

The relationship between man and woman in the recent teaching of the Church

Ana Cristina Villa Betancourt

Women's Section – Pontifical Council for the Laity

I was struck a few months ago when I heard a University professor, an expert in the history of the Councils of the Church, speaking to students about how the theological themes discussed in the Councils like Nicea or Constantinople were far from being the interest of just the Bishops or the Emperor, far from being an interest or a concern just for “the higher spheres.” He was saying: on the contrary, these theological questions: Is Jesus true God? Is the Holy Spirit God? Did Jesus really die or was it just an apparent death? ...were discussed widely by all Christians. He even mentioned the markets of Constantinople as places where there were discussions about the divinity of the Holy Spirit...

It struck me just to think how those deep theological questions are far from being a main interest or a main point of reflection for the average Catholic of our times... for whatever reasons which I don't have the expertise to analyze. But I don't think we exaggerate if we say that our times are rather times of big anthropological questions. In ancient times questions regarding the divinity seem to have been more present and felt to be more urgent. But in our times we seem to pose questions that are more anthropological, not so much theological. We want to know who we are. We want to better understand where we come from and why we are here. We live in times that are “anthropocentric”. Maybe this risks making us all too centered on ourselves and our problems, but the fact is that man has become a question for himself; not that questions about himself were absent to ancient man, nor that questions about God are absent now. It is just a matter of what prevails, I believe we live in times of deep anthropological questions even in the midst of the amazing advances in science and technology which may hide our questions but ultimately don't have an answer for them. Furthermore, many of those questions arise precisely because of those advances and what they mean to us... And we could add that many of those questions are impossible to address without God because when man excludes God from his life he becomes for himself an indecipherable enigma: only those who know God, know man. Cardinal Ratzinger, in his address in Subiaco shortly before his election as Pontiff, said: “the extreme attempt to fashion the things of man without any reference to God leads us ever closer to the edge of the abyss, to the total abolition of man.”¹

I find it interesting to note that one of the reasons John Paul II gives for writing *Mulieris dignitatem*, is “a question of understanding the reason for and the

¹ JOSEPH CARD. RATZINGER, *Europe in the Crisis of Cultures*, Subiaco, April 1st 2005.

consequences of the Creator's decision that the human being should always and only exist as a woman or a man."² This was the first full Papal document dedicated to reflecting on this theme, and probably the reason for this is that the question about God's decision in creating us always and only as a woman or a man has not been a question before our times... But for us, it is question, it is an issue: Why, Lord, have you created us always and only as a woman or a man? And what does this fact mean? What do you want from us?

1. Sexual difference

1.1 Its ontological character

Maybe one of the first things we can affirm about the sexual difference is its fundamental, ontological character, not to be confused with something merely external, biological or accidental. "Sexuality characterizes man and woman not only on the physical level but also on the psychological and spiritual, making its mark on each of their expressions"³, it is not a mere biological fact, it is a fundamental component of one's personality, feelings and expressions. Without it humanity would be reduced to a mere abstraction.

The sexual difference appears – though in different ways – in both accounts of creation of man in the book of Genesis. In the first one it is stated as a fact: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Gen 1:27) In the second one we see Eve taken from Adam to be different, having in common with him the same personal essence. God forms her from Adam's rib and puts her in front of him, as an interlocutor that he cannot give himself nor dominate.

Cardinal Scola beautifully says: the sexed nature represents one of those original spaces where man and woman experience their own creatural contingency, their ontological dependence and their capacity for relationship. The original design of God in making us male or female may be related to educating us in understanding what our own "I" means and its "weight" and how much it needs "the other", a "you" that helps me complete myself⁴. Not so much an insufficiency of each one as a person, but a sign of an invitation to fullness in communion, in the image and likeness of God's own mystery of love.

² JOHN PAUL II, *Mulieris dignitatem* (MD), 1.

³ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Educational Guidance in Human Love*, November 1, 1983, 4.

⁴ ANGELO CARD. SCOLA, *Uomo – donna: il caso serio dell'amore*, pp. 15-17: "La natura sessuata rappresenta uno dei luoghi originari in cui l'uomo fa l'esperienza della propria contingenza creaturale ... della propria ontologica dipendenza... Il disegno originario di Dio nei farci maschi o femmine ha a che fare con l'educarci a capire il peso dell'io e il peso dell'altro."

1.2 Original solitude and the “principle of help”

In the second account of creation we find what John Paul II has called the “principle of help”. This account is rich with beautiful symbolism where we find Adam “surrounded by the innumerable creatures of the created world” but realizing that he is alone (Gen 2:20). God himself states: “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen 2:18). Man is not an isolated individual, but a person, in need of personal encounter to fulfill his being.

Where will man get this “helper fit for him”? Interestingly, the symbolism of the account shows us Adam falling in a deep sleep while God creates the woman. She is a helper that he does not give himself, she remains for him a mystery, she is given to him, and he must receive her as a gift.

What does this help refer to? John Paul II teaches us it does not so much refer to acting, to practical help, but to being: an ontological help. The first help to be offered is if each one is “a human person” in the fullness of his masculinity, of her femininity, enabling each other to discover their humanity anew and confirm its whole meaning.

Another idea Pope John Paul underlines regarding the principle of help is that it is a help which is not one-sided, but mutual, reciprocal, complementary⁵. Both womanhood and manhood express what is human, but in a different and complementary way.

John Paul II also reminds us that in the first account of creation we find the affirmation that both – man and woman – are created in the image of God while in the account of Genesis 2, even if we don’t find the term “image of God”, we can find that the “complete and definitive creation of ‘man’ ... expresses itself in giving life to the *communio personarum* that man and woman form.” He affirms that in this second account man is shown as being 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” and goes on to state “man becomes an image of God not so much in the moment of solitude as in the moment of communion” as he in this way appears as “the image of an inscrutable divine communion of Persons.”⁶

Given that from the first account we learn that both man and woman are created in the image of God, both created to fully express what it means to be human, in this second account the differences between them appear clearly and strikingly: man and woman are a different expression of the one humanity, they are presented as having a different relationship to each other... It is insufficient and extremely reductive when one tries to find the reasons for this presentation of the Sacred Scripture as motivated by a social or cultural environment that may

⁵ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to women*, 7; MD, 7.

⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Catechesis* of 14th November 1979.

have influenced the writer. I believe rather that we must come to terms with both these sides of the formula to fully understand the sexual difference: What the accounts of Creation clearly state is both that man and woman are equal but different; they are given to each other in a different way. In the second account the man is created first, the woman appears in order to relieve him of his solitude, what does this mean? The reciprocity is asymmetrical; the complementarity is mutual but asymmetrical, not in the same way. We need to go deeper in order to better take illuminations and ideas from the teachings of the Church that help us grasp these questions in depth.

1.3 Mutual gift

John Paul II gives an explanation in his exegesis of the second account of Creation that helps us to start to answer our question. Let's quote him in full:

“...due to original innocence, the woman, who in the mystery of creation ‘is given’ by the Creator to the man, is ‘welcomed’ or accepted by him as a gift. The biblical text is completely clear and transparent at this point. At the same time, the acceptance of the woman by the man and the very way of accepting her become, as it were, a first gift in such a way that the woman, in giving herself ... at the same time ‘discovers herself’ thanks to the fact that she has been accepted and welcomed and thanks to the way in which she has been received by the man. She therefore finds herself in her own gift of self ... when she has been accepted in the way in which the Creator willed her, namely, ‘for her own sake’”⁷.

He says we are allowed to interpret that from the beginning man is the one who receives the gift; the woman is the one who is “given” to the man. He, in receiving her as a gift enriches her and is enriched in this reciprocal relationship.

“The man, therefore, not only accepts the gift, but at the same time is welcomed as a gift by the woman in the self-revelation of the inner spiritual essence of his masculinity together with the whole truth of his body and his sex. ... The exchange is reciprocal, and the mutual effects of the ‘sincere gift’ and of ‘finding oneself’ reveal themselves and grow in that exchange.”⁸

This seems to speak to us about the asymmetric character of the mutual relationship; an asymmetry that takes nothing from the common personal dignity. Each one of them – man and woman – is a gift for the other and wholly understands himself or herself in self-giving to the other and in receiving the gift of the other.

A few catecheses later John Paul II spoke of the man as the one who knows and the woman the one who is known.⁹

⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Catechesis* of 6th February 1980.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Catechesis* 12th March 1980.

Again, the theme of mutual gift shows us clearly we need to keep the two sides of the formula together: equal dignity, deep differences, a complementary way of being human.

1.4 How to name this difference

What is the best way, then, to name this difference? What names have been used for it in recent teaching of the Church?

Maybe one of the most used and the one chosen for our study day is “complementarity”. However, this name is not liked by many. According to some¹⁰ it would be too simple a term to fully express what is implied in the sexual difference, and does not fully express the asymmetry of the man-woman relationship. Or recently I came across a paper where the author seems to have objections to the use of this term because he believes it maintains the idea of the inferiority of the woman, who would come to “complete” what man lacks¹¹. However, though these objections are noteworthy, it is important also to note that “complementarity” is a term that is used by both John Paul II and Benedict XVI; we need to better understand in what terms they use it.

I find it interesting to note that the concept of complementarity is used in another context in *Christifidelis laici*, as expressing the mutual enrichment within the Church of different vocations (ordained ministers, religious, laity)¹². This Apostolic Exhortation speaks of complementarity in the context of describing the Church with the help of the Pauline image of the body, formed from different members which need each other. In this context the concept of complementarity does not imply any “member” being inferior to another; on the contrary, all are necessary for the common good. The use of the term complementarity to express the man-woman relationship in John Paul II and Benedict XVI seems to have more in common with this usage than with others that appear problematic to some experts.

Some academics have suggested the use of another term: “reciprocity”, a term that can also be found in the papal documents. However, I believe this term too has its insufficiencies because it does not sufficiently take into account the asymmetry of the reciprocity we have been stating here. Others speak of

¹⁰ A. CARD. SCOLA, *cit.*, 22: «... la differenza sessuale apre sì ad una reciprocità, ma ad una reciprocità asimmetrica. ... la reciprocità dell'uomo-donna non si dà mai “a senso unico”, ma sempre dentro una pluralità di flessioni. ... La differenza non si pone, dunque, nei termini di una semplice complementarità, come invece sostiene Platone nel suo celebre Simposio.» Sexual difference shows itself indeed in a reciprocal relationship, but in a reciprocity that is asymmetric. The reciprocity of man and woman never shows itself as going “one way” but always within the context of a multiplicity of aspects. The difference is therefore not shown in terms of a simple complementarity, as Plato suggests in his famous Symposium.

¹¹ G. CARD. RAVASI, *Mensaje a UPAEP*, noviembre 2011: «El modelo de la «complementariedad», no obstante, fue progresivamente recuperado, siguiendo la definición de la mujer como «ayuda semejante» (en realidad, en Génesis 2,18, se habla de una igualdad, una ayuda que se encuentra «frente a frente»). Pero el concepto es también ambiguo, porque el término de referencia siempre era el varón, que se «completa» con las cualidades femeninas.»

¹² Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Christifideles laici*, 20.

“reciprocal complementarity” and John Paul II uses that term on several occasions.

The 2004 Letter of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith “On the Collaboration of Man and Woman in the Church and in the World” uses another term: “collaboration”. This is a term not to be considered in opposition to, but together with the concepts more commonly used by John Paul II. In fact, the Pope uses “collaboration” too and the document of the CDF uses John Paul’s concepts extensively. However, it is interesting to note that the 2004 Letter contains this concept in its title, and mentions it in its first paragraphs, stating the specific contribution which this new document wanted to give to the ongoing dialogue on the issue. In fact, it affirms in its first paragraph to want to offer reflections on “active collaboration, in recognition of the difference between men and women in the Church and in the world.”¹³

The idea of active collaboration between the sexes calls for man and woman to “no longer see their difference as a source of discord to be overcome by denial or eradication, but rather as the possibility for collaboration, to be cultivated with mutual respect for their difference.”¹⁴ Surely it is not so much a term that wants to name the sexual difference but rather denote the possibilities that are implied by it; collaboration is the ideal of a relationship that is enriching for man and woman and that makes the most of the difference between them, making it a resource for the building of a world more fitting for human dignity.

We can bring clarity to our question – how to name this difference – looking at the way John Paul II uses the terms; he uses complementarity and reciprocity, but it is interesting to note that he never uses the terms in isolation, he always uses them within his personalistic approach to the human mystery: always in a context where he is speaking about the identity of the human person and uses these terms together with other personalistic terms: mutual relationship, gift of self, communion... Therefore, his affirmation that man and woman are complementary, for example, is very far from complementarity as it was understood by Plato in his Symposium and is always considered in the context of the common personal dignity of man and woman, never used to make her in any way inferior. But at the same time, he does not ignore a certain asymmetry and speaks at length of it...

There is, however, an interesting expression that John Paul II uses: man and woman as unity of the two, or uni-duality. This seems to be a very complete way of naming the sexual difference, present in *Mulieris dignitatem*, repeatedly used in successive Magisterial interventions on the theme.

¹³ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF FAITH, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the collaboration of men and women in the Church and in the world*, 1.

¹⁴ *Idem.*, 12.

1.5 Complementarity as uni-duality

In one of his earliest Catechesis on Theology of the Body, John Paul II gives a beautiful description of the man-woman relationship:

“the knowledge of man passes through masculinity and femininity, which are, as it were, two ‘incarnations’ of the same metaphysical solitude before God and the world – two reciprocally completing ways of ‘being a body’ and at the same time of being human – as two complementary dimensions of self-knowledge and self-determination and, at the same time, two complementary ways of being conscious of the meaning of the body. Thus, [...] femininity in some way finds itself before masculinity, while masculinity confirms itself through femininity.”¹⁵

Let us note those concepts which he highlights as having two dimensions: two incarnations of the same metaphysical solitude before God and the world, two reciprocally completing ways of being a body, of being human, two complementary dimensions of self-knowledge and self-determination, of being conscious of the meaning of the body. And he states the asymmetry of the relationship, inspired by the second account of Creation: femininity finds itself before masculinity; masculinity confirms itself through femininity.

Persons exist always in relationship to other persons, the “original solitude” has shown us that man “can exist only as a ‘unity of the two’ and therefore in relation to another human person.” The “unity of the two” that man and woman form in God’s plan is “a sign of interpersonal communion” showing that “the creation of man is 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’.”¹⁶ The man-woman relationship cannot be understood without the concept of mutual relationship, of a personhood that implies “being in relationship.”¹⁷

The unity of the two overcomes that original solitude where man could not find “a helper fit for him” (Gen 2:20); he now finds in the woman a helper, another “I” in a common humanity¹⁸, a “you” with whom he can share his own “I” in a manner that was impossible with any creature before. In the Letter to Woman John Paul II speaks of the relationship between man and woman as uni-duality in these terms:

“woman and man are marked neither by a static and undifferentiated equality nor by an irreconcilable and inexorably conflictual difference. Their most natural relationship, which corresponds to the plan of God, is the ‘unity of the two’, a relational ‘uni-duality’, which enables each to experience their

¹⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Catechesis* 21st November 1979.

¹⁶ *MD*, 7.

¹⁷ Cf. A. SCOLA, *cit.*, 25.

¹⁸ Cf. *MD*, 6.

interpersonal and reciprocal relationship as a gift which enriches and which confers responsibility.”¹⁹

God entrusts the earth to both man and woman, calling them to cooperate in the Creation, transforming the face of the earth at the service of human dignity; the task of culture is entrusted to man and woman alike. The papal teachings repeatedly remind us that the accounts of Creation are clear in entrusting to both not only procreation and family life, but that the whole of creation, history, culture are entrusted to the “unity of the two” formed by man and woman²⁰. Though marriage is the first and fundamental dimension of this call to unity of the two, it is not the only one, but in all spaces of human history the development of humanity in accordance to God’s will, invites the integration in all matters of what is masculine and what is feminine²¹.

It might seem that if we stress too much the unity of the two that man and woman form there will be no room left for celibacy; but in the Pope’s teachings this opposition does not exist. On the contrary, celibacy is an expression of the face that masculinity and femininity will have in eternity, it reminds us that “the temporal and earthly expression of sexuality is transient”²² but not their distinction, which will remain such for all eternity. Besides, celibacy is strongly linked with the spousal character of each human being, man and woman, in relationship to God.

So, as we can see, complementarity is understood in the Magisterium as “unity of the two”, as a uni-duality; this means man and woman are united by their common humanity but differentiated by their sexual distinction which is a fruitful one. It is an ontological complementarity, it makes man and woman discover that they are a gift for each other, called to mutually enrich each other through the reciprocal gift of self.

The Letter on collaboration published by the CDF speaks of:

“physical, psychological and ontological complementarity, giving rise to a harmonious relationship of ‘uni-duality’, which only sin and ‘the structures of sin’ inscribed in culture render potentially conflictual.” Competition and retaliation in the man-woman relationship comes from sin; the relationship is good “in the beginning” but has been “changed... by the disharmony between God and humanity introduced by sin” and therefore is in permanent “need of healing.”²³

In Christ man and woman “no longer see their difference as a source of discord to be overcome by denial or eradication, but rather as the possibility for collaboration, to be cultivated with mutual respect for their difference.”²⁴

¹⁹ *Letter to Women*, 8.

²⁰ Cf. *Letter to Women*, 8.

²¹ Cf. *MD*, 7.

²² *Letter on collaboration*, 12.

²³ *Letter on collaboration*, 8.

²⁴ *Letter on collaboration*, 12.

1.6 Woman: room for difference...

We have seen in the last century a cultural shift in how the man-woman relationship has been considered; a modern, pre-feminist way of considering the differences would tend to see them as unchangeable, based solely in nature, something that could and should not be put into question. In recent years, and as a consequence of cultural changes, among them the changes brought about by feminism in all its forms, the sexual differences have come to be considered as something superficial, interchangeable, merely cultural, even a matter open for choice.

Therefore there is a strong need in this matter for a synthetic perspective. Equal dignity: of course. Complementarity, yes. Reciprocity, yes. But it seems to me an element is still lacking in the formula: the importance of not losing sight of the difference. Sometimes I note among intellectuals who speak of man-woman relationship a reluctance to stress too much this difference, as if a certain fear remains of losing the freedom and the spaces that women have gained in the last decades. But on the other hand, as I get to know more and more women through the contacts because of my office, I have been surprised to notice how among younger women, who maybe have grown up with the certainty of their spaces in education, world of work and culture, etc. there seems to be much more urgency to get to know what the difference is about, what is it that is different, unique in being a woman and that expresses our most true being; and how to contribute, with that femininity, to the building of the world. And, to add another element to the panorama, as a result of the current cultural confusion brought about by feminism, some notice that men are as confused as women are, if not even more so, about what it means to be a man, what is truly masculine according to God's plan and how to unfold it. We could go on about this...

We need a vision of the man-woman relationship that values what is proper to each one of them. Scola beautifully explains the specificity of femininity when he says: "In my opinion the secret of the woman is found in her being above all the place of difference. Eve is Adam's other. The woman always takes the position of 'the other'. But who is this 'other', properly speaking? In the deepest sense of the term, it is God himself. And in some way the woman is the most powerful sign of this. What higher exaltation can there be of the feminine identity?"²⁵

We cannot consider complete the ideas on what is proper of women without speaking briefly of femininity's unique relationship with Mary, the Mother of God. Women have a "genius" proper to them, a prophetic character, which in the Popes' teachings always appears linked closely to holiness, to the *sequela Christi*. And the clearest model of all these feminine characteristics is the Blessed Virgin Mary, our mother. Mary, the mother of God, is an icon of the

²⁵ A. SCOLA, *Uomo-donna*, 23.

Church who by her “yes” welcomes God’s gift of himself for our redemption. John Paul II tells us: “When we consider the ‘iconic’ complementarity of male and female roles, two of the Church's essential dimensions are seen in a clearer light: the ‘Marian’ principle and the Apostolic-Petrine principle.”²⁶

Let me quote here, in full, John Paul II, in *Redemptoris Mater*, as he explains femininity’s relationship to our Most Blessed Mother Mary in a unique way:

“The figure of Mary of Nazareth sheds light on womanhood as such by the very fact that God, in the sublime event of the Incarnation of his Son, entrusted himself to the ministry, the free and active ministry of a woman. It can thus be said that women, by looking to Mary, find in her the secret of living their femininity with dignity and of achieving their own true advancement. In the light of Mary, the Church sees in the face of women the reflection of a beauty which mirrors the loftiest sentiments of which the human heart is capable: the self-offering totality of love; the strength that is capable of bearing the greatest sorrows; limitless fidelity and tireless devotion to work; the ability to combine penetrating intuition with words of support and encouragement.”²⁷

2. Spousal Character – Ephesians

Scripture speaks many times in many different contexts of the God–man relationship using a nuptial symbolism. God is the bridegroom who gives himself to humanity, his bride. His faithful love makes her realize the depth of her dignity. God is always presented as a Father, his Son is sent into the world and gives himself for the Church, his Bride... If we miss the profound truths written by God in creating us male and female, we will miss also an important part of the alliance He wants to establish with us. There is a sacramental economy, an economy of signs, chosen freely by God to establish his relationship with humanity.

Another important characterization of the man-woman relationship present in the Magisterium is precisely this bridal analogy that is beautifully expressed in a verse of the letter to the Ephesians: “For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is a profound one, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church” (*Eph* 5:31-32).

“The love of a man and a woman, lived out in the power of baptismal life, now becomes the sacrament of the love between Christ and his Church, and a witness to the mystery of fidelity and unity from which the ‘New Eve’ is

²⁶ *Letter to Women*, 11.

²⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Mater*, 46.

born and by which she lives in her earthly pilgrimage toward the fullness of the eternal wedding.”²⁸

This analogy teaches us that the man-woman relationship has a deep theological meaning. John Paul II calls it “the truth about woman as bride”, the truth, we could add, also of man as bridegroom. The bridegroom loves, the bride is loved, she receives love in order to love in return. This analogy is fundamental to understand the sexual difference and the deep theological meaning it has. The analogy of the bridegroom and the bride speaks of the love with which each and every one of us is loved by God in Christ. Origen affirmed that in relationship with God, each soul is feminine, each soul is the bride loved by the Bridegroom, opening up with this affirmation all the mystic tradition of Christianity. With this analogy we can better understand what John Paul II calls the “prophetic character” of femininity²⁹, necessary to fully understand the dignity of each one and, I believe, essential to understand the role of women in the Church and, last but not least, the theological reasons why the Sacrament of Ordination is to be conferred to men only.

3. Safeguarding human nature

Recently Pope Benedict has introduced what I believe is an important intuition that needs to be thought about with regards to the man-woman relationship. In his *Magisterium* regarding the man-woman relationship he tends to quote extensively John Paul II in a clear sign of continuity and communion of thought between the two Pontiffs. This does not surprise us as we know Cardinal Ratzinger was a close collaborator and would have contributed to many of the John Paul II’s documents giving his expert advice. However, I think we can notice a theme that he has stressed greatly, in the light of today’s challenges to a correct anthropological vision.

Pope Benedict has spoken on several occasions about the importance for the Church to reflect upon and promote what he calls a “human ecology.” In his teachings this idea refers not only to promoting a care for the environment that cares above all for the human person. He says even more, he refers to an ecology that is applied also to the care of the “order of creation of the nature of the human being as man and woman”. He notices and is worried about a lack of respect of this order of creation. He explains this order has a “language” proper to itself, to which we have to listen and welcome. He is worried by seeing, in what is sometimes understood as *gender*, an “attempt at self-emancipation from creation and the Creator”³⁰ which is deceptive: man cannot manipulate his own

²⁸ *Letter on the collaboration...*, 10.

²⁹ Cf. *MD*, 29.

³⁰ BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Members of the Roman Curia for the Traditional Exchange of Christmas Greetings*, 22nd December 2008.

nature at will without consequences, analogously to the way his disrespectful manipulation of nature always brings negative consequences.

The Pope says: “Man is not merely self-creating freedom. Man does not create himself. He is intellect and will, but he is also nature, and his will is rightly ordered if he respects his nature, listens to it and accepts himself for who he is, as one who did not create himself. In this way, and in no other, is true human freedom fulfilled.”³¹ Therefore, listening to the language of our nature and welcoming it is a fundamental premise of human freedom. In this sense, I believe a renewed understanding of the concept of human nature, as created by God, man and woman, is an essential element of this “safeguarding of what is human” that Pope Benedict sees as an important task for the Church in today’s culture.

Interestingly enough, these ideas already appear in the 1985 interview by journalist Vittorio Messori of the then Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, published in English as “The Ratzinger Report”. He sees a danger in diminishing the importance of what it means to be a man or a woman, stating: “whether one is male or female has little interest for us, we are all simply humans’. This, in reality, has grave consequences even if at first it appears very beautiful and generous. It signifies, in fact, that sexuality is no longer rooted in anthropology; it means that sex is viewed as a simple role, interchangeable at one’s pleasure.”³² This conception, he goes on to say, ignores the specific natural character written in the depths of being... For the Church the language of nature is also the language of morals...

4. Conclusions

Man and woman are created by God with equal dignity, united in the same humanity; but created different, with a sexual difference. A truly Catholic vision of the man-woman relationship, following the Magisterium, has to keep these two sides of the formula together.

At present, Pope Benedict has introduced the theme of the need of safeguarding the human nature, as created by God, man and woman, in front of the challenges posed by the current anthropological confusion and, in particular, the ideology of gender. We need to think more deeply on this theme, following these lines.

A question for each one of us: the Pope calls us to promote a safeguarding of humanity, as man and woman. What can I do?

I would like to conclude with a quote from Europe in the Crisis of Cultures:

“What we most need at this moment of history are men who make God visible in this world through their enlightened and lived faith. (...) We need

³¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Address in the Visit to the Bundestag*, Berlin, 22nd September 2011.

³² Cfr. J. RAZTINGER, V. MESSORI, *The Ratzinger Report*, p.95.

men who have their eyes fixed straight on God, and who learn from him what true humanity is. We need men whose intellects have been enlightened by the light of God and whose hearts have been opened by God, so that their intellects can speak to others' intellects and their hearts can open others' hearts. God returns among men only through men who are touched by God."³³

And if God returns among us we will understand better the dignity of our humanity and be able to work for a world that better promotes such dignity.

³³ JOSEPH RATZINGER, *Europe in the crisis of cultures*, cit.