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Jarosław MERECKI

MODERNITY AND THE FAMILY, AS SEEN IN LIGHT OF THE TEACHING OF ST. JOHN PAUL II

Modernity sees man as an individual who is separate from other human beings and interested in satisfying his or her own needs. A person is the center of her world. If, indeed, "we never really advance a step beyond ourselves," a human person never overcomes her solitude, not even in a relationship with another. No wonder that on such grounds the idea of love as a gift of self becomes incomprehensible. How can a person make a gift of self to another, if she is unable to leave the confines of her loneliness?

At the beginning of the pontificate of St. John Paul II, the future of the family as a social unit did not look very promising. Marxism and liberalism, two modern currents of thought influential at the time, considered the family as an institution of the past and overcome in the process of modernization. The family was said to imply bonds that hindered rather than promoted free development of the individual and, as such, to oppose progress and liberation (e.g., women's liberation or sexual liberation).

Confronting the situation, John Paul II showed the courage to be 'the sign of contradiction' and decided to put the issue of the family in the center of his teaching and his pastoral activity. In his various speeches, the Pope would show the beauty of the family as a 'communion of persons,' who—through their mutual and selfless gift of self beget a new identity, precisely that of a communion. The mutual gift in question is in its essence free, unconditional and ultimate—taught John Paul II—and it is this gift, fully lived through, that lies at the heart of conjugal love.

While the vision of love proposed by the Pope did not subscribe to the ideas of the 'mainstream' of Western culture, one can say that in developing his teaching, John Paul II followed the example of Christ himself. Indeed, Christ's proclamation of the Gospel of marriage and the family went against the practice universally accepted in the culture of his times. When Jesus spoke of the indissolubility of marriage, the Pharisees would invoke the authority of Moses, who had commanded that, if need be, the man give the woman a bill of divorce and dismiss her (cf. Mt 19:3–8). Christ, however, did not regard the practice accepted in his times as the ultimate criterion of his teaching and, instead, asked his disciples to look to the 'beginning,' that is, to the original design of God for man and woman, which was marriage and the family.

TRUTH AND FREEDOM

In 1991, the year beginning a new historical era marked by the collapse of communism, the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Europe took place in the Vatican. Together with the European bishops, John Paul II wanted to reflect on the opportunities the new phase of European history created and the challenges it posed. On that occasion, Tadeusz Styczeń, a Polish philosopher and successor of Karol Wojtyła to the chair of ethics at the Catholic University of Lublin, wrote an article with an interesting and somewhat provocative title: "Conscience and Europe, or Should the Pope invite Aristotle to the 1991 Synod of Bishops for Europe, what Would the Philosopher Have to Say?"[1] What was the idea Styczeń elaborated in the article? In his opinion, the fundamental problem of Western culture was its mistaken view of the moral conscience, caused by a wrong conception of the relationship between truth and freedom, which has been reversed. The heart of the problem might be described as follows: Human freedom has been granted the power to create the truth about man. While in Eastern Europe, for decades subjected to the communist ideology, the power in question was attributed to the collective consciousness, the West developed a form of individualism that granted such a prerogative to every individual conscience. However, the element common to both visions was the belief that the truth about man is the result of a free decision rather than an existing reality that precedes any human resolution. Thus, it was accepted that truth can and must be created by man himself as he exercises his freedom, and that, consequently, each person has his or her own truth. It is not difficult to imagine that such 'individual' truths may easily enter in conflict with one another.

Likewise—we may add—Western culture questioned another important concept, namely, that of natural law. 'Nature' was considered to be the realm of merely bare facts rather than of values or meanings, the latter considered as products of reason and freedom responsible for giving nature its truly human sense. In consequence, the role of reason in the field of morality was changed: once expected to find objective truth, reason was now considered as a creative faculty with the task to determine the contents of truth. To put it simply, while the pre-modern times saw the specific trait of man in human reason with its ability to acquire knowledge of objective truth, independent of the preferences of the subject and identical for all, to modernity, which has questioned such a capability of reason, what distinguishes man from all other beings in the

[1] See Tadeusz S t y c z e ń, "Sumienie a Europa, czyli gdyby Ojciec Święty zaprosił Arystotelesa na Synod Biskupów Europy 1991," in Styczeń, *Solidarność wyzwala* (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, 1993), 203–19.

world is his freedom, which creates subjective truths. "We never really advance a step beyond ourselves,"[2] wrote David Hume, who is counted among the fathers of modern philosophy, and his idea indeed expresses the essence of the modern (as well as postmodern) vision of man, which has had its repercussions also in the field of moral theology.

John Paul II addressed modern intellectual currents in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, where he wrote:

> Certain tendencies in contemporary moral theology, under the influence of the currents of subjectivism and individualism ... involve novel interpretations of the relationship of freedom to the moral law, human nature and conscience, and propose novel criteria for the moral evaluation of acts. Despite their variety, these tendencies are at one in lessening or even denying the dependence of freedom on truth.[3]

It is understandable that in a vision which weakens or even denies the relationship between truth and freedom, there is no place for universally valid moral norms, that is, rules that do not allow exceptions. According to such a vision, a human person is unique, each moral situation being also unique and unrepeatable. Moral norms, which must necessarily be general, cannot account for the vicissitudes of a human life and, therefore, apply at the most in a majority of cases (*ut in pluribus*), but not in each of them. Occasionally, performing an act prohibited by a general rule might be justified—say the proponents of this view—by the calculus of the values at play in the given situation. This also refers to the moral norms regarding marriage; for instance, it becomes impossible on such grounds to consider the indissolubility of marriage as a norm valid always and without exception. One might say, yes, there are good reasons why it is better for marriages to be stable, but marriages cannot be required to follow the principle of indissolubility in any situation. Ultimately—the proponents of this view argue—the validity of any moral norm referred to a particular case depends on the decision of conscience (*Gewissensentscheidung*) taken by the person concerned. Not surprisingly, human bonds become increasingly fragile once such ideas are applied in real life.

One needs to note, though, that the ideas discussed above are a corollary to a more general concept of man. Modernity sees man primarily as an individual who is separate from other human beings and interested in satisfying his or her own needs. A person is the center of her world, others entering her

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[2] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 1, "Of the Understanding," Part 2, "Of the Ideas of Space and Time," Section 6, "Of the Idea of Existence, and of External Existence," ed. Lewis A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), vol. 1, 42.

[3] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor*, August 6, 1993 (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), Section 33.

cognitive horizon merely as potential objects of desire. If, indeed, "we never really advance a step beyond ourselves," a human person never overcomes her solitude, not even in a relationship with another. No wonder that on such grounds the idea of love as a gift of self becomes incomprehensible. How can a person make a gift of self to another, if she is unable to leave the confines of her loneliness? How can an individual who is first and foremost interested in the satisfaction of her own desires come to love another person exclusively for the sake of that person?

Yet when Tadeusz Styczeń proposed that the Holy Father invite Aristotle to the Synod of Bishops for Europe he probably had in mind one more thing. Aristotle's perennial ideas are the reason why he is universally considered as a great teacher of humanity and one who knew the depth of the human heart, the essence of happiness, as well as what helps us accomplish our goals. Also today, it is from him that we can learn the wisdom of life. Even though we are not always willing to admit it, we need masters of humanity in today's world, and perhaps today we need them more than we ever did in the past. We want to get to know who we really are and what we really want, and for this purpose we need the wisdom of the masters of thought who deeply reflected on man and who can help us answer important questions regarding the meaning of things. For instance, there are occasions when we feel like doing something appealing to us at the moment. However, can we say that what we feel like doing at the moment is what we really want in life? In the case of every human being, one might see a superficial self and an inner one, the desires of the former not always coinciding with the preferences of the latter. And, as a result, we sometimes make mistakes which are very difficult to rectify. So it is good to listen to those who are confirmed as true masters of humanity. They may speak to us about things which perhaps are not obvious at the moment or which are in conflict with our immediate desires, but involved in a specific situation, we do not always perceive the reality objectively enough. It is then worth referring to the wisdom of the masters of humanity who can show us the values we perhaps fail to notice at the time being. This is no different from situations that happen in everyday life: faced with a difficult existential problem, we often seek the advice of a friend who wishes us well, but is not directly involved in the specific condition we experience and can therefore pass a more objective judgment.

Nowadays there is no doubt that John Paul II was a great expert on the human heart. Throughout his life—as theatrical actor, poet, philosopher, theologian, and in particular as pastor—he wanted to fathom the mystery of man. He probed deeply into the human experience, interpreting it in the light of the Revelation. In the context of the present reflections, it is important to note that already at the beginning of his pastoral work Wojtyła was particularly fascinated by the phenomenon of love born in the hearts of a man and a woman and

culminating in their starting a family. In the interview with Vittorio Messori, he himself confessed, "As a young priest I learned to love human love."[4] His love of human love lasted throughout his lifetime and earned him the name of the Pope of the family. Since Karol Wojtyła is universally considered as a great expert on and a friend of the family, one might rephrase the title of Styczeń's essay, and ask: What would happen should Pope St. Francis invite John Paul II to the Synod on the Family? What would the Pope of the family say to address the problems and challenges the family is facing today? How would he respond to the questions which emerged during the Synod?

On the one hand, it is indeed true that each person is unique and unrepeatable. Everyone lives their specific existence in a different way, and no definition of man can ever give justice to the richness of the reality of a human life. Each person is ultimately a freedom center creating its own history, and everyone embraces their own truths. On the other hand, though, we need to confront the objective truth about man. One might say that a good life integrates the latter with the one and unrepeatable history of a human existence. However, the truth about man cannot be imposed on an individual existence by force, since it would destroy the person's freedom, the fundamental condition for a good life. Only if freely assumed, can truth guide a person towards her individual fulfillment. Yet it is important that the truth about man be remembered and referred to. This task is of particular value today, when certain intellectual currents of thought still question the existence of truth as such, and one is tempted to succumb to skepticism and to forsake the fundamental truths about man which provide the 'space' within which everyone is called to live their human lives.

Before we investigate more closely the vision of the family we can reconstruct on the basis of the wisdom and teaching of John Paul II, we shall stop for a moment to analyze the origins of the modern vision of man.

THE MODERN VISION OF MAN AND THE FAMILY

In a considerable part of modern political philosophy reflecting on the social life of man, the point of departure is the assumption that, rather than mutual support and friendship, there exist a primordial conflict and enmity among human beings. In ancient and medieval philosophy, the prevailing model of social life was that of 'cooperation': it was assumed that human beings are naturally oriented towards collaboration and only by way of joint effort can

[4] John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, ed. Vittorio Messori (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 158.

they accomplish the potential inscribed in their nature. In that sense, Aristotle defined man as a social animal and called those who claimed to be able to live outside society "either beasts, or gods."[5] Drawing on man's natural inclination to social life, ancient and medieval philosophy described the institutions which enable man to exercise his social nature in the best way possible, that is, the family and the state.

Modern philosophy, by contrast, chooses as its point of departure a vision of primeval conflict (one needs to note that this choice was undoubtedly influenced by the experience of religious wars in Europe). Thomas Hobbes, the first theorist of the modern state, argues that the natural situation of man is that of "war of all men against all men"[6] (*bellum omnium in omnes*) and, therefore, the natural state in which human beings live is governed by the principle *homo homini lupus* (man to man is an arrant wolf).[7] Hobbes held that man is naturally selfish, focused on himself, and on the satisfaction of his needs and desires, which he accomplishes even at the expense of others, so it is only by force that he can be socialized. The original conflict can be contained only through a limitation of human freedom, which in its natural state is unlimited and can go as far as to take the life of another. It is here that we find the justification of the modern idea of the social contract. In the state of nature, no man can feel strong enough not to fear the abuse from others. Therefore, a certain limitation of originally unlimited freedom is advantageous for all: everyone gives up a part of their freedom (for instance, the option to kill or rob another) in order to create a space in which social life will become possible. The function of the state is, on the one hand, to ensure that such a limitation of freedom is effective rather than simulated, and, on the other, to threaten with sanctions those who might abuse the contract, taking advantage of the self-restraint of others without adopting the same attitude themselves. Incidentally, in Hobbes's vision of social life, enjoying rights is related to being a subject to force. And consequently, should one turn out stronger than others, one need not feel bound by any freedom-limiting laws. In other words, the sphere of justice established according to the principles put forward by Hobbes is artificial rather than natural and thus it is weak: it will suffice to think about the situation of an unborn child who has no force at her disposal to claim her rights and only for this reason remains outside the sphere of so conceived justice.

The idea of the original, primordial conflict can be found also in later philosophy, among others in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's master–slave

[5] A r i s t o t l e, *Politics*, 1253a29, trans. T. A. Sinclair (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1986).

[6] Thomas H o b b e s, *De Cive: Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society*, ed. Howard Warrender (Oxford, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1983), 49.

[7] See ibidem, 24.

dialectic,[8] in Karl Marx's theory of class struggle,[9] in Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the "will to power,"[10] or in Jean-Paul Sartre's analysis of the 'dialectic of gaze,' famously captured in the phrase "Hell is—other people."[11] In our context, the latter vision is particularly eloquent. According to Sartre, a human being is affirmed as a subject by the power of her gaze: by means of looking at the world and giving the objects the meanings they have for her, a person makes the world *hers*. It is thanks to the ability of gazing at the world that a human being lives the life of a subject, while the other beings she encounters in the world (also non-human living beings) have merely the status of objects for her. In other words, since I can gaze at the world in such way, while the world is incapable of gazing at me, I can feel the master of my world. However, it is not true that it is only me gazing at the world: I am myself subject to other people's gaze. Other people also gaze at me. Sartre finds this fact extremely irritating, since it casts a doubt on human subjectivity. Why is that so? Because due to the sight of others directed at me, I find out that I am not the only master of the world. On the contrary, to another person, I may well be one of world's objects. In this way, every other person, due to her existence, deprives me of the experience of the unboundedness of my freedom. To Sartre, such is the main reason for atheism: God cannot exist, because should he exist, there would be someone there continuously gazing at me, thus making me an object (depriving me of my freedom and, consequently, of my subjectivity). It is not difficult to notice that, within Sartre's vision of human subjectivity, human relations are necessarily those of conflict. To assert my subjectivity, I have to somehow neutralize the gaze of others, because its very existence becomes unbearable to me. I can kill the other (as Cain did), but I can also reduce her to an object in my world, subjecting her to my plans and making her satisfy my needs. Using the Hegelian metaphor, one might say, 'In my world, I can make the other a slave.' On the grounds of such a vision of man also family relationships are perceived in terms of a struggle for self-affirmation which is accomplished by way of exploitation of others.

One cannot certainly deny that human freedom embraces a potential for aggression and that particular individuals frequently affirm their subjectivity at the cost of the subjectivity of others. In our daily lives we are all too often confronted with the 'face of Cain.' But perhaps it is worth posing ourselves the

[8] See Georg Friedrich Wilhelm H e g e l, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford, New York, Toronto and Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1977), 111–9.

[9] See Karl M a r x, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Friedrich Engels, vol. 1, *The Process of Production of Capital*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2011).

[10] See Friedrich N i e t z s c h e, *Will to Power*, trans. Michael A. Scarpitti and R. Kevin Hill (London: Penguin, 2017).

[11] Jean Paul S a r t r e, *No Exit*, https://ia600700.us.archive.org/11/items/NoExit/NoExit.pdf.

question whether we can indeed truly say that the most fundamental relationship between human beings is that of a conflict. Is it true that the most original human experience is that of mutual animosity and alienation? It is not without a reason that I have mentioned the name of the biblical Cain. The opening chapters of the Book of Genesis describe with great realism a potential conflict between two persons which may have fatal consequences for either of them. The message of the Bible, however, is not that it is conflict that expresses the original truth about the human being, or the ultimate model for human relations. Rather, conflict is a result of the betrayal of the primordial truth. In the Book of Genesis, the story of Cain and Abel in fact follows that about the original sin, which resulted from an act of disobedience to God's original design for man. God's plan—which indeed expressed the original truth about man—can be seen in the original experience of the first human beings, Adam and Eve, before the fall.

In his theology of the body, expounded in a series of catecheses he gave in the early years of his pontificate, John Paul II included a profound philosophical and theological analysis of the original experience of the first human beings. The condition of Adam, who is initially alone (his 'original solitude'), shows, on the one hand, his position in relation to the rest of the creation (out of the entire creation, only he, Adam, is a person: a subject to whom all the non-human world is given as objects he can subdue). On the other hand, though, Adam's experience of original solitude is described in terms of discomfort: he needs someone with whom he might enter into an interpersonal relationship. Thus, the Creator says, "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gn 2:18). And only with the creation of a woman is Adam capable of the fulfillment of his humanity; only now can he encounter a being with whom he can enter into a deep interpersonal relationship which today we call love and which is impossible in the case of non-personal beings.

One also needs to note that, according to the Bible, sexual difference is part of God's original design for man: "Man and woman he created them."[12] Interestingly, when Plato, in his exquisite dialogue on love, reflects on the origin of sexual difference, he says that the primeval man was round (the Greeks believed that the sphere was the most perfect shape), and it was only because Zeus wanted to humble men's pride that he cut them in two. As a result, each two parts originally belonging to each other seek to restore their lost unity, which explains why the man and the woman are attracted to each other.[13] While the Platonic myth is beautiful, one immediately notices how it differs

[12] See J o h n P a u l II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston, MA: Pauline Books, 2006).

[13] See P l a t o, "Symposium," in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, https://webs.ucm.es/info/diciex/gente/agf/plato/The_Dialogues_of_Plato_v0.1.pdf, 1655.

from the biblical account. In the Bible, sexual difference exists even before the fall of man and it is part of the 'original design' of God. In a sense one can say that sexual difference as such—the fact that a human being exists either as a male or as a female—is part of the Christian identity and one cannot think of Christianity without recognizing this difference. The first man was created in the image and likeness of God, but it was only after the creation of the second human being, the woman, that the two—together—became a representation of God, who—which we otherwise know from the Christian revelation—is not a solitary God, but the Triune One, the communion of the three divine Persons. Therefore, as noted by John Paul II, it is not in his solitude that the first man becomes the image and likeness of God; rather, it happens in his communion with the woman, when the two persons begin to exist for each other.

Thus, according to the biblical image of the human relations as they were 'in the beginning,' the original truth about man did not embrace conflict, but a mutual relationship between the man and the woman: a relationship in which both persons affirmed their humanity by a mutual gift of self rather than by subjecting the other to his or her will. This original experience still remains part of the one in which human beings share as a consequence of the first sin, however ambiguous—precisely due to the sin—a human life might turn out. Even human weakness and sinfulness cannot 'cancel' the original truth: the fact that man and woman have been created for each other.

A human being needs to belong to someone. Man and woman have been created free and they want to live their freedom in concrete situations of life. However, although freedom is a fundamental value, it is not the principal one. Freedom is given to men and women so that they can realize other values, including the greatest one among them, namely that of, love. In other words, only free beings are capable of love and human beings have been given freedom precisely because they can love. We encounter a paradox here: a person who loves is free and belongs to herself, but at the same time she wants to belong to another. Although modernity understands freedom primarily as autonomy and independence, it turns out that the experience of belonging to each other in love not only does not diminish one's freedom, but also turns out its best fulfillment. Perhaps the greatest misfortune one can experience is to feel one does not belong to anyone. John Paul II addressed the importance of love in his first encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, where he said, "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."[14]

[14] John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis*, March 4, 1979 (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1979), Section 10.

Now, marriage and family are a privileged space where one experiences participation and donation. The family is a community of the gift, because it is founded on the mutual gift of persons: the gift which is simultaneously the most fundamental principle of its existence. Through spousal love, man and woman in a certain sense redefine themselves by redefining their identity, and from now on neither of them can live without a reference to the other person, with whom they are bound by the bond of gift. Neither of them can say what they want without considering what their loved one wants. Karol Wojtyła developed that theme in his three-act play *The Jeweler's Shop*. In one of its scenes, Teresa, a young woman who is in love, reflects, as she is standing in front the window of a shoe-shop,

> I was looking for high-heeled shoes.
> There were many sports shoes,
> many comfortable walking shoes,
> but I was really straining my eyes
> for high-heeled shoes.
>
> Andrew is so much taller than I
> that I have to add a little to my height
> —and so I was thinking about Andrew,
> about Andrew and about myself.
> I was now constantly thinking about us two;
> he must surely think like this too—
> so he must rejoice at my thought.[15]

The thoughts that cross Teresa's mind reflect her experience of the presence of Andrew, which becomes the criterion of the decisions she takes, even the most banal ones, such as the choice of shoes to buy. The same idea was well explained by Rocco Buttiglione, a teacher of mine, who, in one of his lectures, said something like, 'When a friend of mine asks me whether I will accompany him in his trip to the mountains or to the seashore, I answer, "I do not know, first I need to know what my wife will think about it." I do not say this because I'm afraid to take the decision without her consent; rather, my love for my wife is greater than my love for the mountains, or for the sea, and I really do not know what I want without knowing what she wants.'

Thus, the experience of belonging to each other, which is characteristic of marriage, leads one to a discovery of the original meaning of freedom, which does not consist in doing whatever we might happen to wish to do in a particular situation (the kind of freedom we share with animals, which are free

[15] Karol W o j t y ł a, *The Jeweler's Shop: A Meditation on the Sacrament of Matrimony, Passing on Occasion into a Drama*, trans. Bogusław Taborski (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 32.

in that they follow their instincts), but in the ability to give ourselves, in love, completely to another person. In such a context, John Paul II would usually quote the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* of the Second Vatican Council, which teaches, as follows:

> 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. This likeness reveals that man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.[16]

This ability—the ability to express the gift love—is already present in the body of the human person, who, says Cardinal. Angelo Scola, is created from the beginning as a "dual unity".[17] This fundamental truth has been inscribed in the constitution of the human body either as male or as female: man and woman have been created for each other. John Paul II beautifully says,

> The human body, with its sex—its masculinity and femininity—seen in the very mystery of creation, is not only a source of fruitfulness and of procreation, as in the whole natural order, but contains "from the beginning" the "spousal" attribute, that is, the power to express love: precisely that love in which the human person becomes a gift and—through this gift—fulfills the very meaning of his being and existence.[18]

Marriage creates a natural space for spousal love. However, neither modern anthropology nor modern social or political philosophy has given much attention to this experience. The main reference point for contemporary philosophical thought remains the human being seen as an individual who needs to be socialized, for which purpose a certain amount of violence is required. It is perhaps due to that focus that modernity has worked out the concept of freedom in which every other person is seen as a threat. Others are considered as competitors rather than collaborators in their exercise of freedom.

It is not surprising that, within such a vision of man and his freedom, human bonds, also the bond of marriage, become fragile. If one is interested primarily in the potential benefit the bond that ties a person to another might bring, the relationship is going to rest on the result of the calculation of its advantages and disadvantages. A constant evaluation serves as the yardstick

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[16] The Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, Section 24, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

[17] See Angelo S c o l a, *The Nuptial Mystery* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 11.

[18] J o h n P a u l II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, 185−6.

of the judgment whether the bond is worth keeping. Appraisal of this kind actually needs to be made even before the relationship starts and, consequently, marriage is not considered in such cases as a stable union or one 'for life.' Rather, throughout its course, marriage is continually subject to assessment, which is to prove whether it pleases both parties. Should marriage not bring the expected satisfaction to either of them, there are no longer reasons for continuing it. This specific turn in the understanding of marriage has been aptly described by sociologists.[19]

Freedom conceived as independence from others necessarily implicates loneliness. Although Adam was initially alone, his solitude ultimately resulted in encountering Eve and in his communion with her: "The two of them become one body," says the Book of Genesis in 2:24. On the modern view, however, human beings can feel truly free provided they do not develop strong bonds with others. They certainly have relationships, yet ones not deep enough to touch and change the identities of the persons involved. As a result, the experiences that build up a human life in modernity turn out shallow, as if stopping at the 'surface' of things, and nothing, not even love, can help persons overcome their original solitude.

From the perspective of modernity and postmodernity (which is in its essence a continuation and radicalization of modernity) everything becomes *liquid*. The term, coined by Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman,[20] is used to describe the fact that, in contemporary reality, nothing is stable, everything is temporary, and there are no lasting points of support. In a liquid society also love and marriage become liquid. In the cultural climate in which everything is short-lived, one can hardly imagine a bond which might last 'forever.' Marriage is no more than a contract, and its terms, freely set by the two parties in question, can be terminated any time, should either of them consider the other is failing to meet its provisions.

REVOCABLE AND IRREVOCABLE RELATIONS

Robert Spaemann reminds us that, "there is an immense appeal in the idea that the union of a man and a woman is 'written in the stars,'"[21] and that it is intended to last throughout their lifetimes despite the inevitable transformations

[19] See Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love & Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); Ulrich Beck, *The Normal Chaos of Love*, trans. Mark Ritter and Janet Wiebel (Oxford: Polity Press, 1995).

[20] See Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2000).

[21] Robert Spaemann, "Divorce and Remarriage," *First Things*, August 2014, https://www.firstthings.com/article/2014/08/divorce-and-remarriage.

it will undergo. Karol Wojtyła was well aware that human love is 'wounded' by sin and therefore needs a strong foundation. A poet's confession confirms this view. "Yet each man kills what he loves,"[22] wrote Oscar Wilde in his "Ballad of Reading Gaol." Indeed, with his merely human capacities, man is incapable of absolute, unambiguous love, even though he might sincerely wish it. Human love is necessarily marked by original sin, or, to use the language of theology, by concupiscence which has entered the human heart. Therefore human love needs to be once again made whole. However, this does not mean that human love, as it is, is not meant to be forever lasting; rather, its fragility should motivate the persons in question to seek support which will help them remain faithful to the vows they once made. The protagonists of the play *The Jeweller's Shop* are aware of this fact, and they reflect on their love, which has only just begun:

> How can it be done, Teresa,
> for you to stay in Andrew forever?
> How can it be done, Andrew,
> for you to stay in Teresa forever?
> Since man will not endure in man
> and man will not suffice.[23]

John Paul II teaches that the support human beings need is offered to them precisely in the sacrament of marriage, in which the mutual love of the man and the woman becomes united with divine love, which has never betrayed man and which, to show the human beings its irrevocability, chose to die on the cross. Through the sacrament of marriage, the newly wedded couple receives the grace of participation in this unconditional and definitive love, so that their mutual gift of self can also last forever in each other.

It is due to the mutual gift of self it implies that the spousal relationship may be described as unconditional and irrevocable. It embraces the 'common project for life' in which both the man and the woman participate on equal terms. Such a project not only encompasses the lives of the two of them, but transforms their existence into that of a 'community of life': their togetherness permeates their home, their parenthood, and their everyday problems.

Unlike the spousal bond, conditional and revocable relationships are not intended as 'projects for life' involving permanent engagement. They remain open to termination, should any of the conditions on which they rest not be

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[22] Oscar Wilde, "Ballad of Reading Gaol," https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/the-ballad-of-reading-gaol-by-oscar-wilde.

[23] Wojtyła, *The Jeweler's Shop: A Meditation on the Sacrament of Matrimony, Passing on Occasion into a Drama*, 41.

met. They are precarious in their nature, experienced as 'survival strategies,' and thus replaceable by more perfect ones.

In the an irrevocable relationship, the person is accepted in her entirety both in the synchronic sense (as she is now) and in the diachronic one (as she changes over time). This, however, is not tantamount to an uncritical acceptance of everything that the other is, and those who truly love their spouses want to help them follow their deepest vocation and, if necessary, overcome their shortcomings and vices. Contrary to popular belief, true love does not mean acceptance of everything the loved one does. Not even God loves us in such a way. But if God calls us to repent, it means that he does not want us to remain as we are now. He wants us to change our lives and our actions so that we can become more faithful to our human and Christian vocation. However, God remains faithful in his love for us in that he does not stop telling us, 'It is good that you exist.' In this sense, God's love for us is unconditional and irrevocable. And spousal love, which establishes an irrevocable relationship between the man and the woman, in some sense reflects this love of God.

In contrast to the marital bond, in a revocable relationship, the other is accepted 'under certain conditions,' rather than being affirmed in the totality of his or her being; what is affirmed is certain characteristics of the person which meet the desires and expectations of her partner.

The spousal relationship is public in the sense that husband and wife take responsibility for each other (as well as for their children) before the society. Marriage is a natural and privileged environment in which children are born and educated. There is no better alternative for the education and bringing up of children than the family in which both parents fulfill their respective roles. It is in the family that the children receive "the gift of humanity,"[24] as John Paul II put it.

As opposed to the 'revocable' relationships characteristic of modern times, generally perceived as 'private matters' and not expected to accept any responsibilities towards the society, marriage has a fundamental social role and needs to enjoy a special recognition by public authorities (*favor iuris*).

In the case of a spousal relationship, the freedom of the persons in it is accomplished through their 'mutual belonging to each other,' which, however, does not undermine the individual nature of either person, but offers each of them an opportunity to reach their full human potential, and the same is true about children reared in families. Being a husband, a wife, a son or a daughter in a family creates a profound relationship with its other members which cannot be simply cancelled. It is perhaps most evident in the case of the relation-

[24] John Paul II, Letter to Families *Gratissimam Sane*, February 2, 1994, (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), Section 16.

ship between parents and their children: despite all the vicissitudes of life, one can never stop being a son or a daughter of one's parents. A relationship of a similar nature is established also between husband and wife, and since it defines their identity, it cannot simply expire. By contrast, in a revocable relationship the parties wish to preserve their respective 'autonomies' and, as a result, the bond between them does not really affect their identities, and is ultimately is considered as contingent.

At the base of the spousal relationship there is sexual difference and complementarity of the sexes. Therefore, in a spousal relationship, having children is natural and is not perceived in terms of a difficult choice: it comes as a consequence of the spouses' mutual gift of self which finds its 'incarnation' in every child they conceive. Although not every morally licit union of a man and a woman can be fruitful in this sense, the aspect of 'transcendence towards the third person' should not be a priori ruled out from it. In his book *Love and Responsibility*,[25] Karol Wojtyła observes that the awareness of the possibility of becoming a mother (or a father) is decisive for the way in which the sexual union is experienced and gives existential significance to the sexual act as such, which then involves the whole person, with his or her personal destiny. Being a mother or a father is a lifelong vocation and taking responsibility for the conception of a child is a mark of the greatness of spousal love. It also makes it possible for the husband and the wife to experience more deeply who they are. In the religious perspective, still another aspect of the marital union may be observed: transcendence towards the *third one* means at the same time transcendence towards the *Third One*, or the Creator, who is present whenever a new person is being called to life. One can metaphorically say that by the decision of God the union between a man and a woman has been chosen as a privileged space in the world to create new life. In his theology of the body John Paul II observes:

> When they unite with each other (in the conjugal act) so closely so as to become "one flesh," man and woman rediscover every time and in a special way the mystery of creation, thus returning to the union in humanity "flesh from my flesh and bone from my bones" that allows them to recognize each other reciprocally and to call each other by name, as they did the first time.[26]

It is worth analyzing what happens once the dimension of transcendence towards the third one is intentionally excluded from the sexual union. In his book *Eroticism*, Georges Bataille describes the erotic experience as it is ap-

[25] See Karol W o j t y ł a, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (London and New York: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd. and Farrar, Straus and Giroux Inc., 1981).

[26] J o h n P a u l II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, 167.

pears on the grounds of the vision of man who is irreparably closed in himself. As Hume said, within such a vision, man is incapable of taking a step beyond himself and cannot overcome his solitude even in an erotic act. This means that even in the erotic act the person of the opposite sex is exploited and that this act involves a form of violence against the individuality of the other. Bataille writes:

> In essence, the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation…. What does physical eroticism signify if not a violation of the very being of its practitioners?—a violation bordering on death, bordering on murder? … On a lower level that this implied violence—a violence matched by the separate individual's sense of continuous violation—the world of habit and shared egotism begins, another mode of discontinuity, in fact.[27]

It is striking that Bataille does not refer in his analysis of the erotic act to its transcendent dimension, which we have described as the 'transcendence towards the third one.' It is perhaps due to this absence that, in Bataille's interpretation, the erotic act is incapable of fulfilling its promise and does not result in a true unity between the man and the woman. Instead, it manifests their dual selfishness. Although they reach out towards the other, they remain separate, living through their respective 'discontinuities.' In the case of a nuptial relation, as seen by John Paul II, the transcendence towards the third one, which provides the ultimate horizon of an erotic act, makes the man and the woman open themselves up to the gift of life which sums up their existence and is received in the child: the third one.

In this way, the spousal relationship, based on the irrevocable gift of self and open to the gift of life, can become a record of the history of the couple in question. Their shared history is built upon their common identity, impossible in the case of a revocable relationship, which can at best remain an important, albeit not decisive, event in the biographies of the persons who experience it. An irrevocable relationship embraces the whole person and owing to its solemn nature the couple can live through the drama of existence *and* taste the true flavor of life. A revocable relationship, instead, in its contingency does not 'touch' the person or change her deepest self, because the other is ultimately replaceable. While an irrevocable relationship is dramatic, a revocable one remains 'banal': it stops at the surface of things and makes it impossible for the persons involved to discover a deeper meaning of their lives.

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[27] Georges B a t a i l l e, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, trans. Mary Dalwood (San Francisco: City Light Books, 1986), 16−8.

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What is the future of the family? Social sciences teach us that family forms change over time. We have witnessed, for instance, the decline of the multi-generational family and its transition to the nuclear one, as well as the decline of the patriarchal family. The fact itself that the patterns of the family change does not yet tell us whether we are dealing with its progress or regression. In Western culture, we have definitely observed changes for better, such as the change of the once diminished position of the woman, or of the relationship between parents and children. There is, however, a 'horizon,' within which all the transformations of the family take place and should they go beyond this horizon, the essence of the marriage and the family as such will be changed. This 'essence' has been defined by sociologist Pierpaolo Donati as the 'genome of the family.'[28] Therefore, the basis of the family is the bond between the man and the woman, who—at least such is their intention—want to go beyond themselves by becoming parents. The family can only fulfill its social function if it remains what it is by its nature, that is, the communion of persons open to the conception of a new life, based on the principle of the irrevocable gift of self. And such is the teaching that the Pope of the family has left us.

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[28] Pierpaolo D o n a t i, *La famiglia: Il genoma che fa vivere la società* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubettino, 2013).

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ABSTRACT / ABSTRAKT

Jarosław MERECKI, Modernity and the Family, as seen in the Light of the Teaching of St. John Paul II

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Modern philosophy of man has assumed that the original human condition is that of conflict and has made this presumption its starting point. Consequently, it proposes that the originally unbounded freedom of human individuals be limited by means of a social contract. John Paul II juxtaposes this vision of man and society with his teaching on the community, in which the starting point is the relationship between a man and a woman who confirm their humanity by means of an unselfish gift of self to the other, rather than by subordinating the other to his or her will. Marriage and the family represent the type of community which is governed by the principle of gift. While the ways of understanding marriage and the family change throughout history, one can speak of an array of their original qualities which make up their essence as social institutions regardless of the historical period. Among them are: gift, reciprocity, sexuality, and parenthood. Together, they may be considered as a specific 'genome' of marriage and the family.

Keywords: family, person, community, relationship, love

Contact: Pontificio Istituto Teologico Giovanni Paolo II per le Scienze del Matrimonio e della Famiglia, Pontificia Università Lateranense, Piazza San Giovanni in Laterano 4, 00120 Città del Vaticano
E-mail: merecki@istitutogp2.it
http://www.istitutogp2.it/public/CV%20MERECKI%202014.pdf

Jarosław MERECKI, Nowoczesność i rodzina w świetle nauczania św. Jana Pawła II

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Nowożytna filozofia człowieka za swój punkt wyjścia przyjęła ideę konfliktu między jednostkami, których pierwotnie nieograniczona wolność zostaje ograniczona poprzez kontrakt społeczny. Tej filozofii Jan Paweł II przeciwstawia wizję człowieka, której punktem wyjścia jest relacja mężczyzna–kobieta, gdzie dwie osoby potwierdzają swoje człowieczeństwo nie poprzez poddanie drugiej osoby własnej woli, ale poprzez dar z siebie, który składają sobie nawzajem. Małżeństwo i rodzina są rodzajem wspólnoty, której wewnętrzną zasadą istnienia jest zasada daru. Sposoby rozumienia małżeństwa i rodziny zmieniają się w dziejach. Istnieje jednak podstawowy i istotny zbiór cech, które należą do istoty tych instytucji społecznych. Są to: dar, wzajemność, płciowość i rodzicielstwo, które stanowią swego rodzaju genom małżeństwa i rodziny.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzina, osoba, wspólnota, relacja, miłość

Kontakt: Pontificio Istituto Teologico Giovanni Paolo II per le Scienze del Matrimonio e della Famiglia, Pontificia Università Lateranense, Piazza San Giovanni in Laterano 4, 00120 Città del Vaticano
E-mail: merecki@istitutogp2.it
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