

Gendered Issues: A Critical Perspective on Catholic Sexual Ethics

1. Why Catholic sexual ethics call for a constructive dialogue between magisterium and gender theorists

1.1 Male-centred and patriarchal tendencies in sexual ethics

If we look at catholic sexual ethics as a whole, we see an ambiguous picture. On the one hand, recent theological developments show new approaches based on thoroughly researched studies in cultural and human sciences. Shining examples are Margaret Farleys's great book "Just Love" and Todd Salzman's and Michael Lawler's "Sexual ethics."¹ Both are examples of post-patriarchal ethical concepts, including the works and insights of feminist theology and gender studies. At the same time, these two outstanding works have raised eyebrows from the side of the more conservative bishops and consequently have been notified by the CDF. On the other side, the magisterium fosters a kind of sexual ethics that is still male-centred and patriarchal. This is obvious concerning certain norms and its substantiations – e.g. contraception, homosexuality, pregnancy issues, etc. These are looked at from a predominantly male perspective – to be precise: the perspective of celibate men, who often do not even understand what we mean by "male perspective".

One of the most striking – and enlightening – issues of the recent decade was the so-called "Phoenix Abortion Case" (2010). Mercy Sister Margaret Mary McBride was swiftly excommunicated by her bishop for assenting to the abortion of an 11-week-old foetus in order to save the life of a pregnant woman, a 27-year-old mother of four, suffering from pulmonary hypertension. The woman was so gravely ill that doctors were certain that she would die if the pregnancy were not terminated. McBride, vice president of mission integration at St. Joseph's Hos-

¹ Farley, Margaret A.: *Just Love. A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics*, New York ⁵2012; Salzman, Todd A./Lawler, Michael G.: *Sexual Ethics. A Theological Introduction*, Washington 2012.

pital and Medical Center in Phoenix, where the procedure occurred, was a member of the hospital ethics committee that approved termination of the pregnancy. – At this point, it is necessary to mention that we can find many reasons deduced from traditional moral teaching why a procedure like this would be morally justified, even less entail excommunication “*latae sententiae*”. However, that is not the issue here. Our point is, how and by whom roles and issues are defined. In the eyes of the bishop, it is not the role of the Sister-Doctor to determine moral reasoning independently of the church. Even less is it the role of a woman to decide whether a dead mother, together with a consequently dead foetus, really would be morally better than – as tragic as it may be – just a dead foetus with the woman still alive. The bishop’s approach – together with a strictly traditionalist moral reasoning – would argue that abortion is always wrong no matter what and, therefore, nothing could be done to save the mother.² It is God’s will. Period. Obviously, this is male-centred, patriarchal moral reasoning – if we want to call it reasoning at all. More than that: this proves to be a model case for the argument that Carol Gilligan’s critique of Lawrence Kohlberg’s approach to moral reasoning is not only right, it is still necessary even now.³

So my question is, Who is defining the issues what a man and a woman must or must not do? Moreover, what is the basic ethical framework behind this?

1.2 Signs of hope – signs of trouble

Right now, many hope that Pope Francis might change his tune. In fact, he is calling us to find ways to integrate women – and with them, the “feminine genius” – into political and ecclesial decision-making; this notion is very ambiguous in itself, as exemplified in the following passage of *Amoris laetitia*: “I certainly value feminism, but one that does not demand uniformity or negate motherhood. For the grandeur of women includes all the rights derived from their inalienable human dignity but also from their feminine genius, which is essential to society. Their specifically feminine abilities – motherhood in particular – also grant duties, because womanhood also entails a specific mission in this world, a mission that society needs to protect and preserve for the good of all.” (AL 173)

My first question aims to know what the Pope means by “feminine genius”, and further, what does it entail in particular – and who has the right to define its

2 Cf. Roberts, Tom: Ethicists fault bishop’s action in Phoenix abortion case, in: National Catholic Reporter, June 8, 2010 (source: <https://www.ncronline.org/news/ethicists-fault-bishop-s-action-phoenix-abortion-case>).

3 Cf. Gilligan, Carol: In a different voice. Psychological theory and women’s development, Cambridge (Mass) 1982.

specifics?⁴ The well known US feminist theologian and ethicist, Jamie Manson, published a firm critique of Pope Francis's lack of gender sensitivity.⁵ In his documents, and even more in his talks, he shows an "unwavering belief in complementarity" and a naïve "nuptial symbolism" of gender roles. A glimpse at the "relatio finalis", the final report of the Bishops' Conference on Family in 2015, helps to highlight the issue. How do the bishops look at men and women?⁶

No 25 emphasizes that women play "a crucial role" in family and society, because they are mothers and as such human and spiritual formators. In the very beginning of this paragraph, the bishops invoke the example of Mary and link this strongly with the birth experience. The following section deals with discrimination and violence against women and strongly defends their dignity as human persons against exploitation and sexual violence. Then the perspective turns to procreation: Women have to be defended against abortion and forced sterilization and against the abuse as "womb for hire" and the "marketing of gametes and embryos".

However, the main point seems to be: "The emancipation of women requires a rethinking of the duties of the spouses in their reciprocity and shared responsibility for family life." So far, this seems to pose no problem, if it were not for the problematic overall perspective: Women as birthgivers are persons that even men need, since they all are born by a woman. The defence against violence and oppression is noble and necessary, but at the same time, there is obviously no idea that a woman could also choose – out of free will – to give birth to a child of another couple. Is "womb for hire" really the right term for this complex matter? For the sake of comparison, a look at the male side is helpful. No 26 states: "Man plays an equally decisive role in family life, particularly in reference to the protection and support of his wife and children." The role model is St. Joseph who took care for his family and protected them. This statement is followed by a lamentation that fathers oftentimes are absent from their families depriving their sons of a masculine role model. But that model, as seen above, is limited to the double task of providing support and protection, nothing more is said about the role of the fathers except, maybe, that they should love their wives "as their own body" (Eph 5:28) just as Christ loves his church.

So far, the model of complementarity seems perfect: women give care, while men offer protection and support. Is there nothing else offered by each? For a

4 For a detailed analysis of the meaning and history of the expression "feminine genius" cf. the article by Sharon Bong in this book.

5 Cf. Manson, Jamie: It's time to be honest about Pope Francis and women, in: National Catholic Reporter, May 19, 2016 (source: <http://ncronline.org/blogs/grace-margins/its-time-be-honest-about-pope-francis-and-women>).

6 Cf. Relatio finalis 2015, Nos 27–28.

more detailed background, we have a look at the 2004 CDF document “on the Collaboration of men and women”, which shows how highly men of the church still think of “the woman” and the “feminine genius” – as long as no woman gets into their way.

1.3 CDF “on the Collaboration of Men and Women” (2004)

First of all, the CDF makes very clear that Feminism, and what today is called “gender ideology”, have to be opposed, because they not only present no valid solution to gender injustice, but on the contrary: they constitute the problem! The CDF states: “A first tendency is to emphasize strongly conditions of subordination in order to give rise to antagonism: women, in order to be themselves, must make themselves the adversaries of men.” (No 2)

I always was inclined to think that to fight subordination means to fight for justice – a fight that is well in accordance with catholic social teaching. Nevertheless, this document is not about social teaching; it deals with matters of sexuality, family, and last, but not least, with the role of women in the church. However, let us stick to the first matter: the consequence of the “first tendency” is a second one: “A second tendency emerges in the wake of the first. In order to avoid the domination of one sex or the other, their differences tend to be denied, viewed as mere effects of historical and cultural conditioning. In this perspective, physical difference, termed sex, is minimized, while the purely cultural element, termed gender, is emphasized to the maximum and held to be primary.” (No 2)

What are the consequences? “This theory of the human person, intended to promote prospects for equality of women through liberation from biological determinism, has in reality inspired ideologies which, for example, call into question the family, in its natural two-parent structure of mother and father, and make homosexuality and heterosexuality virtually equivalent, in a new model of polymorphous sexuality.” (No 2) Now there’s the rub! We are facing a hidden agenda. The aim of the gender ideologists obviously is the following: “All persons can and ought to constitute themselves as they like, since they are free from every predetermination linked to their essential constitution.” (No 3) So, we are in the centre of sexual ethics: once the strong complementary model of man and woman crumbles, we face total promiscuity without any ethical values at all. One can only guess what the following warning really means: “This tendency would consider as lacking in importance and relevance the fact that the Son of God assumed human nature in its male form.” (No 3)

Christologically, we are on precarious grounds. If Christ’s maleness had any soteriological relevance, we might have to accept the fact that women are redeemed only partly, i. e., their femaleness itself is either unredeemed or un-

redeemable. This would be a major shift from the original tradition that states that, by assuming human form, God has redeemed all of humanity. Of course, this notion is aimed at the question of women's ordination; but if we take it seriously, it goes much deeper than that. Jamie Mason's analysis is the following (this time aimed at Pope Francis): "Francis is delicately saying that because women do not have a phallus, they cannot 'image' the body of Christ."⁷ If that were the case, women could not only not be priests, but could also not be full members of the Church at all.

Back to the main question: What is the role of woman as "complementary" to man? The CDF document invokes the creation of Eve as a "helpmate", which, of course, does not entail inferiority, but the role as a "vital helper" (cf. No 6): "This is so that Adam's life does not sink into a sterile and, in the end, baneful encounter with himself. It is necessary that he enter into relationship with another being on his own level. Only the woman, created from the same 'flesh' and cloaked in the same mystery, can give a future to the life of the man." (No 6)

As nice as the words may sound, this thought leads to the conclusion that woman is created because man needs her; woman is there for the other, i. e., for man. Although the text speaks of a "relational reality", it seems that man is the sole purpose and woman the necessary means to that purpose: "Through this same spousal perspective, the ancient Genesis narrative allows us to understand how woman, in her deepest and original being, exists 'for the other' (cf. 1 Cor 11:9). Woman is 'there for the other'." (No 6)

Therefore, we have a definition of woman as "being there for the other", i. e., for man; the purpose of her life is to offer herself as a gift for the other. I wonder why it is not said explicitly: "gift for the man"? If we look at the complementary model more thoroughly, we see that equality is only there at the level of ideas, whereas, in reality, it leads to inequality and unjust relations, even if the CDF denies it. It states: "Their equal dignity as persons is realized as 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." (No 8)

Who is responsible for the conflict? Whose "sin" is the root of this? In No 2, we read that it is the "tendency" of feminist and gender theorists to wage conflict – a conflict that would not be there without them in the first place. In other words, no conflict between sexes would arise if woman would just know her place and stay there. This idea is based on the preferred nuptial symbolism, which follows the role models of Mary and Joseph, or Mary and Christ. The conclusions drawn by the CDF states in short: "Among the fundamental values linked to women's actual lives is what has been called a 'capacity for the other'. Although a certain

7 Manson, op.cit.

type of feminist rhetoric makes demands ‘for ourselves’, women preserve the deep intuition of the goodness in their lives of those actions which elicit life, and contribute to the growth and protection of the other.” (No 13) Here, we see clearly that the “genius of woman” (No 13) or “feminine genius” is related to family, motherhood, and all sorts of caring. Together with the theological model of Mary, it means the basic attitude of “listening and receiving” (No 15) – it is the place of the obedient servant. This, of course, is considered a virtue for all Christians, but even here, women are “special”: “While these traits should be characteristic of every baptized person, women in fact live them with particular intensity and naturalness.” (No 16)

In the concluding point, we can see how a patriarchal way of thinking considers woman as the prime saviour from sin, and in the end, the hope to overcome the damage male sin has done to earth and society: “The witness of women’s lives must be received with respect and appreciation, as revealing those values without which humanity would be closed in self-sufficiency, dreams of power and the drama of violence. Women too, for their part, need to follow the path of conversion and recognize the unique values and great capacity for loving others which their femininity bears.” (No 17) In short: Woman saves the world from the egocentric perspective of men through her obedient service; and it would be a sin to refuse this service – a fall of woman into the pattern of male sinfulness.

1.4 Perspectives from feminist theology and gender theory

It is not at all difficult to apply a few of the basic insights of feminist critique to the gender perspective – maybe we should call it even more clearly gender ideology – of the magisterium, which is clearly androcentric, considering “the male as the determinant of the human being”⁸ and the female as deviant. This is the main character of patriarchy as a fundamental and universal power structure defining not only the place of women in matrimony, but also in society overall.⁹ This androcentric self-perception predisposes females to follow behaviour patterns that subordinate their own needs and desires to those of the men and children in their lives.¹⁰ Overall, we see the classic dualistic pattern,¹¹ identifying woman with body, household, inside, emotion, and decency, while men are identified with mind, public sphere, outside, reason, and dignity. For more than half a

8 Rossi, Mary Ann: *Androcentrism*, in: Isherwood, Lisa/McEwan, Dorothea: *An A to Z of Feminist Theology*, Sheffield 1996, 5–6, 5.

9 Cf. Schottroff, Luise/Schaumberger, Christine: *Patriarchat*, in: *WBfemTh*¹ (1991), 319–323.

10 Rossi, *Androcentrism*, op.cit. 5.

11 Cf. Nagl-Docekal, Herta: *Dualismus*, in: *WBfemTh*¹ (1991), 64–67.

century, feminist and gender studies have analysed this kind of construction as being far from natural, but rather a socially constructed knowledge system: the dualistic pattern is the way to interpret the world, and social gender roles are attributed via the biological dimension of sex.¹² This attribution is only possible if sex is considered the natural basis on which gender as a cultural construct is built upon. The studies of Judith Butler and many others have shown this idea itself to be an intellectual construct: since sex is experienced within a cultural framework there is no “natural” experience of body and sex in itself; even the genitals are just a “sign” for being male or female.¹³ Therefore, the importance of gender roles cannot be overestimated.

To analyse and deconstruct these roles is first of all a criticism of power structures – which explains why anti-genderism is so strong in the hierarchy: “they fear losing the perspective of a stable reality organized along dualistic gender differences that are considered to be natural (and therefore unchanging), complementary (and therefore unequivocal), and hetero-normative.”¹⁴ This would entail that everything begins to destabilize – not only sexual morality, but all of society as well. Therefore, gender is considered a “strategic vehicle used by feminists and homosexual activists to attack and destabilize the ‘natural’ family”¹⁵. Feminism and gender theories are not seen as academic discussions, but as “political strategy” and an “anthropological threat”.¹⁶

1.5 Conclusions for catholic sexual ethics

From a gender-sensitive perspective, we have to reconstruct theological ethics – and the initially mentioned moral theologians, Margaret Farley and Todd Salzman/Michael Lawler, are good examples how this could and should be done. Our question, therefore, is not primarily to question oppressive power structures that eventually become destructive and violent. The example at the very beginning of this article has shown clearly enough how a male-centred perspective is dam-

12 Cf. Hirschauer, Stefan: *Wie sind Frauen, wie sind Männer? Zweigeschlechtlichkeit als Wissenssystem*, in: Eifert, *Was sind Frauen?* In: Eifert, Christiane u. a. (Hg.): *Was sind Frauen? Was sind Männer? Geschlechterkonstruktionen im historischen Wandel*, Frankfurt/M. 1996, 240–256.

13 Cf. Hirschauer, a. a. O., 241–242.

14 Cf. Hark, Sabine/Villa, Paula-Irene: “Eine Frage an und für unsere Zeit”, in: dies. (Hg.): *Anti-Genderismus. Sexualität und Geschlecht als Schauplätze aktueller politischer Auseinandersetzungen*, Bielefeld 2015, 15–40, 30.

15 Paternotte, David: *Blessing the Crowds*, in: Hark, Sabine/Villa, Paula-Irene (Hg.): *Anti-Genderismus. Sexualität und Geschlecht als Schauplätze aktueller politischer Auseinandersetzungen*, Bielefeld 2015, 129–148, 136.

16 Paternotte, David: *Blessing the Crowds*, op.cit., 138.

aging in real life situations. Feminist and gender studies have shown clearly enough how an oppressive patriarchalistic culture has damaged women's bodies and souls. Now it is our task – not only women's – to uncover, expose, and fight those structures. However, the focus here is that everybody is entitled and called to find his or her own place in life – especially in sexual relationships.

Salzman/Lawler have shown clearly that complementarity is a sensitive issue and also necessary between partners; but at the same time, it cannot be linked to the genital complementarity of sex, not even to role-complementarity of gender, but it has to be understood as “holistic complementarity” between individuals, deeply rooted in the person and his/her understanding of him-/herself.¹⁷ Complementarity is not a question of gender, even less so of sex, but of personal identity – not individualistic, but essentially relational. From that understanding of sex, gender and personal relations, we go one step further in our question: how does this all correspond to sexual identity and sexual orientation?

2. The responsibility of acknowledging and accepting one's sexual identity

2.1 Introduction

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) acknowledges, “sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of his body and soul. It especially concerns affectivity, the capacity to love and to procreate, and in a more general way the aptitude for forming bonds of communion with others” (no 2332). It continues: “[e]veryone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his sexual identity. Physical, moral, and spiritual difference and complementarity are oriented toward the goods of marriage and the flourishing of family life. The harmony of the couple and of society depends in part on the way in which the complementarity, needs, and mutual support between the sexes are lived out” (no 2333).

In the first part we have already expounded the problem of the notion of complementarity if it is reduced to genital complementarity of sexes, i. e., of maleness or femaleness, or to role-complementarity according to gender, i. e., of masculinity and femininity or father- and motherhood. On the contrary, it has to be understood in a holistic personal sense, which includes the whole person and their identity. Independently of his/her sex or gender, every human being is fully

17 Cf. Salzman, Todd A./Lawler, Michael G.: *Sexual Ethics. A Theological Introduction*, Washington (DC) 2012, 47–93; Salzman, Todd A./Lawler, Michael G.: *The Sexual Person. Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology*, Washington (DC) 2008.

and integrally human, but is at the same time in need of a relationship in which the person finds its/her identity in one's relations with others.

2.2 What does sexual identity mean?

The aforementioned paragraph of the CCC clearly affirms that "everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his [and her] sexual identity". What does sexual identity mean and who has the power and the competence to define one's sexual identity? Sexual identity includes different areas of human being¹⁸: (1) the biological dimension, (2) the socio-cultural dimension, and (3) the psychological dimension.

2.2.1 The biological dimension

We must differentiate various aspects at the level of the biological sex: the genetic chromosome-related level (female XX, male XY), the reproductive and internal genital organs (ovaries, testes) and the related level of the hormones (oestrogen, testosterone), and the phenotypic appearance of sexual characteristics. In the current state of knowledge of sexual sciences, it is still controversially discussed whether there should be added as a further aspect of biological sex the prenatal development of that region of the hypothalamus that has not only an important function for sexual maturation, but is also linked to sexual orientation and influences sexual behaviour from adolescence. The process of the development and maturation of the biological sex is a very complex one, which in most cases proceeds in the way that the different aspects fit neatly together. Therefore, we can speak of a normal development or of normality in an empiric sense, but we must not speak of normativity in an ethical sense in order to avoid the naturalistic fallacy. There are also anomalous developments that may have different causes, e. g., a genetic anomaly of sex chromosome trisomy (XXX, XXY, XYY), or anomalous developments of the internal and/or external sexual characteristics, e. g., intersexuality. There may also be biological causes of the phenomenon, where the sexual orientation of a person does not tend towards a person of the opposite sex. The discussion of "normal" or "deviant" sexual orientation has, again, to be understood in an empiric sense, not in a medical or in an ethical sense. Hetero-normativity means that most people have a heterosexual orientation, but there exist also other forms of sexual orientation, which are not

18 Cf. e. g. Ulrike Kolanowski, *Wie Jugendliche ihre sexuelle Orientierung entdecken. Persönliche Geschichten einmal anders betrachtet*, in: Meike Watzlawik / Nora Heine (ed.), *Sexuelle Orientierungen. Weg vom Denken in Schubladen*, Göttingen 2009, 101–109.

subject to the free choice of the individual, but rather are given conditions, constituted prior to the freedom of the individual. As we will see later, the truly ethical question is how a person relates to these biological given realities.

2.2.2 The socio-cultural dimension

It is undoubtedly an achievement of Gender studies to differentiate between sex and gender. Even though the two Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops on family and marriage in 2014 and 2015 reflect a quite undifferentiated and negative opinion about Gender theories by characterizing them generally as ideological, they have endorsed the distinction between “sex” and “gender”. The Final Report of the Synod of Bishops of October 2015 in paragraph 58 affirms: “According to the Christian principle, soul and body, as well as biological sex (sex) and socio-cultural role of sex (gender), can be distinguished but not separated.” *Amoris laetitia* no 56 also speaks about the “challenge (that) is posed by the various forms of an ideology of gender” and identifies the very core of the “ideology of gender” in the denial of the “the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman” and in the vision of “a society without sexual differences.” This is interpreted subsequently as “elimination of the anthropological basis of the family.” I have my doubts as to whether this criticism is correct, as to whether it is justified against gender theories in general. I rather believe that this criticism fails to understand either the main common issue or the main concern of Gender studies, that is, to make us aware of the differentiation of sex and gender and to sensitize us to the various consequences of understanding the nature of masculine and feminine, as well as of the relationship between men and women.¹⁹ However, this cannot be discussed at this point.

Anyhow, it is interesting that Pope Francis in *AL* no 286 affirms: “Nor can we ignore the fact that the configuration of our own mode of being, whether as male or female, is not simply the result of biological or genetic factors, but of multiple elements having to do with temperament, family history, culture, experience, education, the influence of friends, family members and respected persons, as well as other formative situations. It is true that we cannot separate the masculine and the feminine from God’s work of creation, which is prior to all our decisions and experiences, and where biological elements exist which are impossible to ignore. But it is also true that masculinity and femininity are not rigid categories.” Therefore, Pope Francis has in principle taken up the distinction between sex and gender positively.

¹⁹ Cf. the summary on feministic and gender studies by Gertraud Ladner, *Feministische Forschung und Geschlechterforschung*, in: *ZKTh* 136 (2014), 210–219.

Excursus: The portrayal of women in Religions

The Viennese religious scholar Birgit Heller states that, in all the major religious traditions, there exists a subordination of women to men, and vice versa the domination of men over women.²⁰ This vision is not only a matter of socio-cultural understanding of women's role in society and religion, but rather reflects the deeper problem of projecting socio-cultural aspects into the nature of human beings and of legitimising this projection in religion.

Historically and culturally developed understandings of the relationship between men and women were justified by declaring them as "given by nature", that is, as conforming with human nature itself, or as willed by God. As a result, the masculine was attributed to the spiritual and divine sphere, the feminine, on the contrary, to the bodily and material one. The masculine nature and the male body were seen as the active, creative, and procreative part, while the feminine nature and the female body as the passive and receptive part. Men are seen as able to reason and acknowledge the truth, women are seen as weaker, not only physically, but also in terms of reasoning and of moral behaviour and, therefore, as needing to be led by men. The risk of understanding being female not only not only as a form of non-self-sufficiency, but the feminine as such as a deficient form of being human, is quite evident. The move from here to the non-recognition of women's self-understanding is gradual and small. Therefore, it is no wonder that, in the male-centred doctrine on sexual ethics, the female dimension and the women's point of view is generally omitted. Women were seen as persons without their own sexual feelings and desires.

These distinctions and this dualism are not mere religious characteristics, but can be found also in secular philosophies of the ancient West, as well as in the ancient social orders in the Roman Empire. These tendencies have exercised significant influence on the development of the Christian anthropological doctrine of notions of man and woman and, consequently, on sexual ethics. Women's subordination to men was explained by the Order of creation, believed as revealed by the Holy Scripture, as well as by virtue of Natural Law. These questions, however, cannot be discussed here in detail.²¹

It should be noted, in any case, that this vision of subordination of woman to

20 Cf. e.g. Birgit Heller, *Gender and Religion*, in: Kari Elisabeth Børresen et al. (ed.), *Gender and Religion. Genre et Religion*, Rome 2001, 351–360; id., *Gender und Religion*, in: Johann Figl (ed.), *Handbuch Religionswissenschaft*, Innsbruck 2003, 758–769.

21 See e.g. Mary Douglas, *Purity and danger: An analysis of the concepts of pollution and taboo*, London 1966; Peter Brown, *The Body and Society. Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, New York 1988; Theresa Heimerl / Stefanie Knauß, *Religion M/macht Geschlecht. Religion, Geschlechtskonstruktion und Medien*, in: Sigrid Eder / Irmtraud Fischer (ed.), "... männlich und weiblich schuf er sie ..." (Gen 1,27). *Zur Brisanz der Geschlechterfrage in Religion und Gesellschaft (= Theologie im interkulturellen Dialog 16)*, Innsbruck/Wien 2009, 162–182.

man can be found in different texts of the Roman Catholic Magisterium up to the present day, even though in a more subtle form. As long as the “feminine genius” is seen as “for others”²², it is identified with a form of relationship of women to others in terms of caring. This form of relationship, in reality, all-too-often leads to asymmetric relations between the genders and causes social injustice and an asymmetric distribution of burdens.²³ The emancipation of women requires critical rethinking regarding how Mary, virgin and mother of God, in the tradition was used as a model of how to be female and what the role of women should be. For example, in the late 1980s, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians Women’s Collective in the Philippines had revealed the improper application of devotion to Mary, the Sorrowful Mother, because this devotion all-too-often was used to keep people, especially woman, shackled and passive.²⁴ It states: “the ‘new’ Filipina (or female Indio) [after Spanish colonization, MML] was now her father’s meek daughter, her husband’s faithful subject, the Church’s obedient servant, and before her marriage, a chaste virgin who would yield only to her husband (and occasionally to the friar). Of course, like her peasant husband, she was also a slavelike toiler who worked the rich man’s and his descendants’ land for pittance.”²⁵

Gender studies have revealed how these anthropological positions reflect male-dominated, that is, patriarchal, social structures, rather than nature-given features. The problem is not the differentiation of masculine and feminine, of male and female, but the normative evaluation of this division and the abuse of it in order to justify binary-ordered social structures of power. By defining a male or female genus, such structures are prolonged even nowadays.²⁶ Therefore, it is necessary to free men and women from socio-cultural frames that were declared as nature-given and willed by God. There is no doubt that sex is a given element of nature, that human beings have to accept and personally make sense of it, but we have to distinguish it from the social role defined by religious and cultural traditions and societies. For example, in regard to the subordination of women to men, it must be emphasised that, according to Gen 3:16, this subordination is presented clearly as a consequence of sin and does not correspond to the original

22 Cf. CDF, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the collaboration of men and women in the Church and in the World (2004), no. 13.

23 See Schnabl Christa, Gerecht sorgen. Grundlagen einer soziaethischen Theorie der Fürsorge (= Studien zur theologischen Ethik 108), Freiburg i.Br. et al. 2005.

24 Cf. Sr. Mary John Mananzan, “The Filipino Woman: Before and After the Spanish Conquest of the Philippines”, in: id. (ed.), Essays on Filipino Women, Manila 1987, 7–36; Aida F. Santos, Do Women Really Hold Up Half the Sky?: Note on the Women’s Movement in the Philippines, in: Carolyn I. Sobrיתה, Gender, Culture Society: Selected Readings in Women’s Studies in the Philippines (Women’s Studies in Asia Series: The Philippines), Soul 2004, 23–41.

25 Santos, Do Women Really Hold Up Half the Sky?, 26.

26 Cf. e.g. *Relatio finalis* 2015, 27–28.

divine vision of relationship between man and woman. "Through sin the relationship of love and purity between man and woman turns into domination: 'Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you' (Gen 3:16)."²⁷ Overcoming this sin's consequence of domination of men over women through Christ's salvation means that for those who belong to Christ through baptism "there is no male and female" (cf. Gal 3,28).

This does not "declare sex difference in any sense abolished in a new creation of unified, sexually undifferentiated humanity. Rather, it refers to the adiaphorization of sex difference in a new creation where being male or female is no advantage or disadvantage in relation to God and others and where man and woman are reconciled and united as equals."²⁸

2.2.3 The psychological dimension

Sexual identity is strongly linked to one's own Self-concept, that is, to one's very personal understanding and image of him- or herself. Sexual identity has to do with one's psychological feeling as being male or female, with one's body awareness and experience, and with one's personal sexual desire and orientation. It is also an expression of how one would like to be perceived by others with his or her very individual identity that includes the sexual dimension of his or her personality. The question of finding out and developing one's personal identity belongs to the important aspects of self-awareness and of the sense that is inscribed into sexuality.²⁹ Self-perception and the perception of oneself by others are two fundamental pillars for the development of personal identity. Every personal identity is always developed in a complex process of interpersonal relations.³⁰ One's sexual self-concept is influenced and determined by the biological dimension, as well as by the socio-cultural understanding of gender roles, but it is not determined either by the first or by the second.

Therefore, it is one's own responsibility to form his or her sexuality through critical confrontation, as well with one's own biological sexual dimension, which includes the understanding of gender that one learns from the different social contexts where he or she lives, e. g., family, school, peer groups, Church, etc. This

27 Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia* 19.

28 Judith M. Gundry-Volf, Christ and Gender. A Study of Difference and Equality in Gal 3,28, in: Christof Landmesser et al. (ed.), *Jesus Christus als die Mitte der Schrift. Studien zur Hermeneutik des Evangeliums*, Berlin/New York 1997, 439.

29 Cf. Stephan Leimgruber, *Christliche Sexualpädagogik. Eine emanzipatorische Neuorientierung für Schule, Jugendarbeit und Beratung*, München 2011, 97. Leimgruber distinguishes five such sense-aspects: identity, communication, lust and vitality, fertility, and openness to transcendence (cf. *ibid.*, 96–100).

30 Cf. Martin Buber's Dialog principle of the necessity of the encounter with others in order to develop one's identity: "The person in you becomes me."

process, of course, can be very difficult and painful if a person's sexual self-concept does not correspond to their biological appearance or to social expectations. These tensions may put pressure on individuals, but are also critical questions that aim towards gender understanding and towards social judgments regarding what is normal and normative

2.3 Who defines one's sexual identity?

As has been said previously, the forming of one's identity is the fruit of a complex process. Personal responsibility always has to deal with different limitations of freedom, that is, it has to be achieved within real limitations and contingencies. These form the biological, social, and psychological framework of the concrete exercise of human freedom. Ultimately, the question is to enable and empower a person to his or her self-development and to ethical autonomy. This, first, requires taking seriously one's own self-concept, as well as one's own moral self-determination. Of course, both of them are embedded in a social and cultural context and do not happen in a vacuum. There are various forms of interactions and of social relations that influence personal self-determination. At the same time, personal self-determination and personal behaviour influence the interpersonal social dimension and the social understanding of gender. These close interactive relationships exist and must be considered. The determining factor, in any case, is the question of enabling the individuals to acknowledge and to accept their own sexual identity.

In the end, this identity cannot be assigned outwardly to a person, but has always to include a person's own self-concept, feeling, and desire. As many aspects of sexual identity are predetermined (as for example the biological aspects) or influence a person even before he or she has the possibility to relate to them consciously and critically (as for example the socio-cultural gender notions), finding out one's own sexual identity does not consist simply in a free choice between different sexual concepts. Acknowledging his or her own sexual identity means to deal with determinations and limitations, as well as with personal and social expectations. To claim sexual autonomy does not mean that sexual identity becomes the choice of the individual, which can be changed freely over time, but to recognize one's own responsibility of self-recognition, of sexual behaviour, and of placing meanings on sexuality. Further, it demands respect for body consciousness and psychological self-awareness, as well as for one's individual sense of femaleness or maleness. Moral autonomy means the freedom and responsibility to express his or her own sexual identity by different forms of behaviour that are embedded in certain understandings of male and female roles, and that in different cultural contexts can be understood very differently.

This means that it is a person's individual responsibility to learn to communicate with bodily sexual language and to use it in a proper way within daily interpersonal relationships.

2.4 Some conclusions for catholic sexual ethics

Sexual identity is neither biologically nor socio-culturally defined. It is rather an integral part of a person's responsibility to acknowledge their sexual identity, to form and develop it within certain biologically, socio-culturally, and psychologically determined limitations. Freedom and moral autonomy have to be exercised within such a framework.

There is the challenge to realize personal freedom in the tension between nature and culture. Culture has to be understood as the ability to act upon and to transform nature. This means, of course, to acknowledge the meanings and potentials offered by nature, and to actualize the potential inherent in nature. Mere nature does not have a normative force; on the contrary, any approach to interpret nature and its inherent potentials and meanings are mediated through a specific socio-cultural and anthropological-philosophical value-system. This is valid also for human sexuality. Any approach to biological sex is mediated through socio-cultural notions of gender. Acknowledging this, however, does not mean to deny the biological sexual dimension, but to recognize that there is no access to it beyond gender notions.

It is up to the Church to acknowledge this scientific knowledge of Gender studies and to accept the personal responsibility of every man and woman for coping with his or her sexuality, body, affectivity, sexual desire, and orientation. Many of these aspects cannot be objectified, but are subjective experiences. Therefore, sexual identity cannot be assigned outwardly, but has to be formed by the person herself in a complex process of maturation and through confrontation with biological, socio-cultural, and psychological aspects. Sexual ethics has to aim to enable and empower people to assume this very personal responsibility.

Ultimately, the Church should be very attentive to the negative consequences of deducing meanings of male or female sexuality from the biological basis of sexuality. It has to be attentive to the differentiation of sex and gender. Otherwise, it risks prolonging a male-centred perspective and view on sexuality and gender that creates distorted and unjust relations between men and women to the detriment of the latter. The Church has to overcome the historical baggage of a patriarchal understanding of sexuality and of relations between men and women that, until the present day, has caused the subordination of women and opened the door to violence against women and the instrumentalisation of the female body. This is a serious requirement, given our insight on how strongly such a

male-centred and predefined approach makes it impossible to deal freely and self-responsively with one's sexuality. At the same time, the Church has to listen to people's own self-understanding and to their own experiences, as well as to their own moral insights. As members of the Church, we do not have to speak on behalf of people – women and men – but we have to let them speak for themselves. Individual conscience and self-understanding need to be incorporated more broadly into the Church's reflection on sexuality and on sexual ethics.³¹

31 The author fr. Martin M. Lintner OSM wishes to thank fr. Paul M. Addison OSM, London, for proofreading the manuscript of this text.