Love means more.

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

Vocabulary Term: Reciprocity

3/1/16

Asymmetrical Reciprocity

The word “reciprocity” originated in the middle of the 18th century, from the Latin word meaning “moving backward and forward.”[i] It is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “The practice of exchanging things with others for mutual benefit.”[ii]

Reciprocity is a frequently-used term when referring to the relationship between the sexes. Many theologians, in particular, pair it with the word “asymmetrical,” so today we will look at these two words together.

Human beings like to have reciprocal relationships. With our relatives, friends, and particularly spouses, we do not like to feel as if one person does all the “giving” and the other all the “receiving,” (or, more cynically, the “taking”). We want to experience our relationships as balanced—even if our idea of balance does not match up with that of other people or society at large. Reciprocity means, in relationships, that there is a giving and a giving-back in love. As the actor in Made for Each Other says, marriage is not 50-50, it’s 100-100. But imagine if one spouse, Jack, feels they are giving 100% in the relationship, and the other, Jill, suspects that Jack is really only giving 75% of his effort into it, holding back on X, Y or Z. Trouble is bound to follow.

When I was in high school, I remember getting frustrated with my parents’ relationship, in which, from my perspective, my mom “did everything.” According to my enlightened (i.e., teenaged) mind, their relationship lacked reciprocity. Years later, I found out that my parents did not see it that way. My mom’s doing the chores was her way of showing love

(acts of service), which is not the same as my dad's.[iii] This is a reminder that reciprocity in a relationship cannot be measured from the outside.

Add "asymmetrical" to "reciprocity" and you have a closer approximation of the love of God. He always gives first. Our relationship with Him is always asymmetrical in that way. When we give to God, it is in response to Him who loved us first—"In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

Marriage is also asymmetrical in a number of ways, many of which are based on sexual difference. The most obvious example is that of childbearing. It is indisputable that the woman gives more of herself to the infant for the nine months of gestation and a certain length of time after birth than the man does. This is not "fair" or "equal"; it may not even seem "complementary" since there is not really a parallel for the man. But it can (and must) be integrated into a relationship of reciprocity, albeit "asymmetrical". A husband can certainly respond to the needs of his wife, especially after having a child, by supporting and encouraging her in any number of ways. Meanwhile, a man may be able give more of himself in some other way. For example, traditionally it is the man who kneels down to ask a woman to marry him; in this way he is imaging an "asymmetrical" type of love, a love that takes the first step and places itself at the service of the other. Marriage is full of little imbalances which, paradoxically, result in true balance.

[i] "Reciprocity." Oxford Dictionaries. http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/reciprocity (accessed February 23, 2016).

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] If you've never heard of the 5 love languages, check out Gary Chapman's book, The Five Love Languages.

Vocabulary Term: Theological Anthropology

3/8/16

"Anthropology" is the study of human beings. Like many topics of study, it lends itself to further specification, such as our topic today: theological anthropology.

Since theology is the study of God, the juxtaposition of these two terms would be hard to understand or justify in any belief system besides Christianity. Only in Christ does God become man and thus open the door to the study of the human being in light of who God is. Since Jesus is true God and true man, not only can we consider ourselves in light of him, but we must, if we truly want to know ourselves.

Many—if not all—of the questions confronting the Church today about marriage (among other issues) have their roots in questions about anthropology—who man and woman are. This may be why Pope St. John Paul II spent so much of his pontificate exploring this question of who man is. In his very first encyclical, Redemptor Hominis, John Paul II quoted a phrase from the Second Vatican Council that would come to be one of his most-used lines: "Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling" (Gaudium et Spes, no. 22). Only in light of this truth, he said, does man discover "the greatness, dignity and value that belong to his humanity" (RH, no. 10). John Paul II echoes this again in Veritatis Splendor, where he wrote, "only in the mystery of Christ's Redemption do we discover the 'concrete' possibilities of man" (no. 103). And in Fides et Ratio, we read, "the more human beings know reality and the world, the more they know themselves in their uniqueness, with the question of the meaning of things and of their very existence becoming ever more pressing" (no. 1). Put another way, human beings are the creatures that ask, "Why?"

The whole of Pope St. John Paul II's theology of the body could be understood as a reflection on theological anthropology. Beginning with Adam and Eve, in response to Christ's direction in Matthew 19 to consider "the beginning," John Paul II reveals the profound meaning of man's being made male and female in the image of God. We are "Made for Each Other" and made to bring God's loving presence into the world. The sexes can be understood as truly one and equal in dignity, but at the same time, totally

different. This seeming paradox is possible only in light of a Trinitarian God, in whom difference is not subordination or conflict but the basis for fruitful communion.

John Paul II's work is called an "adequate anthropology." This doesn't mean that it is "barely passable" as a way of understanding the human being. Instead, since we cannot know everything about ourselves, the Holy Father offers us an adequate place to start. (St. Augustine famously noted that God is "more intimate to me than I am to myself.") In order to grasp something of our own mystery, we need to know, at the very least, that we are created man or woman, a son or daughter, and called to be a father or mother (in some way). Only this is an "adequate" beginning, a portrayal fitting to our identity as humans.

These considerations are ever more important as we approach the current cultural landscape, where every one of these assertions is questioned. We live in a world where people think that, instead of receiving their sexual identity as part of who they are, they should be able to choose their own sex, and that, instead of receiving new life as a gift, they seek control over the coming-to-be of new life, or its destruction. All of these choices have drastic consequences, not only for the individual soul, but for all of us.

Now even the government seems bent on forcing everyone to agree with this false anthropology—one that is not an adequate consideration of what and who a human being is. For example, take a recent veto of a bill in South Dakota regarding facility use. The measure, which passed both houses in the state legislature, would maintain the biological separation of bathrooms, but included provision of "reasonable accommodation" to those who consider themselves to be "transgender" (by providing single-occupancy restrooms, for example). This was not good enough, apparently—everyone must be forced to accept a person's chosen "gender identity." And of course the HHS Mandate is all about forcing everyone to provide contraception regardless of their convictions. The anthropology peddled today is a radical disassociation from reality, from the truth of ourselves as sons and daughters, fathers and mothers. We cannot allow this false anthropology to let us forget who we are.

Vocabulary: Irreducible

3/15/16

This is one of my favorite words in the realm of reflection on sexual difference because it reminds me that human being have limits that we must simply accept. Another term that is used to say the same thing is “insuperable.” One of the greatest lessons that we learn over and over again in relationships is: “other people are not me.” While this is certainly true in every case, between any two people, it is a particularly striking fact in the relationship between a man and a woman.

Taking the word in itself, irreducible denotes that a given thing is not-able-to-be-diminished. So not only can the thing not go away, it can’t even be lessened. We say sexual difference, then, is an irreducible difference. It cannot be any less than it is. A man cannot become somehow less a man in order to satisfy his wife, and a woman cannot be made somehow less a woman for her husband. In fact, in the union of marriage, each spouse will most likely find out for the first time just how different a man and woman are. Pope Francis preached in a homily for a celebration of Matrimony at the Vatican, “This is what marriage is all about: man and woman walking together, wherein the husband helps his wife to become ever more a woman, and wherein the woman has the task of helping her husband to become ever more a man.” Cardinal Scola of Milan writes, “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. Here we see all the force of the originality of man and woman.”[i] Thinking this way about sexual difference—as irreducible—can be a great help to the marital relationship, especially when it comes to expectations of understanding and agreement.

In Arabic, the word for “husband,” “wife” and “married couple” is one and the same: zawj.[ii] The language thus recognizes the mutual dependence and relationality of a man and woman in marriage, because it means “two persons, different from one another, bound together, who cannot manage without each other.”[iii] It highlights that the difference does not disappear in the unity.

In Chinese culture, the yin and the yang are symbols used to communicate a similar idea. “Though yin and yang look like opposites, they can’t exist independently. They embrace

and coordinate each other, and also facilitate each other. One cannot exist or be defined without the other."[iv] This Eastern concept can be helpful when thinking about the irreducible nature of the difference between the sexes: if the other is not, and never will be, you, only then can you be really tied to them in an inextricable way. Mirror images of ourselves cannot last.

[i] Angelo Cardinal Scola, The Nuptial Mystery (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), p. 281.

[ii] Wael Farouq, "We Exist in Relationship," Not Just Good, but Beautiful: The Complementary Relationship between Man and Woman, eds. Steven Lopes and Helen Alvare (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2015), p. 46.

[iii] Ibid, p. 46.

[iv] Tsui-Ying Sheng, "The Union of Yin and Yang," Not Just Good, but Beautiful, p. 141.