

**Christopher P. Klofft**

Assumption College  
Worcester, MA, USA

## **IMAGE AND *IMAGO*: A RATIONAL DEFENSE OF A THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF GENDER**

In the May 2014 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*, there was an interview with actress Kirsten Dunst. In the course of the interview, she talked about relationships and offered this statement:

I feel like the feminine has been a little undervalued. We all have to get our own jobs and make our own money, but staying at home, nurturing, being the mother, cooking—it's a valuable thing my mom created. And sometimes, you need your knight in shining armor. I'm sorry. You need a man to be a man and a woman to be a woman. That's how relationships work.<sup>1</sup>

Depending on one's perspective, this is either a thoroughly commonsensical statement or else a betrayal of the struggle of being a woman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Trying to ascertain which way one should view this statement (and one cannot have it both ways in this specific instance) strikes at the heart of issues of gender identity, gender meaning, and gender confusion today. Modern and Post-Modern discourse espouses an increasingly plastic or subjective understanding on gender. As a result, confusions run rampant throughout discussions on subjects as practical as marriage and as theoretical as questions of human meaning and purpose.

Catholic theology provides a response to this problem with a consistent account of gender that is also compatible with the best evidence available in support of a purely rational approach. A better understanding of the true meaning and purpose of gender, especially in regard to relationships,

---

<sup>1</sup> *Harper's Bazaar* (May, 2014).

will lead to a better understanding of ourselves and all of our relationships, and ultimately to the betterment of culture as a whole. This can be demonstrated through a reflection on the core of the Church's teaching on gender as first revealed in Scripture, and then developed through the personalistic approach espoused by Pope Saint John Paul II, specifically in his *Theology of the Body*.

The specific element of Dunst's statement mentioned previously that caused such consternation was likely its implied commentary on contemporary feminism,<sup>2</sup> which is not necessarily the same thing as the contemporary crisis regarding gender. Feminism, after all, strives for the best realization of the unique gifts that women bring to culture, and in its broadest form is a noble and worthy enterprise.<sup>3</sup> But Dunst also stated that a man needs to be a man and a woman needs to be a woman. That is not something that can be taken for granted any longer.

Modern and Post-Modern thought on gender has reduced it from an element of being human that is readily recognizable and acknowledged as a given to a yet another characteristic of the person subject to radical self-definition. Along with these varying approaches in self-definition comes a dizzying multiplication of new vocabulary to define one's specific niche, often further distinguishing one's gender identity (or lack thereof) with one's predilections in regard to sexual pleasure. Thus, man and woman is first distinguished from male and female and then one can identify as being a trans-male or a trans-female, who in turn may identify as heterosexual or homosexual (which is very confusing to cisgendered men and women—the term for someone who identifies with one's biological sex characteristics). Beyond this, one may identify themselves as asexual or genderless. These different terms can be given further shades of meaning to produce an even greater variety of results.<sup>4</sup> In April, 2014, Facebook made the news when it

---

<sup>2</sup> For example, see <http://uproxx.com/up/2014/04/shut-kirsten-dunst-kirsten-dunst-thinks-women-know-place-home/>, accessed on 02.07.2014, and <http://jezebel.com/kirsten-dunst-thinks-ladies-in-relationships-should-wif-1557845533>, accessed on 02.07.2014.

<sup>3</sup> Cornelius Murphy defines feminism as "a struggle to correct laws and practices that prevent women from achieving full equality with men in all aspects of domestic and public life." See Cornelius F. Murphy, Jr., *Beyond Feminism: Toward a Dialogue on Difference* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1995), 16. "In the most basic sense, feminism is exactly what the dictionary says it is: the movement for social, political, and economic equality of men and women," in Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future*, 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 56.

announced that one could choose from one of 50 preset gender options for one's profile.<sup>5</sup>

New ways to understand gender identification have led to new questions about rights and roles in society. This inevitably leads to legal questions, and in the United States, for example, legal questions regarding gender identification have often been considered to be a part of the same conversation regarding rights for persons with same-sex attraction. The fact that these two phenomena are only tangentially related to one another has largely been lost in the discourse, as both parties benefit from the greater exposure that their political alliance offers.<sup>6</sup>

To what end all this specification? This depends on with whom you are speaking. Those in favor of subjective understandings of gender see the idea as necessary for true autonomy and self-understanding. They assert that the human experience is far more complicated than a mere binary distinction and, as its proponents purport to be happier as a result of a more nuanced understanding of gender, this is necessary for truly human rights.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> For more on this, see the American Psychological Association, *Answers to Your Questions About Transgender People, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression* [<http://www.apa.org/topics/lgbt/transgender.pdf>, accessed on 28.08.2014]. Also see GLAAD *Media Reference Guide—Transgender Issues* [<http://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender>, accessed on 28.08.2014]. According to GLAAD, one is not “born a man or a woman,” but rather one is “assigned” at birth, thus describing the perceived lack of agency in one's subjective understanding.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/06/fashion/facebook-customizes-gender-with-50-different-choices.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/06/fashion/facebook-customizes-gender-with-50-different-choices.html?_r=0), accessed on 05.06.2014.

<sup>6</sup> The two related but distinct issues are how one identifies oneself according to the concept of sex and/or gender, and who one finds sexually attractive. Combining them, as is almost always done under the “LBTQ” moniker (and new letters are often added to this to account for new subjective variations), seems inaccurate from a legal point of view.

<sup>7</sup> A few examples that demonstrate this perspective: Arn Thornben Sauer and Aranka Podhora, “Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Human Rights Impact Assessment,” *United Nations Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal* 31:2 (2013): 135–145; Shannon L. Sennott, “Gender Disorder as Gender Oppression: A Transfeminist Approach to Rethinking the Pathologization of Gender Non-Conformity,” *Women and Therapy* 34:1 (Jan–June 2011): 93–113; Trevor A. Corneil, Justus H. Einfeld, and Marsha Botzer, “Proposed Changes to Diagnoses Related to Gender Identity in the DSM: A World Professional Association for Transgender Health Consensus Paper Regarding the Potential Impact on Access to Health Care for Transgender Persons,” *International Journal of Transgenderism* 12:2 (Apr–June 2010): 107–114; Maya Sabatello, “Advancing Transgender Family Rights Through Science: A Proposal for an Alternative Framework,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 33:1 (February, 2011): 43–75.

The counterpoint to this suggests that this is merely emotive rhetoric. Ignoring the binary distinctions of man and woman, male and female, creates challenges for anyone in any way responsible for helping others to understand the value and meaning of being human. This includes parents, educators, health care professionals, and law makers, to name just a few. While hard data is a little difficult to come by, a 2011 report released by the Williams Institute stated that 3 in 1000 Americans identified as transgendered, though much of this data was obtained from studies conducted in California and Massachusetts, in which more progressive ideas about being human might find greater support.<sup>8</sup> Yet, language is important here, because other studies report as much as two to five percent of the population exhibits some form of gender dysphoria, though this is more broadly classified to include any discomfort with one's biological identity, without necessarily including identification with the opposite sex.<sup>9</sup>

These numbers, while not miniscule, reveal that anywhere from 95 to 99.7% percent of the population identify with their biological sex. Yet a disproportionate amount of energy is placed on changing cultural perspectives on subjective gender as well as the laws to protect gender identification as a category.<sup>10</sup> This does not include the additional challenges discovered in the mental health community, when trying to determine whether the increased prevalence of depression and other emotional disorders among those who identify with a subjective view of their own gender is a result of cultural pressure that does not accept their self-understanding, or whether gender dysphoria is not one aspect of more comprehensive difficulties in one's mental health.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> *How many people are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender?* (The Williams Institute, April, 2011) [<http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Gates-How-Many-People-LGBT-Apr-2011.pdf>, accessed on 26.07.2014].

<sup>9</sup> See "Gender Identity Disorder: An Emerging Problem for Pediatricians," *Pediatrics* (February 20, 2012) [<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/129/3/571.long>, accessed on 28.08.2014], and *Transgender Issues: A Fact Sheet*, [<http://www.transgenderlaw.org/resources/transfactsheet.pdf>, accessed on 28.08.2014].

<sup>10</sup> In the state of Massachusetts, the Department of Education issued a formal set of guidelines for dealing with the miniscule minority of persons identifying themselves as transgender, including allowing students access to changing rooms based solely on gender identity, as long as that identity is "sincerely held." *Guidance for Massachusetts Public Schools Creating a Safe and Supportive School Environment—Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Gender Identity* (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education) [<http://www.doe.mass.edu/ssce/genderidentity.pdf>, accessed on 01.08.2014].

<sup>11</sup> For some examples of the complexity of this question, see James D. Weinrich and J. Hampton Atkinson, Jr., "Is Gender Dysphoria Dysphoric?" *Archives of Sexual Behavior*

Overall, we have great confusion about questions of gender in the west and we have adopted varying views in an attempt to answer these questions. As a generalization of the secular world, there is a movement towards the normalization of the subjective definition of gender: a recognition that, while most people will simply identify with one's biological constitution, if one does not, then that should be recognized, accepted, and legally supported as simply an alternative but equally valid way of being human.

In order to better understand what the Catholic tradition might bring to this situation, a better understanding of the concepts of gender and image are necessary. Theories of gender can be broadly distinguished between essential understandings of gender and constructionist understandings of gender.<sup>12</sup> In the not so distant past, essentialism was understood as normative, but now constructionism is widely accepted, especially in the halls of academia.<sup>13</sup>

---

24:1 (February, 1995): 55–71; Emma Dargie, Karen L. Blair, Caroline F. Pukall, and Shannon M. Coyle, "Somewhere Under the Rainbow: Exploring the Identities and Experiences of Trans Persons," *Canadian Journal of Human Sexuality* 23:2 (2014): 60–74; Walter O. Bockting, Michael H. Miner, Rebecca E. Romine, Autumn Hamilton, and Eli Coleman, "Stigma, Mental Health, and Resilience in an Online Sample of the US Transgender Population," *American Journal of Public Health* 103:5 (May, 2013): 943–951; Walter Bockting, "Are Gender Identity Disorders Mental Disorders? Recommendations for Revision of the World Professional Association for Transgender Health's Standards of Care," *International Journal of Transgenderism* 11:1 (2009): 53–62; Randall D. Ehrbar, "Consensus from Difference: Lack of Professional Consensus on the Retention of the Gender Identity Disorder Diagnosis," *International Journal of Transgenderism* 12:2 (Apr–June, 2010): 60–74; Colin A. Ross, "Ethics of Gender Identity Disorder," *Ethical Human Psychology and Psychiatry* 11:3 (2009): 165–170. While some of these authors present arguments regarding *why* transgenderism may be a disorder, the overwhelming majority do not consider it a disorder.

<sup>12</sup> On essentialism, for example, see Yves Christen, *Sex Differences: Modern Biology and the Unisex Fallacy*, trans. Nicholas Davidson (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1991). On constructionism, for example, see Rosalyn Diprose, *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Difference* (London: Routledge, 1994), esp. 18–37. See also Christopher P. Klofft, *Living the Love Story: Catholic Morality in the Modern World* (Staten Island: St. Paul's, 2008), 61–64. Susan Parsons uses slightly different language in distinguishing between a "naturalist" view (rather than essentialist) and two different ways of looking at the constructionist position. She makes a distinction between "liberal" and "social constructionist," based on differing paradigms of equality and justice. See *Feminism and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996).

<sup>13</sup> It is difficult to cite specific examples to demonstrate this in a comprehensive fashion. However, any search of either the "gender studies" program in any college or university, or a search for "gender" in an academic database, reveals an overwhelming number of

Essentialism asserts that a person's biological makeup is also in some way constitutive of one's personhood. In other words, it simply matters if one is born a man or a woman. The biological and hormonal differences between men and women are not accidents, but rather elements that enable us to understand what it means to be human in both our similarities and our differences. Our body types, the ways in which hormones affect our bodies and our neurochemistry, even certain culturally consistent predilections about the meaning of man and woman, all work together to define two different but complementary kinds of persons in the human community.

In its most extreme form, essentialism could go so far as to suggest that men and women are different creatures in their essence—two different species capable of interbreeding. This is a theologically untenable position. In the Incarnation, God became man—literally—and, paraphrasing Gregory Nazianzus, “that which is not assumed is not saved.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, a radical essentialist account of gender would deny salvation to women, which is simply not true.

The counterpoint to gender essentialism is constructionism. Constructionism denies the value of any sort of biological determinism when it comes to gender. Constructionism distinguishes between sex, one's biological identity as revealed through one's primary and secondary sex characteristics, and gender, which is a social construct formed by attitudes and ideas coming from one's self-understanding and/or the culture around the person. There can be little doubt that culture does have an effect on gender understanding. One of the challenges of discussing gender today is working through disagreements about what might actually constitute a real distinction between men and women and what might be merely a social attitude that could be changed. Constructionism sees one's identity as biological man or woman equally or perhaps less important than one's understanding of oneself as male or female, which may or may not have any relation to one's biology.

In its radical form, more manifest now than in any time in the past, constructionism becomes the situation described earlier: one's understanding of oneself is not bound by biology, nor even necessarily guided by the

---

examples of gender constructionism, broadly understood. By contrast, gender essentialism remains either a minority view, highly specialized in a biological context, or presented merely for critique.

<sup>14</sup> “To gar aproslepton, atherapeuton ho de henotai to theu, touto kai sozetai” (Gregory Nazianzus, *Letter*, 101.5).

larger culture, but rather solely defined by one's self. Functionally speaking, there are as many genders as there are persons, with classifying vocabulary merely being used as a convenient shorthand for generalization, but which is not ultimately accurate. One of the strongest arguments against radical constructionism is simply common sense, as defined by Aquinas.<sup>15</sup> There is a reason why the overwhelming majority of people throughout recorded human history have divided people as men and women: because it is simply true.

What is at stake for many people struggling with the question of gender is the matter of self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is certainly important for one's psychological and spiritual well-being, for the quality of one's relationships, for some degree of success in one's professional life, and most especially in one's quest for Truth and growth in holiness. Proponents of a subjective definition of gender assert that the ability to define one's gender as one understands oneself is a necessary part of understanding—even defining—one's self-image.

There seems to be a critical difference between the idea of understanding one's self-image and defining one's self-image. Certainly, there are elements to one's self-image that are chosen and that are personal or even unique to each individual: one's taste in music, the style of one's hair, one's preference for flavor when eating ice cream. But while these can be important characteristics in a person's sense of self, they have little or no effect on the level of the very personhood of the individual in question.

Gender, however, is a characteristic that *does* go to the core of what it means to be a human person. As such, can it be something that is defined by one's own perceptions and subsequently thrust upon those with whom one is in relationship? Are one's personal perceptions automatically to be taken as accurate for that person because they come from within? Or rather, is it possible that this aspect of one's image, one's gender, is something that can only be *discovered* rather than defined by oneself?

The revelation of God about the meaning of the human person as taught by the Catholic Church reveals that we are creatures, lovingly fashioned by a Craftsman Who is Himself personal and relationship. Therefore, even with all the delight we human beings can experience in a journey of

---

<sup>15</sup> *ST I*, 78, 4 ad 2. Part of the role of the common sense is to distinguish between the real and fantasy, to utilize the data provided by the senses and arrive at a conclusion as to what is really real.

self-discovery throughout our corporeal lives,<sup>16</sup> there are elements of ourselves that are simply defined from the moment of our conception.<sup>17</sup>

There is a benefit to acknowledging and accepting one's gender based on one's biology. It is easier and convenient. It simplifies relationships with others, especially people who we may not know as well. It promotes good physical health. It leads to psychological wholeness and easier spiritual growth. And perhaps most importantly, it is better for a person to live in conformity with the Truth that has been revealed by God and in nature than to try to establish one's own personal world amidst worlds of different persons. To put it more simply, the Catholic tradition is grounded in revelation, but also common sense.

The teaching of the Church has always espoused a moderate essentialist account of gender, as revealed through the first witness of Scripture. The creation accounts in Genesis describe the explicit creation of human persons as man and woman. "Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness . . . God created mankind in his image; in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them" (Gn 1:26–27). Two things are important in this passage. First and foremost, all human beings are created in the image of God, the *imago Dei*. God is the author of the human person and we are all created in His image, not in an image of our choosing. Second, being made in the image of God means being made specifically as male or female. Not only is this a defense of a binary account of gender, but the very idea that we are God-like is specifically revealed through our maleness and femaleness, not through any other characteristic that might have been described.

<sup>16</sup> The first chapter of *Gaudium et spes* begins by defining the human person as being made in the image of God (GS 12), and notes that: "When he is drawn to think about his real self he turns to those deep recesses of his being where God who probes the heart awaits him, and where he himself decides his own destiny in the sight of God. So when he recognizes in himself a spiritual and immortal soul, he is not being led astray by false imaginings that are due to merely physical or social causes. On the contrary, he grasps what is profoundly true in this matter" (GS 14).

<sup>17</sup> To avoid additional complexity, I am avoiding consideration of the phenomenon of intersex human beings, in which even the biological fact of the person as male or female is not necessarily clear. For more information on intersex persons in general, see *What is Intersex?* (Intersex Society of North America) [[http://www.isna.org/faq/what\\_is\\_intersex](http://www.isna.org/faq/what_is_intersex)], accessed on 21.08.2014]. For some thoughts on one possible approach to this issue from a theological context, see the work of Susannah Cornwall, especially "Recognizing the Full Spectrum of Gender? Transgender, Intersex and the Futures of Feminist Theology," *Feminist Theology* 20 (May, 2012): 236–241. Her approach is illustrative of a subjective understanding of gender.



The creation account in Genesis 2 specifically describes the relationship between men and women.<sup>18</sup> In the familiar story of the Garden of Eden, we read of our creation and also of our first disobedience against our Creator; in a sense, our first attempt to define our own image apart from the *Imago* in which we were created.<sup>19</sup> While the details of this story are straightforward, there is a greater depth about the meaning of man and woman that can be uncovered here. And there is no better teacher in the modern world in this regard than Pope Saint John Paul II.<sup>20</sup>

John Paul II's Theology of the Body, his weekly catecheses from 1979 to 1984, present a comprehensive "body" of thought on the relationship between God, our bodily nature, and personhood. The first part of the catecheses present a thorough explication of Genesis 1–3, especially Genesis 2, that reveals a deep understanding of the meaning of man and woman in the context of our creation in the *Imago Dei*.

Focusing on his presentation of Genesis 2, John Paul II begins by describing the creation of the creature in the garden. This creature, not defined as man or woman, but merely as *adam*, human being, is made of the muck of the earth: it is a corporeal creature.<sup>21</sup> Yet, God breathes into it and makes it a living being. This breath establishes the creature's personhood, as it now possesses God's spirit dwelling within it.<sup>22</sup>

This leads to the first of three Original Experiences described by John Paul. These Original Experiences of Genesis 2 are contrasted with the experience of Original Sin in Genesis 3. The first Original Experience is Original Solitude. The creature, made in the *imago Dei*, recognizes that is a subject amidst a world of objects, and in this recognition, also comes to realize that it is alone.<sup>23</sup> God creates more creatures, but none of these are

---

<sup>18</sup> Genesis 2 is actually the first account of creation, the Yahwist account, written c. 10<sup>th</sup> c. BC, while the Priestly account in Genesis 1 dates to c. 6<sup>th</sup> c. BC.

<sup>19</sup> Specifically, the serpent says to the woman, "God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, who know good and evil" (Gn 3:4). What the serpent is suggesting is that the woman will be able to know for herself and be able to choose for herself. Her personal subjectivity could be in contrast with the objective design of the Creator in Genesis 2.

<sup>20</sup> For additional theological reflection on gender complementarity, see also Prudence Allen, "Man–Woman Complementarity: The Catholic Inspiration," *Logos* 9:3 (2006): 87–108; "Integral Sex Complementarity and the Theology of Communion," *Communio* 17 (Winter, 1990): 523–544, and "Self-Creation and Loss of Self: Mary Daly and St. Teresa of Avila," *Studies in Religion* 6:1 (1976–1977): 67–72.

<sup>21</sup> Pope John Paul II, General audience of October 10, 1979.

<sup>22</sup> Pope John Paul II, General audience of October 31, 1979.

a fit companion for the creature, as none of them are made in the Image as it is.

Thus, God, in His recognition that it is not good for the creature to be alone (Gn 2:18), puts it into a deep sleep and constructs a new creature out of the muck of the earth and the rib of the first creature. John Paul II describes the mystical significance of this sleep in two ways. The first is that the creature has fallen asleep and, in a sense, has dreamed up his fit companion. In another way, sleep is likened to annihilation; in this way, God, through his creative initiative, remakes His creature who then emerges from sleep as male and female.<sup>24</sup>

This leads to the second experience, the experience of the Original Unity of Man and Woman. The man, who we can now call a man instead of a mere creature,<sup>25</sup> sees the answer to his longing in the presence of the woman, contained in his exclamation: “This one at last is bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh!” The original creation, the creature made in the *Imago*, is now fully revealed: two different ways of being a body, two different ways of being made in the Image of God.<sup>26</sup> These two different bodies also have the capacity to unite, to form one body, in the experience of marriage, which John Paul II describes as “the primordial sacrament.”<sup>27</sup> This union is also described using one of his favorite phrases throughout the catecheses as a *communio personarum*, a “communion of persons.”<sup>28</sup> The answer to the longing of the solitude of the individual is to enter into relationship, and this is especially realized in the marital relationship of a man and a woman. Manhood and womanhood are corporeal realities that are discovered, not chosen, and they would make no sense otherwise, because bodily man and woman were literally made for each other.

The final Original Experience in Genesis 2 is the Original Nakedness: “The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame” (Gn 2:25). The full meaning of this experience is less relevant to the present discussion, but it does indicate that in their bodily awareness from the first moment of creation, the man and the woman did not fear one another, physically, emotionally, or spiritually.<sup>29</sup> It is not beyond the

<sup>23</sup> Pope John Paul II, General audience of October 24, 1979.

<sup>24</sup> Pope John Paul II, General audience of November 7, 1979.

<sup>25</sup> Id.

<sup>26</sup> Pope John Paul II, General audience of November 14, 1979.

<sup>27</sup> Pope John Paul II, General audience of February 20, 1980.

<sup>28</sup> Pope John Paul II, General audience of November 14, 1979. In his use of the phrase, John Paul II is recalling *Gaudium et spes* 12, referenced above (n. 16)

intention of the Theology of the Body to also suggest that the man and the woman did not feel shame at their own corporeality, their own recognition of themselves as man and woman.<sup>30</sup> This is not just about their bodies; their very personhood was constituted as man and woman. Our bodies reveal our personhood. The way that we are made is a cause for joy and wonder at the mystery of God's love; when it becomes a matter of psychological discomfort or shame, perhaps a prayerful return to the design of the Creator might yield better results than trying to re-define reality according to one's own perceptions, as if one's personhood could differ from the reality of one's body.

This brief exposition of the first part of Pope Saint John Paul II's Theology of the Body only begins to plumb the depths of human experience uncovered by the Holy Father's reflections. Much more is said about the meaning of marriage, parenthood, the family, celibacy, and the way that bodies influence and contribute to our growth in holiness, our greater conformity to the *imago Dei*. All of this makes sense because it takes seriously the first fact that human beings are deliberately fashioned as man and woman and for a purpose.

Despite the philosophical language of John Paul II and his obvious foundation in Sacred Scripture, it is important to note that many of his conclusions about the nature of man and woman are not explicitly sectarian; one does not need to accept the fundamental premises of Christianity in order to see the wisdom in his teaching. Human persons come into being and come to identify themselves through the medium of their bodies.<sup>31</sup> This discovery fundamentally reveals the person as either

<sup>29</sup> See Pope John Paul II, General audiences of December 12 and December 19, 1979.

<sup>30</sup> "[T]he words 'they were not ashamed' can mean *in sensu obliquo* only an original depth in affirming what is inherent in the person, what is 'visibly' female and male, through which the personal intimacy of mutual communication in all its radical simplicity and purity is constituted. To this fullness of exterior perception, expressed by means of physical nakedness, there corresponds the interior fullness of man's vision in God, that is, according to the measure of the 'image of God.'" Pope John Paul II, General audience of December 19, 1979.

<sup>31</sup> See the recent article by Helen Alvare, "Reflecting on Complementarity" (Pontifical Council for the Laity) [<http://www.laici.va/content/laici/en/sezioni/donna/tema-del-mese/Complementarita.html>, accessed on 14.08.2014]. Also see Madhura Ingahalikar, Alex Smith, Drew Parker, Theodore D. Satterthwaite, Mark A. Elliott, Kosha Ruparel, Hakon Hakonarson, Raquel E. Gur, Ruben C. Gur, and Ragini Verma, "Sex differences in the structural connectome of the human brain," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 111:2 (2014): 823–828. This is a recent article noting the "hard-wired" differences between men and women, immediately challenged by those who prefer a subjective account

male or female. Knowledge of the self, and the peace and wholeness that that brings, includes the simple acceptance of this observation. While some people may experience a disconnect on this level of self-understanding, the reasonable conclusion would be to counsel such persons towards a greater integration of their corporeal reality with their troubled subjective identification.

Gender has become yet another locus of cultural crisis in the 21<sup>st</sup> century west. The problems associated with gender are hardly new: reflections on the specific roles and recognition of the particular contributions of women has been around since the beginning of the modern era. Related to this discussion are equally important conversations about the meaning of parenthood and family and the definition of marriage. But these conversations have made possible new conversations—ones that strike at the very fundamental meaning of the human person: our identity as men and women. Looking back at the history of the west over the past 75 years, it is fairly obvious to see that the problem brought about by a subjective understanding of the concept of gender stemmed from the core conceits of modernity itself: the turn to the subject ultimately suggested that everything about ourselves is up for grabs, subject not only to exploration, but also manipulation. The sin of our first parents remains: we desire to be the selfish gods of our own private universes in which we engage with the Truth only when it is convenient.

The results of this have been significant and far-reaching. Important public discussions on the nature and meaning of the family, marriage, and parenting have all been complicated by confusion about gender. Legislation now serves to protect each individual's self-identity rather than work towards the common good of our shared humanity. Mental health professionals have accepted a curious inversion in which each person can establish their own definition of mental health, while criticizing as neurotic anyone who holds to an objective view of reality, especially in matters of human sexuality. In short, we have an ever expanding multiplicity of images of the human person, while neglecting the good that comes from conforming ourselves to the Image of our Creator.

---

of gender. See, for example, "The Most Neurosexist Study of the Year?" *Slate* (December 4, 2013) [[http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/science/2013/12/hard\\_wired\\_brain\\_differences\\_critique\\_of\\_male\\_female\\_neuroscience\\_imaging.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2013/12/hard_wired_brain_differences_critique_of_male_female_neuroscience_imaging.html), accessed on 21.08.2014].

The work ahead of us is daunting, but the end result is sure. For the immediate future, there will continue to be curious laws, broken relationships, dangerous misunderstandings of human sexuality, depression, suicide, and one or more generations of children growing up confused about what it means to be a human person. The Catholic tradition offers an alternative to this, one which is founded in God's revelation, but because of that, it is also accessible to human reason and common sense. For those who are a part of this tradition, our role for now is to educate when possible, demonstrate by the example of our own lives, and pray continuously as St. Paul exhorts us (1 Thes 5:17). The simple truth remains this: human persons all share happiness as their final end and nothing can ultimately satisfy that longing except for relationship with the Creator in Whose image we are made. Being witness to this truth in a world full of confused images can lead to nothing less than the transformation of culture.

---

**IMAGE AND *IMAGO*: A RATIONAL DEFENSE OF  
A THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF GENDER**

**SUMMARY**

Modern and Post-Modern discourse espouses a subjective understanding of gender. As a result, confusing new problems erupt in discussions as practical as marriage and as theological as questions of human meaning and purpose. Catholic theology, drawing primarily from the personalistic approach to gender contained in Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*, provides a consistent account of gender that is also compatible with the best evidence available in support of a purely rational approach. A defense of this approach could lead to a better understanding of ourselves and our relationships, to the betterment of culture as a whole.

**KEYWORDS:** gender, anthropology, John Paul II, theology of the body, sexuality, common sense.