

Chapter Two



ORIGINAL HUMANITY

All the talk in Genesis about animals, a rib, a garden, a tree and a serpent may sound to us like a primitive fairy tale, not worthy of our serious attention. But this deceptively simple story hides unexpected depths of insight. As we saw in the previous chapter, the story of creation reveals truths about both God’s original intention for human life and the primordial events that underlie human experience to this day.

The creation story is indeed “mythic”—not in the sense that it is fictional but in that it uses symbolic language to reveal profound truths about God and about the human condition. The ancient authors of Genesis were master psychologists as well as brilliant theologians. While the narrative refers to a real event at the dawn of human history, it contains much more than a purely literal account could convey.¹

Only through what Scripture tells us about the beginning can we know what human life was meant to be, since our own experience is marked by sin and its consequences. The point of returning to the beginning is not only to rediscover the meaning of marriage but also to help us grasp the significance of being male and female. If marriage is an unbreakable union of love between a man and a woman, what kind of persons must we be to be capable of such a union?

The pope draws out three important aspects of life before the Fall as revealed in the Bible. These he calls **original solitude**, **original unity** and **original nakedness**.

NOT GOOD TO BE ALONE

Let us look more closely at the second creation account (Genesis 2), which depicts the creation of man and woman separately. First the man is fashioned from the dust of the earth, and God breathes into his nostrils the breath of life. Before Eve comes on the scene, God lets Adam (who represents all humanity) experience the fact that he is different from the rest of creation.

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 out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper fit for him.

—GENESIS 2:18–20

In a certain way Adam is alone before God. As he encounters the animals, he is aware that he is unique, utterly distinct from everything else in the visible world. He is not a "something" but a "someone," with the capacity to know and love and thus to interact with God. As John Paul II points out, this is true of every human being: I am aware of being a self, a *person* who transcends the rest of creation and is capable of relating to the Creator. The pope calls this experience "original solitude."

Adam discovered his uniqueness through his body. By encountering other living creatures, he became aware that

only his body was the body of a person. This is true for us as well. Think of the way a child comes to understand herself as a self by recognizing other persons and objects around her. The body is the basis of both our awareness of ourselves and our relationships to others, including God.

The man in Genesis was aware that his existence was a gift from God, and that therefore he was called freely to enter into a relationship with God—to respond to him in love and gratitude. Adam, like every human being since, is called to an interior life; he is capable of hearing God and responding.

But the Bible also indicates that more was needed: “It is not good for the man to be alone.” In his solitude Adam experienced a longing for another human person like himself—a “helper fit for him.” We, too, are fulfilled only in communion with other human beings.

We should note that *helper* in this verse (*ezer* in Hebrew) does *not* mean “cook, laundress and scullery-maid.” After all, it is God who is most often called our “helper” in the Old Testament (see, for instance, Exodus 18:4; Psalm 33:20). Rather, the helper the man needs is someone who can remind him of and help him to fulfill the deepest purpose of his life: that is, to *love*. In other words, the man needs the woman in order to be fully human, just as the woman needs the man.

THE TWO BECOME ONE

In response to Adam’s longing, God does what he had planned all along: He causes the man to fall into a deep sleep and creates a woman from his rib—showing how closely she is related to him. Like the father of the bride, God presents Adam with his masterpiece. The man responds by crying out in a hymn of joy, expressing his happiness that he has

encountered the body of another *person*—a body like his own, yet wonderfully different.

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.”

—GENESIS 2:23

Adam recognizes that Eve shares his human nature, yet it is embodied in a different way. This sexual complementarity of the man and woman—their bodily differences within a common nature—reveals their call to relationship. In fact, their sexual differentiation is what enables them to become a mutual gift of self to one another. Their bodies’ natural aptitude for union is the visible reflection of their interior capacity to form a communion of persons.

The care with which God carries out his design for humanity shows us that sexual differences are not just skin-deep. Sexuality is more than a superficial, biological attribute. It is not manipulatable like hair or eye color. Even the various methods that attempt to manipulate it surgically or pharmaceutically only change its exterior characteristics. Sexuality is integral to us as male or female persons.

The passage goes on: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). The husband and wife enact their “original unity” in sexual union, which expresses exteriorly what is true in their minds and hearts.

Here is where we find the insight that is the linchpin of the theology of the body: what the Pope calls the **nuptial meaning of the body**. The word *nuptial* calls to mind a wedding; it is synonymous with “spousal.” *The nuptial meaning of the body is our call to self-giving love, which is written into our*

very embodiment as male or female. By becoming a gift to one another in a communion of persons, *we learn to love and be loved as God loves,* and so fulfill our highest destiny. We become a reflection of the very life and love of the Trinity and prepare to share in that life forever. This is true for every human person, whether married, single or a consecrated celibate, though it is lived out in different ways.

The fullest expression of the nuptial meaning of the body, on a natural level, is marriage. The communion that exists in marriage is unique, in that the gift of self is total and exclusive. Its bodily expression is the sign of an unbreakable covenant bond, in which the spouses commit themselves to one another in a lifelong union. Only such a total gift of self is capable of authentic sexual expression.

God has also designed the love of spouses to be inherently expansive. The one-flesh union of husband and wife becomes “incarnate” in a mysterious way when a new human being is brought into the world. Thus their communion is widened to encompass new persons equal in dignity and equally worthy of unconditional acceptance, enabling the spouses to reflect even more fully the mystery of God’s own love.

Human freedom finds its deepest realization in the marriage covenant. The world tells us that freedom means avoiding all commitment, but the truth is the opposite! True freedom is the ability to unite your whole being in choosing what is good, without any constraint. Who is more free: we who struggle with temptation or the saints in heaven, who have been so perfected in love that they cannot choose evil and can give themselves totally and unreservedly to God?

In fact, the covenant bond expressed in wedding vows is precisely for the purpose of freedom. Rather than remaining indefinitely open to a potential relationship with another

person, I choose this one person to give myself to completely in an irrevocable union. I voluntarily channel all my freedom into a total gift of self to my chosen spouse—and through that person, to God. The covenant bond is the *fulfillment* of human freedom.

Although marriage is unique, it is not the only way of living out the nuptial meaning of the body. We are all called to become a gift of self to others through our God-given masculinity or femininity. We are all in need of “helpers”—whether parents, relatives, friends or coworkers—who can help us discover our call to self-giving love. Whenever we make a sincere gift of self to others through bodily actions showing love and respect, and that gift is affirmed and reciprocated, a communion of persons is formed. There is also a supernatural way of living out the nuptial meaning of the body, consecrated celibacy, which we will discuss in Chapter 5.

What about homosexual persons? For those who experience same-sex attraction, the truth about the human person revealed in our bodies is both challenging and liberating—as it is for everyone. Despite what the media often present, no one is “born homosexual.” That is, no one is intrinsically oriented to union with the same sex.² Thus homosexual attraction does not define anyone in the essence of his or her identity.

In fact, properly speaking, *sexual* union is not possible with a person of the same sex. The fact that life-giving genital union is possible only with a person of the opposite sex is a visible sign that our call to spousal communion is through our innate complementarity as man and woman. The many severe health risks associated with homosexual activity also underscore the fact that such an orientation is not in accord with God’s design.

This is not to imply that homosexual inclinations are in themselves sinful. They are but one form of the disorder in our desires that results from the Fall. Sin occurs only when we *act* on these fallen desires.

Where there is disorder and sin, there is also hope for restoration. By God's grace we can experience a healing of our identity as men and women in the image of God, as we will see in Chapter 4.

NAKED AND UNASHAMED

The second creation account concludes with this cryptic observation: "And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed" (Genesis 2:25). This nakedness without shame, John Paul II explains, means that before the Fall the first couple experienced unveiled communication with one another. They saw each other as God sees. Their bodies were transparent windows to the inner person. There was no danger of looking at the body as an object, separate from the person. Between the man and woman there was a depth of intimacy, communication and mutual understanding that we can hardly begin to imagine.

Adam and Eve expressed their reciprocal self-giving through their naked bodies. Through their femininity and masculinity, each became a total, faithful and potentially fruitful gift for the other. Through their one-flesh union they also came to a deeper self-understanding. This is why the Bible uses the expression "to know" for the marital embrace: "Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived" (Genesis 4:1).

The mention of nakedness without shame contrasts with the experience of shame after the Fall (see Genesis 3:7), which we will consider in Chapter 3. It points to a time when there was wholeness within human persons, when there was