

On the Natural and Revealed Meaning of Human Sexuality: Response to John Hittinger's "Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the Polis"

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In his essay, Prof. John Hittinger suggests that a metaphysical understanding of the human being is needed for an adequate understanding of human sexuality, and that the Christian faith sheds considerable, even new, light on such an understanding. Responding to this, this essay argues that in an anthropology that takes the body as integral to our human identity, in contrast to a Cartesian-like account which does not, human sexuality is naturally ordered to marriage as a procreative-unitive institution. As a body-soul composite unity, the human being enjoys a dual (yet inseparable) ordering to the joint goods of procreation and unitive love. The biblical account, particularly the Genesis creation narrative, confirms unequivocally this joint ordering and lends especial attention to the personalist or unitive ordering of our sexuality. That God himself, in his assumed humanity, takes on a (male) sexed nature, and that our sexuality gains a share in the sacramental economy through the sacrament of marriage indicates, indeed, what kind of "new" understanding of the meaning and purpose of human sexuality is offered in the Christian faith.

In his paper on the family and the polis in Plato and Aristotle, Professor Hittinger turns toward a metaphysical understanding of the human being in order to gain an adequate grasp of human sexuality, or sexual differentiation, and its place in political society. I agree wholeheartedly with this approach. (So does Pope Benedict XVI, I might point out, who near the end of his pontificate asserted "the very notion of what being human really means" is called into question when society attempts to deny the "true structure of the family, made up of father, mother, and child."¹)

I also appreciate Prof. Hittinger's signaling us to be mindful not only of our indebtedness to the Greeks, but also of the limitations of Greek thought, especially as concerns the sexual anthropologies of Plato (no surprise there) and even Aristotle (somewhat surprising here, and I thank Prof. Hittinger for instructing me on this element of the Stagirite's thought).

I further agree with the point on which Prof. Hittinger's paper concludes, namely, that it is to Christianity that we owe a fuller and truer account of man, an account that is theoretically accessible to reason alone, but which takes divine revelation, especially in the Incarnation, to be known. In other words, a sexual anthropology grounded in a proper metaphysics of human nature but which benefits from divine revelation provides a case in point of how philosophy, or reason, becomes purified by faith, or revelation. (It reminds me of the difference between classical sculpture and Renaissance sculpture; on the surface it would appear a Michelangelo is simply copying Greco-Roman sculptors, but he's not. He has a much deeper view of the human person

¹ This assertion came in Pope Benedict's 2012 year-end address to the Roman Curia, an annual address generally regarded as one of the most important papal statements of the year, as reported by the Vatican Information Service, "Family, Dialogue, New Evangelization: Central Themes of Benedict XVI's Address to the Roman Curia," Dec. 21, 2012; visnews-en.blogspot.com/2012/12/family-dialogue-new-evangelisation.html.

that I would suggest shows through in his sculpture, a view that one could argue traces back to the untold dignity of man wrapped up in the Christian doctrine of God become man.²) Equipped with a deeper and more refined view of the human person, we are in a position to recover a proper metaphysical regard of human sexuality and of its place in human society. To that end, I offer the following remarks.

A Metaphysics of Human Sexuality: Choosing a Cartesian or a Hylemorphic Anthropology

First, I would like to put in relief the danger of a lingering hangover of a Platonic anthropology, a hangover that was given a new life in the modern epoch by the father of modern philosophy, René Descartes. In my mind, the dominant anthropology with which the anthropology that Catholic tradition has made its own must contend is a Cartesian one. The Cartesian or rationalist view sees the human person essentially as a thinking “self” who is only loosely or accidentally bound to a body. The body does not enter into the essential definition of man and subsequently stands in fundamental and perpetual contest with the soul or the “self.” If I tie this anthropology in with Plato, it is because, as Professor Hittinger observes, “the body [according to Plato] is defined negatively, as the point of non-absorption into the common; it is treated as a secondary or non-essential feature of being human; sexuality is treated as a mere animal phenomenon.”³

The modern secular approach to sexual choices and lifestyles is largely predicated, even if merely implicitly, upon this Cartesian-styled anthropology. We know this because of the attitude taken toward our biological hardwiring. According to many today, the biological ordering to procreation is impertinent—if not outright hostile—to sexual love (unless we choose to make it otherwise) and places no inherent moral obligation upon us. Sex is more or less an affair of desire and love, with the (biologically-structured) body standing on the outside looking in (save for the pleasure enjoyed). Pope Benedict XVI, in one of his weightiest statements on the topic, put it insightfully when he charged this view with “disput[ing]” the notion that “bodily identity serves as a defining element of the human being,” as it instead conceives of the human being as “merely spirit and will.”⁴

² Here we are reminded of how, among the many reasons St. Thomas Aquinas offers for the fittingness of God’s having become man in *Summa contra gentiles*, Bk. IV, ch. 54, the Dominican Master mentions the fact that “man’s worth . . . is most fittingly indicated by God, since God joins himself immediately to human nature.”

³ John Hittinger, “Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*,” *The Saint Anselm Journal* 8.2 (Spring 2013), 7.

⁴ These remarks came again in his 2012 year-end address to the Roman Curia, as reported by Vatican Information Service, “Family, Dialogue, New Evangelization: Central Themes of Benedict XVI’s Address to the Roman Curia,” Dec. 21, 2012. Here are the Pontiff’s fuller remarks:

People dispute the idea that they have a nature, given by their bodily identity, that serves as a defining element of the human being. They deny their nature and decide that it is not something previously given to them, but that they make it for themselves. According to the biblical creation account, being created by God as male and female pertains to the essence of the human creature. This duality is an essential aspect of what being human is all about, as ordained by God. This very duality as something previously given is what is now disputed. . . . Man calls his nature into question. From now on he is merely spirit and will.

Possessing no inherent moral worth because non-essential to our human identity, the body, on the Cartesian-styled account, can be treated recreationally, like a toy. The body can be treated like a kind of morally neutral playground, where, as with Peter Pan in Never-Never Land, we prefer perpetually to play without a proper grown-up sense of moral responsibility. Consent, provided by the “self” (the soul), meets the only necessary condition for morally acceptable sexual activity. The body’s sole aim, at least sexually speaking, is utilitarian, namely, to provide pleasure or enjoyment for the self. In a certain respect, it is the modern equivalent of Prof. Hittinger’s referencing Plato’s “sexual mixing with one another,”⁵ i.e., highly depersonalized and dehumanizing sexual interaction, captured today by the popular phenomenon of hook-up sex.

Predicated on a disintegrated view of the human being, the Cartesian attitude leads to a destructive domination of the body. It incites us not to live in deferential harmony with our bodies, but to exploit and conquer our bodies, to use or manipulate our sexual organs as a mere means to satisfying sexual desire. This is to give echo to Prof. Hittinger’s reference to C.S. Lewis’s *Abolition of Man*,⁶ which warns us that a rationalist-like mastery of nature has led to the development of technology that has reaped the untold degradation of man. It matters not, say, if two bodies of the same sex lack the biological design for true oneness of flesh; all that matters (with the ever-growing support of our secular culture, and of technology in the case of confused sexual identity, or of those same-sex couples desiring to be “procreative”) is the mutually consenting love between the same-sex partners. Likewise, it matters not if heterosexual intercourse is biologically hardwired for conception; all that matters (with the help of technology) is the internal desire for sex and for the ensuing pleasure irrespective of this hardwiring. And on it goes.

A Cartesian-styled disdain for the body is not difficult to find in modern Catholic authors and moralists who dissent from the Church’s official line on sexual love, marriage and family, as their disparaging references to “biological function” and “procreative/physicalist processes” make clear. One author, for instance, tells us that Catholic moral teaching is driven by an “obsession” with the “mechanics of the pro-creative process.”⁷ Another takes issue with the way the Church takes “biological givenness as normative,” while a third proposes a moral theory that goes “beyond physicalism.”⁸ Still another accuses the Church of “reduce[ing] sex to a mere biological function” and of “turn[ing] human sexuality into a barnyard-animal affair.”⁹

⁵ Hittinger, “Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*,” 8.

⁶ Hittinger, “Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*,” 3.

⁷ This is from the Catholic priest and sociologist/novelist, Andrew Greeley, *Sex: The Catholic Experience* (Allen, Texas: Thomas More, 1994), 75 and 82; here Greeley also charges “conservative hierarchies” in the Catholic Church with holding “romantic love” in ill repute.

⁸ The former comes from Richard McCormick, “The Consistent Ethic of Life: Is There a Historical Soft Underbelly?,” in *The Critical Calling* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1989), 211-32 (cited in Romanus Cessario, *Introduction to Moral Theology* [Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001], 72, n. 50); the latter is from Philip S. Keane, *Sexual Morality: A Catholic Perspective* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 46. For the charge of physicalism or of biological determinism, see also Charles Curran, “Natural Law,” in his *Directions in Fundamental Moral Theology* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985);

We should not be fooled here. The charges of “physicalism” or of excessive importance placed upon biological processes and ends (biological determinism) act as nothing more than a ruse camouflaging an underlying Cartesian-like bias against the physical or biological order. Quite justly did Pope Benedict, who might be accused of being the “farmer” tending this “barnyard,” charge this view of the human being with promoting a veritable “debasement of the human body” and a “hatred of [human] bodiliness” (*Deus Caritas Est*, no. 5).

The anthropology appropriated by Catholic moral thought contrasts sharply with the Cartesian rationalist view, since it is one we can term an integrated or hylemorphic anthropology. This anthropology identifies the human being as a body-soul unity, wherein the individual is as much identified with his body as with his soul. A paradoxical union of body and soul, the human being is yet one.¹⁰

In the Church’s common tradition, the most ardent proponent of an integrated, hylemorphic anthropology is St. Thomas Aquinas, who himself in this regard draws deeply upon Aristotle. On Aquinas’s account, the human being is a unified composite of organic matter (which he shares with all other animals) and a rational form (which is unique to him), of an animal body joined to an immaterial or spiritual soul.¹¹ Underscoring the nobility that such an account accords the body, Aquinas in one passage does not hesitate to assert that the human body, because of its dignity of being fitted for a rational soul, stands apart from all other bodies as the most excellent expression “of the divine art” (*ab arte divina*).¹² The human body represents the divine Artist’s highest artistic achievement!

The Church continues to promote this integrated view of the human being. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, for instance, citing the Council of Vienne (1311-12), affirms: “The unity of soul and body is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the ‘form’ of the body. . . . [S]pirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature” (no. 365). Pope Benedict echoed this in his inaugural encyclical letter on love,

and Timothy O’Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978), ch. 14, “The Nature of Natural Law.”

⁹ Daniel A. Helminiak, *Sex and the Sacred: Gay Identity and Spiritual Growth* (New York: Harrington Park Press, 2006), 92-3; here the psychotherapist and moral theologian Helminiak also writes: “Psychological studies show that the *distinctive* function of human sex is intimacy and relationship, not procreation” (emphasis his).

¹⁰ “Radiance of the flesh” is how Dante’s *Divine Comedy* expresses the exalted view of the body in this anthropology (*Paradiso*, Canto XIV, trans. Anthony Esolen [New York: Modern Library, 2004], 147). Here Dante is affirming how our humanity will be “lovelier for being whole” when our souls are “robed about” with the glorified, yet still material body at the final resurrection. No mere husk or shell, the human body, on Dante’s account, is a glorious “robe” for the human soul. Without the body, in other words, the human being, particularly in the case of the separated soul awaiting the final resurrection, remains incomplete.

¹¹ Aquinas affirms in *Summa theologiae* (hereafter *ST*) I, q. 76, a. 6 ad 3: “the intellectual soul is united by its very being (*per suum esse*) to the body as a form.” Previously in I, q. 29, a. 1 ad 5, Thomas maintains: “the soul ever retains its nature of unibility (*unibilitatis*) [with the body].” For a more profound look at the metaphysical hylemorphic conception of the human being in Aquinas, cf. Anton Pegis, *St. Thomas and the Problem of the Soul in the Thirteenth Century* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute for Mediaeval Studies, 1978).

¹² *ST* I, q. 91, a. 3.

Deus Caritas Est: “it is neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves, it is man, the person, a unified creature composed of body and soul, who loves” (no. 5).

Human sexuality shares in an especial way in our hylemorphic constitution as body-soul composite beings. How so? First and foremost, it is primarily as *embodied* that we own a sexed nature in the first place. Indeed, the very basis of the sexual differentiation between male and female, obviously the distinguishing mark of sexuality as such, is our animal bodiliness, as seen in the simple biological fact that the sex chromosomal complement determines one’s sex. Sex cannot be affirmed of angels and of God, because neither angels nor God (except in reference to the Incarnation) have bodies.¹³ We do. And so we are sexed. St. Thomas Aquinas once observed that certain essential human attributes follow necessarily upon our rational animal-like nature, such as risibility, as owing to our rational form, and male/female sexuality, as owing to our having animal-like bodies.¹⁴ Human sexuality, inclusive of our affective loves and desires, necessarily implies embodied alterity, embodied complementarity.

In brief, without our bodiliness, without our animality, we have no truly satisfactory way of explaining the male-female sexual complement. Human sexuality implies embodied alterity, embodied complementarity. While this point may seem incontrovertible, especially as we consider it in light of the entire animal kingdom, we should not take it for granted, since one would search in vain for references to human bodiliness in various Cartesian-styled definitions of human sexuality that circulate today (“Sexuality refers to an intimate aspect of identity through which human beings experience an understanding of self and connectedness to others, the world, and God,” is how one of them goes.¹⁵) The point holds as well for those well-intentioned Catholic moralists, otherwise in good standing with the Church, who, representing the “personalist” school of thought, locate the ground of human sexuality not in our embodied animality per se, but in the Trinitarian relations; maleness and femaleness, they argue, should be looked upon as strict relational properties constitutive of personhood, like the Trinitarian relation of Father and Son, rather than constitutive of our embodied, animal-like nature.

That human sexuality as an embodied reality is hardwired for a predetermined end, namely, procreation, is plainly obvious. Unless we wish to abstract biology outright from our

¹³ “[T]hough invisible in his own divine nature, he has appeared visibly in ours.” From Preface II of the Mass for the Nativity of the Lord.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *De ente et essentia*, chs. 5-6; cf. Aristotle, *Metaph.*, Bk. X, ch. 11 (1058b21-23). Here St. Thomas notes that only those essential attributes that ensue upon the human form (the rational soul) will characterize the whole human species as such, such as risibility. And so *all* human individuals are risible. However, since matter (the human body) accounts for what differentiates (or individuates, concretizes) particular human beings, the attributes that derive from human body pertain only to individuals. Maleness and femaleness are thus to the individual what risibility is to the human species. And so we say only *some* human individuals are male and *some* female. But since any *true* human being must share in full rationality and full animality, every human individual must be both risible and *either* male *or* female.

¹⁵ This definition comes from the iconic University of Notre Dame, whose Gender Relations Center, in its 2009 brochure, answers the question “What is sexuality?” with the cited statement. This brochure boasts that Notre Dame’s Gender Relations Center “is the first and only office of its kind within collegiate student affairs nationwide.”

sexed nature, there is simply no way to deny or dismiss this. Male-female sexual dimorphism, looked at on the level of strict biology, targets procreation in the same way that, say, respiration targets the oxygenation of blood, to borrow the analogy of one modern author in his pointing out the absurdity of denying the natural biological purposiveness of sex when we would never deny this of any of our other natural powers:

[S]ex is the only natural power about which we [deride the purpose of nature]. The purpose of respiration is to oxygenate the blood; apart from it there would be no reason to have lungs. . . . If we are consistent, we will reason this way about sex. We will say that its purpose is to generate posterity; apart from this purpose there would be no reason for sexual organs. Instead of saying this, we interrupt the argument to say that the purpose of sex is pleasure. . . . [Now compare this, say, to] a young man [who] is more interested in using his lungs to get high by sniffing glue. What would you think of me if I say, ‘That’s interesting—I guess the purpose of *my* lungs is to oxygenate my blood, but the purpose of his lungs is to get high?’ You’d think me a fool, and rightly so. By sniffing glue, he doesn’t change the purpose built into his lungs, he only violates it.¹⁶

However, if we say human sexuality is ordered *exclusively* to procreation, we distinguish in no way the meaning and purpose of our sexuality from the rest of the animal kingdom. We are not “centaur-like” creatures lacking integration, where the animal-like in us remains isolated in a sub-rational sphere of activity. To be genuinely *human*, our sexuality must share in what is unique and noblest in us, it must be integrated into the totality of our lives as *rationaly ensouled* embodied beings.

That we know there is a difference—a radically profound difference—is shown by the very physical manner of sexual union among humans, namely, face to face, which is unique in the animal kingdom. Further, humans engage in sex not only face to face, but also at will and for an extended duration, whereas animals engage in sex only when the female is “in heat” and only for a very abbreviated period of time. What is more, animals always derive the gratification they seek in sexual encounters, but humans often come away from sexual encounters unfulfilled emotionally and with a foreboding sense of moral or spiritual emptiness (think here of the “walk of shame” that commonly occurs on college campuses).

So we ask: what does the uniquely physical manner of sexual union among humans—face to face—indicate for us? Why do human sexual encounters sometimes yield a sense of emptiness, shame, regret, self-recrimination, even loneliness?

The answer, of course, is that there is, or at least should be, something more, much more, than the mere physical that takes place in human sexual encounters. In the sexual joining of two

¹⁶ J. Budziszewski, *The Line through the Heart. Natural Law as Fact, Theory, and Sign of Contradiction* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2009), 50; and J. Budziszewski, *On the Meaning of Sex* (Wilmington, Del.: ISI Books, 2012), 22.

human beings, we are dealing not just with a physical act, but with an encounter of *persons*—how else to interpret the bodily posture of “face to face”? We are dealing with an act that serves spiritual, moral, and emotional needs, in addition to physical needs.

Nothing symbolizes better how the sexual joining of bodies becomes elevated to the level of personal union and of spiritual fulfillment than the face-to-face bodily position. In this connection, we should recall that face to face is the very image St. Paul uses in 1 Cor 13:12 when addressing the ultimate destiny of man, and thus the ultimate meaning we can ascribe to our humanity, namely, the attaining to beatific glory, or to the immediate beholding of the Triune God “face to face,” wherein all human desire, bodily and spiritual, shall find complete and everlasting satisfaction.¹⁷ The sexual union of man and woman “face to face,” in its own faint yet privileged way, points toward our final aim, toward supreme human glory

And so, as matter is for the sake of form, as the body is for the sake of the soul, so is human sexuality for the sake of the soul’s highest, noblest functions: intellectual knowing and loving. Sexuality implies, then, not only the offering of one’s (procreative) body, but the offering of one’s entire self in the deepest bonds of knowledge and love, in the deepest bonds of personal communion and friendship.

Subsequently, we can say human sexuality owns an intrinsic ordering not simply to procreation, but also to unitive love (to the “love-making” end). Human sexuality, in its primary ordering to procreation as owing to the body, is at the same time ordered essentially to personal, unitive love as expressive of our rationality. If the procreative ordering of our sexuality is particularly expressive of our embodied, animal-like nature, the unitive ordering is especially expressive of our rational nature. In this sense, Georges Cottier, theologian of the pontifical household under Pope John Paul II, points out that human sex is a “great paradox,” in as much as it symbolizes the paradoxical union of body and soul in man.¹⁸

With this anthropology in mind, Catholic moral teaching maintains that human sexuality comprises the two co-essential dimensions of the procreative (expressive of the body) and the unitive (expressive of the soul). Or, to put it in the words of *Humanae Vitae*, there exists “an inseparable connection, established by God . . . between the unitive meaning and procreative meaning.”¹⁹

Because sex, as owing to our body-soul composite nature, owns a twofold per se ordering to procreation and to unitive love, it has an intrinsic ordering to marriage. For, only marriage as

¹⁷ As for the body’s sharing in the beatific vision (after the final resurrection), a vision that is primarily spiritual or intellectual, St. Thomas writes: “There will be a kind of beatitude for our bodies, in as much as they will see God in his sensible creatures and especially in the body of Christ” (*IV Sent*, d. 49, q. 2, a. 2 ad 6). That our sexed nature will remain in the resurrected state St. Thomas also unhesitatingly affirms: “(Humans) shall rise again of different sex. And though there be difference of sex, there will be no shame in seeing one another, since there will be no lust to invite them to shameful deeds which are the cause of shame.” *ST Suppl.*, q. 81, a. 3.

¹⁸ Georges Cottier, *Défis éthiques* (Saint-Maurice, Switz.: Editions Saint-Augustin, 1996), 25.

¹⁹ Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, no. 12; see Pius XII, *Casti Cannubii*, no. 24; and Leo XIII, *Arcanum*, no. 26.

the union of a man and a woman unites the procreative and unitive dimensions, as corresponding to the indivisible, substantial union of body and soul. Human sexuality, in other words, has a nuptial “grammar” written into it, as marriage, nuptiality, marks its intrinsic teleological meaning. This explains why Pope Benedict XVI, tireless in his efforts at reminding the world that the Catholic vision of sex and marriage is grounded not only in divine revelation but also in the natural law, that is, in a vision that appeals to human reason per se, could insist in his message for the 2012 World Day of Peace, “the natural structure of marriage as the union of a man and a woman is inscribed in human nature itself, accessible to reason and thus common to all humanity.”²⁰

So if the Catholic Church remains immovable in her insistence upon the traditional meaning and purpose of marriage, it is because she refuses to forsake the integrated, hylemorphic anthropology from which this meaning flows. In the Church’s view, to affirm, with Pope Paul VI, the “inseparable connection” between the unitive and procreative orderings is purely and simply to affirm the inseparable union of body and soul. While we can, and must, distinguish the procreative from the unitive or personalist, we can no more separate these two than separate body from soul. This separation happens, on the Church’s account, whenever one attempts to further the aims of one dimension at the exclusion of the other, or to pit one dimension in fundamental contest with the other.

So much for the metaphysical foundation of sex and marriage.

A Higher Understanding of Human Sexuality

“[A] new understanding of the dignity and meaning of our humanity has entered the world [through Christianity], against an enormous resistance,” writes Father Donald Keefe, whom Prof. Hitinger cites in his essay.²¹ Hitinger cites this in his signaling a danger, latent in Aristotle, of undervaluing the personalist or unitive ordering of our sexuality, i.e., of adopting a “depersonalized” view of the human person. It is on this point especially that, on Hitinger’s account, Pope John Paul II’s theology of the body brings correction. I am in substantial agreement with these claims.

To be sure, because God is the Author both of the changeless metaphysical order of nature and of the sacred Page (as the medievals called the Bible), there is unity and fundamental harmony between the natural and revealed orders. But the appeal to the light of faith for guidance on moral issues is all the more urgent in a culture that evermore denies the nuptial

²⁰ Benedict XVI, “Blessed are the Peacemakers,” no. 4; Dec. 14, 2012, Vatican Information Service; visnews-en.blogspot.com/2012/12/blessed-are-peacemakers.html. This message generated such visceral negative reaction in the Italian media that the director of the Holy See Press Office, Rev. Federico Lombardi, issued an editorial on Vatican Radio the next day; in this editorial he denounced said reaction for its “consist[ing] in shouting, not in reasoning” and for its seeking “to intimidate those who want to support this [the Church’s] view freely in the public arena.” Vatican Radio, “Lombardi message: Read Pope’s Peace Message objectively,” Dec. 15, 2012; news.va/en/news/lombardi-editorial-read-popes-peace-message-object.

²¹ Hitinger, “Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*,” 4.

grammar of human sexuality. As Hittinger correctly observes, “Truly to truly the abolition of man we will need both nature and grace, faith and reason.”²²

To that end, and following the example of Pope John Paul II, we need look no further than the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis for confirmation that our sexuality is ordered to the joint goods of procreation and unitive love. At its very outset the Bible offers divine instruction on the nuptial grammar of human sexuality. Among the beginning verses of Genesis, for instance, we find these lines signaling the ordering of human sexuality to procreation:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.’ (Gen 1:27-28 [RSV])

With these arresting words, utterly unique among ancient creation accounts, the Book of Genesis establishes the male-female anthropology (sexual dimorphism) as the norm of our sexuality. Genesis makes clear that we possess the ability to “be fruitful and multiply” only because God, the Author of nature, has endowed his human creatures with sexually dimorphic animal-like bodies, that is, only because “male and female he created them.” As Pope Benedict XVI puts it, “being created by God as male and female pertains to the essence of the human creature . . . of what being human is all about, as ordained by God.”²³ God’s creative handiwork establishes alterity or complementarity, with procreation as its intended end, as the defining mark of our embodiedness, and thus as the normative good of our sexuality.

We should also stress how the command to “be fruitful and multiply” makes explicit the fact that God “blesses” as good and sacred the procreative design of our sexuality. The Bible could do no better to distance itself from a rationalist, Cartesian-like (or Platonic-like) disdain for the body and to approximate a view of the human body that sees it as God’s finest work of art (as Aquinas suggests in *Summa theologiae* I, q. 91, a. 3) or as a glorious “robe” for the human soul (as Dante calls it in *Paradiso*, Canto XIV) than to list expressly the sexed (procreative) design of our nature as among those things that issue from the supreme goodness of God’s creative will.²⁴

Altering course somewhat, and in another remarkable lesson relative to the moral meaning and purpose of our sexuality, the second creation account in Genesis places the focus squarely upon what today we call the unitive or personalist dimension:

Then the Lord God said, ‘It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him’. . . . So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the

²² Hittinger, “Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*,” 4.

²³ From Pope Benedict’s 2012 year-end address to the Roman Curia, as reported by Vatican Information Service, “Family, Dialogue, New Evangelisation: Central Themes of Benedict XVI’s Address to the Roman Curia,” Dec. 21, 2012; visnews-en.blogspot.com/2012/12/family-dialogue-new-evangelisation.html.

²⁴ Contemporary Jewish authors recognize that this passage leaves no room for negative views of sex in marriage; as, for instance, Norman Lamm, *A Hedge of Roses: Jewish Insights into Marriage and Married Life* (New York: Philipp Feldham, Inc., 1966), 45.

man, and while he slept took one of the ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the Lord had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.' Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh. And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed. (Gen 2:18, 21-25 [RSV])

The Bible here presents our sexuality as a gift from God to provide us with a means for attaining oneness in the deepest bonds of human love or friendship (companionship). But as this passage's pivotal terms "man" and "woman" unmistakably intimate, the personalist dimension is firmly imbedded in our sexually dimorphic design, in our being "male" and "female" (Gen 1:27). "Male and female" is God's first response to the human need for friendship, the first response to his fashioning us with a social nature. After all, when the first man found no true companion among the animals (Gen 2:20), God made not another man but a woman. Aristotle himself, while undervaluing the personalist ordering of our sexuality (he knew nothing of the Genesis creation account, we should recall), at the same time leaves room for it, as his assertion in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the friendship of marriage can be of a virtuous sort proves.²⁵

And so this biblical passage proposes the man's "maleness" and the woman's "femaleness," to import the language of Gen 1:27, as the necessary medium by which they attain to the unitive or personalist end of sexual union.²⁶ Man and woman become truly one only on account of their embodied complementarity. Embodied complementarity makes unitive love possible; indeed, to speak of "becoming one flesh" without it is to speak nonsensically.

Taken together (much like how body and soul are taken together), then, the two creation accounts confirm that God has indeed endowed his human creatures with a sexed nature for the dual (yet inseparable) purpose of procreation and unitive love, that is, for the purpose of marriage. Contrary to Plato's bizarre and unnatural charge, cited by Hittinger,²⁷ that "no woman is to live privately with any" and that "neither will a parent know his offspring, nor a child his parent," the Genesis creation account affirms that human sexuality is a gift from God ordered to marriage, wherein alone the procreative and unitive join. (To his credit, and as noted by Prof. Hittinger,²⁸ Aristotle at least appreciates the naturalness of the family association, as owing to its

²⁵ Hittinger, "Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*," 11.

²⁶ John Grabowski (*Sex and Virtue: An Introduction to Sexual Ethics* [Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2003], 29-48) observes how the terms "to leave" (or "to forsake") and "to cleave" of Gen 2:24 are elsewhere used in the Old Testament in reference to God's covenant with his people. Requiring fidelity and exclusive belonging, this covenant, at least as it relates to marriage, also implies fundamental equality between husband and wife. Further, as every covenant involves an oath and a ratification, a sealing, of that oath, so too in marriage the mutual consent between spouses, the vows, represent the oath, while conjugal intercourse ratifies or seals the oath that binds them. For this reason, Grabowski nicely terms conjugal intercourse an "anamnesis," that is, an act of remembering that makes present anew the binding together of the spouses through their covenant oath.

²⁷ Hittinger, "Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*," 7.

²⁸ Hittinger, "Plato and Aristotle on the Family and the *Polis*," 10.

being “earlier” and “more necessary” than the city.) The Book of Genesis establishes marriage as the normative good of our sexuality. To this end, Pope John Paul II, in his celebrated theology of the body to which Prof. Hittinger appeals, affirms that the biblical creation narratives lead to “*the discovery of the ‘spousal’ meaning of the body in the mystery of creation.*”²⁹ Little wonder the early Church Father Clement of Alexandria (†c. 215) should insist the biblical account “assails the view of those (gnostics) who attribute the invention of marriage directly to the devil,” a view that “comes dangerously near to a slander against the lawgiver.”³⁰

Slander against God the lawgiver indeed. For, the “new understanding of the dignity and meaning” of human sexuality revealed by Christianity to which Hittinger refers does not end with the Genesis creation narrative, but attains to unprecedented and unimagined heights in the sexed nature that God himself, in the divine Person of the Son, would take on in his incarnate humanity. The body that the Son assumed, and thus the body that hung upon the Cross and which rose from the dead for the purposes of our salvation, was (is) a sexed body, that is, a male body. Sex marks an essential property of the human nature wedded to the Godhead in the Incarnation.

Unparalleled in his esteem for the full humanity of Christ and for the objective goodness of God’s entire created order, St. Thomas Aquinas is unambiguous on this point at the very outset of his writing career:

Christ came to restore [or redeem] human nature by his very assumption; and for this reason it was necessary that he assume everything following upon human nature, namely, all the properties and parts of human nature, among which is sex; and therefore it was proper for him to assume a particular sex. . . . He assumed a sex not in order to use it but for the perfection of nature.³¹

²⁹ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books, 2006), 184 (general audience of Jan. 9, 1980) [emphasis his]. These catechetical addresses began on Sept. 5, 1979 and ran virtually uninterrupted until Nov. 28, 1984; they are compiled in this edition translated by Waldstein, to which the reader is directed for this fuller and at times extraordinarily insightful treatment of sex and marriage in the Genesis creation account.

³⁰ Taken from *Stromateis: Books One to Three*, trans. John Ferguson, vol. 85 of the Fathers of the Church Series (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1991), quoted in Matthew Levering, ed., *On Marriage and Family: Classic and Contemporary Texts* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 8.

³¹ *III Sent.*, d. 12, q. 3, a. 1, qc. 1, sol. 1, *corpus* and ad 2. This comes in response to the query of “whether Christ had to assume any particular sex at all” (*utrum Christus debuerit sexum aliquem accipere*), a query that Aquinas himself adds to the Sentence commentary tradition. While Thomas does not pick up the matter again in the *Summa*, we know from this passage in his *Commentary on the Sentences* that he does clearly imply Christ’s sexed humanity when he asserts, for instance, in *ST III*, q. 9, a. 4, that “nothing implanted in our nature by God was lacking in the human nature assumed by the Word of God.” For more on this, see my own “The Truth of Christ’s Human Nature ‘In All Its Singular Parts’: The Case of Christ’s Male Sexuality,” in my *The Passions of Christ’s Soul in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Münster: Aschendorff, 2002; reprinted, Scranton, Penn.: University of Scranton Press, 2009), 145-50. John Grabowski (*Sex and Virtue*, xi) notes that any genuine renewal in moral theology must ground its view of the human person in the doctrine that man is fully revealed in the light of Christ. Along these lines, cf. John Paul II’s call for a renewal in moral theology, *Veritatis Splendor*, §§6-8; and Livio Melina, *Sharing Christ’s Virtues: For a Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of ‘Veritatis Splendor,’* trans. William May (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

If Aquinas stood alone in making such a claim, he yet did not do so without drawing upon the much celebrated patristic tenet known as the “soteriological principle,” which echoes unmistakably in the opening sentence, “Christ came to restore human nature by his very assumption.” As the traditional formulation of this principle goes, what was not assumed by Christ was not healed by him.³² For the whole of human nature to be healed or redeemed, then, Christ had to take on the whole of our human nature. That the whole of our nature includes our sexuality St. Thomas takes as self-evident, given the view, outlined above, that it represents an essential property of our animal-like bodies, that is, of our concrete materiality or animality. (Aquinas sees sex as so integral to our nature, in fact, that he insists we shall retain it even in the resurrected state.³³) If we wish to affirm the concrete realism of Christ’s humanity, then, we cannot abstract Jesus’s male sex from it. Otherwise we compromise his full humanity.

In addition to this, Thomas was committed to the view, also going back to certain venerable Church Fathers, which holds that Christ in his very incarnate being, and not simply at the moment of his death and resurrection, already represents redeemed humanity—a view that remains liturgically alive to this day in the western Church’s practice of bowing during the Creed when the line “and became man” is recited.³⁴

For these reasons, then, Aquinas is unabashed in his recognition of what the tradition has otherwise been loathe to acknowledge, save at the time of the Renaissance (whose artistic representations, inspired by what one scholar terms an “incarnational theology,” draw deliberate attention to Christ’s male sexuality): Christ was a male individual in the fullest sexed sense of the term!³⁵ Long a champion of “no more docetism” before this slogan became fashionable in

³² See, e.g., *ST* III, q. 5, a. 4. Those Fathers who employ the soteriological principle include Origen, Irenaeus, Athanasius, Basil the Great, Cyril of Jerusalem, Gregory of Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa, Ambrose, Augustine, Cyril of Alexandria, Leo the Great, and John Damascene. (Aquinas usually cites Damascene’s formulation of the principle.)

³³ “The diversity [of sex] is becoming to the perfection of [our human] species. . . . Wherefore . . . (human beings) shall rise again of different sex. And though there be difference of sex, there will be no shame in seeing one another, since there will be no lust to invite them to shameful deeds which are the cause of shame.” *ST* Suppl., q. 81, a. 3 (this is pulled from *IV Sent*, d. 44, q. 1, a. 3, qc. 1). Thomas offers this same argument on sex “belong[ing] to the perfection of nature” as the reason for its inclusion in our glorified risen bodies in *CG* IV, ch. 88: “(The risen) will, therefore, have all the members of this sort [i.e., sexual members], even though there will be no use for them, to re-establish the integrity of the natural body.”

³⁴ The theological position claiming that “the being of Christ already represents redeemed man,” to quote Aloys Grillmeier (*Christ in Christian Tradition. From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, vol. 1, trans. J. Bowden [2nd ed., Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975], 531), and which is sometimes called the mystic doctrine of redemption, goes back to Irenaeus, Athanasius, and especially Leo the Great. For more on the mystic doctrine of redemption, cf. J.-P. Jossua, *Le salut, incarnation ou mystère pascal, chez les Pères de l’Église de saint Irénée à saint Léon le Grand* (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1968); and Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Le Christ en ses mystères. La vie et l’oeuvre de Jésus selon saint Thomas d’Aquin*, 2 vols. (Paris: Desclée, 1999), 91-2.

³⁵ We have Leo Steinberg’s *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (2nd revised and expanded edition, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) to thank for bringing to light the “incarnational theology”—to use John O’Malley’s term in his “Postscript” to this work (213-6, at 213)—that inspired much of Renaissance art. With ample evidence, Steinberg shows that many Renaissance paintings of the infant Christ and of the dead Christ depict a veritable *ostentatio genitalium*, that is, a deliberate viewing of Christ’s genitals (as when the

twentieth-century theology, St. Thomas refuses to leave the doctrine of God-made-man in the abstract.³⁶ He knows that Jesus is no generality, he is not “humanity,” as is no human being.

We cannot overemphasize the redemptive significance that God’s assumed male sex bears on our own sexuality, given the evident confusion that persists today, at least in some circles, on this point. Some contemporary feminist theologians, for instance, scandalized by the “naïve physicalism” of giving weight to the particularity of Jesus’s maleness, are fearful that such focus “collapses the totality of the Christ into the human man Jesus,” and so wish that discussion on this topic would simply “fade away.”³⁷ These theologians, in other words, want to warn us that if we accentuate Christ’s maleness, we do so at the theological peril of women, as this will obscure the way Christ’s redemptive accomplishments extend to all without distinction: male and female, Jew and Gentile, slave and free man, “for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28).

Such concerns, while not entirely without merit, arise from a mindset that is wont to pit the particular against the universal. More generally, this is the mindset that is troubled by the “scandal of particularity,” as it is sometimes called, which is part and parcel of the larger Christian story of salvation. The scandal of particularity refers to the irony that a salvation of universal import should be bound up in, because accomplished through, not only a particular history of a particular people, namely, the Jewish people, but especially a particular member of this Jewish people: Jesus of Nazareth, who is himself God “particularized,” embodied, in a human individual.³⁸ To many it seems scandalous that the God of all peoples should bind himself

infant Christ’s clothes are deliberately removed to reveal his genitals), with the goal of making manifest his full humanity. Steinberg writes: “In many hundreds of pious, religious works, from before 1400 to past the mid-16th century, the ostensive unveiling of the Child’s sex, or the touching, protecting or presentation of it, is the main action [there follow two images]. And the emphasis recurs in images of the dead Christ, or of the mystical Man of Sorrows [there follows an image]” (3). Though seemingly unaware of the patristic “mystic” doctrine of redemption (see preceding note), O’Malley (“Postscript,” 214) implies that such a doctrine stands behind the Renaissance’s “incarnational theology” when he suggests: “Humanity [according to Renaissance thought] was saved, redeemed, at least inchoately, at the moment the Godhead assumed human flesh.” The connection between the Renaissance regard for Christ’s male sexuality and Aquinas’s theological regard is not accidental, as Steinberg observes that Aquinas was held in honor by Renaissance Rome “beyond any medieval figure” (55).

³⁶ Docetism has ravaged Christianity since its very inception in various, sometimes diluted or masked forms. Already in the Johannine and Pauline writings of the New Testament, one can see clear anti-docetic retorts: 2 Jn 7, for instance, warns that “many deceivers . . . will not acknowledge the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh,” while 1 Jn 1:14 and Col 2:9 announce, respectively, that “the Word became flesh” and that “in Christ the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily.” For its part, Heb 2:14-16 attests that Christ “partook of the same nature” as “the children of flesh and blood” and as “the stock of Abraham.” For more on Aquinas’s anti-docetic adherence to Christ’s full humanity, see my own “The Humanity of Christ, the Incarnate Word,” in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, eds. J. Wawrykow and R. van Nieuwenhove (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 252-76; and “Anti-Docetism in Aquinas’s *Super Ioannem*: St. Thomas as Defender of the Full Humanity of Christ,” in *Reading John with St. Thomas Aquinas. Theological Exegesis and Speculative Theology*, eds. M. Dauphinais and M. Levering (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 254-76.

³⁷ Thus, the charge of the feminist theologian Elizabeth Johnson, “The Maleness of Christ,” in *The Special Nature of Women? Concilium* 6 (1991), 108-15, at 113 and 115. Eleonore Stump repeated this same charge during the discussion portion of a paper I presented on Aquinas’s thought at a conference at Blackfriars Hall, University of Oxford, in March, 2006.

³⁸ The scandal of particularity is touched upon by many authors. For instance, C. S. Lewis broaches the notion in *Mere Christianity*. Normally, it is used in reference to God’s becoming a member of the Jewish race, as when Karl

to one particular people, the Jews, thereby raising them above all other peoples, and should unite himself substantially to one particular human individual, to a man, to the male Jesus, thereby granting him “the name which is above every name,” to quote St. Paul (Phil 2:9).

However, if we but reflect upon the full meaning of the Incarnation, particularly along the lines of the doctrine of the hypostatic union, we can easily overcome the perceived divide between the universal and the particular, and thereby sidestep the fear that focusing on Jesus’s male sex will lead to an implosion of the “totality of Christ.” In truth, the Incarnation *unites* the particular with the universal. How so? The concrete reality of Christ’s humanity is joined to a divine hypostasis, the one divine Person of the Son. Put more directly, the particulars of the Incarnation (Jesus’s maleness, his Jewishness, his body and soul, etc.) subsist in a divine Person who, as God, transcends all particulars and all limits of time and place. The whole of God and the whole of his infinite power, a power that cannot be quantified or temporally constrained in any way, are at work in every existential particularity of the life of Jesus.

The reality of God’s accomplishing our redemption through his assumed manhood presses us to say more. If the universal (namely, salvation of the human race) does not occur through the particular (that is, through the man Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph of Nazareth and whose historical male body was put to death on a cross in Palestine nearly two thousand years ago only to come to life again three days later), it does not occur at all: “Christ gives life to the world through the mysteries that he accomplished in his flesh,” writes Aquinas, for whom “flesh” always signifies the particular.³⁹ We must ever be on our guard against recycled forms not only of docetism, the heresy denying Christ’s full humanity, but also of gnosticism, that other ancient heresy which proposes universal (spiritual) salvation with no necessary, immediate link to historical particularity.

The Jewishness of Jesus, a favorite topic of current biblical scholarship, provides a fine illustration of universal salvation being linked to the historical particularities of Jesus’s humanity. If we stress the fact that Jewishness is inseparable from the historical reality of the Incarnation, it does not follow from this that we are slighting non-Jews and calling into question St. Paul’s claim in Gal 3:28 that there is “neither Jew nor gentile” in Christ. In the same way, laying stress on Jesus’s maleness does not of itself undercut the place of women in the “totality

Barth (*Church Dogmatics*, IV.1, §59, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961], 166-67) stresses how the universality of the Son of God is revealed in the particularity of the Son’s assumption of Jewish flesh (Barth bemoans the “all too generalised views of the man Jesus” which lose sight of “the simple truth that Jesus Christ was a born Jew”), or when William N. Ewer whimsically pens in a rhyme: “How odd of God, / to choose the Jews.”

³⁹ *In Ioan.*, ch. 6, lect. 4 (n. 914); English translation: *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John by St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. J. A. Weisheipl and Fabian Larcher, Part I (Albany: Magi Books, 1980), 364 (Part II published by St. Bede’s, Petersham, Mass.). Similarly, in ch. 5, lect. 5 (n. 791), Aquinas writes: “through the mysteries Christ accomplished in his flesh we are restored not only to an incorruptible life in our bodies, but also to a spiritual life in our souls.” More generally, Aquinas likes to say it is the humanity of Christ that leads us to God, as in the prologue to the entire *Summa theologiae* itself (I, q. 2, Prol.): “Christ, who, as man, is our way to God,” or again in *In Ioan.*, ch. 7, lect. 4 (n. 1074), “the humanity of Christ is the way that leads us to God.” Also, cf. *ST* III, q. 9, a. 2.

of Christ.” If God became human, then he *had* to become one of us in all the existential particulars that being genuinely human requires.

Indeed, it is the same St. Paul who, through his use of the term *kenosis* when discussing the Incarnation in his celebrated “Hymn to the Philippians” (Phil 2:6-11), exalts the soteriological import of the existential particulars of the God-man. *Kenosis*, on the Apostle’s account, signifies the fact that the Son of God freely emptied himself of his divine condition in order to embrace our human condition in all its particulars. *Kenosis* in the Pauline sense, in other words, implies God’s self-emptying embrace of a true flesh-and-blood embodiment, and thus of such things as subordination to human parents and to the Mosaic Law, or subjection to the penal demands of Roman law as regards the execution of criminals. *Kenosis* implies God’s becoming a Jew, a Nazarene, a man “in all the singular parts” of being a man, to use Aquinas’s phrase.⁴⁰

It is, then, a great paradox of the faith: the universal is realized through the particular. Universal reconciliation of humanity with God is achieved only because God became the individual man Jesus of Nazareth. To aver the existential particulars of the Incarnate Christ, including his male sex, is to affirm the indispensable means through which we arrive at the doctrine where “there is neither male nor female” (Gal 3:28). As Jesus is no generality, so neither is the means of our redemption a mere generality.

Regarding our sexuality proper, it is because the Son of God took on a particular sex, the male sex, that the redemption of our sexuality, universally considered, is made possible. To call this “naïve physicalism” is to misconstrue fundamentally the realism of the Incarnation and instead veer towards a semi-docetic Christology, towards an abstract Christ, as well as towards a Cartesian or Platonic-like bias against the body.

Here is the “new understanding,” to cite again Prof. Hittinger’s use of Father Keefe’s phrase, of the meaning and purpose of human sexuality that Christianity reveals. And it goes further, since, of course, marriage is a sacrament. That is, the culminating share in the economy of salvation that our sexuality attains by virtue of the sexed reality of the Incarnation extends to the sacramental economy itself. Because, as Aquinas affirms, the sacraments derive their power from Christ’s own death and resurrection (accomplished through his embodied, i.e., sexed, reality), they apply the fruits of Christ’s Passion to us.⁴¹ And if the sacraments in general give us a share in Christ’s redemption, then the sacrament of matrimony in particular gives our marriages, or more generally our sexuality, a share in this redemption. The fruits of Christ’s death and resurrection are applied to husband and wife through the sacrament of marriage. The sacrament of matrimony allows man and woman to join themselves, in their very spousal union, not simply to the Person of Christ, but specifically to the Person of Christ on the Cross.

But that would be the subject of another essay.

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 26, a. 10.

⁴¹ “Christ’s Passion is, so to speak, applied to man through the sacraments.” Aquinas, *ST III*, q. 61, a. 1 ad 3. Similarly in q. 64, a. 3, he asserts “the merit and power of Christ’s Passion operates in the sacraments.”