction between “first principles” and “second principles” of the natural law.

<sup>64</sup> M.S. Archer, *Essereumani. Il problema dell’agire*, Marietti 1820, Genoa – Milan 2007, 271.

<sup>65</sup> Cf. G. Angelini, “La legge naturale e il ripensamento dell’antropologia”, in G. Angelini (ed.), *La legge naturale. I principi dell’umano e la molteplicità delle culture*, Glossa, Milan 2007, 187–215.

<sup>66</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty, *Fenomenologia*, op. cit., 261.

<sup>67</sup> John Paul II, *Uomo e donna*, cit., LIV–LVIII, 219–234. On this topic the classic treatise is D. von Hildebrand, *Purity: The Mystery of Christian Sexuality*, Franciscan University Press, Steubenville (Ohio) 1989.

renders man more human, i.e. that which makes him grow in his humanity<sup>68</sup>, so human culture is realized precisely in the virtues, through the joint action of liberty and the Spirit, the source of the new culture.

Purity is a capacity, “centered on the dignity of the body, i.e. on the dignity of the person in relation to his or her own body, to the femininity or masculinity that is manifested in this body.”<sup>69</sup> It achieves victory over disunion, and the capacity to express the gift of self in the body. Far from being opposed to the body and its dynamics, purity gives the body its full value in reference to the vocation to love. Thus it is an interior transformation, which allows full transparency in the acts of the body: “It is the glory of the human body before God. It is the glory of God in the human body.”<sup>70</sup>

## CONCLUSION

At the end of our journey of meditation on the relevance of the sexual difference for human action, we can now draw some conclusions, gradually gained along the way.

The full meaning of the sexual difference between man and woman has emerged, thanks to the hermeneutic of the experience of love, taken in its entirety. This has shown how, in the personal encounter, the body manifests

a *logos* and implies an *ethos*; it has a nuptial significance and calls for its realization. The sexual difference has appeared therefore as a good ordered to the realization of communion between the persons, according to the specific requirements that characterize it: interpersonal polarity, transcendence, and fecundity. In fact, it makes possible a common good that overcomes the horizon of the individual.

Written in the body and revealed in the relationship of love, the sexual difference pertains therefore to the very grammar of love, and represents the fundamental element of love’s authentic language. Therefore, the truth of human sexuality is not extrinsically imposed on love, but reveals the intrinsic logic of the event of love as a personal event.

Accepting the sexual difference that characterizes the body as significative of an ethical direction of action, means accepting the view of love as the space of the definition of one’s proper identity, in rapport with the other, and in the call to communion; ultimately in rapport with the Other, who is the origin and end of created being, and the foundation of the grammar of love. If homosexuality represents the negation of the sexual difference and its grammar, then, as Albert Chapelle said, “In homosexuality, much more than sexual behavior is in play.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Cf. John Paul II, Discorso all’Unesco, 2 June 1980, cf. L. Negri, *L’uomo e la cultura nel magistero di Giovanni Paolo II*, Jaca Book, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition, Milan 2003; F. Follo (ed.), *Jean-Paul II et la culture contemporaine*, Cerf, Paris 2005.

<sup>69</sup> John Paul II, *Uomo e donna*, cit., LVI, 225.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, LVII, 229.

<sup>71</sup> A. Chapelle, *Sexualité et sainteté*, op. cit., 150.

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