

The Image of God in Man Extended Upwards and Downwards Through Grace and Our Bodily Nature

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An understanding of the image of God in man is enriched by considering the extensions of that image upward through grace and downward through our bodily nature. We are in the image of God primarily through our intellect and will by which we can naturally know the truth and freely love and choose the good. These faculties are capable of elevation through grace, perfecting the image of God through faith in His revelation, hope in His supernatural goodness, and friendship love with Him. Our bodily nature, however, also extends the image of God “downwards” into the material realm, attaining aspects not available to the angels. This happens through our ability to participate with God in procreation and education, making possible the richness of complementarity between maternal and paternal gifts. Another aspect is artistic perception by which we can appreciate beauty in the material world, mold matter to express the spirit, and worship God through material sacramental symbols. Finally, our bodily nature makes possible the temporal dimension by which we can develop in the good, forgive, repent and convert, and so have a history of salvation, gifts denied to the angels because of their higher nature.

Mark Spencer makes a distinction between the primary way in which we are in the image of God through acts of knowing and loving ourselves and God, and four secondary ways of being in the image of God that arise from our bodily nature: procreation, the ability to create and participate in God’s providence, gender difference, and social communion. He argues, I think correctly, that the secondary aspects are grounded in the primary image and serve to *extend* that image into the bodily realm, *expressing* it there through the substantial union of body and soul: “What Aquinas called the secondary images of God are, on my view, extensions of the primary image.”¹

I would like to enlarge on the notion of extension of the image in Dr. Spencer’s paper, and also on the notion of the hierarchy of the universe that was stressed by Seamus O’Neill. The

¹ Mark K. Spencer, “Perceiving the Image of God in the Whole Human Person,” *The Saint Anselm Journal* 13.2 (Spring 2018) 1-18, at 17-18. See *Summa theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) I, q. 93, a. 3, trans. by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns, Oates, & Washbourne, 1920–1932): “We may speak of God’s image in two ways. First, we may consider in it that in which the image chiefly consists, that is, the intellectual nature. Thus the image of God is more perfect in the angels than in man, because their intellectual nature is more perfect, as is clear from what has been said (Q. LVIII., A. 3; Q. LXXIX., A. 8). Secondly, we may consider the image of God in man as regards its accidental qualities, so far as to observe in man a certain imitation of God, consisting in the fact that man proceeds from man, as God from God; and also in the fact that the whole human soul is in the whole body, and again, in every part, as God is in regard to the whole world. In these and the like things the image of God is more perfect in man than it is in the angels. But these *do not of themselves belong to the nature of the Divine image in man, unless we presuppose the first likeness*, which is in the intellectual nature; otherwise even brute animals would be to God’s image. Therefore, as in their intellectual nature, the angels are more to the image of God than man is, we must grant that, absolutely speaking, the angels are more to the image of God than man is, but that in some respects man is more like to God.”

extension of the image goes *upwards* as well as *downwards*. I shall reflect on how the primary image is elevated upwards by grace and glory, and is extended downwards *analogically* into the bodily realm through our bodily nature, thereby elevating and ennobling the physical order. I will also reflect on how the image of God in man and angels is alike with regard to openness to grace and glory, but *complementary* insofar as it extends into the bodily realm in man, which makes possible distinct ways that the image of God can exist uniquely in man.

Primary Aspects of the Image of God in Man (and Angel)

Man and angel share in the primary aspects by which we are made in the image of God: possession of intellect and will that can know and love God, by which we mirror, although in an infinitely deficient way, the divine life consisting in His infinite knowing and loving. With regard to intellect, the Angels can be said to be more perfectly in the image of God because of their higher intellectual faculties. However, it is not only the possession of spiritual faculties that determines the closeness of the image of God in the creature, but also the use that is made of them. Thus while the possession of spiritual faculties makes man and angel in the image of God, the operations of those faculties can bring the rational creature closer to that image.

Capable of Knowing Truth

The first defining characteristic of the created person as image of God is his intellectual nature. This characteristic leads to all the other properties of the person. Intellect gives man (and angel) a universal openness to being, enabling him to go *out of himself* and attain to *being and truth, to seek objective goodness*, and attain to knowledge of God as First Cause. As Aristotle said and St. Thomas frequently repeated, through our intellect and will “the soul in some way is all things.”²

Our rationality makes us capable of knowing truth, and seeking it for its own sake. The capacity to know the truth makes us capable of knowing the truth about the good, of knowing true goodness, and of ordering all else to it. Our capacity to know the truth about the good enables us to form dictates of conscience and thus to determine ourselves morally. We can say that our ability to know truth—because we are *rational* animals—is the foundation of our human dignity.

Because man can know the truth, he is open to accepting the witness of Christ, who manifests Himself to be “*the truth*.”³ Only persons can know the truth as such; every being capable

² See Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 3.8.431b; St. Thomas, *De veritate*, q. 24, a. 10, ad 2 (my translation): “Corporal nature is distinct from spiritual nature. Corporal nature is determined to a certain genus, and therefore, nothing else can become connatural to it, without corrupting its nature entirely. . . . But spiritual nature is made in such a way that its being is undetermined, and open to all things; as is written in III *De anima*, ‘The soul is in some way all things.’”

³ See Karol Wojtyła, *Sign of Contradiction* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 120: “Christ, the great prophet, is the one who proclaims divine truth; and he is also the one who shows the dignity of man to be bound up with truth: with truth honestly sought, earnestly pondered, joyfully accepted as the greatest treasure of the human spirit, witnessed to by word and deed in the sight of men. . . . Every man is born into the world to bear witness to the truth according to his own particular vocation.”

of knowing the truth as such is a person. Through this property the created person transcends himself, since his spiritual nature is intrinsically oriented towards universal truth and goodness.

Secondly, our intellectual nature makes us specifically like the Trinity of Persons, because to know is an immanent activity that involves the production of an interior word, and that word arouses the desire of love.

Capable of Love

Because of our rational nature, we can know the truth about the good. Knowing the good makes it possible to love the good on account of its own goodness.

Our capacity to love mirrors God in two ways. St. Thomas makes an important distinction between love of concupiscence and love of benevolence or friendship.⁴ In every act of love we love *some good* for *someone*. The aspect by which love is directed to some good is referred to as love of concupiscence (or love of desire or eros). The love directed to the person for whom we will the good, is called love of benevolence (or agape). When love of benevolence is mutual, it is love of friendship. Of the two, love of benevolence has a primacy, because it is the motive for love of desire. We love goods for the sake of persons.

Both aspects enter into the image of God, mirroring His own infinite love of the Good, and His self-giving love of benevolence. Our love of desire (eros) images God insofar as we love and seek God as the supreme good, and also insofar as we love and seek universal and transcendent goods, such as truth, beauty, communion, which are fully realized in God. Man is in the image of God through his will above all because of his capacity for love of friendship. Love of friendship, by which we will the good for our friend for the friend's sake, culminates in self-gift, by which we will our friend to be enriched not merely by external gifts, but by the gift of ourselves being *for* them. In the love of friendship, especially spousal friendship, the friends or spouses become mutually *for* one another. This is an image of the procession of the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son as the uncreated Gift of divine love.

The will images God in every act of genuine love of friendship or benevolence. It mirrors Him still more, however, when that act of friendship love is directed to God Himself. This, however, requires grace. Let us now turn to the elevation of the image of God by grace and glory.

⁴ ST I-II, q. 26, a. 4: "As the Philosopher says (*Rhetoric* 2.4), 'to love is to wish good to someone.' Hence the movement of love has a *twofold tendency*: towards the good which a man wishes to someone (to himself or to another) and towards him to whom he wishes some good. Accordingly, man has *love of concupiscence towards the good that he wishes to another, and love of benevolence towards him to whom he wishes good*. Now the members of this division are related as primary and secondary: since what is loved with the love of friendship is loved simply speaking and for itself; whereas what is loved with the love of concupiscence, is loved, not simply speaking and for itself, but for something else."

Elevation of the Image of God by Grace

The primary image of God through knowledge and love in human beings and angels exists on three levels: nature, grace, and glory. Because of our natural capacity to know and to love, by which we are primarily in the image of God, both human and angelic natures are *capax Dei*, which means that we are capable of being elevated to receive a participation in the divine nature, without losing our own nature and identity. St. Thomas and scholastic theologians speak of this as an obediential potency specific to the rational creature.⁵ In this regard humans and angels are equal, for the realization of these obediential potencies is infinitely above the natural proportionality both of angels and of human beings.

The three theological virtues involve a supernatural elevation of our acts of intellect and will to know and love God in a higher way. Faith enables us to know God in His inner life and plan of salvation insofar as He reveals Himself. Hope elevates love of desire, ordering the will to desire perfect beatitude in God as our final end, through God's aid. Charity elevates love of friendship, enabling us to love God with a spousal and filial love.

The image of God is made perfect in a soul in glory because that soul knows God face to face, and not just through the mirror of creation. Charity likewise will be made perfect and indefectible. The soul in glory will be an image of the procession of the Word, through the beatific vision, and of the spiration of the Holy Spirit through beatific love.

St. John of the Cross, speaking about the state of mystical matrimony with God, gives a magnificent description of how the soul in grace and glory becomes an image of the divine processions. He connects the act of beatific love with the procession of the Holy Spirit. Since the soul in glory loves God with the same love with which God loves Himself, by which the Holy Spirit eternally proceeds, St. John of the Cross concludes that the beatified soul, through its act of perfect charity, participates in the very spiration of the Holy Spirit:

By his divine breath-like spiration, the Holy Spirit elevates the soul sublimely and informs her and makes her capable of breathing in God the same spiration of love that the Father breathes in the Son and the Son in the Father. This spiration of love is the Holy Spirit himself, who in the Father and the Son breathes out to her in this transformation in order to unite her to himself. There would not be a true and total transformation if the soul were not transformed in the three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity in an open and manifest degree.

And this kind of spiration of the Holy Spirit in the soul, by which God transforms her into himself, is so sublime, delicate, and deep a delight that a mortal tongue finds it indescribable, nor can the human intellect, as such, in any way grasp it. Even what comes to pass in the communication given in this temporal

⁵ For the notion of obediential potency, see Feingold, *The Natural Desire to See God according to St. Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* (Ave Maria: Sapientia Press, 2010), 105–114.

transformation is unspeakable, for the soul united and transformed in God breathes out in God to God the very divine spiration that God—she being transformed in him—breathes out in himself to her.⁶

God is not content to enable the soul to receive Him perfectly in the vision, conforming the soul to the generation of the Son, but enables the soul to perfectly give not only herself, but the uncreated Love back to God, conforming the soul to the Holy Spirit.⁷ In beatitude, then, both for men and angels, the image of God is brought to perfect likeness, and the divine processions are mirrored in the most perfect way outside of God.⁸

Extension of the Image of God to Man's Bodily Nature

Let us look now at how the image of God in man is complementary to that of the angels because of its extension into the physical world of time and space through involving man's body and history. Although the angels have a higher nature than ours, being pure spirits endowed with higher intellects, it is interesting that there are certain ways that human beings are in the image of God more perfectly than angels, precisely because of our lower nature, which is bodily. At first sight this seems paradoxical, but it illustrates the principle of complementarity, by which creatures whose nature is lower in nature one way nevertheless have certain gifts that their higher counterparts lack. Creation is structured both by hierarchy and complementarity.

Hierarchy and Complementarity in Creation

God wills to communicate His goodness outside of Himself, and He wills to maximize this goodness by creating all the different levels of goodness by which His infinite goodness can be participated by creatures. Since God infinitely transcends any creature that could be created, many levels of created goodness more fully represent God's goodness than any one level would, no matter how great. And if there are many levels, this will mean that some levels will be higher, endowed with more and greater perfections, and others will be lower, endowed with fewer and lesser perfections. But all the levels taken together produce a more excellent universe than if only the highest levels were created. This is the key principle for understanding the hierarchy of creation.

In contrast to positions that ascribe the variety of creatures to chance and dynamic natural necessity, St. Thomas assigns the fundamental cause of the variety of creatures to the divine

⁶ *Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 39, no. 3, in *Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publ., 1979), 558.

⁷ By the way, this sheds light on the disputed question of whether beatitude is essentially an act of the intellect or the will, or of both. To be an image of the Trinitarian processions beatitude must involve both faculties in an order and in a complementary way. It seems that both the receiving (beatific vision) and the self-giving (beatific love) essentially constitute the essence of supernatural beatitude.

⁸ See *In I Sent.*, d. 14, q. 2, a. 2.

wisdom and love that desires to produce a maximum communication of the divine goodness outside of Himself.

Hence we must say that the distinction and multitude of things come from the intention of the first agent, who is God. For He brought things into being in order that His goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided; and hence the whole universe together participates the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever.⁹

Aristotle compares the different grades of goodness found in different species to the multiplicity of numbers. A higher species is like a higher number to which an additional perfection has been added that is lacking to a lower species. St. Thomas explains:

Now, formal distinction always requires inequality, because as the Philosopher says (*Metaph.* viii. 10), the forms of things are like numbers in which species vary by addition or subtraction of unity. Hence in natural things species seem to be arranged in degrees; as the mixed things are more perfect than the elements, and plants than minerals, and animals than plants, and men than other animals; and in each of these one species is more perfect than others. Therefore, as the divine wisdom is the cause of the distinction of things for the sake of the perfection of the universe, so is it the cause of inequality. For the universe would not be perfect if only one grade of goodness were found in things.¹⁰

Creation, however, displays not only hierarchy, but also complementarity. Gifts are said to be complementary when they are unequal and mutually enrich each other. just as creation is endowed with hierarchy so that God's goodness can be participated in it at all different levels, so too it is endowed with complementarity, which also makes it resemble the triune God, in whom the three divine Persons are infinitely complementary in their distinction of relation.

Creatures complement one another because God divides His gifts among creatures, giving some gifts to some and other gifts to others. The complementarity of different and unequal created gifts makes possible a mutual enrichment because a creature with one set of gifts supplies what a creature with a different set lacks.

Man's Place in the Hierarchy of Creation

⁹ *ST I*, q. 47, a. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

Because man is a rational animal whose essence is comprised of both soul and body, his bodily nature enables the primary image of God present in the acts of intellect and will to be extended into the bodily realm, elevating it to participate in the spiritual. This is in harmony with man's place in creation as the intersection of the spiritual and the material.

Man's place in the hierarchy of creation is not to be the top, as we sometimes like to think, but the center, uniting the spiritual and the material realms in our composite nature. We are in the image of God because of our spiritual nature, but we extend God's image into the physical realm because our nature is also bodily. Man's place lies right in the middle, at the top of one half of creation, the physical creation, but at the bottom of the other invisible half of creation, the spiritual creation, peopled by myriads of angels. Psalm 8 has eloquent words on this subject, as the Psalmist marvels at man's place in the cosmos:

What is man that you are mindful of him? Or the son of man that you visit him?
You have made him a little less than the angels, you have crowned him with glory
and honor: And have set him over the works of thy hands. You have subjected all
things under his feet, all sheep and oxen: moreover the beasts also of the fields. The
birds of the air, and the fishes of the sea, that pass through the paths of the sea. O
Lord our Lord, how admirable is your name in all the earth!¹¹

The Psalmist indicates that man's position in the cosmos is higher than all the beasts, but lower than the angels. Man occupies a unique and central position in the hierarchy of creation, as the intersection of the material and spiritual worlds. This is the profound sense in which man is said to be a *microcosm*—a cosmos in miniature or “little universe.” Man is a little universe because he has in himself both orders that God created. In his body is the perfection and summary of the physical universe, and in his soul is a part of the spiritual universe, although in its lowest form. Man unites in himself all the different levels of God's creation, extending the image of God into the bodily realm.

While man is a microcosm in relation to the whole of creation, he is also head with respect to material creation. All material creation is for the sake of man, and it achieves its end of giving glory to God through man and man's act of contemplation of God through creatures. God has given to mankind in general a kingship or headship over the rest of the material creation, as seen in the first chapters of Genesis that is a participation in God's kingship. God set man in the garden to tend and cultivate it, and gave him the order to dominate the earth. Thus the image of God in man's soul extends to his dominion over the physical world. We shall return to this below.

The fact that the created image of God exists in two fundamental levels—angelic and human—is a beautiful example of the principle of complementarity in creation. In the angel, the primary image of God is more perfect. But in man the image is extended through the body to make

¹¹ Psalm 8:5–10, Douay Rheims version.

possible an imaging of God that the angels cannot directly share in, and which involves the physical world, drawing it up to participate in God's image.

We shall examine two spheres of this extension: (a) procreation, sexuality, marriage and the family, and social communion, and (b) technology, art, symbolism, and sacramentality. Both of these spheres are indicated in Genesis 1:26–28.

Man's Spousal Nature

In his catecheses on Genesis, John Paul II has developed the theology of the body, in which he brings out the “spousal meaning of the body.”¹² The human body, as male and female, participates in the dignity of being created in the “image of God,” and is a created sign of God's inter-Trinitarian communion and fecundity.

We have said that man is created in the image of God principally through the spiritual nature of his soul, which is capable of knowing and loving God, but that because of the substantial unity of body and soul in human nature, bodily factors in our nature are elevated by the spiritual nature of our soul, and are given a spiritual dimension. This is the case with regard to human sexuality and affectivity. Man's sexuality, therefore, is also an aspect of our being created in the image of God.

St. John Paul II stresses the fact that Genesis 1:27–28 intimately links man's being created *in the image of God* and man's being created with two genders, *male and female*, through which God calls men to marriage and procreation. We can see something mysterious in this connection. In what sense does human sexuality participate in our being made in the image of God?

Human sexuality is transformed and elevated by being the sexuality of a spiritual creature. Human sexuality can never be reduced to a purely biological category, for it is intimately affected by man's being *in the image of God*. In man, sexuality acquires a deep spiritual dimension, for it is the sexuality of a *person* made for spousal union, and is ordained to the procreation of a person with an immortal soul that is *capax Dei*.

Unitive Dimension of Human Sexuality: Orientation to Communion

Sexuality extends the image of God in man in two ways, which coincide with the unitive and procreative meanings of the conjugal act. First, human sexuality gives man a natural inclination to seek interpersonal communion through matrimony and the formation of a family, the most basic cell of society. Human sexuality profoundly inclines man to seek his complement in another person, with whom he may join in a common project of life. Man is created in such a way that he is not self-sufficient, but is a profoundly social creature, drawn naturally to making a full gift of self to another person. On the natural level, he needs a “helper,” a complement, a person

¹² See especially the above-mentioned General Audience of January 9, 1980.

with whom he can enter into a mutual relationship of love and most intimate collaboration, in order to generate and educate other persons.¹³

Through this natural orientation to form a family, man is oriented to social communion in its larger forms as well, which are analogically likened to the family, and in which we also find the aspects of complementarity that mark the family. Man's spousal nature, therefore, gives man an opening to the social communion that will find its fullness in the Church triumphant.

This natural inclination towards matrimony does not mean, of course, that all men and women are called to matrimony or that they can only find their fulfillment in it, for the impulse to spousal communion implanted in human nature can find an immeasurably higher fulfillment on the supernatural level. The spousal nature of the human being, as elevated by grace, orients us toward a spousal relationship with God. The natural inclination to matrimony thus provides a natural preparation or foothold for elevation to spousal union with God and to a supernatural familial life in the communion of the Church.

Since man learns about supernatural realities by analogy with the natural realities experienced first through the senses, the spousal nature of man and the natural inclination toward marriage and the forming of a family serves thus as a natural analogy to reveal and prepare for the supernatural dimensions of mankind's call to union with God.

John Paul II has explained in numerous texts how the notion of "image of God" includes man's natural inclination to enter into the communion of matrimony. In his General Audience of November 14, 1979, he explains:

The account in Genesis 2, by contrast, does not speak of the "image of God," but reveals, in the manner proper to it, that the complete and definitive creation of "man" (subject first to the experience of original solitude) expresses itself in giving life to the "*communio personarum*" that man and woman form. . . . We can deduce that *man became the image of God not only through his own humanity, but also through the communion of persons*, which man and woman form from the very beginning. The function of the image is that of mirroring the one who is the model, of reproducing its own prototype. Man becomes an image of God not so much in the moment of solitude as in the moment of communion. He is, in fact, "from the beginning" not only an image in which the solitude of one Person, who rules the

¹³ See the International Theological Commission, "Communion and Stewardship" 10: "Secondly, the creation accounts in Genesis make it clear that man is not created as an isolated individual: 'God created mankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them' (Gen. 1:27). God placed the first human beings in relation to one another, each with a partner of the other sex. The Bible affirms that man exists in relation with other persons, with God, with the world, and with himself. According to this conception, man is not an isolated individual but a person—an essentially relational being. Far from entailing a pure actualism that would deny its permanent ontological status, the fundamentally relational character of the *imago Dei* itself constitutes its ontological structure and the basis for its exercise of freedom and responsibility."

world, mirrors itself, but also and essentially the image of an inscrutable divine communion of Persons.¹⁴

This Trinitarian theme is further developed in John Paul II's Apostolic Letter On the Dignity and Vocation of Woman (*Mulieris dignitatem*) §7:

Moreover, we read that man cannot exist "alone" (cf. Gen 2:18); 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. Being a person in the image and likeness of God thus also involves existing in a relationship, in relation to the other "I." This is a prelude to the definitive self-revelation of the Triune God: a living unity in the communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

. . . In this way new light is also thrown on man's image and likeness to God, spoken of in the Book of Genesis. The fact that man "created as man and woman" is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created as a "unity of the two" in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God through the unity of the divinity, exist as persons through the inscrutable divine relationship. Only in this way can we understand the truth that God in himself is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:16).

The image and likeness of God in man, created as man and woman (in the analogy that can be presumed between Creator and creature), thus also expresses the "unity of the two" in a common humanity. This "unity of the two," which is a sign of interpersonal communion, shows that the creation of man is also marked by a certain likeness to the divine communion. . . . 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." . . . To say that man is created in the image and likeness of God means that man is called to exist "for" others, to become a gift.

These passages are primarily referring to the fact that human sexuality is a sign of man's call to the intimacy of interpersonal relationships. This natural desire of man to give himself to others in love is an image of the inner life of the Blessed Trinity. As also implied in these passages, marriage itself is a particular and profound form of interpersonal communion to which man is called. The unity and friendship that characterize the relationship of the spouses beautifully reflect the interpersonal communion of the triune God.

Procreative Dimension of Human Sexuality

¹⁴ *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 9:3, p. 163.

Secondly, human sexuality enables man and woman to be an image of God in another no less profound way. Through it man is able to participate in a properly human way with God's creation of other human persons. It thus involves man in a participation in God's paternity/maternity. This is an amazing privilege by which creatures enter in participation with God in the constitution of a new person with an immortal destiny, a person willed by God uniquely for his own sake. Thus through marital love and the integral education of their offspring, spouses participate in the highest part of God's creative activity *on the natural level*: the creation of a person.¹⁵ They participate in the gratuitous gift of a new person with an immortal soul, and their parental love is called to be a finite "image or likeness" of God's infinite love for each human person.¹⁶

Man's capacity to participate with God in the creation of new human persons is the natural foundation for a capacity to be elevated to a participation with God in the work of supernatural regeneration in the Church, through the exercise of spiritual maternity and paternity.

Thus those who are called by God to renounce matrimony for the priesthood or the religious life are intended by God to exercise a supernatural fecundity in spiritual paternity and maternity. Jesus shows the greater fecundity of spiritual paternity/maternity by promising a hundredfold for all who renounce spouse and children for the sake of the Kingdom of God: "Truly, I say to you, there is no man who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive manifold more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life" (Lk 18:29-30).

One of the great tragedies of original sin is that the spousal character of the body has become obscured due to disordered concupiscence: the lust of the flesh and the eyes (see 1 Jn 2:16). Nevertheless, the human body, as male and female, conserves its *spousal meaning* that stems from creation; it is a perennial sign of the "great sacrament" of marriage (see Eph 5:32), of the truth revealed in the beginning in Genesis 2:23-24: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh. . . . Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh." As St. Paul says: "This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the Church" (Eph 5:32). The spousal meaning of the body is a created image or figure of our supernatural call to enter into spousal union with Christ in the Church, and to give ourselves to Him as He has given Himself to us.

¹⁵ Of course, the re-creation of a soul in grace is an even greater work, on an infinitely higher level.

¹⁶ See John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* 14: "Conjugal love, while leading the spouses to the reciprocal 'knowledge' which makes them 'one flesh,' does not end with the couple, because it makes them capable of the greatest possible gift, the gift by which they become cooperators with God for giving life to a new human person. Thus the couple, while giving themselves to one another, give not just themselves but also the reality of children, who are a living reflection of their love, a permanent sign of conjugal unity and a living and inseparable synthesis of their being a father and a mother.

When they become parents, spouses receive from God the gift of a new responsibility. Their parental love is called to become for the children the visible sign of the very love of God, 'from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named' (Eph 3:15)."

The “Law of the Gift” as Key Aspect of the Image of God

Because the human person is made in the “image and likeness of God,” the human person is called to share in a unique way in one of the most sublime attributes of God, which is His outpouring of His own goodness to other beings, which He causes to share or participate in His goodness. God, in His relationship with creation, is the Giver of the gifts of existence, truth, goodness, and beauty to all things. His relationship to creation is that of Giver to gift. Furthermore, these gifts of existence, nature, truth, and goodness to each creature, according to the hierarchy of creation, can be described as a kind of awesome and sublime gift of God’s self. The nature and being of every creature is a finite *participation* or sharing in some aspects of God’s infinite goodness, truth, and Being.¹⁷

Furthermore, God’s gifts to creatures also include the capacity to share in God’s operation and causality in a unique way. God gives to each creature certain kinds of operations and exercise of causality. In inanimate things this participation of God’s causality is impersonal, exercised through physical properties such as gravitation, electromagnetism, movement, etc. In living things it is much greater. Man has a more significant sharing in God’s causality and providence, in that man is called to freely govern the earth and subdue it, exercising a participated providence over it.

God also gives Himself to the rational creature in a fuller sense, for He gives not just a sharing in being and in His causality, but He gives Himself in friendship, to be known and loved, as He knows and loves.

Man too is called to be an image of God in this respect. Man is called to freely communicate to others the goodness which he has received from God. Because this communication of the goodness received constitutes a great likeness to God’s infinite self-giving, it is fitting that man find his perfection and happiness in passing on that goodness to others.

This “law of the gift” corresponds to the nobility of man’s nature. Each creature, according to his place in the hierarchy of creation, possesses himself in a lower or higher degree. Because he has free will, man possesses himself in such a way that he can freely give himself to others, in imitation of God, thus communicating the goodness received.

Since God possesses Himself absolutely, His own gift of self has an absolute and infinite aspect. God’s own gift of self manifests itself in two ways. There is an infinite, eternal, inter-Trinitarian gift which is the generation of the Son and the procession of the Holy Spirit. There is also a finite gift which God makes to creatures, in giving them existence, essence, and operation to an end, which is ultimately to manifest the glory of the infinite ocean of Being and Love that is God.

¹⁷ Nevertheless, it must always be remembered that there is an infinite gap between the infinite Plenitude of Perfection which is God, and the finite goodness and being of a creature, no matter how exalted.

In the inter-Trinitarian gift, the Father exists eternally for the Son, and the Son for the Father. And the Holy Spirit exists for both, and both for the Holy Spirit. This being “for” the other does not diminish the Persons of the Trinity, but constitutes their ineffable glory.

In creating the human person and calling him to the final end of the beatific vision, God began to exist also “for” the human person (in an analogous sense), for whom He Himself wills to be our eternal beatitude.¹⁸ Indeed, God does not disdain to be called the God *of* Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Likewise the human person is called to exist for others. Above all for God who has loved him first, and then for other human persons with whom he is called to share in the communion of marriage, family, friendship, or society.

This theme is expressed in a great text of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes* 24, which connects man’s fulfillment with a participation in the infinite self-giving and communion of the inter-Trinitarian life:

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*.

John Paul II quoted this text countless times in a great many contexts,¹⁹ but especially in reference to spousal love as it reflects the Trinitarian communion. In the catecheses on the “theology of the body,” John Paul speaks of the capacity for gift of self as “*a particular characteristic of personal existence*, or even of the very essence of the person.”²⁰ In interpreting the text of Genesis 2, he writes:

In this way, then, these two expressions, that is, the adjective “alone” and the noun “help,” seem truly to be the key for understanding the essence of the gift on the level of man, as the existential content inscribed in the truth of the “image of God.” In fact, the gift reveals, so to speak, *a particular characteristic of personal existence*, or even of the very essence of the person. When God-Yahweh says, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (Gen 2:18), he affirms that, “alone,” the man does not completely realize this essence. He realizes it only by existing “*with*

¹⁸ Of course, God does not change in Himself when He creates His creatures. However, in creating man, God has ordered man to Himself, such that man is for God, and God is “for” man as his end. Nevertheless, man’s beatitude is itself ordered to God, to manifest His infinite glory and goodness.

¹⁹ See the excellent article detailing John Paul II’s use of GS 24 by Pascal Ide, “Une Théologie du don: Les occurrences de *Gaudium et spes*, n. 24, 3 chez Jean-Paul II”, *Anthropotes* 17 (2001) 149-178, 313-344.

²⁰ General Audience of January 9, 1980, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 14:2, p. 182.

someone”—and, put even more deeply and completely, by existing “for someone.”²¹

Complementarity of the Sexes

The spousal meaning of the body implies that the two sexes are complementary. This complementarity is a consequence of man’s creaturely status, but it is also a likeness of the complementarity of the divine Persons.

God created man male and female, so that each sex might better manifest different aspects of God and of our common humanity. This complementary character is summarized in the distinction between paternity and maternity to which man and woman are called.²² God has endowed woman with a special aptitude for the particular virtues most intimately connected with her mission of maternity, and man with those more particularly connected with his mission of paternity.

The special characteristics of woman consist in a special aptitude for all that is oriented towards nurturing the new life that emerges from her womb. This entails a special attitude of attention to the personal sphere, to the concrete person in his totality, a special gift of empathy, intuition, and sensitivity to the other, to affectivity and the sphere of the heart. The gift of paternity, on the other hand, leads the male sex to be generally more oriented towards governance, production, and abstract thought.

Karol Wojtyla has spoken of a certain supremacy of the intellect over the heart in men, and of a primacy of the heart in women.²³ Pius XI, in *Casti connubii*, speaks of the husband as the head of the household and the wife as its heart. In this sense, gender serves as a type or figure of the two Trinitarian processions.

This complementarity between the sexes, which is as much spiritual as it is physical, is a source of great richness to humanity. It is this natural complementarity which makes possible the specifically spousal form of love that is realized in marriage, in which man and woman complement each other both as persons through their spiritual union, and as potential mothers and fathers through their bodily gift to each other. Indeed, their complementary maternity and paternity

²¹ Ibid., 182.

²² See Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Man and Woman: Love and the Meaning of Intimacy* (Manchester, NH: Sophia Institute Press, 1992), 37: “What matters in our context is to understand, first, that man and woman differ not merely in a biological and physiological direction, but that they are *two different expressions of human nature*; and, second, that the existence of this duality of human nature possesses a great value. Even if we prescind for the moment from all biological reasons as well as from procreation, we must see how much richer the world is because this difference exists, and that it is in no way desirable to efface as much as possible this difference in the spiritual realm, a trend which is unfortunately very widespread today.”

²³ See *The Way to Christ: Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Leslie Wearne (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 35–6, 51, 53 (Spiritual Exercises preached in 1962).

is realized only through the other, through their bodily union which manifests and is called to enrich their spiritual union of love.²⁴

That the gender complementarity within marriage is an image of God is made explicit by the fact that marriage is a sacrament, as we see in Ephesians 5. Every sacramental marriage is an image of Christ's love for His Bride. Christ's love for His Bride is itself an image of the inter-Trinitarian love uniting the Father and the Son.

Man as an Artistic Being

A second extension of the image of God into the bodily realm concerns man's artistic creativity, and his capacity for appreciating beauty and symbolism.

Man is naturally both a maker (*homo faber*) and an artist. Man is a "maker" in that he has the capacity through reason and hands to conceive of and to make material instruments of all different kinds. St. Thomas Aquinas, in discussing the fittingness of the human body despite its lack of natural bodily instruments, says that "*man has by nature his reason and his hands*, which are 'the organs of organs' (*De anima* 3), since by their means he can make for himself instruments of an infinite variety, and for any number of purposes."²⁵ In this sense we could say that our hands are a sign of our being in the image of God, and our acts of making things an expression of that image.

It can be objected that animals can do some making and tool-using through their estimative sense, and perhaps machines and artificial intelligence can do so as well. I would respond that man is in the image of God not simply through the mere making of things, but through the activity of the intellect and will in conceiving and choosing that is then expressed and completed through the act of production.

But it is above all when we make things not simply for utilitarian purposes, but as an expression of beauty, harmony, and order that we image God, who has made the universe ordered sweetly "in measure, number, and weight" (Wisdom 11:21). Jacques Maritain expresses this eloquently: "So just as He made the world from matter, and from the slime of the earth made that great masterpiece of art, the human body, in the same way man in his turn, with his creaturely hands, makes great and beautiful things out of matter, an entire universe that is all his own."²⁶

²⁴ This complementarity of man and woman as ordered to marriage has been well expressed by D. von Hildebrand, *Man and Woman: Love and the Meaning of Intimacy*, 37: "Man and woman are spiritually oriented toward each other; they are created for each other. First, they have a mission for each other; second, because of their complementary difference, a much closer communion and more ultimate love is possible between them than between persons of the same sex.

Their mutual mission manifests itself in a wholesome mutual enrichment as well as in the mitigation of the dangers to which the masculine and the feminine type of human beings are exposed when they are deprived of this influence."

²⁵ *ST I*, q. 76, a. 5, ad 4.

²⁶ Jacques Maritain, *Untrammelled Approaches*, trans. Bernard Doering (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 412.

Capable of Responding to Beauty

In addition to being a maker of things, man is also a lover of beauty. Just as the capacity to respond to truth is a property of the person endowed with an intellectual nature, so too is the capacity to respond to beauty. Since the person is open to being and truth in its full range through intellect, it follows that he is also open to goodness and beauty, for these are part of the fullness of being. Only the person can be attracted by sheer beauty, independently of the practical utility grasped by the instinct of the animals. This opening of our nature to beauty is mysterious and difficult to grasp with rational analysis. Nevertheless, like rationality itself, the perception of beauty marks human life since the exultation of Adam at the creation of Eve.

The classical definition of beauty is “that which is pleasing to sight” (*quod visum placet*).²⁷ In this definition, “sight” is applied analogically also to other senses—such as hearing—and above all to the understanding, which is intellectual vision. Something is pleasing to vision insofar as it has a certain *order* and a due *proportion* among its parts and to its end. Thus beauty lies in things; like goodness it is something real and always accompanies *being*. Everything that is, insofar as it is, has a certain order and proportion that is suitable for pleasing either intellectual or sensible sight. Defect and disorder, on the contrary, are ugly, for they are a lack of the being that ought to be present.

In his commentary on *The Divine Names* of Dionysius, St. Thomas says: “There is nothing which does not participate in beauty and goodness, since everything is beautiful and good according to its own proper form.”²⁸

In a text discussing the second Person of the Trinity, St. Thomas assigns three characteristics to beauty: (a) integrity (forms an integral whole), (b) due proportion, and (c) clarity or splendor of form.²⁹ Only a rational being can grasp, in any given image, the qualities of integrity, proportion and harmony, and the clarity or splendor of form. Beauty is appropriated to the second Person of the Trinity as the perfect Image of the Father in which there is perfect integrity, harmony, and clarity.

Sensible beauty is grasped by the cogitative sense which spontaneously perceives the value, whether attractive or repugnant, of particular objects (in their particularity). However, this internal sense can grasp beauty only insofar as it belongs to a rational subject capable also of grasping universals. The human recognition of beauty involves a perception of some universal value in a particular sensible form. Thus the human perception of beauty involves the intersection of our sensitive and our rational nature. Adam, for example, exulted on seeing the beauty of Eve, as her

²⁷ St. Thomas, *ST I*, q. 5, a. 4, ad 1.

²⁸ St. Thomas, *In librum beati Dionysii De divinis nominibus expositio*, ch. 4, lect. 5 (my translation).

²⁹ *ST I*, q. 39, a. 8.

body was a manifestation in the physical world of her spiritual soul and her (spiritual) capacity for interpersonal communion and self-giving.

Man as a Symbolic and Religious Being

In addition to being a *maker* and a lover of beauty, man is also a *symbol-making* creature, precisely because he is endowed with senses, imagination, and intellect. Thus it is natural for us to use sensible images to represent our abstract ideas and values. All of human culture and communication is made up of a tremendous variety of signs and symbols.

Symbol-making is a beautiful imitation of God's activity in creation. Throughout creation God creates lower creatures as natural symbols of spiritual realities. I refer to this as the "typology of creation." And God also governs history in such a way that earlier historical events and persons are symbols or types of greater events or persons to come in Christ and the Church. Man's symbolic activity, especially when directed to God in religious worship, thus can be said to be an image of God's use of types in creation and salvation history.

Man is also a naturally religious being, in that he is naturally capable of knowing God's existence in a spontaneous and non-rigorous manner, and secondly that he naturally seeks to act on this knowledge by worship, expressed through sensible signs and acts, such as sacrifice.³⁰

The Sacramental Order

This aspect of man as a symbolic being is realized most sublimely in the sacramental order, in which the symbols instituted by Christ have the mysterious power of being vehicles of grace and divinization. In the sacraments, the downward extension to the physical aspect of our being in the image of God is made to be the means of the elevation of that image upwards to the supernatural order.

Conversion and Repentance: In Man the Image of God Has a Temporal Development

One final aspect of the way in which man is the image of God in his bodily aspect involves our temporal dimension and the capacity for repentance and spiritual development. This is a gigantic topic, and I am simply mentioning it for further reflection. In the angelic world, the image of God does not admit of growth, development, re-acquisition through repentance, or history. The

³⁰ See St. Thomas, *ST* II-II, q. 85, a. 1: "Natural reason tells man that he is subject to a higher being, on account of the defects which he perceives in himself, and in which he needs help and direction from someone above him: and whatever this superior being may be, it is known to all under the name of God. Now just as in natural things the lower are naturally subject to the higher, so too it is a dictate of natural reason in accordance with man's natural inclination that he should tender submission and honor, according to his mode, to that which is above man. Now the mode befitting to man is that he should employ sensible signs in order to signify anything, because he derives his knowledge from sensibles. Hence it is a dictate of natural reason that man should use certain sensibles, by offering them to God in sign of the subjection and honor due to Him, like those who make certain offerings to their lord in recognition of his authority. Now this is what we mean by a sacrifice, and consequently the offering of sacrifice is of the natural law."

human capacity for conversion and repentance make possible an image of God's providence that brings good out of evil, and *extends* the primary image of God, including its supernatural elevation, into the dimension of temporality, history, and development.

Because of man's temporal nature, God can be reflected through a sacred history on two levels: the personal history of each individual in the process of repentance and conversion, and in the larger history of society and the world in salvation history. Time itself is thus brought into the image of God to make possible a dynamic image of growth.

Finally, this temporal nature capable of repentance is also open to mercy and calls forth mercy. On account of our bodily nature, we are in constant need of aid by others, and called to aid. And since we sin and repent, we are in need of forgiveness and capable of working mercy through forgiveness.

Conclusion

In conclusion, an understanding of the image of God in man is greatly enriched by a consideration of the extensions of that image upward through grace and downward through our bodily nature. As we have seen, it is remarkable that our bodily nature, though lower than the angels, makes it possible for the image of God that is in us through our intellect and will to be extended through our bodies in manifold ways unavailable to the angels. The image of God in us is enriched by our sexuality and call to paternity or maternity, our capacity for art, symbol, and religious sacramental worship, our capacity for drama and repentance through our temporal nature, and our need to be receivers and givers of mercy and forgiveness.