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A DISORDERED VIEW OF MANHOOD AND ITS EFFECT ON THE IDEA OF WOMANHOOD

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A child conceived in its mother's womb is never an unjust aggressor; it is a defenseless being that is waiting to be welcomed and helped.

It is necessary to recognize that, in this context, we are witnessing true human tragedies. Often *the woman is the victim of male selfishness*, in the sense that the man, who has contributed to the conception of the new life, does not want to be burdened with it and leaves the responsibility to the woman, as if it were "her fault" alone. So, precisely when the woman most needs the man's support, he proves to be a cynical egotist, capable of exploiting her affection or weakness, yet stubbornly resistant to any sense of responsibility for his own action. . . .

Therefore, *in firmly rejecting "pro choice" it is necessary to become courageously "pro woman," promoting a choice that is truly in favor of women.* It is precisely the woman, in fact, who pays the highest price, not only for her motherhood, but even more for its destruction, for the suppression of the life of the child who has been conceived. The only honest stance, in these cases, *is that of radical solidarity with the woman.* It is not right to leave her alone.¹

~Pope John Paul II

INTRODUCTION

In the passage above from his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul II implies that it is precisely the irresponsibility of men that creates a disordered perspective of manhood. Men take advantage of women's sensitivity and self-giving attitude, presenting women with a so-called "liberation" from their womanhood and

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1. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *CROSSING THE THRESHOLD OF HOPE* 206-07 (Vittorio Messori ed., Jenny McPhee & Martha McPhee trans., 1994).

motherhood through various physical and pharmaceutical contraceptive barriers and, if these measures fail, abortion. Some of the extremist branches of feminism have embraced this perspective, contending that women's true liberation is manifested in sexual freedom without natural consequences. In this way, these branches of feminism play into the hands of the disordered man. The result is devastating. Women, in many cases, cooperate with men in becoming sexual objects. This in turn leads to more subtle forms of exploitation, where women are promoted as sex objects and their more or less naked bodies become the main point of reference in advertising, fashion, sports, and other entertainment industries. It also opens the door to lucrative "industries" of exploitation: pornography, prostitution, and human trafficking. This Article explores the contemporary disordered view of manhood, its effects on women and on the contemporary view of womanhood, and the biblical parameters for restoring the proper view of manhood and womanhood according to the teaching of John Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

I. THE DISTORTION OF MANHOOD

John Paul II, in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, emphasizes that the woman is a subject who should never "become the 'object' of 'domination' and male 'possession.' . . . Burdened by hereditary sinfulness, [man and woman] bear within themselves the constant 'inclination to sin,' the tendency to go against the moral order which corresponds to the rational nature and dignity of man and woman as persons."²

The distorted vision of manhood, however, does just this: it promotes women as objects. There are many examples of this. In 1945, medical student Bernard Nathanson, funded by his father's five-hundred Canadian dollars, facilitated the abortion of his pregnant girlfriend, Ruth, who lived in Montreal at the time.³ In the words of Nathanson—who became a famous abortionist—some fifty years later, "Thus was the first of my seventy-five thousand encounters with abortion."⁴ The most striking aspect of the story is that young Nathanson and Ruth were very much in love, but they both accepted the father's proposal. Nathanson's vivid recollection of that particular

2. Pope John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* [*Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women*] ¶ 10 (1988) [hereinafter *Mulieris Dignitatem*].

3. BERNARD NATHANSON, *THE HAND OF GOD: A JOURNEY FROM DEATH TO LIFE BY THE ABORTION DOCTOR WHO CHANGED HIS MIND* 54–55 (1996).

4. *Id.* at 55.

day as he recounts it many years later clearly indicates that this event deeply marked him, and he is clearly sorry for facilitating the abortion of his child.⁵ At Ruth's request, Nathanson did not even accompany her to undergo the abortion. She insisted he not accompany her so he would not jeopardize his future medical career, because at the time, abortion was a crime that carried a jail term for the abortionist and accomplices.⁶ Unsurprisingly, the relationship of Nathanson and Ruth ended with the life of the child.⁷

Two other incidents provide more contemporary examples. One concerns a long letter to the editor I read in February 2008. The female author of this letter recounted that while cohabiting with a man, she became pregnant and desired to give birth to their child, but the man convinced her that the timing was not right. He proposed an abortion and promised to marry her at a later date and to have children with her. She accepted these terms and underwent the abortion. Shortly afterwards, he abandoned her. Her letter makes it evident she regrets her act. I was shocked as I read the very striking account of the man's manipulation of the woman.

The second event concerns a popular news item in the Italian media. In mid-May 2008, while I was in Rome teaching a seminar course at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, the country was buzzing about the murder of a teenage girl in a small village.⁸ A surveillance camera in the place where her body was found recorded the images of three teenage boys leaving the building. The police investigation later discovered that each boy had been enjoying promiscuous relations with her. The girl announced to all three that she was pregnant and that she did not know which one was the father.⁹ They responded by killing her.

These are just some examples of how dysfunctional men manipulate women. They bring alive the words in *Genesis* as they relate to women: "[H]e shall rule over you."¹⁰ They also point to the effects of sin on such men as expressed by Pope John Paul II: "For

5. *Id.* at 56–58.

6. *Id.* at 56; 1 POPULATION DIV., U.N. DEP'T OF ECON. & SOC. AFFAIRS, ABORTION POLICIES: A GLOBAL REVIEW at 84–85, U.N. Doc. ST/ESA/SER.A/187, U.N. Sales No. E.01.XIII.10 (2001).

7. NATHANSON, *supra* note 3, at 58.

8. See Nick Pisa, *Teens Slaughtered "Pregnant" Girl*, SKY NEWS, Nov. 12, 2008, <http://news.sky.com/skynews/Home/World-News/Italy-Teen-Murder-Jail-For-Three-Teenagers-Who-Raped-Beat-And-Burned-14-Year-Old-Pregnant-Girl/Article/200811215150117>.

9. *Id.*

10. *Genesis* 3:16 (Revised Standard, Catholic Edition).

whenever man is responsible for offending a woman's personal dignity and vocation, he acts contrary to his own personal dignity and his own vocation."¹¹

II. THE DISTORTION OF WOMANHOOD

To sum up what has been said so far, dysfunctional men deny their own anthropology as based on their "'image and likeness' to God, which is the basis of biblical anthropology."¹² Through a disordered view of manhood, usually manifested as a form of machismo, they develop strategies that serve their own selfish desires, including debasing the loving disposition of women and their spirit of service. Unfortunately, many women are manipulated and accept the propositions of such men, which run contrary to the women's very nature. The distorted man, in fact, becomes a predator on the receptive disposition of women.

John Paul II discusses how this all relates to the loss of the fundamental equality between man and woman. He states:

[W]hen we read in the biblical description the words addressed to the woman: "*Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you*" (Gen 3:16), we discover a break and a constant threat precisely in regard to this "unity of the two" which corresponds to the dignity of the image and likeness of God in both of them. But this threat is more serious for the woman, since domination takes the place of "being a sincere gift" and therefore living "for" the other: "he shall rule over you." This "domination" indicates the disturbance and *loss of the stability* of that *fundamental equality* which the man and the woman possess in the "unity of the two": and this is especially to the disadvantage of the woman, whereas only the equality resulting from their dignity as persons can give to their mutual relationship the character of an authentic "*communio personarum*." While the violation of this equality, which is both a gift and a right deriving from God the Creator, involves an element to the disadvantage of the woman, at the same time it also diminishes the true dignity of the man. Here we touch upon an *extremely sensitive point in the dimension of that "ethos"* which was

11. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 10.

12. *Id.* ¶ 9.

originally inscribed by the Creator in the very creation of both of them in his own image and likeness.¹³

Professor Karl Stern also takes up the topic of equality but notes how it has been interpreted as sameness. In his insightful book *The Flight from Woman*, he devotes a chapter to womanhood and presents a comprehensive analysis from a diversity of perspectives.¹⁴ Stern includes an important point:

[S]ince the French Revolution and the rise of the feminist movement, the cry for *equality* has changed into an assertion of *sameness*. Any view of dissimilarity smacked suspiciously of injustice. It is characteristic of our time that the word “discrimination,” which originally means “sorting out,” has often acquired the meaning of hate, and in works like those of Simone de Beauvoir and others any attempt at making *distinctions* is branded as an act of *discrimination* in the derogatory sense.¹⁵

The notion of “equality” has been tied to women’s human rights. Certainly women have been deprived of civil rights in many legal systems. One need only consider the French Civil Code, in which a married woman was considered an incapable person.¹⁶ It is well documented that this was a personal decision of Napoleon precisely because he was not able to “control” his wife Josephine.¹⁷ Similarly, in the Anglo-American legal system, the interpretation of the biblical *erunt duo in carne una* (“the two become one flesh”) was that this “one” was the husband.¹⁸ While the struggle of women to obtain the full recognition of their human rights (as authentically defined) is

13. *Id.* ¶ 10.

14. KARL STERN, *THE FLIGHT FROM WOMAN* 9–39 (1965).

15. *Id.* at 14.

16. *See* CODE CIVIL arts. 213–217 (E. Blackwood Wright trans., Stevens & Sons 1908).

17. *See* ERNEST CAPARROS, *LES LIGNES DE FORCE DE L’ÉVOLUTION DES RÉGIMES MATRIMONIAUX EN DROITS COMPARÉ ET QUÉBÉCOIS* 30–31 (1975) (discussing the relevant provision and attributing it to Napoleon); STEVEN ENGLUND, *NAPOLEON: A POLITICAL LIFE* 92–96, 189, 487 n.49 (2004) (discussing Josephine’s marital indiscretions and Napoleon’s role in restoring the legal subordination of wives to their husbands); RÉGINE PERNOUD, *WOMEN IN THE DAYS OF THE CATHEDRALS* 172 (Anne Côté-Hariss trans., Ignatius Press 1998) (1989) (noting the superior place of women in society prior to the Napoleonic Code).

18. WILLIAM BLACKSTONE, *COMMENTARIES* *430 (“By marriage the husband and wife are one person in law: that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during the marriage, or at least is incorporated and consolidated into that of the husband” (footnote omitted)); *Genesis* 2:24.

totally justified, it should not lead women to mimic disordered men, who encourage them to abandon their femininity.

Again in his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II gives us the proper parameters:

In our times the question of “women’s rights” has taken on new significance in the broad context of the rights of the human person. *The biblical and evangelical message* sheds light on this cause, which is the object of much attention today, *by safeguarding the truth about the “unity” of the “two,”* that is to say the truth about that dignity and vocation that result from the specific diversity and personal originality of man and woman. Consequently, even the rightful opposition of women to what is expressed in the biblical words, “He shall rule over you” (Gen 3:16) must not under any condition lead to the “masculinization” of women. In the name of liberation from male “domination,” women must not appropriate to themselves male characteristics contrary to their own feminine “originality.” There is a well-founded fear that if they take this path, women will not “reach fulfillment,” but instead will *deform and lose what constitutes their essential richness*. . . .

The personal resources of femininity are certainly no less than the resources of masculinity: they are merely different.¹⁹

Clearly this is the proper approach to the disordered view of manhood, which has provoked distortions in the perspective of womanhood. It is the selfishness of the dysfunctional man that is taken up by the woman, as evidenced in the rejection of her maternity, which in turn leads to numerous social problems.

Abandoning femininity, as Stern illustrated, would mean the masculinization of women and might even lead to the depersonalization of human beings and the possible feminization of men.²⁰ In response, John Paul II offers a clear path for a healthy masculinity and femininity in his discussion of mutual and reciprocal “self-gift” of the spouses:

A human being, whether male or female, is a person, and therefore, “the only creature on earth which God willed for its own sake”; and at the same time this unique and unrepeatable creature “cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self.” . . .

19. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 10.

20. STERN, *supra* note 14, at 14–16.

This statement in Genesis 3:16 [“Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you”] is of great significance. It implies a reference to the mutual relationship of man and woman *in marriage*. It refers to the desire born in the atmosphere of spousal love whereby the woman’s “sincere gift of self” is responded to and matched by a corresponding “gift” on the part of the husband.²¹

He gives a deeper reflection of self-gift within the context of the New Covenant:

At the beginning of the New Covenant, which is to be eternal and irrevocable, there is a woman: the Virgin of Nazareth. It is a *sign* that points to the fact that “in Jesus Christ” “*there is neither male nor female.*” In Christ the mutual opposition between man and woman—which is the inheritance of original sin—is essentially overcome. “For you are all *one* in Jesus Christ,” St. Paul will write.

These words concern that original “unity of the two” which is linked with the creation of the human being as male and female, made in the image and likeness of God, and based on the model of that most perfect communion of Persons which is God himself.²²

Only in this way can society move away from the problems posed by the male predator and toward the recognition that men and women are made in the image and likeness of God and called to union and collaboration. In other words, only in this way can men and women move to the realm of love, as defined by one contemporary saint: “To love is to cherish one thought, to live for the person loved, not to belong to oneself, happily and freely with one’s heart and soul to be subjected to another will . . . and at the same time to one’s own.”²³ This could be considered as the quintessential manifestation of the sincere gift of self and the touchstone of the civilization of love.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that building a new culture that respects the Christian anthropology of men and women is not an easy task. But this should

21. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 10 (citing Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* [*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*] ¶ 24 (1965), reprinted in THE SIXTEEN DOCUMENTS OF VATICAN II 513, 522–23 (Nat’l Catholic Welfare Conference trans., 1967)); *Genesis* 3:16 (Revised Standard, Catholic Edition).

22. *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *supra* note 2, ¶ 11 (citation omitted) (quoting *Galatians* 3:28).

23. JOSEMARÍA ESCRIVÁ, *FURROW* 307 (1992) (ellipsis in original).

not prevent us from participating in this venture. Christians confronted the moral depravity of the Roman Empire with far fewer means than we have today, and they changed the world! I conclude with the words of Pope Benedict XVI on the occasion of the international congress on woman and men held in Rome in 2008:

A renewed anthropological study is certainly necessary based on the great Christian tradition, which incorporates new scientific advances and, given today's cultural sensitivity, in this way contributes to deepening not only the feminine identity but also the masculine, which is often the object of partial and ideological reflections. Faced with cultural and political trends that seek to eliminate, or at least cloud and confuse, the sexual differences inscribed in human nature, considering them a cultural construct, it is necessary to recall God's design that created the human being masculine and feminine, with a unity and at the same time an original difference and complimentary.

There are places and cultures where women are discriminated against or undervalued for the sole fact of being women, . . . where acts of violence are consummated in regard to women, making them the object of mistreatment and of exploitation in advertising and in the consumer and entertainment industry. Faced with such grave and persistent phenomena the Christian commitment appears all the more urgent so that everywhere it may promote a culture that recognizes the dignity that belongs to women, in law and in concrete reality.²⁴

24. Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Participants of the International Convention on the Theme "Woman and Man, the *Humanum* in Its Entirety" (Feb. 9, 2008), in *Woman and Man, the 'Humanum' in Its Entirety*, L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO (English ed.), Feb. 20, 2008, at 3; see also Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Members of the Roman Curia for the Traditional Exchange of Christmas Greetings (Dec. 22, 2008), in *Listening to the Language of Creation Saves Mankind from Destruction*, L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO (English ed.), Jan. 7, 2009, at 10.

What is needed is something like a human ecology, correctly understood.

If the Church speaks of the nature of the human being as man and woman, and demands that this order of creation be respected, this is not some antiquated metaphysics. What is involved here is faith in the Creator and a readiness to listen to the "language" of creation. To disregard this would be the self-destruction of man himself, and hence the destruction of God's own work.

What is often expressed and understood by the term "gender" ultimately ends up being man's attempt at self-emancipation from creation and the Creator. Man wants to be his own master, and alone—always and exclusively—to determine everything that concerns him. Yet in this way he lives in opposition to the truth, in opposition to the Creator Spirit.

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Rain forests deserve indeed to be protected, but no less so does man, as a creature having an innate “message” which does not contradict our freedom, but is instead its very premise.

The great scholastic theologians described marriage, understood as the life-long bond between a man and a woman, as a sacrament of creation, which the Creator himself instituted and which Christ—without modifying the “message” of creation—then made part of the history of his covenant with humanity.

Id.