

Man and woman: some reflections on the masculine and the feminine¹

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G.

In response to a request by Cardinal Ryłko, we shall give a simple and improvised presentation that draws from our experience as a couple and our qualifications in the field of the human sciences (anthropology and social science, and, let us not forget, statistics).

A.

When we first met, we immediately realised that we were very different in education, temperament and cultural background. We very soon had arguments because I thought of women in a certain way and her feelings and experience of the matter were not at all the same. The early days of our engagement were quite stormy.

G.

Young engaged couples are normally told that it is all a bed of roses at the beginning and that problems explode later on. In our case – and this might be of consolation to some of you – it was quite the opposite. Things were very difficult at the beginning, and now, although there are still occasional storms, on the whole, things are far better. As Attilio said, many of the difficulties were due to the stereotypes of the masculine and feminine that we had absorbed from the environment. We did not recognise ourselves in them, but they coloured the way we related to each other.

We shall describe our own experience because it could sound familiar to some of you. Personally, my reaction was one of rejection with regard to the masculine, both because of how I saw it in some people I had met and because of the way it was being presented culturally (in psychology, sociology, physiology, religion, etc.). I felt that if I married, I would not be able to achieve the many ambitions I nurtured in my heart. I actually enjoyed everything – art, music, sculpture, philosophy – so I thought that marriage would be like a cage where a man would squash my intellectual and spiritual exuberance.

A.

I thought that this was a highly unusual way of thinking. I was wondering what kind of strange being it was that I had met. She did not seem to think in the same way as all the other women I knew and who seemed to put marriage before any other aspiration. Giulia told me firmly and serenely that she had decided not to marry me. She did not want to end up under the yoke of a man who would think it his right to place limits on her. She had no intention of following me as if I were the boss. That was the beginning...

¹ Transcription of a short off-the-cuff talk given by the two speakers.

G.

Naturally, you have to put this in context. This was some time ago. We are older than you. We met in 1968 and got married in 1971. Our difficulties have to be seen in the context of those times. I was not rejecting marriage as such, because I come from a united family. However, I still felt that what I wanted could not be achieved in marriage. This was because of the perception I had of men. It seemed to me that they could not help being somewhat aggressive. He thought that women were naturally disposed to being at the service of men. I think that I could say that he interpreted the biblical concept of “help” with reference to women in the sense that, although in different ways, women were “for” someone else: mother for him, wife for him, companion for him, etc. Both of us had to remove a certain amount of mental rigidity. Inevitably, we had to deal with a battle of minds that lasted for a long time. I could not decide whether we should go our separate ways or not. We did actually break it off for a while. However, we both realised that our lives had been marked by meeting each other. We could never return to being as we were before and pretend that nothing had happened. There was something in our relationship that went beyond us and convinced us that nothing would be better or more beautiful for each of us if we did not build on love with the person with whom life had presented us. To break off that relationship did not seem a good thing and would have been like a self-mutilation that we could not bear.

I think that many others like us have inherited stereotypes of the masculine and feminine from our culture. This burdensome inheritance helps us to understand – even when we do not share it – the negative consequences that certain influences can have on the history of culture (feminism, the sexual revolution, gender affirmation, etc.). It is likely that distorted convictions concerning masculinity and femininity gave rise to oscillating reactions that oblige us today to rethink the meaning of being a woman or man, and to try to build better relationships as history progresses.

A.

We can also add a note that belongs to the dominant culture in UN conferences and also in part of Italian culture. There are those who place the transgender prototype against the bisexuality of our origins. In a widely circulated newspaper in Italy, two pages were devoted to exalting the transgender culture. It went beyond gender to extol the androgyne of ancient times. The overcoming of stereotypes turned into a struggle against the traditional culture of couples like Adam and Eve, Joseph and Mary, etc.

G.

To come back to our story, we were travelling a path balanced on the crest of a mountain. On the one hand we had to deal with male and female stereotypes, and on the other, with the destruction of the anthropological reality of being men and women. How could we maintain our balance between these two sides of the mountain without rejecting data from nature and without rejecting the development of culture?

A.

We agreed to look for some guidelines. One of these was the hermeneutics of the body. We recognised that we had been given a body, so we observed the structure of that body.

We ecologically respected its dynamics and saw how to interpret this in each other. We were careful to do this together, as a duet in which neither the female nor male voice predominated.

G.

We also decided to build a new model of relationship where we would avoid prejudice and only say to each other what the other would accept. I have no right to say “men are like this”, and you have no right to say “women are like that”, because neither of us has the code that tells us how we are made. Only our Creator has the keys, the One who called us into existence in a certain way and who knows us before we are conceived in our mother’s womb. God introduces us to each other. It was very important for us to recognise the mystery of ourselves and of the other. In the more metaphorical biblical account, Adam was sleeping when Eve was created, and so he could not know her well. It seems that Eve was not there before Adam, so she is equally ignorant about him. This reciprocal recognition of ignorance is an indispensable act of humility in a real conversation. It asks them both to listen to each other and to accept both themselves and the other by trusting in the love of the One who created us and decided that what he created was “very good”.

A.

In this short time that we have at our disposal, we would like to tell you about some attributes that we feel best identify the masculine and the feminine. We shall not even attempt to cover the entire complexity of these questions, and we shall be careful not to automatically identify what we call the “feminine and masculine” with the women and men that we meet. Above all, they are people to be respected.

G.

It was like a new start. You might remember the expression “uni-duality” used by John Paul II in his *Letter to Women*. It means to be one and to be two, a mystery that reflects the mystery of the Trinity. In a way it would be better to keep quiet and not enclose reality within definitions that are tight and put limits on mystery. On the other hand, we cannot just say nothing. We have a body, a history, and specific vocation, an intelligence that tries to say something, to stutter, to humbly offer, without claiming to define the question once and for all.

When we speak of the feminine, what seems to characterise it is a higher degree of **relationality**, attention to relationships with others. It is evident that this attribute is connected to women’s bodies and the fact that they have this special possibility of experiencing “two in one” – a beautiful resource of motherhood – which in some way urges them to welcome, to make space and help the one within to grow, to allow him/her to live by means of the love and blood received.

A.

As regards the masculine, we felt that it could be characterised best by **assertiveness**. This entails self-esteem which is necessary in order to relate with dignity. This is not only a male characteristic, but it is more typical of men.

G.

If we look at the physiological aspect, differences can certainly be seen. If we go to higher levels – mental, cultural, intellectual and spiritual – we notice that the differences are more moderate, although they do not disappear. We should also take into account the corruption of each of the attributes that we are describing, but we cannot delay on that. We have discussed some of these aspects before, and if you like, you can find them [in Italian] on the website of the Pontifical Council for the Laity in the women's section.²

A second female attribute is a keener **awareness of limits**. This might seem to be a negative aspect, but it is not so, because we are all limited. None of us can count the hairs on our head or add a day to our lives. This goes for every created being, but women become conscious of it earlier, when they are girls. Awareness of their own cycle and times of physical fragility puts them into contact with this truth. It makes them more prepared to accept the universal dependence of human beings, and it leads them more easily towards faith.

A.

It seems to us that when men are faced with limits, they are more inclined to **fight**. They refuse to accept limits and are willing to contest all the obstacles that life presents with the strength and impetuosity of their character, convinced that they can do it. Males are more predisposed to wage war. Even their childhood games show how they like to be competitive.

G.

The attributes that we are describing should not be taken to be absolute, and certainly should not be applied to every man and every woman, given that each human being is unique. However, they allow us to identify some constants in attitudes and behaviour in men and women.

A third feature of the feminine is **care for life**. Since the world began, the care of life, in itself as universal as is the command to love, is especially linked to the feminine. Children, the sick, the dying and anyone who is weak will instinctively cling to a woman. Women feel called to respond. They do not try to work out the reason for this first, nor do they feel that they must fulfil a moral duty or categorical imperative. They personally respond to this request to give care, beginning with the baby within them.

A.

When we looked at the male approach to life, we saw that it has a **dynamic quality**, a desire to experiment with what is new and to open up new paths. There are many episodes in the Bible that emphasise this point. Joseph listened to the angel who told him to go to Egypt in order to protect Mary and Jesus. This dynamic quality enjoys adventure and journeys to unknown territories. It is an important asset for the service and protection of

² Cf. <http://www.laici.org/index.php?p=danesedinicola>. The English version of the talk can be found in the proceedings of an international congress held in Rome (7-8 February 2008): *Woman and Man: the humanum in its entirety*, Vatican City 2010. The talk is entitled: *Woman and man: created one for the other*. See also the book: *Lei & Lui. Comunicazione e reciprocità*, Torino 2002.

the world of intimate affection. At the same time it prevents it from being corrupted by the tendency to merge into a strong and exclusive sentimental unit (as in the case of “mummy’s boys” and over-protective mothers). The father, with his affectionate presence and eagerness to find the best way to satisfy the needs of his dear ones, plays a role in socialisation and openness.

G.

We identified an aspect of the feminine that is not usually found in the textbooks. I do not know if you would agree, but we call it ‘**rule-breaking and irony**’. We wanted to emphasise a particular ability to be within structures but also, in a way, to go beyond them. I do not mean that women scoff at them, because that would be a negative approach, but they give a different perspective to efforts being made to put absolutes in place. A classic example can be found in Sophocles’ *Antigone*.³ Some of you may be familiar with this lovely pre-Christian tragedy. Creon made the laws, but Antigone, in responding to the prohibition of the burial of her brother Polyneices, spoke of the law in her heart which was stronger than Creon’s law and which said that it was a duty to bury one’s brother. She said that she was “born through love and not through hatred”. Hegel referred to this tragedy when he spoke of the feminine as the “irony of the community”. Women’s ‘in/out’ approach goes for human institutions and for the Church. Women can occupy the roles they conquer in institutions and in which they come to be recognised, and with their feminine qualities they can use the opportunity to be within and without, ‘in’ and ‘beyond’, by maintaining their mastery over the reality that seems to dominate them.

A.

Men, on the other hand, seem to us to have a greater **sense of institutions**. A research study on children conducted by Gilligan demonstrated how boys prefer to defend the rules even if this means breaking off relations, while girls prefer to save relations even if it means breaking the rules. Girls regard human relations to be more important, while boys give priority to the props of the game. This is confirmed by the fact that men are more interested in standard norms, in the construction of rules and in institutions. This male attribute plays an important role in building universal channels of communication. Without institutions we could never all come together. We would be limited to the private circles of ‘our’ family and ‘our milieu’. A law is made for everyone, and it allows us to carry out a moral duty even towards those human beings with whom we may never socialise, but who are nevertheless recipients of justice in the distribution of resources. This should not become simply a bureaucratic norm. Men are more often attached to respect of the Sabbath, but “the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath”.

G.

The last of the female attributes that we find significant is the **positive face of pain**. What is wonderful about women is how, with pregnancy and birth, the pain experienced by their

³ This idea is developed in: G. P. Di Nicola, *Nostalgia di Antigone*, Torino 2010 (Greek text with parallel Italian translation).

bodies is not only associated with pathology and illness that signals decline and death, but it is associated with life and regeneration. It is a specific sign of the Resurrection. Jesus referred to this when he pointed out a connection that linked him to womanhood. A woman suffers and then rejoices at the child's birth, just as He died on the cross to give life to the Church.

A.

We feel that men are prepared to **face suffering**, risk and death and to try to eliminate them. This is their dominant feature from the cultural and historical points of view (think of knights and heroes...). Men have so often placed their lives at risk in order to save their dear ones and their town by facing death at war, prepared to give their blood for the sake of their people. This ability to defy death and risk can be debased by adolescents who enjoy extreme games like jumping off the railway tracks at the last minute, speeding in a car with eyes closed, running across the road, etc. In these cases, paradoxically, their attachment to rules becomes enjoyment at transgressing them, and they have no thought for the suffering this could cause their loved ones.

All of this input deserves further consideration and perhaps completion.

G.

We are passing these on to you in the way we developed them in our conversations. We are aware that, in order to be mature men and women with self-awareness and flexibility with regard to the other person, we learn far more from life than from books. When looking at the other person's face that asks for love and that is suffering, we always have to reconsider our ideas and increase our concern.

We really want to transmit the joy of being men and women, just as we are called to be by nature and by God, with a specific identity that must be respected and appreciated. The serene acceptance of one's being as a woman or man is not born of self-sufficiency. It is in the face-to-face encounters of daily life that there is a decisive appreciation of each other's resources and a serene acceptance of our own and others' limitations. In this we all have the same call. Attilio spoke of how we face death. So many women in history have given their lives in childbirth for the sake of their children, and so many men have given their lives in war. They are united in their giving of their blood in different ways. What at one time was seen to happen mostly at certain times in life, today, day after day, strengthens our willingness to give ourselves for love in mutual relationships.

A.

It is a relationship that is nourished more by obligations than by claims for rights that could in fact impede understanding and create barriers between people who demand their due without caring for others. Men and women learn together. They teach and are taught if they give each other the care that is essential in mutual love.

G.

Thank you.