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Tenderness: Outlining the Anthropological Perspective of Femininity

SUMMARY. The article “Tenderness: Outlining the Anthropological Perspective of Femininity” is written from the point of view of Philosophical Anthropology and outlines the outlines tenderness as particular feature which characterizes femininity and a special way of communicating the truth. In the hermeneutical reading of the story of Creation in Genesis and Plato’s *Symposium* the author shows that image of original unity of man and woman is deeply rooted in human nature. In the reading of John Paul II’s Apostolic letter *Mulieris dignitatem* tenderness of femininity is featured as divine gift. Article examines how the lack of tenderness deprives the sacredness from sexual relations causing alienation. Following the idea of French philosopher Ricoeur it claims that returning the sacred force to sexuality it becomes penetrated by the reciprocity of gift, so that self-centred eroticism is transformed with tenderness and sacredness of mystery of Love.

KEYWORDS: tenderness, person, femininity, unity, eroticism.

Introduction

The challenge of our age is to question the fundamental principles of anthropology: What is humanity? What is true masculinity and femininity? Therefore it is important to go to the roots in the search of the truth and prudential answers to these questions. Here, hermeneutics or the art of interpreting the texts can be very suitable to give a new ‘life’, new reading to the ancient narrative of Creation and also to the Apostolic letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* by John Paul II. For all of us, this conference is an opportunity to see the meaning of this text in new light so that in the polemic atmosphere of so the called ‘cultural wars’ we do not lose something substantial in our understanding of the vocation of woman and femininity.

In this paper we shall **first** turn to the prophetic words pope Paul VI said at the closing of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council addressing women. He describes particular features which characterize vocation of woman and her special ways of communicating the truth. In this discourse the theme of tenderness is first introduced and related to femininity. **Second**, we shall investigate Pope John Paul II's mariological perspective in the search of true femininity, its association with tenderness and his warning against masculinization of the vocation of woman in the polemical heat of the 'culture wars'. **Third**, we shall turn to the classical narratives of Plato's *Symposium* and the ancient narrative of Creation in *Genesis* to show that the image of the original unity of man and woman is deeply rooted in human nature. **Fourth**, we shall explore tenderness of femininity as a divine gift. And finally, we shall examine how the lack of tenderness deprives the sacredness and meaning in sexual relations causing alienation, feeling of shame, guilt, suspicion and loneliness. Here we shall follow the idea of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur suggesting that when returning the sacred spiritual force to sexuality it becomes penetrated by the reciprocity of gift, so that the uncontrolled and self-centred eroticism is transformed with tenderness and sacredness of the mystery of Love.

Pope Paul VI about the vocation of woman

I would like to recall the prophetic words about the identity and mission of women. Pope Paul VI said this addressing women at the closing of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council (8 December 1965):

But the hour is coming, in fact it has come, when the vocation of woman is being achieved in its fullness, the hour in which woman acquires in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is under-going so deep a transformation, women impregnated with the spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid mankind in not falling.¹

As we can see the Pope stressed the importance of the time in history when women liberated in the course of the centuries now have achieved the freedom they have never had before. Indeed the powerful metaphorical phrases of temporality abundantly used in this short passage by Paul VI and in particular the utterance – 'the hour is coming, in fact it has come' read in association with his statement about the present moment when 'the human race is undergoing deep transformations' – is a testimony

¹ Paul VI, Closing of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council "Address of Pope Paul VI to Women" (8 December, 1965), http://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/speeches/1965/documents/hf_p-vi_spe_19651208_epilogo-concilio-donne.html.

of significant reflection about the dynamic process in the society of his time and of providential intuition about the role of woman for the future of mankind. From the quotation we learn that this time opens a great potential for the fullness of woman's vocation. However the fulfilment of this potential requires a deeper acknowledgement of the true nature of vocation. Therefore one may ask: what are the special qualities of woman's vocation?

In the speech of Pope Paul VI we can outline particular features which characterize the vocation of woman as the guardian of life and humanity, since she has special closeness to the mystery of life and death and some power to protect the humanity from destruction:

Women have always had as their lot the protection of the home, the love of beginnings and understanding of cradles. They are present in the mystery of the beginning of life and offer consolation in the departure of death. Our technology runs the risk of becoming inhuman. Reconcile men with life (...) and hold back the hand of man who, in a moment of folly, might attempt to destroy human civilization.²

Moreover the Pope speaks of some kind of special knowledge that women possess: "*Women, you do know how to make truth sweet, tender and accessible*"³. By this statement our attention is drawn to two things. First – the knowledge of how to convey the truth. As we can see, in this case the emphasis is on the way the truth is delivered, – some sort of wisdom to communicate the content of the truth, its inter-relational or interpersonal perspective. Second – this way of communicating the truth is characterized as sweet and tender, so that the truth becomes accessible and personal. Let us keep this amazing characteristic in our mind – the tenderness and sweetness of truth since the concept of tenderness will be the key word of today's search of the true femininity.

John Paul II: Mariological approach in the search of femininity

With his special intellectual and spiritual formation, saint John Paul II had a deep introspection of human nature. His phenomenological approach towards mystery of man – his body and soul – is a great contribution to the Christian anthropology. His theological and philosophical heritage is very broad indeed, but on this occasion we shall focus upon some of his ideas about woman's identity in his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

Significantly this letter is related to the Marian year in the Church reminding to us that “Mother of God in the mystery of the Church makes us think of the exceptional link between this “woman” and the whole human family.”⁴ In Apostolic Letter, Our Lady is set as iconic example of the fullness of femininity and motherhood.

Here one can set before their eyes the most beautiful and beloved of all icons “Mother of God – (*Eleusia*) Loving Tenderness” in which Our Lady is gently holding the Child in her hands who gently presses His cheek to her face. One can notice the presence of love and tenderness which is human and divine at the same time, since it shows us both the motherly love to her child and God’s love and tenderness to us. This icon is particularly impressive since the closeness of God to us is expressed in it by a tender gesture of touch. The presence of sorrow in the gaze of the Mother of God mirrors the anticipation of death in her heart roused by the words of prophet Simeon – “a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Lk 2:35). It reveals a powerful anthropological dimension of the mystery of life and death – in a special way Mary is ‘present in the mystery of the beginning of life’ when she conceives the Child and gives birth to Him, and when she stays by the Cross of Jesus.

John Paul II likes to remind us to follow the signs of the time. And today maybe more than ever the question of identity and vocation of woman is involved in the so called ‘cultural and political wars’. Therefore the reading of *Mulieris dignitatem* is of utmost importance since it leads us to the spiritual and biblical roots and meaning of the femininity or masculinity, of the true vocation of man. Each generation has to search the truth and answer to these questions by returning to the texts which have shaped the human identity during centuries. John Paul II leads us to the ancient narrative of Creation of man and woman with a hope that our generation has not lost the hermeneutical skills of interpreting the writings which are mute today.

Saint John Paul invites us to avoid the deformations of the truth. In *Mulieris dignitatem* he speaks of ‘masculinization’ of women and warns us that: “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 fulfilment’, but instead will deform and lose what constitutes their essential richness.”⁵

He suggests to consider the question of women’s rights in a broader context of the human person taking into account that human dignity and vocation “results from specific diversity and personal originality of man and woman”⁶

One of the causes of masculinization of women is related to a certain understanding of power and domination and therefore we should search once again the true

⁴ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem* AAS 80 (1988) (MD), 2, http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1988/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19880815_mulieris-dignitatem.html.

⁵ MD, 10.

⁶ Ibid.

meaning of power in Christian anthropology. The holy Pope in his Apostolic Letter points to the words “to serve means to reign”. Again he settles an example of Our Lady who “signifies the fullness of the perfection of what is characteristic of woman, of what is feminine. Here we find ourselves, in a sense, at the culminating point, the archetype, of the personal dignity of women.”⁷

In Mary’s answer to the angel: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord” (Lk 1:38) one senses her complete awareness of being creature of God. The word “handmaid” (...) is inscribed throughout the whole history of the Mother and the Son. In fact, this Son, who will often say of himself, especially at the culminating moment of his mission: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Mk 10:45).

By losing the perspective of Christian anthropology and this truly sacred dimension in sometimes passionate polemical debates there is a danger to misinterpret the true goal and vocation.

Man and woman – the original unity of the two: anthropological perspective

Indeed, the history of mankind with various changes of paradigms and specific cultural habits and beliefs during the centuries offers a vivid illustration for inequality of man and woman. At the same time we can find signs of deeper intuition of their original unity in the classical texts which have shaped the spiritual and intellectual pattern of European civilization. Here we can mention the ancient narrative of Creation in *Genesis* and Plato’s dialogue *Symposium*. These texts in a mythical or symbolic language tell us about human strivings to reach the lost original harmony and fullness of love.

Reflecting upon the narrative of Creation in *Genesis* we can understand what constitutes the personal character of human being, thanks to which both man and women are a rational and free creature. Freedom belongs to the basic structure of Creation, to the spiritual existence of man. Freedom is present within us so that each one can shape his own life and inner self. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) reminds us that in the story of *Genesis* man and woman are shown as one being and have one and the same dignity. The other point is that they are turned toward each other. This is seen in the wound which is present in all of us and which leads us to turn to each other. The image we meet here in Scripture runs through different religious texts⁸. To deepen the understanding of the human condition and the tragic split between man and woman, he invites us to pay attention and contemplate the text of Plato’s *Symposium*.

The great philosopher tells us the myth of how man was divided into two and how the two halves became man and woman. These halves forever are seeking one another:

⁷ MD, 5.

⁸ Joseph cardinal Ratzinger, *God and the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 80–81.

“Now when our first form had been cut in two, each half in longing for its fellow would come to it again; and then would they fling their arms about each other and in mutual embraces”⁹ By mischievous irony of Plato this story is narrated by comic playwright Aristophanes, who tells us that these two halves when they find each other are overwhelmed with affection and love. This great amount of care cannot result simply from a desire for sex, but they have difficulty articulating precisely what it is that makes them care so much. In his speech Aristophanes tells us about the offer of Hephaestus, the blacksmith god, to weld the couple together so that they would become one and never be parted, even in death – “Do you desire to be joined in the closest possible union, so that you shall not be divided by night or by day? (...) From being two you may be made one; (...) Bethink yourselves if this is your heart’s desire, and if you will be quite contented with this lot.”¹⁰ Plato is sure that they would leap at this opportunity and on hearing this no one will refuse. On the contrary, they will be convinced that this is exactly the thing they were “yearning for all the time, namely, to be so joined and fused with their beloved that the two might be made one”¹¹.

This famous passage from Plato’s *Symposium* reminds us that “love” is the name that humans give to their desire for wholeness and their longing to be restored to their original nature.

Perhaps this picture – both in Plato’s *Symposium* and the book of *Genesis* – each in a different way illustrates the anthropological situation where man is longing for unity. Plato’s *Symposium* shows that man is divided and each part is made to fit the other. In *Genesis* as John Paul II explains this concept unity is of more complex nature: *Genesis* does not present two sexes as to parts of a primal human being *h’adam*, even if woman is taken from it as Adam said, “This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man” (*Genesis* 2:23). John Paul II says that Adam recognizes himself as being a man (male) only in the presence of the woman (female), who is the other human being with whom he can be in reciprocal unity (not as two parts or halves of one). Christopher West in his *Theology of body explained: Commentary on John Paul II’s “Man and woman He created them”*¹² considers Adam’s declaration the biblical prototype of the Song of Songs. The words of *Genesis* (2:23) are the original love song. They express “for the first time... joy and even exultation” (TOB 8,4). Later in his catechesis John Paul II says that Adam’s words “express wonder and admiration, or even better, the sense of fascination” (TOB 108,5). To Adam woman seems something unique and unrepeatable – “In short, the gift of woman enthral Adam. At last (...) he has found one who is *like himself*. He has found

⁹ Plato, *Plato in Twelve Volumes*. Vol. 9, *Symposium*, transl. by Harold N. Fowler (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1925), 191a.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 192e.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Christopher West, *Theology of the Body Explained: A Commentary on John Paul II’s “Man and Woman He Created Them”* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2007), 106.

another person whom he can *know* as a person and be *known* by a person. (...) with whom he can live in *communion*.”¹³

As we can see John Paul II points to the interpersonal nature of man: he can't exist alone: “he can exist only as a ‘unity of the two’, and therefore in relation to another human person. It is a question here of a mutual relationship: man to woman and woman to man.”¹⁴ From the perspective of personalist philosophical approach John Paul II invites us to see interpersonal relations as a gift. It means that a man needs the other and therefore is capable to transcend his limited self. So John Paul II explains these interpersonal relations by saying: “In the ‘unity of the two’, man and woman are called from the beginning not only to exist ‘side by side’ or ‘together’, but they are also called to exist mutually ‘one for the other’”¹⁵

Tenderness of femininity as a divine gift

Man needs to be completed. He must look for himself in the other person and find himself in him. In the tender gaze of woman man is able to fulfil his masculine and paternal nature. The same can be said about woman and her feminine and maternal features. But this tender and loving gaze is shattered by the fall of man and through that the equality of man and woman destroyed.

In this search of true masculinity and femininity Jon Paul II introduces the theme of the limits of analogy between God and man. In the chapter “Anthropomorphism of Biblical language” he indicates that: “biblical Revelation says that, while man’s ‘likeness’ to God is true, the ‘non-likeness’ which separates the whole of creation from the Creator is still more essentially true”¹⁶ It explains why ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ qualities are equally attributed to God in many comparisons of Scriptures. John Paul II mentions paradoxical examples from Scriptures where God’s love to man is compared with motherly tenderness and care. It is also a sign that in Jesus Christ there is neither male nor female (*Gal 3:28*). In Christ the mutual opposition between man and woman inherited with the original sin is essentially overcome¹⁷, but this unity do not cancel diversity.

Love between man and woman has its roots in divine order since “love belongs to the intimate life of God himself, the life of the Trinity”¹⁸. Love is received by man and woman as a gift of the Holy Spirit. By quoting saint Augustin’s words from *De Trinitate*

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ MD, 7.

¹⁵ MD, 7.

¹⁶ MD, 8.

¹⁷ Cf. MD, 10.

¹⁸ Cf. MD, 29.

John Paul II explains that the dignity of women is measured by the order of love, which is essentially the order of justice and charity.¹⁹

At this stage I would like to involve the idea of French philosopher Paul Ricoeur who, thinking in the perspective of personalist anthropology in his 1986 Gifford Lectures (published as *Oneself as Another*, 1992), investigates the broad question – what it is to be a self? In his investigation he introduces the notion of ‘wounded cogito’, which can be ‘healed’ by following the ethical intention: “aiming at a good life lived with and for others”²⁰ Ricoeur is convinced that the tenderness of love is a way of responding the tragic dimension inherent in all human action, which never fully achieves what it intends, another reminder that human freedom is always a finite freedom. In that sense the human condition can be described in the words of Gabriel Marcel – *homo viator*. We are always on the way to the fullness of interpersonal relations since ‘only person can love and only person can be loved’²¹. Therefore John Paul II can describe love as ‘an ontological and ethical requirement of the person’²².

Sexuality and the Sacred: Eroticism versus Tenderness

In Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem* John Paul II describes one of the basic arguments of Christian anthropology²³ – the sin has brought a wound in the human nature and his capability to love and to be loved, throwing man in alienation, feeling of shame, guilt, suspicion and loneliness.

Today more than ever we are confronted with disability to love with tenderness and passion. Probably it is a sign of our time that human Eros is wounded and people are losing their trust in each other. Coolness and distance is becoming a norm in our communication. We can see the efforts of the Church to heal this wound if we just look at the titles of last encyclicals of pope Benedict XVI and Francis – words ‘love’, ‘hope’, ‘friendship’ are central in them (*Caritas in veritate*, *Spe salvi*, *Deus caritas est*, *Fratelli Tutti*).

The whole world is affected by pandemic experience of Covid -19 with strong restrictions of distancing. From the negative experience of lockdown we suddenly discover in a new way the importance of the lively presence of the other person without any technical mediation; how important the feeling of touch is, shaking hands and embracing our friends. Saint John Paul II in his phenomenology of body outlined the

¹⁹ Cf. MD, 29.

²⁰ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, transl. by K. Blamey (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 172.

²¹ Cf. MD, 29.

²² Cf. MD, 29.

²³ Cf. MD, 9,10.

very basis of Christian anthropology that human body is not just an exterior addition to man. It participates in our interpersonal relations.

However something has happened and now we can't afford the luxury to embrace a friend or child without unhealthy background thought of being accused. It can be called an anthropological catastrophe. And in the last part of my paper I would like to introduce some ideas of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur whose philosophical anthropology was well known and appreciated by John Paul II.

Although I wrote my doctoral thesis about hermeneutical philosophy of Paul Ricoeur and studied his philosophical analysis of Freud's psychoanalysis, I had not come across an article by Ricoeur *Wonder, Eroticism and Enigma*²⁴ where he outlines the roots of the split in understanding of human sexual relations from the position of philosophical anthropology and personalist position. Perhaps this investigation has a marginal place in the philosophical heritage of Paul Ricoeur. Nevertheless in this article he somehow tries to interpret sexuality from the personalist point of view and poses the question – Why sexuality rather than love? And he answers that what nourished him personally in this investigation was a new understanding of the sacred in the ethics of marriage, the wish to emphasize the wonder of sex.

Ricoeur notes that in our times there is a growing desire to reunite sexuality with the experience of the sacred. This desire is prompted by a more holistic understanding of the person and of the ways in which sexuality is present in all of human experience. Ricoeur reflects about the nature of human sexuality using two opposite terms: eroticism and tenderness. He describes eroticism as ambiguous: it can designate components of human sexuality, its instinctual and sexual component; it can also designate the art of loving built upon the cultivation of sexual pleasure. As such it is still the aspect of tenderness as long as the concern for reciprocity, mutual gratification, of gift wins over egoism and narcissism of enjoyment²⁵.

But eroticism becomes a restless desire for pleasure when it dissociates from the network of tendencies linked by the concern for lasting, intense, intimate interpersonal bounds. Ricoeur compares it with the famous leaky cask of the Greek legend²⁶ – for it never compensates for the loss of value while accumulating the substitutes of tenderness. On the other hand tenderness is characterized by personal relational bound between man and woman. It responds to mutuality and acceptance of the other as a gift. Ricoeur reminds us that in both tenderness and eroticism sexuality remains basically impermeable to reflection and inaccessible to human mastery. He writes: “When two beings embrace each other they do not know what they are doing and what they want. It is a desire of pleasure? Yes, certainly. But it is a poor response.”²⁷ In

²⁴ Paul Ricoeur, “Wonder, Eroticism and Enigma”, in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources of theological reflection* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1994).

²⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 83.

²⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*

the experience of closeness man and woman join in the mystery of life. Life is much more than the life understood as a struggle against death or delaying the time when the debt must be paid. By returning the sacred spiritual force to sexuality it becomes penetrated by the reciprocity of gift, so that the uncontrolled and self-centred eroticism is transformed with tenderness and sacredness of the mystery of Love.

Conclusion

From the perspective of Christian anthropology and personalist approach, John Paul II invites us to come to the roots of what is truly feminine, what is the true vocation of woman. Femininity is a gift of Love which grants us tenderness as a special knowledge, a kind of wisdom which makes truth tender and accessible. Feminine tenderness in interpersonal relations is an ontological and ethical condition for recreating the original unity and harmony between man and woman. According to French philosopher P. Ricoeur – tenderness has a healing power to return the meaning of reciprocity of gift to the wounded sexuality, transforming self-centred eroticism into sacredness of mystery of Love.

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ŠVELNUMAS. ANTROPOGINĒS MOTERIŠKUMO PERSPEKTYVOS METMENYS

S a n t r a u k a

Šis straipsnis yra parašytas iš filosofinės antropologijos perspektyvos. Jame švelnumas apibūdinamas kaip savitas moteriškumo bruožas ir ypatingas tiesos perteikimo būdas. Hermeneutiškai skaitant Pradžios knygos pasakojimą apie pasaulio sukūrimą ir Platono *Puotą* atskleidžiama, kad pirminės vyro ir moters vienybės vaizdinys giliai įsišaknijęs žmogaus prigimtyje. Skaitant Jono Pauliaus II apaštališkąjį laišką *Mulieris dignitatem* moteriškasis švelnumas parodomas kaip dieviškoji dovana. Straipsnyje nagrinėjama, kaip dėl švelnumo stokos seksualiniai santykiai netenka sakralumo ir įsigali susvetimėjimas. Remiantis prancūzų filosofo P. Ricoeuro mintimi, teigiama, kad, sugrąžinus seksualumui šventą jėgą, jį persmelkia abipusiškas dovanojimas, todėl į save nukreipta erotika perkeičiama Meilės slėpinio švelnumo ir šventumo.

RAKTAŽODŽIAI: švelnumas, asmuo, moteriškumas, vienybė, erotika.

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