

Sexual Difference and the Catholic Tradition: Challenges and Resources¹

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IN ITS PENETRATING ANALYSIS of the modern world, the introductory statement of *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, draws attention to a seeming paradox facing modern men and women. While scientific discoveries have unlocked mysteries of life and the cosmos and growing technological prowess has harnessed these discoveries to create stunning new possibilities in human life and culture, questions of the meaning of human life and existence have become ever more vexing and their answers even more elusive.²

¹ An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the Academy of Catholic Theology Conference on May 21, 2019. I am grateful to the members of the Academy for helpful comments and feedback, particularly David Cloutier, Jennifer Miller, and Lawrence J. Welch.

² See *Gaudium et Spes* §§ 4–10. To cite but one example, the Council fathers state: “As happens in any crisis of growth, this transformation has brought serious difficulties in its wake. Thus while man extends his power in every direction, he does not always succeed in subjecting it to his own welfare. Striving to probe more profoundly into the deeper recesses of his own mind, he frequently appears more unsure of himself. Gradually and more precisely he lays bare the laws of society, only to be paralyzed by uncertainty about the direction to give it” (§4). All citations from magisterial and curial documents are taken from the English translations on this website unless otherwise noted. R. A. Sigmond, one of the drafters of what became the final version *Gaudium et Spes*, puts it this way: “One of the most striking aspects in this diagnosis of modern man is that in the same measure that man accomplishes wonderful achievements in the area of nature and work, he becomes increasingly confused about himself, about his vocation and about the sense of his life. This is his greatest problem. This is the point, in the opinion of the Council, at which dialogue has to

The human person is increasingly seen as a question without a clear answer.

The fifty-plus years since the close of the Council have underscored the truth and profundity of this anthropological analysis. And often it is our highest technical achievements which most confound and bemuse us. Communication technology has made the globe smaller, enabling instantaneous and face-to-face contact between persons from all corners of the world. Yet this very technology increasingly isolates those living under the same roof from one another.³ The “information superhighway” of the internet puts an unprecedented wealth of information at people’s fingertips. Yet it also brings with it information overload, new possibilities for overt deception and “fake news,” limitless possibilities for aimless distraction and even addiction,⁴ and a never-ending flood of content aimed at the basest expressions of the seven deadly sins.⁵ Social media platforms enhance communication and personal expression but also reinforce the idea that personal identity is self-created and malleable. Genetic modification of other organisms and the mapping of the human genome raise the question of whether similar procedures might be applied to genetically alter human beings. Improving medical technology increasingly blurs the line between therapy and “enhancement” of the human person.⁶ Pushed to

begin” (“Unterlagen zur Geschichte der pastoralen Konstitution über die Kirche in der Welt von Heute,” *IDOC Bulletin* 66-2 and 66-3 [1966]: II.3; cited in Walter Kasper, “The Theological Anthropology of *Gaudium et Spes*,” trans. Adrian Walker, *Communio* 23 [1996]: 134).

- ³ Pope Francis diagnoses the problem in his usual straightforward fashion: “A family that hardly ever eats together, or that does not talk at the table but watches television, or looks at a smartphone, is a ‘barely familial’ family. When children are engrossed with a computer at the table, or a mobile phone, and do not talk to each other, this is not a family, it is like a boarding house” (General Audience of November 11, 2015).
- ⁴ For a review of some recent literature on Internet Addiction Disorder, see: C. H. Ko, J.-Y. Yen, C.-F. Yen, C. S. Chen, and C. C. Chen, “The Association between Internet Addiction and Psychiatric Disorder: A Review of the Literature,” *European Psychiatry* 27, no. 1 (January 2012): 1–8; *Internet Addiction in Children and Adolescents: Risk Factors, Assessment, and Treatment*, ed. Kimberly S. Young and Cristiano Nabuco Abreu (New York: Springer, 2017); Daria J. Kuss and Halley M. Pontes, *Internet addiction*, *Advances in Psychotherapy—Evidence-Based Practice* 41 (Boston: Hogrefe, 2019).
- ⁵ For a thoughtful analysis of the presence of the seven deadly sins in modern life, relationships, and social structures, see *Naming Our Sins: How Recognizing the Seven Deadly Vices Can Renew the Sacrament of Reconciliation*, ed. Jana M. Bennett and David Cloutier (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019).
- ⁶ For an analysis of different models of enhancement in relation to a theological

the limit, “enhancement” opens the door to the brave new world of transhumanism in which the very identification of what counts as “human” is put in question.⁷

Nowhere is this confusion more pronounced than in understanding sexual difference. While “gender” used to be the common word for describing this difference because one did not say “sex” in polite company, under the impact of existentialist and postmodern strands of feminism it is now a highly technical term whose meaning continues to be ever more rarified through ongoing contention.⁸ This confusion is not simply a matter of academic debate. Some educational programs, in the effort to promote acceptance of transgender students, use concepts like “the gender bread person” or “the purple unicorn” to teach children that “gender” is a complex correlation of body awareness, (self-chosen) gender identity, gender expression, romantic attraction, and sexual attraction.⁹ Little wonder that social media platforms such as Facebook now recognize some seventy self-chosen “genders.”¹⁰ People who “misgender” others by using pronouns other than those chosen by the individual are subject to not just

understanding of the person, see Gerald McKenny, *Biotechnology, Human Nature, and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁷ For theological resources for a response to transhumanism, see Justin Tompkins, “Developing Theological Tools for a Strategic Engagement with Human Enhancement,” *The New Bioethics* 20 (2014): 141–52. For an incisive critique of the transhumanist project from a Christian perspective which also utilizes Stoic insights, see Paul Scherz, “Living Indefinitely and Living Fully: *Laudato Si*’ and the Value of the Present in Christian, Stoic, and Transhumanist Temporalities,” *Theological Studies* 79 (2018): 356–75.

⁸ For relatively “non-partisan” histories and overviews of some of the differing iterations of modern feminism, see: Olive Banks, *Faces Of Feminism: A Study of Feminism as a Social Movement* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1981); Pamela Cochran, *Evangelical Feminism: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Dorothy Sue Cobble, Linda Gordon, and Astrid Henry, *Feminism Unfinished: A Short Surprising History of American Women’s Movements* (New York: Liveright, 2014); Rory C. Dicker, *A History of U.S. Feminisms*, revised ed. (Berkeley, CA: Seal, 2016).

⁹ See genderbread.org/ for “the gender bread person” and transstudent.org/gender/ for “the purple unicorn.”

¹⁰ See Rhiannon Williams, “Facebook’s 71 gender options come to UK users,” *The Telegraph*, June 27, 2014, telegraph.co.uk/technology/facebook/10930654/Facebooks-71-gender-options-come-to-UK-users.html. If individuals do not identify with any of these preset options, Facebook allows them to create their own (facebook.com/facebookdiversity/posts/last-year-we-were-proud-to-add-a-custom-gender-option-to-help-people-better-expr/774221582674346/).

social ostracism but, in some cases, the threat of criminal prosecution.¹¹

The Church has recognized some of the dangers posed by these intellectual and social currents, offering a series of critiques of “gender ideology” over the last few decades as well as diagnosing some of the roots of this view. Important as this critique and accompanying diagnoses are, there is more to be said. The Catholic theological tradition, nourished by Scripture, offers resources for a deep and positive portrayal of sexual difference and its meaning. This paper will argue that in biblical and theological concepts such as sexual complementarity, the spousal meaning of the body, and—as the *Gaudium et Spes* indicates—a Christological anthropology, Catholic theology has the resources to account for both the unity of the human race and the difference of male and female who are together the image of God (see Gen 1:27).

The paper will proceed by first examining some of the recent critiques of gender ideology put forward by the Church. It will then point to some of the cultural and intellectual shifts that helped to generate this ideology. This will be followed by a brief examination of some key theological concepts disclosed by Scripture and subsequent theological reflection: complementarity, the spousal meaning of the body, and the Christological and Trinitarian distinction between person and nature. A final section will mention a possible avenue for distinguishing without separating the sexually differentiated body and its cultural interpretation and indicate some questions which need further reflection. This paper is meant to provide something of a survey and overview. The issues treated here are each worthy of more detailed examination and analysis.¹²

The Critique of Gender Ideology

In recent official teaching the Church has drawn attention to dangers posed by the idea that sexual difference is largely a social construct. The recent document by the Congregation for Education uses the description

¹¹ On recent cases in the UK, see Rachel del Guidice, “Police Question UK Journalist for ‘Misgendering’ a Transgender Woman,” *The Daily Signal*, March 19, 2019, dailysignal.com/2019/03/19/police-question-uk-journalist-for-misgendering-a-transgender-woman/. California has recently passed a law making it a criminal offense to “misgender” elderly persons (Mary Rezac, “California Bill Seeks to Punish ‘Misgendering’ with Jail Time,” *Crux*, September 2, 2017, cruxnow.com/church-in-the-usa/2017/09/california-bill-seeks-punish-misgendering-jail-time/). The bill, which passed in October 2017, is currently being challenged in court.

¹² Many of the papers given at the May 2019 Conference of the Academy of Catholic Theology at which this paper was first given provide much more in-depth analyses of ideas touched on here.

of this ideology provided by Pope Francis drawing attention to

varying forms of an ideology that is given the general name “gender theory,” which “denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family. This ideology leads to educational programmes and legislative enactments that promote a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female. Consequently, human identity becomes the choice of the individual, one which can also change over time.”¹³

Building on such warnings given by Vatican dicasteries over the years, Pope Francis has warned about the ongoing “ideological colonization” of the family on the part of global elites.¹⁴

However, easily the most profound analysis of both the roots and trajectory of this ideology has been that provided by Pope Benedict XVI in his

¹³ Congregation for Education, “*Male and Female He Created Them*”: *Towards a Path of Dialogue on the Question of Gender Theory in Education* (2019), §2, citing the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (2016), §56. The warning about the impact of this theory on marriage and the family was sounded with clarity in the year 2000 by the Pontifical Council for the Family in its document *Family, Marriage, and “De Facto” Unions*, §8: “Starting from the decade between 1960–1970, some theories (which today are usually described by experts as ‘constructionist’) hold not only that generic sexual identity (‘gender’) is the product of an interaction between the community and the individual, but that this generic identity is independent from personal sexual identity: i.e., that masculine and feminine genders in society are the exclusive product of social factors, with no relation to any truth about the sexual dimension of the person. In this way, any sexual attitude can be justified, including homosexuality, and it is society that ought to change in order to include other genders, together with male and female, in its way of shaping social life. The ideology of ‘gender’ found a favorable environment in the individualist anthropology of radical neo-liberalism. Claiming a similar status for marriage and de facto unions (including homosexual unions) is usually justified today on the basis of categories and terms that come from the ideology of ‘gender.’ In this way, there is a certain tendency to give the name ‘family’ to all kinds of consensual unions, thus ignoring the natural inclination of human freedom to reciprocal self-giving and its essential characteristics which are the basis of that common good of humanity, the institution of marriage.”

¹⁴ Pope Francis, Address to Meeting with Families in Manila, January 16, 2016. For a detailed examination of this ongoing effort especially in the EU, see the analysis provided by Gabriele Kubly, *The Global Sexual Revolution: Destruction of Freedom in the Name of Freedom* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2015).

final Christmas address to the Curia. Because of its incisive nature, the address is worth quoting at some length:

The Chief Rabbi of France, Gilles Bernheim, has shown in a very detailed and profoundly moving study that the attack we are currently experiencing on the true structure of the family, made up of father, mother, and child, goes much deeper. While up to now we regarded a false understanding of the nature of human freedom as one cause of the crisis of the family, it is now becoming clear that the very notion of being—of what being human really means—is being called into question. He quotes the famous saying of Simone de Beauvoir: “one is not born a woman, one becomes so” (*on ne naît pas femme, on le devient*). These words lay the foundation for what is put forward today under the term “gender” as a new philosophy of sexuality. According to this philosophy, sex is no longer a given element of nature, that man has to accept and personally make sense of: it is a social role that we choose for ourselves, while in the past it was chosen for us by society. The profound falsehood of this theory and of the anthropological revolution contained within it is obvious. People dispute the idea that they have a nature, given by their bodily identity, that serves as a defining element of the human being. They deny their nature and decide that it is not something previously given to them, but that they make it for themselves. According to the biblical creation account, being created by God as male and female pertains to the essence of the human creature. This duality is an essential aspect of what being human is all about, as ordained by God. This very duality as something previously given is what is now disputed. The words of the creation account: “male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27) no longer apply. No, what applies now is this: it was not God who created them male and female—hitherto society did this, now we decide for ourselves. Man and woman as created realities, as the nature of the human being, no longer exist. Man calls his nature into question. . . . Man and woman in their created state as complementary versions of what it means to be human are disputed. But if there is no pre-ordained duality of man and woman in creation, then neither is the family any longer a reality established by creation.¹⁵

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, Christmas Address to the Roman Curia, 2012. Unfortunately, Pope Benedict’s attribution of these ideas to Rabbi Bernheim has been shown to be inadvertently mistaken. Jean-Noël Darde subsequently demonstrated (archeol-

Three points from Pope Benedict's analysis deserve highlighting. First, he notes the cultural transition we have undergone from viewing "gender" as a social construct to now seeing it as an individually chosen or constructed reality. This is a significant part of how "gender" has come to be seen as fundamentally malleable and its number ever-expanding. Second, it is clear that in his view "gender" so conceived becomes a solvent to the very concept of human nature—we become self-creating subjects who lose sight of our Creator and his design for ourselves and the world.¹⁶ Third, notice that Benedict not only references the doctrine of creation, but the words of Genesis 1:27: "male and female He made them." Like his predecessor, Saint John Paul II, Benedict XVI understood the depth and import of the opening chapters of Genesis for an understanding of the human person.

Deconstructing Gender: Cultural and Intellectual Roots

It is worth briefly extending some of this diagnosis in broad brush strokes. How did "gender" come to be separated from sex and ultimately voided of meaning except as self-chosen identity? Both massive cultural shifts and recent intellectual currents, often interconnected with one another, have played a role.

Among the many effects of the Industrial Revolution in the West was its impact on the family, especially among the working classes. It was not just the long hours for meager pay to the men, women, and children who made up the desperate ranks of the working classes which pulled their families apart, but the very fact that the post-Industrial Revolution home was no longer itself a center of economic activity.¹⁷ This separation helped to alter the very understanding of children. Since work happened outside of the home, children no longer contributed directly to a family's

ogie-copier-coller.com/) that much of Bernheim's address was plagiarized from a work by Fr. Joseph-Marie Verlinde, O.P., *L'idéologie du genre: Identité Reçue ou Choisie?* (Paris: Le Livre Ouvert, 2012). For an overview of the controversy, see R. R. Reno, "Rabbi Gille Bernheim's Plagiarism," *First Things*, May, 13, 2013, firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2013/05/rabbi-gilles-bernheims-plagiarism.

¹⁶ See *Gaudium et Spes* §36: "For without the Creator the creature would disappear. For their part, however, all believers of whatever religion always hear His revealing voice in the discourse of creatures. When God is forgotten, however, the creature itself grows unintelligible."

¹⁷ In families in which the father became the primary person working outside of the home, this also had the effect of removing him from the family and limiting his ability to assist his wife in raising and forming their children. I am indebted for that insight to Jennifer Miller.

economic well-being as they did when work was done in the home or on a family business or on a family farm. Within the space of a few generations, the view of children held by many people flipped from the biblical view of them as blessing to a burden and a net drain on the family's economic well-being.¹⁸ The fears about children's negative impact were given pseudo-scientific dressing and extended to the planet as a whole by T. R. Malthus and his followers.¹⁹

This view of children as obstacles to work and economic gain engendered by the Industrial Revolution in its own way fueled the burgeoning Sexual Revolution through the search for more effective contraceptive technologies. The Sexual Revolution was not a wholly twentieth-century phenomenon; these shifting sexual mores were already in play in the nineteenth century. Victorian morality was in many ways a placeholder for conventional bourgeois morality in a culture that had largely abandoned both Aristotelian and Christian teleology in its sexual beliefs and behaviors.²⁰ Advancing contraceptive technologies simply enabled and extended this ongoing abandonment. But it was oral contraception, developed in the latter part of the twentieth century, which served as the jet fuel of this revolution and took it to a new level.²¹ The introduction of "the pill," as it came to be known, produced skyrocketing rates of extramarital sex, unwed pregnancy, divorce, and abortion. The warnings of Pope Saint Paul

¹⁸ See David McCarthy, "Procreation, the Development of Peoples, and the Final Destiny of Humanity," *Communio* 26 (1999): 698–721.

¹⁹ Malthus's 1798 work *An Essay on the Principle of Population* identified population growth as an ongoing cause of the poverty of the lower classes and a threat that could outstrip large-scale food production. Such growth could be curbed by positive checks (i.e., things which raise the death rate such as war, famine, and natural disaster) and preventative (i.e., contraceptive) means. Such fears were given a particularly shrill articulation in the midst of the twentieth-century expansion of the Sexual Revolution by Paul Erlich's book *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine, 1968), which predicted widespread famine due to over-population in the coming decades.

²⁰ This is the argument of Michael Hannon, "Against Heterosexuality," *First Things*, March 1, 2014, firstthings.com/article/2014/03/against-heterosexuality. Hannon builds in a number of ways on the analysis of Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. I: *La Volonté de savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

²¹ These same technologies also helped to redirect the burgeoning women's movement of the 1960s away from many of its initial goals of greater educational and economic opportunities for women (including mothers) in the public sphere and toward greater acceptance of non-marital sex, contraception, and abortion as keys to women's equality with men. See Sue Ellen Browder, *Subverted: How I Helped the Sexual Revolution Hijack the Women's Movement* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015).

VI in *Humanae Vitae* §17 concerning widespread adoption of contraception—a lowering of moral standards, greater moral confusion among the young, a loss of respect on the part of men for women, and the danger of government coercion—while visionary in their day, seem understated in retrospect. Social scientists have shown the prophetic nature of these predictions, as they have been more than vindicated through the most secular of social scientific measures.²² But what Pope Paul VI did not foresee and his teaching’s proponents have not fully explored is the impact of the revolution on our understanding of sexual difference.

Effectively severing the longstanding theological, cultural, and social bonds between marriage, sex, and childbearing, the Sexual Revolution has given us sterile sex (backstopped by abortion), childless marriage, and—with an assist from assisted reproductive technologies—asexual reproduction. The shared fruitfulness of male and female which capacitates them to receive the gift of a child is thus rendered unimportant—peripheral to both sexual activity and the person who engages in it. What Paul VI identified as the “unitive” meaning of the conjugal act is reduced to mere pleasure to which the opposite sex and ultimately one’s own sex becomes unimportant. The line from the pill to *Obergefell v. Hodges* in our social conception of marriage is therefore not difficult to trace.²³

More difficult to discern, perhaps, is the impact of the revolution on personal identity. If, as will be argued below, sexual difference and its capacity for procreation are intrinsic to the person, it stands to reason that its cultural relativization will deeply impact the self-concept of those affected by it. Thus, there may be some connection between this destabilization of the sense of self as an embodied person and the rise in what is being described as “rapid onset” gender dysphoria.²⁴ And perhaps, paralleling Mary Eberstadt’s diagnosis of the irrational character of the “will to

²² See Mary Eberstadt, *Adam and Eve after the Pill: Paradoxes of the Sexual Revolution* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), esp. 134–58.

²³ Mary Eberstadt undertakes aspects of this analysis in tracing the rise of contemporary identity politics to the Sexual Revolution’s dissolution of the family (*Primal Screams: How the Sexual Revolution Created Identity Politics* [West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton, 2019]).

²⁴ On this relatively new phenomenon, see Lisa Littman, “Peer Group and Social Media Influences in Adolescent and Young-Adult Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria,” *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* 57, no. 10 (October 2018): S73–S74, and Littman, “Parent Reports of Adolescents and Young Adults Perceived to Show Signs of a Rapid Onset of Gender Dysphoria,” *PlosOne* 14, no. 3, journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0202330.

disbelieve” the evidence for the damaging effects of the Sexual Revolution in spite of massive evidence to the contrary, there is a growing impulse to employ medical technology to render individuals with gender dysphoria sterile in the process of cosmetically reconfiguring them to take on the appearance of the opposite sex in spite of strong evidence for negative psychological and medical outcomes for those who choose to “transition.”²⁵

But these cultural shifts or “revolutions”—industrial, sexual, and technological—have been accompanied and to some degree enabled by intellectual currents. Pope Benedict XVI traced the roots of gender to the existentialist thought of Simone de Beauvoir. But de Beauvoir was simply bringing the ideas of Jean Paul Sartre into a feminist ambit.²⁶ Eschewing the largely pro-life and pro-maternity impulses of the “first wave” of feminism in the nineteenth century, the “second wave” of feminism which arose in the twentieth century has tended to view women’s capacity to give birth as an obstacle to the social and economic equality which it sought.²⁷ Denying the givenness of the body and human nature and viewing most of sexual difference through the lens of a socially constructed “gender” was a strategy in this pursuit. Downplaying difference in pursuit of equality, many feminist thinkers celebrated the sameness and interchangeability of the sexes. While few went to the extent of Marxist feminist Shulamith Firestone, who advocated “freeing women from the tyranny of reproduction” through replacing pregnancy with laboratory reproduction and abolishing the nuclear family by collectivized child-rearing, her work

²⁵ On this, see Lawrence R. Meyer and Paul R. McHugh, “Sexuality and Gender: Findings from the Biological, Psychological, and Social Sciences,” *The New Atlantis: Special Report* 50 (2016), thenewatlantis.com/publications/introduction-sexuality-and-gender, and Ryan Anderson, *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment* (New York: Encounter, 2018).

²⁶ On de Beauvoir as the first existentialist feminist, see Prudence Allen, R.S.M., “Can Feminism Be a Humanism,” in *Women in Christ: Toward a New Feminism*, Michelle Schumacher, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 251–84, esp. 270; cf. Michelle Schumacher, “Gender Ideology and the ‘Artistic’ Fabrication of Human Sex: Nature as Norm or the Remaking of the Human,” *The Thomist* 80 (2016): 363–423, esp. 369–70. Diana Ibarra argues that the first architect of the idea of gender as a social construct was actually Plato (“Es Aristoteles al ‘sexo’ lo que Platon al ‘género’?,” *Devenires, Revista de Filosofía y Filosofía de la Cultura* 12 (2011): 108–27).

²⁷ On the pro-life and pro-maternity emphases of first-wave feminism, see Erika Bachiochi, “The Uniqueness of Women: Church Teaching on Abortion,” in *Women, Sex and the Church: A Case for Catholic Teaching*, ed. Erika Bachiochi (Boston: Pauline: 2010), 37–56. On the subversion of these impulses by the Sexual Revolution see Browder, *Subverted*.

crystalized an impulse within the some of the radical strains of second-wave feminism.²⁸ Thus a Catholic feminist theologian such as Rosemary Radford Ruether could write: “Maleness and femaleness exist as reproductive role specialization. There is no necessary (biological) connection between reproductive complementarity in either psychological or social role differentiation. These are the works of culture and socialization, not of ‘nature.’”²⁹

With Ruether and other early Catholic feminist theologians, there is also a conscious adaptation of a process metaphysic which dissolves the stability of divine and human nature into a more fluid “becoming” within an ecologically interdependent cosmos.³⁰ Sometimes called “transformative anthropologies,” these approaches paved the way for the more complete dissolution of ontology in the postmodern turn embraced by many subsequent feminist scholars. Nature, along with the gender binary, can simply be deconstructed. For philosopher Judith Butler, not only is “gender” a construct, but so is “sex”—both are performed by the individual within specific matrices of power relations. Thus, in regard to sex she writes: “The body is not ‘sexed’ in any significant sense prior to its determination within a discourse through which it becomes invested with an ‘idea’ of natural or essential sex. The body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations. Sexuality is an historically specific organization of power, of discourse, of bodies and of affectivity. As such, sexuality is understood by Foucault to produce ‘sex’ as an artificial concept which effectively extends and disguises the power relations responsible for its genesis.”³¹ Here we have a philosophical basis for the fluidity of bodily identity. There is no “there” there in the body, gender, or sex. The sexually differentiated person recedes into the pre-Christian *persona*—a mask or the role in a performance.³²

²⁸ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: William Morrow, 1970), 221 (cf. 11).

²⁹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism & God Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon, 1983), 228.

³⁰ In Ruether, the rejection of such dualisms is a stark denial of personal existence after death or any kind of resurrection. The individual energy of deceased human beings is simply absorbed into the collective personhood of God/dess (*Sexism & God Talk*, 257; cf. 256–57).

³¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge Classics 36 (New York: Routledge, 1990), 92.

³² On the pre-Christian meanings of *persona*, see Aloys Grillmeier, S.J., *From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, trans. John Bowden (London: Mowbrays, 1965), 125–26.

It is undoubtedly a fascinating “sign of the times” to witness the growing disconnect between more standard second-wave feminists still pursuing an egalitarian gender justice and those in subsequent waves influenced by queer theory, with the former worrying about the impact of things like biological males who identify as female competing in women’s athletics and the latter dismissing such concerns as “transphobic.” Having sown the existentialist wind, modern feminism now faces a transgender whirlwind which it helped to birth.

Complementarity: Biblical and Theological Resources

Turning to positive resources within Catholic theology for conceiving sexual difference, one concept put forward in both magisterial documents and theological discussion is the language of complementarity. At first glance, it might seem an unlikely and unhelpful candidate to express the rich reality of sexual difference. After all, it has been criticized from many quarters for a host of reasons. It has been rejected as denoting a faulty view of the human person in which individuals are seen as incomplete apart from the other sex.³³ Feminist thinkers for some time have criticized the term as a kind of code for ongoing gender apartheid on the part of the Church—“separate but equal in theory” means “separate and unequal” in practice, inadequate to both Catholic sacramental theology and modern gender theory.³⁴ And finally, some scholars have criticized the term as a late arrival to modern magisterial teaching, being introduced into magisterial teaching by Pope John Paul II.³⁵

³³ Sister Allen calls this “fractional sex complementarity” and contrasts it with her own articulation of “integral sex complementarity. See for example, Prudence Allen, “Integral Sex Complementarity and the Theology of Communion,” *Communio* 17 (1990): 523–44; see also Allen, “Fuller’s Synergetics and sex complementarity,” *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 32 (1992): 3–16.

³⁴ See, for example: Christine Gudorf, “Encountering the Other: The Modern Papacy on Women,” *Social Compass* 36 (1989): 295–310; Susan A. Ross, “‘Then Honor God in Your Body’ (1 Cor. 6:20): Feminist and Sacramental Theology on the Body,” *Horizons* 16, no. 1 (1989): 7–27; Tina Beattie, *The New Catholic Feminism: Theology, Gender Theory and Dialogue* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Susan A. Ross, *Anthropology: Seeking Light and Beauty*, Engaging Theology, Catholic Perspectives (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2012), esp. 85–104; Katie M. Grimes, “Theology of Whose Body? Sexual Complementarity, Intersex Conditions, and La Virgen de Guadalupe,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 32, no. 1 (April 2016): 75–93; and Brianne Jacobs, “An Alternative to Gender Complementarity: The Body as Existential Category in the Catholic Tradition,” *Theological Studies* 80 (2019): 328–45.

³⁵ Mary Ann Case argues that the concept was elaborated in the mid-twentieth century by Edith Stein and Dietrich von Hildebrand (though they typically used

A response to all of these objections is beyond the scope of this paper. Further, many of them have been effectively dealt with by others. Sister Prudence Allen in her historical research and philosophical reflection has shown that what she calls “integral sex complementarity” overcomes the concerns about viewing human persons as “fractional” beings or being a shill for an ongoing inequality which many feminist thinkers decry.³⁶ The idea that complementarity has no foundation in Scripture and is a latecomer to magisterial teaching deserves to be challenged. The claim that the notion of complementarity was largely invented by Pope John Paul II is not accurate. It is true that the term or some equivalent of it appears in Catholic thought and magisterial teaching only in the twentieth century. It is also true that the Polish Pope gave one of the most developed articulations of the idea over the course of his pontificate. But his articulation had ecclesial and philosophical precursors.

One can find the term or equivalents of it in speeches of Pius XII,³⁷ John XXIII,³⁸ the documents of Vatican II,³⁹ and Pope Paul VI⁴⁰ prior to

the term *Ergaenzung* [“completion”] rather than *Komplementarität*) but largely imported into Church teaching by John Paul II and Joseph Ratzinger. See her essay “Implications of the Vatican Commitment to Complementarity for the Equality of the Sexes in Public Life,” in *Women’s Rights and Religious Law: Domestic and International Perspectives*, ed. Fareda Banda and Lisa Fishbayn Joffe (New York: Routledge, 2016), 68–88.

³⁶ Sister Allen’s multivolume work on the concept of woman is the definitive work on this topic in historical scholarship: *The Concept of Woman*, vol. 1, *The Aristotelian Revolution, 750 B.C. – A.D. 1250* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997); *The Concept of Woman*, vol. 2, *The Early Humanist Reformation, 1250–1500* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002); *The Concept of Woman*, vol. 3, *The Search for Communion of Persons, 1500–2015* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017). Her historical work is invaluable, but her own positive articulation of her model seems to carry with it a note of Neo-Platonic or Jungian androgyny insofar as she sees masculinity and femininity as part of the make-up of every person.

³⁷ Pius XII, “Address to Italian Women,” October 21, 1945, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis [AAS]* 37 (1945): 291–92.

³⁸ John XXII spoke of the “necessary complementarity” (*necessaria complementarietas*) of man and woman; see “Convenuti a Roma,” *AAS* 53 (1961): 610–12.

³⁹ See *Gaudium et Spes* §52: “The family is a kind of school of deeper humanity. But if it is to achieve the full flowering of its life and mission, it needs the kindly communion of minds and the joint deliberation of spouses, as well as the painstaking cooperation of parents in the education of their children. The active presence of the father is highly beneficial to their formation. The children, especially the younger among them, need the care of their mother at home. This domestic role of hers must be safely preserved, though the legitimate social progress of women should not be underrated on that account.”

⁴⁰ Pope Paul VI, argued that using the language of equal rights was not sufficient;

its use by John Paul II. Philosophically the term emerged in the phenomenological personalism of twentieth-century Catholic converts such as Edith Stein and Dietrich von Hildebrand.⁴¹ In his ground-breaking treatment of love in marriage, *Die Ehe* (1929), von Hildebrand stated that: "It would be incredibly superficial to consider as a mere biological difference the distinction between man and woman, which really shows us two complementary types of the human species."⁴² Stein used Thomistic principles to argue for a similar understanding: "The insistence that the sexual differences are 'stipulated by the body alone' is questionable from various points of view. 1) If *anima* = *forma corporis*, then bodily differentiation constitutes an index of differentiation in the spirit. 2) Matter serves form, not the reverse. That strongly suggests that the difference in the psyche is the primary one."⁴³ In her historical research, Sister Allen locates the first fully articulated example of the theory in the work of Hildegard of Bingen in the twelfth century.⁴⁴

These ideas would be developed further in the long and fruitful pontificate of John Paul II.⁴⁵ The Polish Pope referred to complementarity numerous times in his teaching ministry.⁴⁶ Complementarity, for Saint John Paul II, pertains to the very existence and self-awareness of the person:

The knowledge of man passes through masculinity and femininity,

that an "effective complementarity" (*complémentarité effective*) between men and women was needed for a world which was harmonious and unified in its expression of difference according to God's design, see his Address to the Committee for the International Women's Year (French), April 18, 1975.

⁴¹ For a more complete overview of these thinkers and their influence on Karol Wojtyła/ Pope John Paul II see the excellent study by Prudence Allen, R.S.M., "Man-Woman Complementarity: The Catholic Inspiration," *Logos* 9, no. 3 (2006): 87–108.

⁴² Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Marriage: The Mystery of Faithful Love* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute, 1991), 13.

⁴³ Edith Stein, "Letter to Sister Callista Kopf," in *Self Portrait in Letters, 1916–1942*, ed. L. Gelber and Romaeus Leuven, trans. Josephine Koeppel (Washington, DC: ICS, 1993), 99.

⁴⁴ See Allen, *Concept of Woman*, 1:292–314, 1:408.

⁴⁵ Allen suggests that Wojtyła encountered Stein's thought through Roman Ingarden, who studied with her under phenomenologist Edmund Husserl; Wojtyła was a student of Ingarden's in Krakow ("Man-Woman Complementarity," 98).

⁴⁶ See, for example, John Paul's apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (1981), §19, his apostolic letter *Dilecti Amici* (1985), §10, and his apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988), §21. The treatment of complementarity in the "theology of the body" catecheses will be considered more fully below.

which are, as it were, two incarnation of the same metaphysical solitude before God and the world—two reciprocally completing ways of “being a body” and at the same time of being human—as two complementary dimensions of self-knowledge and self-determination and, at the same time, two complementary ways of being conscious of the meaning of the body.⁴⁷

His mature position would extend this complementarity to every dimension of the human person: “Womanhood and manhood are complementary *not only from the physical and psychological points of view*, but also from the *ontological*.”⁴⁸ The Vatican’s position paper for the 1995 Beijing Conference differentiated this reality further, speaking of a “biological, individual, personal, and spiritual complementarity.”⁴⁹

Does this modern magisterial usage have a foundation in Scripture? A cursory look at the opening chapters of Genesis yields a number of distinct senses in which the sexes may be said to be complementary. Both accounts of creation offer strong affirmations of the basic equality of men and women in their fundamental humanity and in their creation in the image of God. Men and women together are designated priest stewards of creation by the first creation account. The second and older account designates woman as an *‘ēzer kanegdô* (a “helper corresponding” or “matching”) the man. But in the Hebrew text this helper is free of any notion of being “less than” as it does in modern English idiom, as God himself is designated as the “help” of Israel elsewhere in the Old Testament.⁵⁰

Within this basic equality, these texts also affirm a variety of ways in which men and women might be said to be complementarity to one another. The first might be called a complementarity of “totality”—the idea articulated in the first account (Gen 1:1 through 2:2a) that humankind (*‘ādām*) is complete only as male and female (see Gen 1:27). A second could be described as “procreative” complementarity—that is, the way in which the bodily differences of male and female (*zākār* and *nəqēbāh*) enable them to receive the blessing of fertility (see Gen 1:28). A third could be called the complementarity of “alterity”—the way in which the

⁴⁷ John Paul II, General Audience of November 21, 1979, §1, in *Man and Woman He Created Them* [theology of the body catarches], ed. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline, 2006), 166 (emphasis original).

⁴⁸ John Paul II, *Letter to Women* (1995), §7.

⁴⁹ John Paul II, *Holy See’s Position Paper for Beijing* (1995), 1.1.

⁵⁰ Exod 18:4; Deut 33:7, 26, 29; Psalms 20:2; 33:20; 70:5; 89:19; 115:9, 10, 11; 121:1–2; 124:8; 146:5; Hos 13:9.

threshold of solitude (see Gen 2:18) is crossed by going out from oneself to relate to others. We realize our humanity in fellowship and friendship and we do so as embodied persons. We become an “I” when we recognize and give ourselves to a “Thou.” To integrate the teaching of the two accounts and to employ the language of John Paul II: “*Man became the image of God not only through his own humanity, but also through the communion of persons.*”⁵¹ A fourth could be called “spousal complementarity,” which adds to the previous idea the dimension of the sexually differentiated body and the way in which this makes possible the covenant of marriage. The second half of the second account of creation (Gen 3) makes clear that both the basic equality and every one of the senses of complementarity identified in the preceding analysis is attacked and destabilized by human sin.

The Spousal Meaning of the Body

The notion of complementarity bespeaks a kind of teleology of the body. The body may be likened to a compass which provides the person with a basic direction in life. To read the compass rightly and navigate by it, one needs the further “map” of revelation provided in Scripture and Tradition.⁵² Revelation clarifies that the world as a whole and the existence of the human person within it must be understood through the lens of gift—what John Paul II referred to as “the hermeneutics of the gift.”⁵³ But what is the telos at which the body points? In the language of the Conciliar text, it is in giving oneself as a gift: “Man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.”⁵⁴ As a composite of body and soul, such a gift necessarily includes

⁵¹ John Paul II, General Audience of November 14, 1979, §3 (Waldstein, *Man and Woman*, 163; emphasis original).

⁵² Similarly, Angelo Schola argues that understanding the meaning of nuptiality upon perceiving the phenomena of sexual difference, love, and procreation depends upon the religious sense or upon divine revelation. See *The Nuptial Mystery*, trans. Michelle K. Borrás, Ressourcement: Retrieval and Renewal in Catholic Thought (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 96–97.

⁵³ John Paul II, General Audience of January 2, 1980, §2 (Waldstein, *Man and Woman*, 179). In the same audience he goes on to explain: “The biblical creations account offers us sufficient reasons for such an understanding and interpretation: *creation is a gift, because man appears in it, who is an ‘image of God,’ is able to the very meaning of the gift* in the call from nothing to existence” (§4 [p. 180], emphasis original).

⁵⁴ The Latin original reads: “hominem, qui in terris sola creatura est quam Deus propter seipsam voluerit, plene seipsum invenire non posse nisi per sincerum sui ipsius donum.” The fact that “man” is here *homo* and not *vir* indicates that the text has in view the whole of humanity—women and men—a point reflected in

the body and its inherent maleness or femaleness. This gift orientation of the body person manifested in sexual differentiation can be described as its “spousal” meaning. This idea too has deep roots in Scripture.

To the dilemma of the first man’s solitude in the second story of creation (“it is not good for the man to be alone”; Gen 2:18), God responds with the creation of woman who, unlike the animals created before her, proves to be the *‘ezer kənegdô*. Emerging from his covenant sleep, the man declares his allegiance to the woman: “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; This one shall be called *’iššāh*, for out of *’iš* this one has been taken” (Gen 2:23). It is noteworthy that until this point in the narrative the text has used only the more generic term *’ādām* to describe the human creature made by God. For the first time in the text we have the gender-specific terms used. The man does not here name the woman in the same way he named the animals in verses 19–20. Rather, for the first time he recognizes the meaning of his sexually differentiated body in light of her—he is not just *’ādām* but *’iš*. Conversely, she too discovers the meaning of her reality as *’iššāh* (woman) in him. Sexual difference is thus revealed to be relational—ordering human persons toward one another. More specifically, it is disclosed as “spousal,” since the whole account of the creation of woman in Genesis 2:21–25 employs covenantal language and the text itself records the effect of the man’s declaration to be marital (2:24).

John Paul II builds upon this foundation in his analysis of the spousal meaning of the body in his catecheses on the “theology of the body.” Commenting on the covenant declaration of Adam in Genesis 2:23 he states:

The body, which expresses femininity “for” masculinity and, vice versa, masculinity “for” femininity, manifests the reciprocity and the communion of persons. It expresses it through gift as the fundamental characteristic of personal existence. This is *the body: a witness to creation as a fundamental gift, and therefore a witness to Love as the source from which this same giving springs*. Masculinity-femininity—namely sex—is the original sign of a creative donation and at the same time [the sign of the gift that] man, male-female, becomes aware of a gift lived so to speak in an original way.⁵⁵

John Paul II’s further specification of the text in *Mulieris Dignitatem* §7: “Man—whether man or woman” (emphasis original).

⁵⁵ John Paul II, General Audience of January 9, 1980 (Waldstein, *Man and Woman*, 183; emphasis original; text in brackets added by Waldstein from the Polish origi-

More than merely its capacity for sexual self-gift, the spousal meaning of the body refers to the body's capacity to give and receive love in any state of life. It therefore applies equally to marriage and consecrated virginity or celibacy. Thus, the Polish Pope writes: "The nature of the one as well as the other love [marriage and perfect continence] is 'spousal,' that is, expressed through the complete gift of self. The one as well as the other love tends to express that spousal meaning of the body, which has been inscribed 'from the beginning' in the personal structure of man and woman."⁵⁶ Pope Francis draws extensively on this understanding of the spousal meaning of the body in *Amoris Laetitia*.⁵⁷

But what about those in which this teleology of the sexually differentiated body is less obvious—so that the "compass" does not provide clear direction for the person? Certainly the dignity of the person, the goodness of the body, the call to communion with God and with others, and the integral nature of male and female in God's plan and in marriage remain non-negotiable starting premises for Catholic theology, but how do concepts like the spousal meaning of the body or complementarity speak to those with intersex conditions or persons grappling with gender dysphoria? These are complex questions which deserve further analysis.

Toward a Christological Anthropology

The biblical and theological analysis thus far offered makes clear the need to account for both unity and diversity, equality and difference, in thinking about sexual difference. The parallel between this anthropological challenge and the "problem of the one and the many" which vexed the ancient world has been noted by scholars.⁵⁸ Just as the revelation of the Trinity

nal of the text).

⁵⁶ John Paul II, General Audience of April 14, 1982, §4 (Waldstein, *Man and Woman*, 431).

⁵⁷ This is especially true of the discussion of erotic love. See Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, §§150–52, esp. §151: "In this context, the erotic appears as a specifically human manifestation of sexuality. It enables us to discover 'the nuptial meaning of the body and the authentic dignity of the gift.' In his catecheses on the theology of the body, Saint John Paul II taught that sexual differentiation not only is 'a source of fruitfulness and procreation,' but also possesses 'the capacity of expressing love: that love precisely in which the human person becomes a gift.'" Other mentions of key concepts of the theology of the body in Pope Francis's 2015 apostolic exhortation can be found in the treatments of: mutual submission in marriage (§156), consecrated virginity (§160), motherhood (§168; cf. §173), the "language of the body" (§216), and education in chastity (§284). Suffice it to say that this constitutes a deep engagement of the teaching of his predecessor.

⁵⁸ See: Patricia Wilson Kastner, *Faith, Feminism and the Christ* (Philadelphia:

through the coming of Christ shattered the polarity of unity and difference by revealing that within the mystery of the Godhead the equality of the one divine nature is possessed by three irreducibly distinct divine persons, so here too the revelation of Christ points the way forward. To cite the text which has been rightly hailed by Walter Kasper as the “standard and short formula of the Pastoral Constitution,”⁵⁹ *Gaudium et Spes* §22 states: “Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.”

The fact of the Incarnation makes clear that sexual difference does not divide humanity on the level of nature. If women have a nature distinct from their male counterparts, then as (second wave) feminist theologians have rightly asked, how are women saved by a male savior?⁶⁰ It is only insofar as we hold that the Son of God assumed a human nature common to men and women, that he is the Savior of the whole human race. In the words of Gregory of Nazianzus: “For that which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved.”⁶¹ But how should the bodily difference between men and women be understood?

For Aristotle sexual difference is simply an accident of the human substance due to a defect in the matter of the individual. The male seed in human generation should produce a replica of itself but either a material defect or some external interference (“a wind from the south which is moist”) disrupts the process resulting in a female—a “misbegotten male.”⁶²

Aquinas utilizes Aristotle’s biology with its limitations but qualifies it in important ways. From Genesis he takes the idea the men and women together form the perfection of the human race in God’s plan. He goes so far as to opine that in the state of innocence human beings might simply

Fortress, 1983), 55–60; John S. Grabowski, “Mutual Submission and Trinitarian Self-Giving,” *Angelicum* 74 (1997): 499–500; D. C. Schindler, “Perfect Difference: Gender and the Analogy of Being,” *Communio* 43 (2016): 197.

⁵⁹ Kasper, “Theological Anthropology of *Gaudium et Spes*,” 137.

⁶⁰ See: Rosemary Radford Ruether, “Can a Male Savior Save Women?,” in *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (London: SCM, 1981), 45–56; Anne Carr, *Transforming Grace: Christian Tradition and Women’s Experience* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 52, 112; Elizabeth Johnson, “The Maleness of Christ,” in *The Special Nature of Women?*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Concilium* 1991/6 (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1991), 108–16, esp. 109.

⁶¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, Epistle 101 (to Cledonius), in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 7, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1894).

⁶² See Aristotle, *De generatione animalium* 2.3.

have determined the sex of a child by willing it.⁶³ From Augustine he takes the idea that sexual difference is original to creation and endures in the resurrected state, dismissing the contrary opinion of Gregory of Nyssa as without merit. His position seems to be that sexual difference is a proper accident of the human composite. However, John Finley has argued that, while Thomas holds that the locus of sexual difference is in the body, it is possible to locate the basis of sexual difference within the soul using Thomas's own principles.⁶⁴

More recent Catholic theology, responding more directly to anthropological questions raised by second-wave and subsequent forms of feminism has focused more directly on the Christological and Trinitarian language of "nature" and "person" as a way to account for the unity and difference of the human race. So, John Paul II writes: "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."⁶⁵ Therefore male and female are two distinct ways of existing as a person within a common human nature. These distinct forms of personal existence are expressed through the two basic forms of human embodiment: "Masculinity and femininity express *the twofold aspect of man's somatic constitution . . . and indicate . . . the new consciousness of the meaning of one's body . . . a 'reciprocal enrichment.'*"⁶⁶

One can find this formulation widely echoed in recent theology. Kasper argues that male and female persons constitute "the two equally valuable but different expressions of the one nature of humanity."⁶⁷ Karl Lehmann speaks of the sexes as a "double issue" (*Dopplelausgabe*) or "persons in different but equal modes."⁶⁸ Michele Schumacher speaks of "one nature that necessarily exists in two modes or 'expressions.'"⁶⁹ D. C. Schindler holds that sexual difference "represents two *ways of being* a single kind of

⁶³ See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* I, q. 99, a. 2.

⁶⁴ See John Finley, "The Metaphysics of Gender: A Thomistic Approach," *The Thomist* 79 (2015): 585–614.

⁶⁵ John Paul II, General Audience of November 14, 1979, §1 (Waldstein, *Man and Woman*, 161; emphasis original).

⁶⁶ John Paul II, General Audience of November 14, 1979, §5 (*Man and Woman*, 165; emphasis original).

⁶⁷ Walter Kasper, "The Position of Women as a Problem of Theological Anthropology," trans. John Saward, in *The Church and Women: A Compendium*, ed. Helmut Moll (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 58–59.

⁶⁸ See Karl Lehmann, "The Place of Women as a Problem of Theological Anthropology," trans. Robert E. Wood, in Moll, *The Church and Women*, 29.

⁶⁹ Michele Schumacher, "The Nature of Nature in Feminism Old and New: From Dualism to Complementary Unity," in Schumacher, *Women in Christ*, 40.

substance” as such representing the perfection of difference at the created level.⁷⁰ Sexual difference is therefore an inescapable part of the embodied individual human being. Put more directly, sexual difference is accidental to human nature in general but essential to existing individuals. Aristotle and Saint Thomas note that it belongs to the nature of numbers (in general) that they be odd or even. However, any actually existing number will be only odd or even.⁷¹ If one makes 4 to be odd, it is no longer 4, but a different number altogether. As Finley observes, “odd and even, while not mutually relational within their being, are difficult to understand and articulate apart from the other, in this sense resembling male and female, which are mutually relational in their being, not to mention in their intelligibility.”⁷²

But the human individual is a person—a “someone” and not merely a “something.” The relationality of sexual difference transcends being simply an inseparable accident of individuated matter.⁷³ Since “the body expresses the person” or is the *Realsymbol* of the person, sexual difference communicates the irreducible uniqueness of the free human subject who is male or female. As such, it can be understood as a created relation constitutive of personhood analogous to the divine and spiritual relations of paternity, filiation, and spiration which we recognize in the Trinitarian *communio personarum*. And this fundamental human relation is itself the basis of other relations at the heart of personal existence—being a son or daughter, a sister or a brother, a husband or a wife, a mother or a father.

Here is a further instantiation of the Council’s insight that the human person becomes intelligible in the light of Christ. The vexing conundrum of sexual difference begins to become clear with the aid of the Christological and Trinitarian distinction of nature and person (understood relationally). Though as a spiritual being God transcends biological sex, male and female who are made in the image of God have the call to communion inscribed in their very bodies.⁷⁴ The compass of the body points us toward the love which is our origin and our fulfillment.

⁷⁰ Schindler, “Perfect Difference,” 216 (emphasis original).

⁷¹ See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.5.986a22–b1 and Aquinas, *In X metaphys.*, lec. 11, no 2128.

⁷² Finley, “Metaphysics of Gender,” 607.

⁷³ In different ways, this point is argued by both Schindler and Finley within an Aristotelian and Thomistic framework.

⁷⁴ See John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, §§7–8.

Distinction in Difference

Returning to the critique of gender ideology found in recent magisterial teaching with which we began, a final nuance is added by Pope Francis. In *Amoris Laetitia* §56, the Holy Father echoes many of the concerns of his predecessor Benedict. He writes;

Yet another challenge is posed by the various forms of an ideology of gender that “denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family. This ideology leads to educational programmes and legislative enactments that promote a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female. Consequently, human identity becomes the choice of the individual, one which can also change over time” [Synod on the Family, *Relatio Finalis* (2015), §8]. It is a source of concern that some ideologies of this sort, which seek to respond to what are at times understandable aspirations, manage to assert themselves as absolute and unquestionable, even dictating how children should be raised.

However, Pope Francis adds an important further observation here: “It needs to be emphasized that ‘biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated’” (citing *Relatio Finalis*, §58). Hence “gender” (or nurture) can be a useful way to talk about the manner in which culture impacts the way we think about difference, but it cannot be separated from the sexually differentiated body and the deeper metaphysical differences between men and women (i.e., nature).⁷⁵

One way to begin to think about the significance of this qualification in light of the analysis above is to distinguish between the vocations, qualities, and roles of the sexes. Only men can be husbands and fathers—whether spiritual or physical and spiritual. Only women can be wives and mothers—whether spiritual or both physical and spiritual. These states in life further specify and concretize the manner in which the fundamental baptismal vocation to holiness is lived out.⁷⁶ Such states draw upon and

⁷⁵ Catholic “new feminist” authors have argued that one of the intellectual tasks of our day is to articulate the intellectual basis for a “reunion” of sex and gender; see Barbara Voles, “New Feminism: A Sex Gender Reunion,” in Schumacher, *Women in Christ*, 52–66.

⁷⁶ Further reflection needs to be devoted to the state of those living as adult single

actualize the distinctive gifts or “genius” of each sex. Recent Church teaching and “new feminist” theology has done much to highlight some of the distinctive gifts of women—for example, their “person-centeredness” which is enhanced by motherhood, their capacity to nurture life, and to build and sustain communion.⁷⁷ Less attention has been paid to the genius of men,⁷⁸ but things like initiative lived as generosity, using the things of the world in the service of authentic human flourishing,⁷⁹ have been put forward in theological discussion.

Where there is more room for flexibility and personal ability is in specific roles of the sexes within the family, society, and, to some degree, even in the Church. Recent Church teaching has emphasized the need for the gifts of women to be more fully manifested in both social and political life as well as in the Church. This same teaching has emphasized the shared authority of the married couple who engage in “mutual submission out of reverence for Christ” (see Eph. 5:21).⁸⁰ What has not yet fully been articulated is the ecclesiological counterpart to this “mutual submission” of men and women in marriage. The Church has definitively taught that this cannot be realized through Holy Orders because of the sacramental significance of the priest’s masculinity representing Christ the Bridegroom and in liturgical action *in persona Christi*.⁸¹ But this exclusion leaves open the more positive question—how can the genius and gifts of women be better incorporated into the life of the Church? Providing an answer to

Christians as a means to live out their basic baptismal call to holiness through friendship and Christian community.

⁷⁷ See John Paul II, *Mulieris dignitatem* §18, Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World (2004), and Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, §§168 and 173.

⁷⁸ On this lack of development, see Christian Raab, O.S.B., “In Search of the Masculine Genius: The Contribution of Walter J. Ong,” *Logos* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2018): 83–117. Raab calls attention to expendability, agonistic differentiation, and exteriority in the order of nature, and (masculine) self-giving, the militancy of discipleship, and being a sign of divine otherness in the order of grace.

⁷⁹ On this, see the insightful analysis Deborah Savage, who extends John Paul II’s analysis of creation in her “The Genius of Man,” in *Promise and Challenge: Catholic Women Reflect on Feminism, Complementarity, and the Church*, ed. Mary Rice Hasson (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2015), 129–53.

⁸⁰ See especially John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* §24. In *Amoris Laetitia* §156, Francis extends this same insight to the sexual relationship of the couple in marriage.

⁸¹ See the CDF’s Declaration on the Question of Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood, *Inter Insigniores* (1976), and John Paul II, apostolic letter, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994).

this question is one of the urgent tasks of both the Church's pastors and the new feminism.

Conclusion

This paper has suggested that the body may be understood as a compass which provides the human person a basic direction in life. To "read" the compass rightly and navigate by it we need the "map" provided by revelation. In particular, through biblical and theological concepts such as sexual complementarity, the spousal meaning of the body, and a Christological anthropology, Catholic theology provides the further perspective needed to navigate well and to account for both the unity of the human race and the difference of male and female who are together the image of God (see Gen. 1:27).

In his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II wrote: "Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it."⁸² The sexually differentiated body is a visible sign of this need for love: "It is not good for the man to be alone." It is also a sign of our vocation to communion—to the "sincere gift" of self in love. We are fulfilled only in communion and community with others. However, the fullness of the communion to which we are called transcends any merely human community. As the fathers of Vatican II note: "Indeed, the Lord Jesus, when He prayed to the Father, 'that all may be one . . . as we are one' (John 17:21–22) opened up vistas closed to human reason, for He implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God's sons in truth and charity."⁸³ In revealing to us the mystery of God's own life as a communion of persons, Christ as Son of the Father and Bridegroom of the Church reveals to us that the ultimate meaning of our own sexually differentiated existence is love—a love which will be fully realized in the Wedding Feast of the Lamb (see Rev 19:3–9; 21:1–4).

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⁸² John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), §10.

⁸³ *Gaudium et Spes* §24.