

Masculinity and Femininity in their Symbolic Aspect

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Abstract. In this paper, I assume the essentially spiritual nature of masculinity and femininity, and consider them in their symbolic character. As created they are themselves contingent; but as symbolic, they are related to necessary or eternal realities which function as the organizing principle of their content. I consider, on the one hand, how masculinity and femininity are clearly given in experience, and on the other, how the content of masculinity and femininity cannot be clearly grasped conceptually, and is thus elusive. I then suggest what are the necessary realities symbolized by masculinity and femininity, namely, spontaneity and receptivity, respectively. Using a passage from Edith Stein's *Science of the Cross*, I consider the depth and richness of the symbolism of masculinity and femininity, and thereby hint at how tragic contemporary culture's attempt is to destroy them.

I. Introduction

This presentation takes as fundamental the idea that the identity of man as man and of woman as woman has its metaphysical grounding in the spiritual soul. I have two, distinct, reasons for holding this position: (a) As the body receives its form from the soul, the soul must be the primary principle of the male/femaleness of the body. (b) But secondly, and more centrally, it is my conviction that masculinity and femininity have a spiritual content, not fully conceptualizable but with an unmistakable intelligibility and unity; and that spiritual content cannot be accounted for by a bodily principle, but only by a spiritual one. Besides being mistaken, I believe that the position holding that the difference between the sexes is rooted in the body, which makes any non-bodily differences accidental and at most psychological, is vulnerable to the contemporary rejection of gender's having any objective metaphysical status, and as being unalterable by desire, experience, or convention. There are two dimensions to this vulnerability. Firstly, the idea that being a man or a woman is a matter of the body leaves a deep intuition theoretically unaccounted for, namely, the intuition that there is such a

thing as masculinity and femininity with an intelligible spiritual content. Without any other spiritual principle to account for it, masculinity and femininity become something existing in the “spiritual” realm of the subject’s own experience, either as something wholly individual, or as constructed by one’s society and culture.¹

As “merely” experiential in its being, it is possible to conceive of gender—and the truths traditionally held to be attendant on it—as variable from person to person, from culture to culture, from epoch to epoch, and so on. Secondly, the metaphysically “accidental” status of the body that this framework assigns to the being of the person as man or woman—and this is the precise technical category in which, for example, Aquinas places the difference between the sexes (calling sex an “inseparable accident”)—coupled with the above lack of accounting for the deep sense of the “spiritual” nature of gender, easily leads to a sense that the body in its maleness and femaleness can and even should be altered to align with one’s subjective sense of one’s gender, and that doing so does not result in any essential alteration to the person. If bodily sex does not have a spiritual ground, and is not an expression of a deeper spiritual reality, then it is difficult to see how to argue against this position—no matter how much one insists that “the body is the person” in the face of transgender ideology.

There is a similar weakness in the argument against those who advocate the homosexual use of sex, and homosexual “marriage,” based primarily on the procreative capacity following upon genital sexuality. My claim is that gender is as relevant to the union of persons proper to marriage as it is to procreation: just as the conception of new human life is possible only in the union of male and female, so the union of persons proper to marriage which is the metaphysical ground of procreation presupposes a difference on the level of the soul.

In this presentation, starting with the premise that masculinity and femininity are spiritual principles within the human person, I will show that considering gender in its symbolic dimension reveals the highly meaningful structure of gender, and puts the burden of proof on those who deny its objective and fundamental metaphysical status within the human person. In the first part, I will show that given the contingent structure of (spiritual) masculinity and femininity, certain difficulties of argumentation arise, since no logically necessary reasoning can be given “proving” their essential nature and meaning. And yet, a deep intelligibility characterizes them because masculinity and femininity, though in themselves contingent in their essential structure, have an essential relationship to certain necessary, eternal realities of which they are a created reflection. This will lead me to consider gender in its symbolic dimension: masculinity and the male person symbolize the personal gesture of “going out of self to be for another,” femininity and the female person symbolize the personal gesture of “receiving another.” I will reference a passage from the work of Edith Stein to explain this symbolic dimension of gender. In this section, the non-contingent aspect of gender will come to the fore, revealing the highly meaningful structure of male and female personhood.²

I will situate the following discussion with reference to the way Edith Stein deals with the question of the identity of man and woman. It is clear that Stein holds that masculinity and femininity have their principle in the spiritual soul. It is strongly implied in the talks collected in the volume titled *Essays on Woman*, and is all but stated explicitly in a letter from 1931, “The insistence that the sexual differences are ‘stipulated by body alone’ is questionable from various points of view. 1) If *anima forma corporis*, then bodily differentiation constitutes an index of differentiation in the spirit. 2) Matter serves form, not the reverse. That strongly suggests that the difference in the psyche is the primary one.”³ It follows that for Stein, there is *some essential core of masculine and feminine identity*. She asserts in a well-known passage in the *Essays on Woman* that there exists a “double species” within the species of “humanity,” and that it is by virtue of a “specific stamp” that the entire humanity of man and woman is rendered male or female. For Stein, it would be this “essential core” of masculinity/femininity, located within the soul, which *gives rise to* the differences she then goes on to mention—that is, it is the masculinity and femininity in this core dimension which “stamps” human nature with the respective characteristics of man and woman. It is clear that she holds that the metaphysical principle of these characteristics is something more fundamental than these characteristics themselves.

However, Stein does not explore this particular aspect of her position; that is, she does not define the content of this essential core of masculinity and femininity. Her work is rather focused on articulating the characteristics (such as the body-soul relationship, and the relationship among the spiritual powers within man and woman) *to which this spiritual core gives rise*. While what she writes about concerns a very deep level of the person, she does not unpack the yet deeper dimension of the core identity of “masculinity” and “femininity.” This is the level of gender I propose to explore in this paper. For it is this core identity that makes intelligible that man and woman would have *such and such particular*—as Stein says—respective “configurations” of the “degree and relationship” of the “powers of sensing, knowing, and willing”;⁴ and it is only under the formative influence of the core spiritual identity that these particular configurations come to be.⁵

I begin with considering the difficulty in speaking about this spiritual core of masculinity and femininity.

II. Difficulties in Arguing for Gender as an “Essential Reality” within the Human Person

The dual reality of “the masculine” and “the feminine” is fundamental, representing one of the deepest features of the world and of human existence. And if human experience is left to its own devices, nothing could be more evident than the fact of the division of humanity into the masculine and feminine person, and the fundamental character of this division. And yet, arguing for it, and for the truths related to it, is difficult, and in fact, possible only up to a point. I first turn to considering

those difficulties, the discussion of which will also reveal how it is that the strong perception of this fundamental reality could be weakened, especially in their fundamental character.

The first difficulty has to do with the fact that masculinity and femininity are contingent essences. That is, they are in their content not intrinsically necessary, having to be the way they are, but are invented by the creator. The implications for our knowledge is that they are not self-evident: it is not as though the mind can simply turn to a consideration of them, and be fully illuminated in its knowledge about their nature without further ado, as is the case with necessary truths. For an easily-accessible example of the latter, let us take the principle of non-contradiction. Simply focusing on the nature of being yields clear insight into the truth of this principle. This is not the case with man and woman; there is nothing about man and woman that dictates that they would have to exist, or be exactly the way they are.

However, because the contingent essences of masculinity and femininity are not arbitrary in their structure, but have a meaningful unity, which is, as we will see, deeply related to necessary realities, the mind does recognize a deep intelligibility in them. But as we will see, knowing them will require an encounter with real instances of them, which will in turn require that they have not in their expression been distorted.

There is another difficulty, related to the above point, yet distinct from it. Masculinity and femininity are not such as to allow for a *conceptual grasp* by the mind. No contingent reality allows for a full and clear grasping of its essence. But masculinity and femininity are yet more obscure, in a way that can be elucidated by considering a parallel case, namely, the nature of an individual person. Just as we cannot form a concept of a person in his or her individuality, and cannot describe them with the common nouns that capture concepts, which are by definition generic, and must therefore rather simply resort to using the proper name to refer to them, so do masculinity and femininity not allow for a conceptualization of their nature. We do perceive them, and we can refer to them; but we cannot “delineate” their outlines in a clear and conceptual manner.

Making the matter of logical or conceptual discussion even more difficult, because the core of masculinity and femininity are *irreducible, primary* realities, they cannot be known by description, but must be *intuited*, or seen directly.⁶ To explain what I mean: Just as it would be impossible to convey the nature of the color yellow to someone who has never perceived it, so masculinity and femininity—and the truths following from them—could not be truly (and not merely verbally) conveyed to someone who has not encountered them himself. We can describe something of yellow, saying that it is a bright color, or cheerful, or lively. But firstly, these do not capture the core of yellow, and secondly, only someone who has already seen yellow can make sense of them with reference to yellow. So it is with gender, and with the realities related to it: even the circumlocutionary speech that can be used is able to “hit home” only for someone who has had a direct perception of the masculine and of the feminine itself.

But there are yet other factors adding to the difficulty of a theoretical discussion of gender, namely, factors created by the post-modern context. I have two in mind here. Because of the qualitative and therefore already conceptually elusive character of gender as we are in touch with it, if we are to have access to it, the contingent aspects of the world that reveal the essential core of masculinity and femininity must remain present to us in as lively and well-chiseled forms as possible, at least in a critical mass of their instances. But the defining core of masculinity and femininity are being rendered more and more obscure by the fact that the contingent structures through which they are communicated are disappearing in ever-weakening contours. To the extent that the contingent trappings of the deep core of masculinity and femininity are effaced from the world to that extent will it become increasingly difficult to remain in touch with the reality of gender, its meaning, and its implications.

The second factor has to do with the loss of chastity, not primarily on the level of the lives of individuals, but in the social fabric, which gives rise to a “communal consciousness” obscuring the reality of gender difference and its true meaning. The conception of the sphere of sexuality as a means for the gratification of one’s own pleasure renders the body of the other no longer “transparent” to the spiritual reality of the person in his or her masculine or feminine individuality. When the body is approached as an instrument of use, to be appropriated for one’s own satisfaction, the body of man and woman cease to reveal the “substantial,” spiritual dimension of masculinity and femininity and their meaning. But when the “dense” spiritual core of gender is no longer visible, when it does not “illuminate” bodily sexuality “from within,” then only the bare outlines of gender remain, and these indeed come to take on the look of something arbitrary, and therefore “fluid.” In a society which in its mores, in its manners, in its dress, in its institutions of education, in every aspect of its culture, not only does not prize chastity, but denigrates it, a “communal consciousness” emerges making it difficult for its members to perceive any reason to respect whatever is left of these outlines. While “gender theory”—understood broadly as the destruction of gender in its true meaning, and so encompassing everything from homosexuality to transgenderism to the complete negation of gender in androgyny—has become greatly politicized, one important explanation for its wide success is the sexualization of gender and the normalization of lust on the level of the social fabric.

In sum, since we do not have a clear grasp of the core of masculinity and femininity containing the reference to the necessary reality symbolized, we cannot give a conceptually clear account of their nature, much less give the kind of argument for their reality the denial of which would entail a contradiction. The best we can do is to put our interlocutor in touch with the contingent realities that manifest this core, and show the *meaningfulness* of the realities that follow from them (customs, moral rules, etc.). The burden of proof would then be on the one who denies what coheres meaningfully with the contingent realities that are manifest to us and transparent to the spiritual realities they symbolize.

III. Masculinity and Femininity in their Symbolic Aspect

There is a way, however, of making an all-important gesture towards conceptualizing the spiritual content of masculinity and femininity. And that is in recognizing their *symbolic character*, and referring to the content of what they symbolize—which can in some measure be grasped conceptually. I first came across the idea of masculinity and femininity as symbols in the work of Gertrude von le Fort, who says that masculinity and femininity are symbols of “ultimate metaphysical realities.”⁷ The kind of symbol le Fort has in mind is an *organic* one—what we might refer to as a “natural symbol”—rather than an *artificial* or conventional one as it is meant by the tradition referring to language as symbolic. “The concept of symbol,” writes von le Fort, “springs from the conviction that in all beings and things there is an intelligent order that, through these very beings and things, reveals itself as a divine order by means of the language of its symbols.”⁸ As I will show below, I ultimately believe that they are symbols not only of the divine order, but of realities contained in the trinitarian being of God.

Now, if we think of a symbol’s spiritual reference as in some sense the essential core of the symbol, we find that masculinity and femininity possess a core symbolically referring to something with a *necessary* (and not contingent) *essential structure*.⁹ Thus, while masculinity and femininity are themselves contingent structures, they have in their content an extremely close affinity with the necessary structure after which they are symbolically fashioned. Further, in the (created) symbol, this core referring to the necessary reality is “buried” in contingent trappings, trappings that both “hide” the core, but at the same time, (*a*) reveal to us something about it, and (*b*) are able to do this because they are formed on the *analogy* of the symbolized reality. Thus, on the one hand, masculinity and femininity announce and reveal the spiritual reality at their core, and its symbolic reference. On the other hand, as with all symbolic realities, they do so only “as in a glass darkly.” This means that while the symbolized reality has a concrete essence, what is at the core of masculinity and femininity “reaches” us primarily in the manner of a *quality*, and not in the manner of a *formal structure* that can be conceptualized. A quality is sensed and felt, rather than conceptually grasped, while a formal structure is conceptually clear by comparison. It is important to note that this does not in any way mean that the (qualitative) reality is not in principle accessible to human experience. We can draw an analogy here: The particular fragrance of some specific type of rose can be strong and specific, and yet one cannot conceptualize the smell in its specificity; but this does not mean that the fragrance is any less real, or any less specific, or any less present to one’s experience in its specific identity.

What, then, are the metaphysical realities that masculinity and femininity symbolize? What is the transcendent spiritual reality at their core as symbolic entities? As mentioned, it is ultimately not possible to fully circumscribe these realities; they remain somewhat hidden from us and reach us in the manner of a quality that is sensed or felt. But to the extent that they can be conceptually grasped, a venerable tradition emerged over the ages that has identified at least the “keynote”

in this symbolism in the following way. Masculinity symbolizes *spontaneity*—which refers to “taking initiative,” or “going out of oneself”—and femininity symbolizes *receptivity*.¹⁰ Spontaneity and receptivity are personal acts with a spiritual content. They are, further, complementary: they are, first, complementary in the *interior dimension* of the person, as neither is complete without the other; that is, the act of giving is not complete apart from an accompanying act of receiving, and vice versa. They are also complementary in the *interpersonal dimension*: the act of giving of one person is completed by the act of receiving of another, and the act of one person’s receiving depends upon another’s act of giving.¹¹ In a Christian context, we discover that each of these two gestures turn out to be derived from something more fundamental, namely, from the two gestures of *love*: the gesture of *going out of oneself in the manner of a gift of self*, and the gesture of *receiving another’s gift of self*. In a Christian context, we can go a step further and say that these two gestures of love find their primary instance as “personified relations” in the first two persons of the Trinity: in the Father, whose very being is constituted by his gift of himself to the second person of the Trinity, and in the Son, whose very being is constituted by the reception of the Father’s gift of himself.¹²

By a free choice, the creator “invented” a kind of embodied person that would symbolize these two gestures of love. Like von le Fort, Damian Fedoryka understands gender to be symbolic, though he does not systematically work out a metaphysics of symbolism.¹³ He writes that giving and receiving are personal acts, but in the human person they find an analogy in the two genders. While man and woman both fully participate in human nature, their distinctness lies in their possessing that human nature according to these two different “modes.”¹⁴ “These two distinct but organically connected spiritual traits of *receptivity* and *spontaneity* (properly found in the sphere of personal action) are also mysteriously ‘articulated’ as *feminine* and as *masculine* ‘modes’.”¹⁵ The male, then, is a human person existing in the mode of spontaneity; the female, a human person fashioned in the mode of receptivity. It is important to note here that the metaphysical category of “mode” does not determine the dimension of *action*; as persons, both men and women are equally capable of giving and receiving, and both equally called to giving and receiving for the perfection of their being as persons.

We next note that gender, though having its foundation in a spiritual reality, is by its nature ordained to a bodily existence. Angels have no gender because they are purely spiritual beings. Continuing the relationship of symbolism in a downwardly cascading direction, male and female bodies “image” the spiritual realities of masculinity and femininity, respectively. Fedoryka writes that there is an “objective metaphysical analogy between the spiritual traits of receptivity and spontaneity in each person and their articulation in the respective bodily genders which are formed as male and female in ‘similarity’ to the spiritual traits of femininity as receptive and masculinity as spontaneous.”¹⁶ And secondly, gender finds its culmination in sexuality—sexuality understood in its “personalized” character within the human person. Masculinity and femininity achieve a special “crystallization” in the sphere

of sex. Human sexuality, as “formed” by the dimension of spirit, also more distantly symbolizes the spiritual realities of giving and receiving: male sexuality is a bodily articulation of masculinity, female sexuality a bodily articulation of femininity. It is in the sphere of sexuality that the relation of the gendered persons in marriage “incarnates” the spiritual fruitfulness of the two gestures of love in their deep complementarity.

I would like to explore this idea of the symbolic nature of masculinity/femininity by way of examining a passage from Edith Stein’s *Science of the Cross*, a work on the spirituality of St. John of the Cross, where Stein considers the Carmelite’s idea of “cosmic night” as a symbol for the spiritual night of the soul. I find that some of what this passage contains corresponds well to the reality of gender as symbolic, and so will use it to unpack my topic. I will give the passage in its original, and then again substituting “night” with masculinity and femininity, placing the two renditions side-by-side with my substitutions in brackets (using the initials “M/F” [masculinity/femininity] as symbolizing “G/R” [giving/receiving]). I have also made every other sentence bold type for easier comparison of the two texts. I will explore each of these items in turn after quoting the passage, but please note the following items. The first two concern the nature of symbolic relationship, generally. Firstly, please note Stein’s distinction between *image* and *symbol*; secondly, note the factor of the “lack of definite outlines” characterizing the symbolic. The third thing to note concerns a feature of the symbolic relationship between the cosmic and the spiritual night in particular, namely, that “An entire worldview and grasp of existence is resolved therein”; I believe that something like this is present in the masculinity/giving, femininity/receiving symbolism, as well:

“. . . one cannot speak of a *relationship of likeness* [between cosmic night and spiritual night]; one is not a copy of the other. Rather one must think of it as a relationship of *symbolic expression* such as commonly exists between the *sensory* and the *spiritual*. So facial features and expressions can express spiritual characteristics and spiritual life, just as the spiritual and even the divine can reveal itself in nature. There exists an original mutuality and an objective correspondence that enables the sensory to reveal knowledge of the spiritual. **Of the relationship of the image, only the similarity remains—a similarity, however, in which what is mutually ‘alike’ is not actually comprehensible but can only be indicated through certain corresponding features**

“. . . one cannot speak of a *relationship of likeness* [between M/F and G/R]; one is not a copy of the other. Rather one must think of it as a relationship of *symbolic expression* such as commonly exists between the [created] and the *spiritual*. So facial features and expressions can express spiritual characteristics and spiritual life, just as the spiritual and even the divine can reveal itself in nature. There exists an original mutuality and an objective correspondence that enables the [created] to reveal knowledge of the spiritual. **Of the relationship of the image, only the similarity remains—a similarity, however, in which what is mutually ‘alike’ is not actually comprehensible but can only be indicated through certain corresponding features.**

What distinguishes this similarity from the image-relationship is not only that there is a lack of replication but also that we are not dealing with structures that have definite outlines. . . . **Night, however, the cosmic as well as the mystic, is something shapeless and something comprehensive whose fullness of meaning can only be indicated but not exhausted.** An entire worldview and grasp of existence is resolved therein. And precisely here what they have in common is to be found: the fact of and the character of this worldview and grasp of existence. **Something intangible here and something intangible there and yet clearly one overlays the other and can be used to access the other,** not by arbitrary choice and systematic comparison but in *symbolic experience* that strikes upon *primitive connections* and thus finds a necessary figuration for what is conceptually unutterable. . . . **The Night is the necessary cosmic expression of the mystic world-view of St John of the Cross.**"

What distinguishes this similarity from the image-relationship is not only that there is a lack of replication but also that we are not dealing with structures that have definite outlines. . . . [M/F, however, as well as what they symbolize, are] **something shapeless and something comprehensive whose fullness of meaning can only be indicated but not exhausted.** An entire worldview and grasp of existence is resolved therein. And precisely here what they have in common is to be found: the fact of and the character of this worldview and grasp of existence. **Something intangible here and something intangible there and yet clearly one overlays the other and can be used to access the other,** not by arbitrary choice and systematic comparison but in *symbolic experience* that strikes upon *primitive connections* and thus finds a necessary figuration for what is conceptually unutterable. . . . [M/F are the necessary created expressions, in the fundamental structuring of human creation, of its relation to the divine.]¹⁷

Stein's approach to explaining the nature of the symbolic relationship is by contrasting it with the imaging relationship. Stein writes: "Of the relationship of the image, only the similarity remains—a similarity, however, in which what is mutually 'alike' is not actually comprehensible but can only be indicated through certain corresponding features." Let us first reflect on Stein's understanding of "image." Imaging for Stein consists of a thing's being a "copy" of (more or less distant from) some original; the thing imaging is a literal "repetition" in a "thinner" or "weaker" way of the original. So, for instance, a photo would be an image in this sense, or even a work of art with the modifications introduced by an artistic rendition; a shadow on a wall would be a yet more distant image. Symbolizing does not have the same structure as imaging; it lacks the element of "replication" (Stein), though it has in common with imaging the element of "similarity."

To turn to the second part of the quotation, what is the nature of the similarity between a thing and what it symbolizes? Unlike in the case of the imaging relationship, Stein tells us that what is similar *cannot be comprehended*. I believe that she means by this that the relationship is unmistakably given, that the mind grasps enough of the two realities to know that they are similar, but not enough to

be able to gain a conceptual focus on exactly what is similar between them. The similarity is rather “indicated through certain corresponding features.” Stein refers to this when she says, “Something intangible here and something intangible there and yet clearly one overlays the other and can be used to access the other, not by arbitrary choice and systematic comparison but in *symbolic experience* that strikes upon *primitive connections* and thus finds a necessary figuration for what is conceptually unutterable.” Without being able to conceptualize the particular content of the elements of the relationship, we see here that a created reality can communicate a transcendent, necessary reality in a definite, even if in an indistinct, way. And the case of gender does indeed concern “primitive connections.”

As in the cosmic/mystic symbolism, in the masculinity/femininity-giving/receiving symbolism, too, there is a “fulness of meaning,” worthy of exploration, but “incapable of being exhausted.” Stein writes that “an entire worldview and grasp of existence is resolved” in the symbolism of night. While care must be taken not to overstate the significance of the duality of masculinity and femininity, or to misunderstand the role it is meant to play, we can nevertheless say that there is something like “an entire worldview” in the symbolism of masculinity and femininity. Articulating the elements found here is beyond the scope of this work; and again—while “sensed,” conceptualizing the entire content of this worldview would be impossible. By way of conclusion, I will name only one symbolic element, found in considering the creaturely status of the human person. The position of God as giver of our existence in an act simultaneous with his own gift of himself to his creature in the moment of creation is symbolized by the masculine, while the essentially receptive and responsive posture of human creaturely existence to the self-giving of the creator is symbolized by the feminine. We find a similar symbolism in the divinely chosen bridal relation between the Savior and the Church, whereby the Savior incarnated as a male who then wedded to himself the Church as his bride.¹⁸ While, on the one hand, there is *no gender* in God, and on the other hand, all the features *symbolized* by *both* masculinity and femininity are found within the divine being, God’s choice to *reveal* himself as Father and for the second person of the Trinity to incarnate as a male in coming to save fallen humanity, and to thereby have his personal creatures relate to him as masculine (Father/Son/Bridegroom)—all these appear not to be arbitrary choices on God’s part, but deeply meaningful ones. The state of affairs resulting from God’s revelation of himself in the mode of masculinity contains within itself an entire “worldview and grasp of existence,” with important metaphysical, religious, and existential implications.¹⁹

IV. Conclusion

While the “proximate” meaning of the division of humanity into male and female does not subsist in its symbolic dimension, I believe that the perception of gender’s symbolic content is bound up with the discovery of this proximate meaning: Just as the spiritual gestures of self-giving and of receiving are complementary, and even more, indicate a relationship of love, this division of the human person into

gendered, embodied persons is also a complementary duality: far from implying hostility or opposition, masculinity and femininity rather evidence a “being-ordered-to” one another, a “being for” one another in the deepest and most profound way possible between human persons: in the relationship of spousal love. Further, the astonishing proportions of the (potential) fruitfulness proper to this union in the possible coming into existence of new human life (as a gift) once again becomes most fully intelligible only in light of the metaphysical structuring of this union of husband and wife according to the reality of love. For by a strict metaphysical law, the emergence of contingent being—and *a fortiori*, of personal life—can occur only as the “overflow” of the mutual self-donation/receiving of persons; for the essential structure of love consists of all three elements of mutual giving, mutual receiving, and the “effluence” to which they give rise.

There is indeed an “entire worldview” contained in the reality of the masculine and the feminine, in ways that can be worked out to some extent, but that cannot be exhausted and cannot be fully conceptualized. One thing is certain: the loss of masculinity and femininity in contemporary culture is no small thing but threatens to disconnect the human person from something fundamental in the very framework of his own being and of human existence as a whole.

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Notes

1. We see this reflected in the idea of Vivencio O. Ballano who argues that the Church’s teaching on sex, gender, and marriage ought to be reassessed in light of the fact that “the human authors of Genesis only understood gender as a biological reality rather than seeing it as a social and cultural experience in their biblical message.” This quote is from the abstract of a chapter in the as-yet unpublished book to be published by Springer Singapore titled *LGBTQI Inclusivity, Homosexuality, and Same-Sex Marriage in the Catholic Church: Pope Francis’s Synodal Theology, Sociology, and Moral Issues*, ed. Vivencio O. Ballano.

2. I would like to say a word here about the reality of homo-erotic relations and homo-erotic literature and poetry, which is an undeniable fact of history, and more or less perennial. I do not here refer to the kind of homosexuality rooted primarily in physical desire, that tends to be promiscuous, and not involving the deeper emotional levels of the person; I rather refer to a phenomenon that engages the person at a more profound level of their being, and for all the world is experienced as genuinely “romantic” and “spousal.” (As we know from history, these relationships do not always involve bodily sex; and to the ancient Greek mind, the involvement of the sexual sphere meant a distinct degradation of the love relation.) The existence of this phenomenon does not undermine the truth of what I say here about the metaphysical requirement for masculinity and femininity in the constitution of spousal love. It is my conviction that what we have here is essentially a counterfeit proceeding from a disorder which often has its roots in family of origin wounds. The “intersection” of the

sexual sphere with the core of the person in his selfhood entails that wounds related to the love so existentially necessary in infancy and childhood for the development of the person complicate the romantic and sexual dimensions of life that are a part of adulthood.

3. Edith Stein, *Self Portrait in Letters: 1916–1942*, trans. Josephine Koeppel, (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1993), 99.

4. Stein writes, “In both instances the structure of the soul is fundamentally the same. . . . But the degree and relationship of [its] powers vary widely from one individual to another, and vary generally from man to woman.” Edith Stein, *Essays on Woman*, trans. Freda Mary Oben (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1987), 95–6.

5. Though, as we will see below, this configuration does not have hard and fast lines, and also finds variation on the basis of the individuality of each person.

6. Put in terms having gained currency through the work of Bertrand Russell, they can only be had in knowledge by acquaintance and not in knowledge by description.

7. Gertrud von le Fort, *The Eternal Woman: The Timeless Meaning of the Feminine*, trans. Marie Cecilia Buehrle (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 3.

8. Ibid.

9. With reference to our knowledge, the scholastics called these kinds of essences and states of affairs following upon them *per se nota*.

10. It is to be noted, however, that historically, there was no *prise de conscience* of the concept of receptivity; the feminine was rather associated with passivity. A gulf separates the two: receiving is a species of *act*, no less so than is spontaneity; as such, receptivity is as opposed to passivity as is spontaneity. Furthermore, understanding the feminine in terms of passivity has had disastrous consequences for understanding the man-woman relation. And yet, it is nevertheless the case that the reality dimly perceived in this error was the reality of receptivity.

11. This structure applies by extension and analogously also to the relation of the person to non-personal realities: every good presents itself as a gift to be received, and the true reception of it consists in the person’s self-giving submission to the good. Ultimately, of course, this structure in relation to non-personal goods heralds the fact that these goods are given by a Person who is simultaneously giving himself as part of a relationship of love.

12. In this framework, the third person of the Trinity could be seen as the fruit of the mutual gift of persons, simultaneously flowing from the resultant union and intensifying it. One theological tradition speaks of the persons of the Trinity as “subsistent relations,” specified precisely as the relations of giving and receiving, with the third person constituting the bond between them. In this connection see my article “‘God is Love’: Personal Plurality as the Completion of Aristotle’s Notion of Substance and Love as the Absolute Ground of the Divine Being,” *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 91 (2017): 105–14, for a philosophical reflection on the meaning of St. John’s statement in his first letter that God is love.

13. See Damian Fedoryka, “Reflections on Homosexual ‘Union’ In the Light of the ‘Hermeneutics of the Gift’ of John Paul II” (unpublished manuscript, 2005), and Damian Fedoryka, “On Allegory and Metaphysics in the Language of Sexuality,” *The Church, Marriage, and Family* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2007), 293–302.

14. Though the use of the concept of “mode” has not yet become widespread in framing metaphysically the status of gender within the human person, I have found that Sr. Prudence Allen uses the term “mode” in just this sense, as well as John Findley in his article, “The Metaphysics of Gender: A Thomistic Approach,” *The Thomist* 79 (2015): 585–614.

15. Fedoryka, “Reflections on Homosexual ‘Unions,’” 26.

16. Damian Fedoryka, “Man and Woman: Identity and Difference. Reflections from the Perspective of a Hermeneutics of the Gift” (unpublished manuscript, 2008), 9, footnote 38.

17. Edith Stein, *Science of the Cross*, trans. Josephine Koeppel, OCD (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2002), 42. Italics in the original.

18. The spousal imagery is already used by God in the Old Testament, in which Israel is depicted as his unfaithful bride. Here, too, human marriage is only a symbol of a higher, fuller instance of the spousal relation between God and Israel, between God and the soul, and between Christ and his Church.

19. Benedict Ashley uses the category of symbolism in arguing for the (exclusively) male priesthood. However, his account of symbolism goes in the opposite direction of mine: the *higher*, supernatural reality of the priesthood is a symbol of the *lower*, natural reality of certain elements within the family, where the father is the head of the family. In other words, the priest is the symbol, the family is the symbolized. See his “Gender and the Priesthood of Christ: A Theological Reflection,” *The Thomist* 57 (1993): 343–79.