

Love means more.

Highlights from the *Marriage: Unique for a Reason* Blog Archive

About the Sexual Difference Series:

What is sexual difference? What is it not? And why does it matter? This series of posts will attempt to answer these questions, in order to shed light on a crucial – but often misunderstood – aspect of marriage: sexual difference. Sexual difference, man to woman and woman to man, is essential for marriage. The posts in this series will by no means say all there is to say about this rich topic, but hopefully they will provide a jumping-off point for further reflection and discussion.

Sexual difference: Shedding light on popular claims (I)

11/21/11

First, let's clear the pathway, so to speak, by thinking about popular notions about sexual difference and where they fail to capture the full truth.

Is sexual difference a wound or a curse?

The idea of sexual difference as a wound has ancient roots. In the myth of Aristophanes, as recorded by Plato in the *Symposium*, the world was originally inhabited by androgynous creatures (a combination of man and woman). These four-legged, four-armed beings mounted a failed rebellion against the gods. For their punishment, Zeus split each of them in half, fashioning what we now know to be individual men and women. Previously united as one dual-gendered person, these new sexually-differentiated creatures were doomed to wander the world, searching for their "other half." Sexual difference, here, is a wound, a punishment, and a scar on humankind's originally unified existence.

The ancient myth of Pandora also alludes to sexual difference as something negative. Pandora is the first woman, and she is as beautiful as a goddess. But along with her

beauty, she brought to men her infamous box. When curiosity overcame her, she opened the box and released every sort of evil, sickness, and disaster upon the earth.

Modern life seems to echo these stories. One only has to watch a few episodes of daytime Court TV or the soaps to see the myriad wounds and pain that men and women inflict on each other: domestic abuse, cheating, shouting matches, and so on. It might seem tempting to say that sexual difference is a wound, and the world would be a better place without it!

But this is not the whole story or even the truth of the matter. As the book of Genesis makes clear, sexual difference is good and a gift from God. In Genesis 1:27, we read, "God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them." And later, "God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good" (1:31). (Note that only here, after the creation of man and woman, the pinnacle of creation, does God find his work not just good but very good.)

It is only after the Fall that problems between the sexes begin. With the first sin, shame, mistrust, accusation and distance enter into Adam and Eve's relationship (see Gen 3:1-13). As John Paul II puts it, "Instead of being 'together with the other'...man becomes an object for man: the female for the male and vice versa" (TOB, 32.4). How often have these words been lived out since the dawn of creation! And yet animosity between the sexes is not part of sexual difference, but rather a result of sin.

Is sexual difference a construct of society?

A second common idea about sexual difference is that the differences between men and women are socially constructed.[i] In other words, sexual difference and gender traits are what we – society – make them to be, and thus are infinitely malleable – and effectively meaningless (if not oppressive). It is claimed that, with the proper upbringing, a child could be raised as a boy, or as a girl, or as neither until "he" is old enough to decide for "himself." (Gendered pronouns are a heated topic in the gender-as-social-construct arena.) As Anne Fausto-Sterling puts it, labeling someone as male or female is a "social decision." [ii]

But is sexual difference just what we make it? Are gender-specific traits caused entirely by nurture, with no contribution from nature? While the interplay of biology and rearing make it difficult to parse out the precise source of a person's personality and behavior, there is something more at the root of one's sexual identity than the dictate of society (see Catechism, nos. 2331-2336: "'God created man in his own image...male and female he created them'" – no. 2331; "Everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his sexual identity" – no. 2333).

Consider the sad story of Bruce/Brenda/David Reimer.[iii] Or consider the testimonies of mothers who, despite making "Herculean efforts" to raise "gender-neutral" children, come to the realization that their daughters will only wear "a dress and tights," and their sons are obsessed with toy guns, which are officially banned from the household. As one mother relates, her son "quickly learned that Tinker Toys make wonderful guns, and one of his male friends found that even waffles could be used to shoot his dad at breakfast." [iv] These stories suggest that sexual difference does, after all, have something to do with a person's body, and that society has less influence on one's authentic sexual identity than is sometimes assumed.

Coming Wednesday: Two more popular claims about sexual difference, and why they're problematic

[i] See, for example, Judith Lorber, *Paradoxes of Gender* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994) and "Feminist Perspectives on Sex and Gender," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (May 12, 2008) at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-gender/#GenSocCon>.

[ii] Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body* (New York: Basic Books, 2000), p. 3.

[iii] For the complete account of David Reimer's story, see John Colapinto, *As Nature Made Him: The Boy Who Was Raised as a Girl* (New York: Perennial, 2001). See also John Colapinto, "What were the real reasons behind David Reimer's suicide?" *Slate* (June 3, 2004)

[iv] See Steven E. Rhoads, *Taking Sex Difference Seriously* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2004), pp. 22-25.

Sexual difference: Shedding light on popular claims (II)

11/23/11

In Monday's post, we shed light on two popular (but misleading) claims about sexual difference: that it is a wound or curse, and that it is a societal construct. In this post, we'll look at two more popular ideas about sexual difference.

Is sexual difference an unbridgeable chasm?

If sexual difference is something more than a societal construct, are we obliged to think that men and women exist on opposite sides of the great Gender Divide chasm – or even on different planets? John Gray's 1992 book *Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus* popularized this view and offered numerous translation devices for Martians and Venutians who wanted to progress from intergalactic gridlock to a tentative truce.

But, as we'll see in the next few posts, sexual difference is not an unbridgeable chasm – if what is meant by that is that men and women occupy completely separate, parallel universes. Instead, as Mary Healy titled her book on the theology of the body, *"Men and Women Are From Eden."* The fact that men and women share a common humanity gives them an abiding source of communion, a shared "difference" in comparison to the rest of the world. [i] Even further, sexual difference itself is the avenue toward the unique communion of persons found in marriage. This difference is the basis for the fruitful complementarity and collaboration between men and women.

Is sexual difference simply another way of saying "gender roles"?

Some may fear that the notion of sexual difference is really just archaic gender roles in disguise. Assertions like "All women are x" or "All men are y" suggest that an individual person can be summed up simply by his or her maleness or femaleness. You're a man, so you must like football; you're a woman, so you must be a chocoholic. Feminists and others roundly criticize this line of thinking, noting it as stereotyping or reducing personal complexities into gender-specific traits.

But sexual difference is much more than gender roles. Masculinity and femininity are neither just a matter of anatomy nor just a matter of different functions in the home and society (although they have something to do with both). Sexual difference has first to do with one's identity as a man or as a woman. Maleness or femaleness reaches to the very core of one's identity, shaping one's personality "from the inside out." The bishops' 2009 pastoral letter on marriage put it beautifully: "Male and female are distinct bodily ways of being human, of being open to God and to one another – two distinct yet harmonizing ways of responding to the vocation to love" (p. 10).

Reducing sexual difference to a matter of rigid "function" ignores the depth of one's sexual identity. A man may nurture, but he nurtures as a man; a woman may provide, but she provides as a woman. There may be biological or historical reasons for tasks that were typically assigned to men and women, but it's important not to confuse sexual difference with these tasks (or think that masculinity or femininity is first a matter of doing; it is first a matter of being).

Onward and upward

The next post will take a look at what Scripture and the Catechism say to us about sexual difference.

[i] In his reflections on the creation accounts found in Genesis, Bl. Pope John Paul II points out that the first man, Adam, realizes that he is different from the rest of creation and experiences what he calls "original solitude": "Man is alone because he is 'different' from the visible world, from the world of living beings" (TOB, 5.6). This solitude is both a lack ("It is not good that the man should be alone" – Gen. 2:18) and a confirmation of man's unique identity as a self-conscious, self-determining subject who is capable of "a unique, exclusive, and unrepeatable relationship with God himself" (TOB 6.2; see also 6.1).

John Paul II is clear that the experience of "original solitude" is shared by both man and woman. It is, in fact, the very foundation of their unity: "The communion of persons could form itself only on the basis of a 'double solitude' of the man and the woman, or as an encounter in their 'distinction' from the world of living beings (animalia)" (TOB, 9.2).

Sexual difference: Going back to the “beginning”

11/29/11

In this post, we will examine Scripture and the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) on the subject of sexual difference.

Jesus takes us back to the “beginning”

Both sections of the Catechism that discuss sexual difference (CCC, nos. 369-373 and nos. 2331-2336) are called “Male and Female He Created Them.” Indeed, they both guide us back to the creation accounts in Genesis (Gen 1:1-2:4 and 2:5-25). It is here, in Sacred Scripture, that we see the sexual difference of man to woman and woman to man for what it really is, an essential good arising from creation itself. The Church’s teaching on sexual difference takes its cue from Jesus, who, when questioned by the Pharisees about marriage and divorce, referred his listeners back to the “beginning”: “Have you not read that from the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female’...” (Matt 19:4).[1]

The book of Genesis gives us not one, but two accounts of the creation story. The first (Gen 1:1-2:4) has a distinct rhythm (“Then God said...And so it happened...And it was good”), a clear progression of events, and the crucial anthropological verse: “God created man in his image...” (1:27). The second account (Gen 2:5-25) has a very different feel. Here, we get a glimpse of the interior life of the first humans, and we are allowed a window into the first encounter between Adam and Eve. Taken together, the two accounts illuminate different aspects of the human condition. According to John Paul II, “When we compare the two accounts, we reach the conviction that this subjectivity [in the second account] corresponds to the objective reality of man created ‘in the image of God’” (TOB, sec. 3:1).

What does the “beginning” reveal to us about sexual difference?

Sexual difference is willed by God as something good: “God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them...God looked at everything he had made, and he found it very good” (Gen 1:27, 31). Contrary to the myths of Aristophanes and Pandora (see this earlier post), sexual difference is not a

wound or a lack, but is a blessing given to men and women by their Creator. The difficulties that sadly befall the relationship between the sexes are not part of God's original plan, but are some of many tragic consequences of the Fall (see Gen 3:1-19).

Men and women share an equal dignity and equal intimacy with God: "Man is a person, man and woman equally so, since both were created in the image and likeness of the personal God" (CCC, no. 2334; quoting MD, no.6). This point is said beautifully in the story of the creation of Eve from Adam's rib (Gen 2:18-25). The original Hebrew uniquely captures the significance, as Fr. José Granados and Carl Anderson explain:

"Most of us probably interpret the account of Eve's creation of how a male human being named 'Adam' got himself a wife. The picture changes somewhat when we learn that the name 'Adam' is actually a play on the Hebrew word for earth: *hā'adāmāh*. For, as John Paul II points out, it's only after the woman is created that the Bible first uses the Hebrew word for man in the sense of 'male': *'iš*. When Eve appears on the scene, a new vocabulary suddenly emerges along with her: The text shifts from *hā'adāmāh*, which emphasizes man's connection with the earth, to *'is*, which it then immediately pairs with the word for 'woman': *'iššāh*." – *Called to Love: Approaching John Paul II's Theology of the Body* (New York: Doubleday, 2009): p. 45.

They conclude, "Far from degrading women to an inferior status, then, the story of Adam's rib actually underscores that Adam and Eve, male and female, are identical in their dignity and their common humanity" (*Called to Love*, p. 45). Both Adam and Eve come directly from the hand of the Creator. As the Catechism puts it, "Man discovers woman as another 'I,' sharing the same humanity" (CCC, no. 371).

Sexual difference reveals that men and women are created for communion with each other. When God created Eve and brought her to Adam, he cried out joyfully, "This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23). The author of Genesis connects Adam's exuberant cry to the institution of marriage: "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body" (Gen 2:24). Centuries later, Jesus quotes this verse in response to the Pharisees' question about divorce, and he adds, "So they [husband and wife] are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore, what God has joined together, no human being must separate" (Mt 19:6).

Sexual difference, present as a blessing from the very beginning of creation, is therefore the necessary foundation of marriage. Indeed, as the Second Vatican Council stated, the

companionship between man and woman is nothing less than “the primary form of interpersonal communion” (GS, no. 12). As the Catechism says,

“Man and woman were made ‘for each other’ – not that God left them half-made and incomplete: he created them to be a communion of persons, in which each can be ‘helpmate’ to the other, for they are equal as persons (‘bone of my bones...’) and complementary as masculine and feminine” (CCC, no. 372).

Sexual difference, inscribed in each person’s body, reveals to us a fundamental truth about human nature: we are not meant to be solitary creatures. Instead, we are created for communion with others, a communion uniquely witnessed by the free, total, and fruitful gift of self exchanged between husband and wife for a lifetime.

Coming Next: Two Phrases about Sexual Difference to Put in Your Back Pocket

[1] See Bl. John Paul II’s reflections on these words of Jesus, as well as on the creation accounts in Genesis, in the first section of his audiences on the theology of the body: TOB, nos. 1-23.

Sexual difference: "Asymmetrical Reciprocity"

12/1/11

Welcome back to this series on sexual difference! So far we have looked at various ways that our culture describes sexual difference (here and here) and have delved into Scripture and the Catechism on the subject. Now, in Part 3, we will examine two phrases – “asymmetrical reciprocity” and “double unity” – that, despite being mouthfuls, are incredibly helpful in illuminating sexual difference.

Asymmetrical Reciprocity

In his book *The Nuptial Mystery*, Angelo Cardinal Scola offers the phrase “asymmetrical reciprocity” as a way to understand sexual difference. He writes that “nuptiality,” the complex phenomenon of male-female interactions, “manifests a reciprocity between me and another. This reciprocity bears a very peculiar characteristic which I call ‘asymmetry’” (92).

Reciprocity: From another, For another

Let’s start with the word reciprocity. In common parlance, reciprocal refers to those relationships in which something is exchanged; there is a sense of mutuality; a back-and-forth in which both parties receive what they need. Unrequited love is, by definition, not reciprocal.

For Scola, reciprocity means all of this, and more. The “more” is that for Scola, reciprocity is not something chosen; it is something given. That is, reciprocity is present in our lives even before we ask for it. The very fact that I am born means that I come from another, to whom I am connected (a relationship of reciprocity) well before my consent – and even despite it. Scola writes, “There is not first a wholly autonomous ‘I’ which then enters into relation with an other. The relation is not extrinsic and accidental, but intrinsic and constitutive” (121). What he means is that reciprocity is “built-in” to the human experience. We are through and through reciprocal creatures.

Scola acknowledges that “the ‘other’ is obviously a category broader than that of the ‘other sex’” (93). In some sense, every person presents themselves to me as an “other” – someone with whom to interact who is not reducible to myself. However, Scola continues, “it is undeniable that the original and basic experience of otherness is founded on sexual otherness” (93). In other words, sexual difference is the paradigm of reciprocity, of otherness, and of relation. When I encounter a person who is sexually different than me, I am eloquently reminded that I do not, in fact, sum up the entirety of what it means to be human. As Scola puts it, “You, woman, are as fully person as I, man. Yet you are this in a way that is radically different from my own, so decisive and so inaccessible. You are, precisely, other” (381).

Asymmetrical: A difference never overcome, open to fruitfulness

Reciprocity, then, highlights the relational character of human persons, and especially of man to woman and woman to man (sexual difference). But what about the qualifier asymmetrical? Scola uses this term to ensure that reciprocity between men and women does not collapse into something akin to Aristophanes’ myth, where man + woman = whole person. If men and women were “halves,” then their relationship would be perfectly symmetrical, and their encounter would erase all difference between them. Instead – and this is key – the sexual difference between men and women is never overcome. Scola says, “Even in the most intimate form of the unity between husband and wife – the biblical ‘one flesh’ – difference is not abolished. The other remains irreducibly ‘other’” (381). Asymmetry ensures, then, that male-female communion in marriage is not a threat to the personal identities of husband and wife. The mystery of the “one-flesh union” is that even in truly becoming one, the two aren’t dissolved into some sort of amorphous uni-creature.

The importance of asymmetry becomes even clearer when we are reminded that it – irreducible difference – is precisely what enables husband and wife to be fruitful! As Scola writes, “The difference between the two (the man and the woman) makes space for a third...The reciprocity does not cancel the difference because it is asymmetrical, since it exists not for the sake of androgynous union of two halves, but for the procreation of the child” (95, emphasis original). Therefore, asymmetry ensures that the relations between a man and a woman never become an enclosed circle, but rather remain open – from within – to the ecstatic eruption of an entirely new person, the child.

Asymmetrical reciprocity is a useful phrase for talking about sexual difference because it expresses both the “built-in” relation between men and women (reciprocity) but also the fact that their relation is never reducible to a tidy equation (asymmetrical). Scola brings out the wholeness of every man and woman as a human person – a wholeness that is nonetheless always receptive to the other.

Coming on Saturday: Another way to talk about sexual difference – “double unity”

Sexual difference: "Double unity"

12/3/11

In this post, we'll look at a second helpful way of understanding sexual difference, one that is found in Pope John Paul II's *The Theology of the Body*, where the Holy Father speaks of "double unity" or "dual unity." Reflecting on the creation narratives of Genesis, John Paul II writes,

"We observed 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; duality, on the other hand, shows what, on the basis of this identity, constitutes the masculinity and femininity of created man" (TOB, sec. 9.1, emphasis original).

"Unity," then, refers to the common humanity and dignity that both men and women have – one humanity, participated in by both. In Eve, Adam finds another creature who, like himself, finds no "suitable partner" among the animals (Gen 2:20). He finds another creature created "in the image of God" (Gen 1:27). And so, as John Paul II writes, "Joy for the other human being, for the second 'I,' dominates in the words the man (male) speaks on seeing the woman (female)" (TOB, sec. 8.4).

Yet although man and woman are united in a common humanity, they are irreducibly different. As John Paul II puts it, "Man, whom God created 'male and female,' bears the divine image impressed in the body 'from the beginning'; man and woman constitute, so to speak, two diverse ways of 'being a body' that are proper to human nature in the unity of this image" (TOB, sec. 13.2). The "duality" of human nature is precisely the sexual difference, masculinity and femininity.

For John Paul II, the "unity in the flesh" that takes place in the sexual encounter between man and woman has its foundation in their "unity in humanity":

"When they unite with each other (in the conjugal act) so closely so as to become 'one flesh,' man and woman rediscover every time and in a special way the mystery of creation, thus returning to the union in humanity ('flesh from my flesh and bone from my

bones') that allows them to recognize each other reciprocally and to call each other by name, as they did the first time" (TOB, sec. 10.2).

It is only because of man and woman's unity-in-difference (two sexes within a shared humanity) that they are able to come together in the fruitful union of marriage. Without a shared humanity, this encounter would not be personal; and without being different sexes, this union "in the flesh" could not take place at all. For Pope John Paul II, the sexual difference is fundamentally "a reciprocal 'for' that can and must...serve the building of the unity 'of communion' in their reciprocal relations" (TOB, 41.4).

Next: Why Does Sexual Difference Matter?

Sexual difference: Why does it matter?

12/6/11

So far in our series on sexual difference, we have looked at various ways that our culture describes sexual difference (part one and part two), examined Scripture and the Catechism on the subject, and added two helpful phrases to our repertoire of describing sexual difference (“asymmetrical reciprocity” and “double unity”). One important point remains to be discussed: Why does sexual difference matter?

Difference: the foundation of love

Before considering sexual difference specifically, let's take one step back: why does difference matter? Our culture seems a bit schizophrenic on the topic of difference. On the one hand, it loudly celebrates “diversity” and the virtue most in vogue is, of course, “tolerance” for people different from you. But on the other hand, difference – especially between men and women – is often treated as suspect, as a thin veneer over inequality. In other words, equality is confused with sameness.

But in a world where everything is the same, love would be impossible. G.K. Chesterton explains why:

“I want to love my neighbor not because he is I, but precisely because he is not I. I want to adore the world, not as one likes a looking-glass, because it is one's self, but as one loves a woman, because she is entirely different. If souls are separate, love is possible. If souls are united, love is obviously impossible. A man may be said loosely to love himself, but he can hardly fall in love with himself, or, if he does, it must be a monotonous courtship.” – Orthodoxy (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2006), 128.

Difference, in other words, is what saves us from the fate of Narcissus. Difference – recognizing the other as other – is what prevents us from becoming entranced with our own reflection in a shoddy imitation of love.

But even if we accept Chesterton's point and agree that difference is necessary for love, we might be tempted to think that sexual difference is just one of many differences between persons, such as race, height, or taste in music. What is unique about sexual difference, compared to other possible differences?

Taking bodily life seriously

First, the reality is that being human means being a man or a woman, embodied as male or female. (Even the difficult situations of those born with ambiguous genitalia are the exceptions that prove the rule. An intersex or hermaphroditic condition is not a new gender, but a combination of male and female characteristics.) Taking sexual difference seriously allows us to take the body seriously. It allows us to treat the body as an integral part of our identities, instead of a cage or shell. We are men or women both body and soul. We don't just have a body—we are our bodies. (See CCC, nos. 362-368 on the human person as a unity of body and soul.)

Distinguishing in order to unite

Second, sexual difference is unique because it is inherently referential. Unlike other differences between individuals (height, ethnicity, etc.), which do not require the presence of an "other" to be understood, the bodily reality of a man is only fully understood in light of the bodily reality of a woman. Recall the point in part three of this series: the generic "Adam" is first referred to as "male – 'iš" when he encounters Eve, the first "woman – 'iššāh" (see Gen 2:18-25).

But the uniqueness of sexual difference doesn't end there. The "referential" difference between man and woman does not simply distinguish between the two; it also serves as the foundation of their unity. Or, more accurately, sexual difference distinguishes in order to unite. Only because a man and a woman are sexually different are they capable of forming a complete union of body-persons; if they were the same, no such union would be possible.

In fact, the sexually-differentiated body reveals that man and woman are fundamentally “for” each other. As Bl. John Paul II explained, “The body, which expresses femininity ‘for’ masculinity and, vice versa, masculinity ‘for’ femininity, manifests the reciprocity and the communion of persons” (TOB, 14.4; see also CCC, no. 371). Being male or female is not simply a matter of biology or anatomy; it is a witness to the call to love and communion that is inscribed within man and woman’s identity as body-and-soul (see FC, no. 11).

Open to the gift of the child

A third reason why sexual difference is unique is because it – and only it – makes two persons capable of welcoming a new child into the world. The “supreme gift” of the child (see GS, no. 50) depends on the sexual difference between father and mother. The spouses’ capacity for procreation, in turn, ensures that their sexual love does not become egotistic, an enclosed circle. The unity of spouses, wrote John Paul II, “rather than closing them up in themselves, opens them up towards a new life, towards a new person” (LF, no. 8).

The difference is the difference

To sum up: Difference is necessary for love; if all were one, love would be impossible. Love requires recognition of the “other” as “other.” But while there are many differences between persons, sexual difference – the difference of man to woman and woman to man – is a unique kind of difference. It is irreducible and primordial, fundamental to human nature and every human experience. In particular, it is the avenue toward full personal-bodily communion between a man and woman, and thus is necessary for a couple to experience the superabundant fruitfulness of conceiving a child. Both of these capacities – for union and for children – matter for marriage. In fact, they are essential for marriage. This helps us to understand why sexual difference – the difference of man to woman and woman to man – is an essential aspect of marriage. Without it, marriage is impossible.

National Marriage Week: What does sexual difference have to do with marriage?

2/10/12

Today is the fourth day of National Marriage Week. On Tuesday, we reflected on what makes marriage unique, different from any other relationship on earth. Today the topic is more focused: why does sexual difference matter for marriage? In other words, why is marriage the union of one man and one woman?

What is sexual difference?

- 1) The call to accept one's sexual identity as a man or as a woman

As we did before, let's begin with the human person, with an authentic anthropology. Crucial here is the fact that to exist as a human person means to be embodied. (When was the last time you met someone without a body?) Echoing Bl. John Paul II's terminology, we can say that the body "reveals" man and is "an expression of the person" (TOB, 9.4 and 27.3). In other words, encountering a living human body means at the same time encountering a human person. The body is not just a shell or a conduit for one's "real" self but is intimately and inseparably united with one's identity, one's "I".

Further, to exist as a human person means to exist as a man or as a woman. The human body is fundamentally a gendered reality, not a gender-less (androgynous) one.[1] And because the body is a deeply personal reality and not just a biological fact, being a man or being a woman is not just a matter of anatomical features or "the shape of my skin." Instead, one's sexual identity – as a man or as a woman – affects a person at every level of his or her existence (biologically, psychologically, genetically, and so forth). As the Catechism puts it, "Sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul... Everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his sexual identity" (CCC, nos. 2332 and 2333, emphasis in original).

- 2) An irreducible and dynamic difference

What does sexual identity have to do with sexual difference? Simply this: when we speak of sexual difference, we mean both the existence of two distinct sexual identities (man or woman) and the built-in mutual relationship between them. In other words, sexual difference has to do with the irreducible and dynamic difference of man to woman and woman to man.

Why “irreducible”? Because sexual difference is primordial, basic, and unique. It is fundamental to human experience and reality. Unlike other differences between people, sexual difference undergirds everything that we are as human persons, male or female. Sexual difference cuts across geographic, ethnic, and other differences, being in fact more basic than these other differences.

Why “dynamic”? Because sexual difference distinguishes in order to unite. In fact, sexual difference is precisely what enables communion between man and woman to exist at all. (More on this soon.)

Put another way, sexual difference is a mutually referential kind of difference – we know woman fully only by knowing man, and know man fully only by knowing woman. The differences between them do not just set them apart but hint at something more, at a call to communion between them. This call to communion inscribed in man and woman is part of what Bl. John Paul II had in mind when he wrote the following:

“The person, by the light of reason and the support of virtue, discovers in the body the anticipatory signs, the expression and the promise of the gift of self, in conformity with the wise plan of the Creator” (VS, no. 48).

Sexual difference, then, far from being merely a biological or anatomical fact, communicates a wealth of truth about the human person! If we have the eyes to see, as Bl. John Paul II urges us to, we’ll see in the human person’s identity as man and woman the “anticipatory signs” of the “gift of self,” or, using the language of the Catechism, we’ll see the call to love, which is the “fundamental and innate vocation of every human being” (CCC, no. 1604).

Sexual difference and marriage

We are now well-poised to understand what sexual difference has to do with marriage. As a recap of Tuesday's post, marriage is a unique relationship that has a number of essential characteristics (without which marriage wouldn't be marriage):

Marriage is total (gift of self)

Marriage is faithful and exclusive (a truthful gift)

Marriage is forever (the gift of one's future)

Marriage is life-giving (the gift of one's fertility)

Sexual difference matters here: it is the ground (the foundation) of the capacity of husband and wife to exchange a mutual, total gift of their entire selves, a gift precisely at the center of what marriage is. Without sexual difference, this gift would not be possible. Put more specifically: the love between husband and wife involves a free, total, and faithful gift of self that not only expresses love but also opens the spouses to receive the gift of a child. No other human interaction on earth is like this!

Sexual difference, then, is not an optional "add-on" to an already existing entity called "marriage" (much like you might choose to add sprinkles to your ice cream – or not). Instead, sexual difference is at the very heart of what marriage is. It's what capacitates man and woman to give themselves completely to each other as husband and wife. Sexual difference matters for marriage.

Interested in learning more? Check out the DVD "Made for Each Other," its Viewer's Guide and Resource Booklet, and all of the Sexual Difference FAQs. Also see the previous blog series on sexual difference.

[1] Even in circumstances when a person expresses ambiguous genitalia or departs from the XX/XY genetic standard, the anomaly is recognized precisely due to its discordance with healthy, normal presentation as male or female.
