



# The Holy See

---

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday 12 December 1979*

### The Meaning of Original Human Experiences

The analysis of the first chapters of Genesis forces us, in a way, to reconstruct the elements that constitute man's original experience. In this sense, the character of the Yahwist text makes it a special source. Speaking of original human experiences, we have in mind not so much their distance in time, as rather their basic significance. The important thing is not that these experiences belong to man's prehistory (to his "theological prehistory"), but that they are always at the root of every human experience. That is true even if in the evolution of ordinary human existence, little attention is paid to these essential experiences. They are so intermingled with the ordinary things of life that we do not generally notice their extraordinary character.

On the basis of the analyses carried out up to now, we have already realized that what we called at the beginning the "revelation of the body," helps us somehow to discover the extraordinary side of what is ordinary. That is possible because the revelation (the original one, expressed first in the Yahwist account of Genesis 2:3, then in the text of Genesis 1) takes into consideration precisely these primordial experiences. In them, there appears almost completely the absolute originality of what the male-female human being is: as a man, that is, also through his body. As we discover it in the biblical text quoted, man's experience of his body is certainly on the threshold of his whole subsequent "historical" experience. However, it also seems to rest at such an ontological depth that man does not perceive it in his own everyday life. This is so even if at the same time, and in a certain way, he presupposes it and postulates it as part of the process of formation of his own image.

Without this introductory reflection, it would be impossible to define the meaning of original nakedness and tackle the analysis of Genesis 2:25, which runs as follows: "And the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed." At first sight, the introduction of this detail,

apparently a secondary one in the Yahwist account of man's creation, may seem something inadequate or misplaced. One would think that the passage quoted cannot bear comparison with what has been dealt with in the preceding verses and that, in a way, it goes beyond the context. However, this judgment does not stand up to a deeper analysis. Genesis 2:25 presents one of the key elements of the original revelation. It is as decisive as the other texts of Genesis 2:20 and 2:23, which have already enabled us to define the meaning of man's original solitude and original unity. To these is added, as the third element, the meaning of original nakedness, clearly stressed in the context. In the first biblical draft of anthropology, it is not something accidental. On the contrary, it is precisely the key for its full and complete understanding.

This element of the ancient biblical text makes a specific contribution to the theology of the body that absolutely cannot be ignored. Further analyses will confirm this. But before undertaking them, I take the liberty of pointing out that the text of Genesis 2:25 expressly requires that the reflections on the theology of the body should be connected with the dimension of man's personal subjectivity. It is within the latter that consciousness of the meaning of the body develops. Genesis 2:25 speaks about it far more directly than other parts of that Yahwist text, which we have already defined as the first recording of human consciousness.

The sentence, according to which the first human beings, man and woman, "were naked" and yet "were not ashamed," unquestionably describes their state of consciousness, in fact, their mutual experience of the body. It describes the experience on the part of the man of the femininity that is revealed in the nakedness of the body and, reciprocally, the similar experience of masculinity on the part of the woman. By saying that "they were not ashamed," the author tries to describe this mutual experience of the body with the greatest precision possible for him. It can be said that this type of precision reflects a basic experience of man in the "common" and pre-scientific sense. But it also corresponds to the requirements of anthropology and in particular of contemporary anthropology, which likes to refer to so-called fundamental experiences, such as the "experience of shame."

Referring here to the precision of the account, such as was possible for the author of the Yahwist text, we are led to consider the degrees of experience of historical man, laden with the inheritance of sin. However, these degrees methodically start precisely from the state of original innocence. We have already seen that, referring to "the beginning" (which we have subjected here to successive contextual analyses), Christ indirectly established the idea of continuity and connection between those two states. This allows us to move back from the threshold of man's historical sinfulness to his original innocence. Genesis 2:25 makes it especially necessary to cross that threshold.

This passage, together with the meaning of original nakedness inherent in it, takes its place in the contextual setting of the Yahwist narrative. After some verses, the same author writes: "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves

together and made themselves aprons" (*Gn* 3:7). The adverb "then" indicates a new moment and a new situation following the breaking of the first covenant. This situation follows the failure of the test connected with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. At the same time that test constituted the first test of "obedience," that is, listening to the Word in all its truth and accepting love, according to the fullness of the demands of the creative Will. This new moment or new situation also implies a new content and a new quality of experience of the body, so that it can no longer be said: "They were naked, but were not ashamed." Here, shame is an experience that is not only original, but a "boundary" one.

The difference of formulations that divides Genesis 2:25 from Genesis 3:7 is significant-in the first case, "They were naked, but they were not ashamed"; in the second case, "They knew that they were naked." Does that mean that, to begin with, "They did not know that they were naked," or that they did not see the nakedness of each other's body? The significant change testified by the biblical text about the experience of shame (of which Genesis speaks again, especially in 3:10-12), takes place at a deeper level than the pure and simple use of the sense of sight.

A comparative analysis of Genesis 2:25 and Genesis 3 leads necessarily to the conclusion that it is not a question here of passing from "not knowing" to "knowing." Rather, it involves a radical change of the meaning of the original nakedness of the woman before the man and of the man before the woman. It emerges from their conscience, as a fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" (*Gn* 3:11).

This change directly concerns the experience of the meaning of one's body before the Creator and creatures. Subsequently, the man's words confirm this: "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, and I hid myself" (*Gn* 3 :10). That change, which the

Yahwist text portrays so concisely and dramatically, concerns directly - perhaps in the most direct way possible - the man-woman, femininity-masculinity relationship.

We will have to return again to the analysis of this change in other parts of our further reflections. Now, having arrived at that border which crosses the sphere of the "beginning" to which Christ referred, we should ask ourselves if it is possible to reconstruct, in some way, the original meaning of nakedness. In Genesis, nakedness constitutes the immediate context of the doctrine about the unity of the human being as male and female. That seems possible, if we take as a reference point the experience of shame as it was clearly presented in the ancient biblical text as a "liminal" experience. We shall attempt this reconstruction in our following meditations.

---

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana