LESSON 55: GENDER ISSUES

Revision from previous lesson:
In the previous lesson, we learned about how marriage is an institution created by God. He put man and woman together so that in their union of love reflecting His own Divine Life, they could participate in God's creative work by producing children and raising them up in the ways of God. This shows us that sex is created by God as a gift for a holy purpose. In this lesson, we learn about distortions that come about when mankind attempts to contradict God's design for human sexuality. We will be discussing some major problems that human society is struggling with on matters of human sexuality.

Current lesson:

1. In terms of human sexuality, there are two major overlapping realities today taking place largely in the West, also affecting the rest of the world, which this lesson aims to outline and discuss. They are the Feminist Movement and the LGBT Movement.

The Feminist Movement

2. It is believed that for many centuries, society had largely viewed women as being inferior to men. Many scholars think that this view stemmed from Aristotle's view on women in his writing entitled *Politics*. Women were viewed by this ancient Greek philosopher as being only higher than slaves and being subject to men.

3. As a result of society's subjugation of women for many centuries, movements arose in the West beginning from the 19th century fighting to uphold the equal dignity of women in society. Their battle for recognition of women's equal dignity, intelligence, abilities, and potentials to those of men brought about an ideology called "feminism". The development of the feminist movement took place in four waves since then.

   A) In the 19th and 20th centuries, they fought for legal equality in the form of propagating the right to vote in political elections.
   B) In the 1960s, once they won the right to vote, they focused on women's equality in wider society by fighting for reproductive freedom, as well as equality in education opportunities in order to help women to thrive in the workplace.
   C) In the early 1990s, they fought for women's rights to express themselves based on self-determined definitions through specific issues like reproductive rights, LGBT rights, redefinition of gender roles, and use of gender-neutral language.
   D) From around 2012, they used social media to fight against sexual harassment and violence against women.

   Evidently, from a Christian perspective, the feminist ideology carried the idea of women's rights too far as society (both men and women) became more and more confused about the meaning and purpose of gender and sexuality. We must turn to the Church to provide clarity on God's idea for the place of women in society.

4. The Second Vatican Council highlighted the divinely endowed role of women in society which urgently summoned the attention of womenfolk:

   The Council's Message to Women, 08 December 1965: "The hour is coming, in fact, has come, when the vocation of woman is being acknowledged in its fullness, the hour in which women acquire in the world an influence, an effect and a power never hitherto achieved. That is why, at this moment when the human race is undergoing so deep a transformation, women impregnated with a spirit of the Gospel can do so much to aid humanity in not falling."

   This statement marked the call for women to rise up as guiding forces in a modern society characterised by decadence in various aspects of life. It was a most natural result of the inherent and inalienable dignity of women being recognised by the Council Fathers.

5. The inherent value and dignity of the woman is implied from the intrinsic value of every human being (CCC 1928-1938). Genesis 1:27 tells us that God created humanity as "male and female" (men and women), and that in the embodiment of these two genders, they are an "image of [God] himself". Men alone do not reflect the glory of humanity in its fullness. It is the complementarity of both sexes together that brings about the more complete reflection of God's own image.

   CCC 2393: "By creating the human being man and woman, God gives personal dignity equally to the one and the other. Each of them, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept his sexual identity."

6. Based on such universal human rights that emanate from the Christian understanding of personhood, the Holy Father, Saint John Paul II, spoke of a "Christian feminism" which he deemed necessary for the exposure of the fuller truth about women. He affirmed the vitality of women's presence in all aspects of social life. In relation to that, he defended the dignity of their being: their skill, their professionalism, their intellectual abilities, their deep sensitivity, among many other admirable qualities inherent to the person of the woman.

7. The Holy Catholic Church has affirmed the role of women in an unprecedented way. Like never before, the equal dignity of women is defended as an intrinsic right that is divinely endowed, and which no other person has the right to take away.

   However, whilst propelling the Church to examine the human historical past with courage, it must be noted that the kind of feminism John Paul II spoke of took a rather different shape in comparison with the kind of feminism found in today's civil society.

8. In accordance with the teachings of the Church, authentic feminism is that of women finding the "entire meaning of their femininity and thus [being] disposed to making a 'sincere gift of self' to others, thereby finding themselves" (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 31). It is only in this sense that a woman can be said to be "acting freely".

   The freedom of a woman is to be found in her capacity to be who she was meant to be, and not to be like someone else or to act in someone else's capacity. As most women themselves point out, equality of dignity should not be taken as a synonym for "sameness with men".

Such an understanding would merely impoverish women and greater society by distorting or compromising the unique wealth and intrinsic value of femininity (Letter of John Paul II to Mrs Gertrude Mongella, 26 May 1995).

9. On this note, one may observe that certain factions of feminists in society tend to exhibit rather disturbing inclinations. For example, some feminists implicitly imply that the acknowledgement of women's equality involves the trivialising of manhood. The undertones of their verbal expressions can be very telling of a "who-needs-men" attitude. The antagonistic approach taken by some feminists in defending the rights of women, which "exalts opposition" between men and women rather than giving rise to mutual respect and recognition of the identity and the role of one towards the other, is not Christian in attitude and philosophy.

   Another pertinent example would be that of battling for the right to do just about anything that men do. Because it is alleged that history and culture have been perpetrators of the supposed inferiority of womenfolk, a great number of women are now attempting to reverse such roles by demonstrating that women too can very proficiently undertake the roles that are commonly attributed to men. Whilst this is warranted to a certain degree, when the traditional roles of say, motherhood, have to give way to a newfound "manhood", society further breaks down.

10. It was indeed said by Pope Saint John Paul II that cultural conditioning had been instrumental in women's roles being "relegated to the margins of society and even reduced to servitude" (*Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women*). This reality indeed warranted a new effort for the restoration of women's dignity.

    However, whilst the Church affirms that women can and should become actively involved in all areas of public life, it also defends the traditional roles of women which constitute the most intrinsic meaning of what "womanhood" means in accordance with God's divine design.

11. A truly Christian feminism means affirming that men and women are equal, both sexes created by God in His image, each having distinct but complementary gifts and attributes. It also means affirming that the social and ecclesial roles of women and men must conform to the natural law and the Divine Plan for mankind. John Paul II instructs, "In the name of liberation from male 'domination', women must not appropriate to themselves male characteristics contrary to their own feminine 'originality'" (*Mulieris Dignitatem*, 10).

12. Some women choose to embody their womanhood through undivided devotion towards the raising of children and caring for the home as a fulltime vocation. They must not be seen as unenlightened prisoners of cultural conditioning.

13. Pope Saint Paul VI, in an exhortation to women, said: "You women have always had as your lot the protection of the home... You are present in the mystery of a life beginning. You offer consolation in the departure of death. Our technology runs the risk of becoming inhuman. Reconcile men with life, and above all, we beseech you, watch carefully over the future of the race. Hold back the hand of man, who in a moment of folly might attempt to destroy civilisation. Women of the entire universe, whether Christian or non-believing –

you to whom life is entrusted at this grave moment in history, it is for *you* to save the peace of the world."

The LGBT Movement

14. A major social problem has now arisen in many societies in which the over-exaltation of human rights (to the exclusion of God's own divine rights) has caused those societies, even governments, to uphold the rights of all individuals to make decisions for the use of their bodies in ways that fulfil their perceived emotional and psychological need, regardless of how disordered these inclinations may be. In such societies, legislation has devolved from being based on objective reality to subjective psychological and emotional sentiments. In this sense, humanity has now attempted to usurp the ultimate authority of God over what constitutes the permissible use of our bodies, without due regard to what it does to the soul.

    Amoris Laetitia, 56: "Yet another challenge is posed by the various forms of an ideology of gender that 'denies the difference and reciprocity in nature of a man and a woman and envisages a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family. This ideology leads to educational programs and legislative enactments that promote a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female. Consequently, human identity becomes the choice of the individual, one which can also change over time.' It is a source of concern that some ideologies of this sort, which seek to respond to what are at times understandable aspirations, manage to assert themselves as absolute and unquestionable, even dictating how children should be raised. It needs to be emphasized that 'biological sex and the socio-cultural role of sex (gender) can be distinguished but not separated.' …It is one thing to be understanding of human weakness and the complexities of life, and another to accept ideologies that attempt to sunder what are inseparable aspects of reality. Let us not fall into the sin of trying to replace the Creator. We are creatures, and not omnipotent. Creation is prior to us and must be received as a gift. At the same time, we are called to protect our humanity, and this means, in the first place, accepting it and respecting it as it was created."

15. What began as a movement to uphold the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals (LGBT) has now been expanded to include also people who identify themselves as queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, and even those who cannot fit into any of these non-normative gender identities (hence the abbreviation LGBTQIA+).

16. Homosexual behaviour used to be considered a criminal offence. From the 1940s, many homosexual rights groups emerged in the West, fighting for the rights to have same-sex relationships without being outlawed. At that time, they preferred the term "homophile" rather than "homosexual" in order to emphasise the "love" rather than the sex. By the 1960s, same-sex relationships started being decriminalised in the West. At the same time, activist groups promoting the rights of bisexual people began to publicly emerge, and they became prominent in the 1970s.

17. After years of battling over the right for people in same-sex relationships to be married in ways that are legally recognised by law, the Netherlands became the first country to legalise same-sex "marriage" in 2001. Many other countries in the West have done the same since then, as well as several other countries on the Asian and African continents.

In some places, it has become law that same-sex couples who are "married" should be granted the right to adopt children. In fact, in those places, adoption agencies are no longer permitted to refuse same-sex couples (who come to them seeking to adopt children) based on disagreement with their same-sex unions. These agencies could be held liable for discrimination.

In many Western schools, children are now taught from a young age that it is perfectly acceptable to be in same-sex relationships and to be raised by two fathers or two mothers. Teachers are not allowed to teach their positions on the matter of sexual attraction if their personal views contradict the support of same-sex unions. In these schools, children must also not be taught that they should be attracted to the opposite sex when they grow up; they must be told that it is acceptable for them to be attracted to someone of the same gender.

18. Not all people in Western society are in favour of such a movement. There are in fact many who disagree that such unions can be termed "marriages". They also opine that if such "marriages" can be legalised, it would also open the door for the legalisation of polygamy in time to come (i.e. marrying more than one spouse), thereby encouraging unhealthy and immoral behaviour. They also believe that allowing such relationships undermines the traditional institution of the family, considering that a child needs to be raised by a father and a mother (instead of two mothers or two fathers) in order to be psychologically healthy.

    The laws enacted to protect the rights of people to enter into same-sex marriages and adopt children have also caused the closure of charitable organisations and religious organisations that opposed this ideology. Refusing to marry same-sex couples or disallowing same-sex couples to adopt children has caused them to run into trouble with the law, since they have been accused of discrimination.

19. God's plan for sexual activity among human beings is meant for the institution of marriage. It is governed by His divine plan of placing man and woman into a union of love to reflect His own Divine Life. Hence, according to God's intention, marriage has always been a union between man and woman, and the sexual expression takes place within the context of such union in which the man and the woman complement each other to reflect God's life and love. Furthermore, the expected result of a marriage is the production of offspring as divinely given fruits of the holy union. When two people of the same gender seek to unite themselves to each other, the biological incompatibility results in the impossibility of procreation as one of the purposes of marriage. Because of this, the Catholic Church is not able to recognise same-sex unions as marriage in the truest meaning of the term.

    CCC 1601: "The matrimonial covenant, by which a man and a woman establish between themselves a partnership of the whole of life, is by its nature ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring…"

    CCC 2333: "Everyone, 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."

Amoris Laetitia, 251: "In discussing the dignity and mission of the family, the Synod Fathers observed that, 'as for proposals to place unions between homosexual persons on the same level as marriage, there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family.'"

20. As an extension of the rights of recognition for same-sex couples, there also seems to be an increase in the numbers of people expressing their wishes to be legally recognised as members of the opposite sex in spite of their bodily anatomies. These people are said to be experiencing gender dysphoria (the popular term used for them is "transgender"). It used to be known as Gender Identity Disorder and was reclassified to gender dysphoria by the psychiatric community. These individuals experience strong desires to be of the opposite gender, and most of the time already behave as if they are (through their gender roles, dressing, and behaviour). It is said that when they are not allowed to do so, they could experience great anxiety and insecurity throughout their lifetimes. They could be children or adults.

    In schools as well as other public places, this situation has created many complications in terms of the use of shared toilets, shower and changing areas. A person may feel like a woman and insist on using the ladies' toilet, but this may cause great discomfort for many other ladies using the same toilet. A person with a girl's anatomy feeling that she is actually a boy may be more comfortable changing with other boys in school, but this raises the question of how it affects the other boys in the changing room.

21. There does not seem to be a clear opinion from within the medical community on how such people should be treated, especially those who are of sound bodies. There are those who have opted to undergo sex reassignment surgeries that involve the destruction of their physically normal sexual organs in order to cosmetically reconstruct sexual organs to look and function like those of their desired gender. Such surgeries, together with other hormonal procedures, do not enable these people to enter into a stable sense of normalcy in terms of their sexual function. After surgery, they seem to need continual psychotherapy treatment.

    The Catholic Church prohibits the practice of mutilating perfectly functional body parts.

    CCC 2297: "Except when performed for strictly therapeutic medical reasons, directly intended amputations, mutilations, and sterilizations performed on innocent persons are against the moral law."

22. In fact, there are groups of people now that also fight for the rights to attach to themselves nonbinary identities, that is, gender identities that are neither exclusively male nor female. These are also people who fall within the transgender category, although some of them may not be comfortable being identified as such because this category was historically used for people crossing over from one binary gender to another binary gender. Most of these people are uncomfortable with the idea of gender identity as being predetermined by their bodily anatomies, since they feel it pertains to their internal sense of self. They have resorted to categorising themselves as gender neutral, nonbinary, agender, pangender, genderqueer,

two-spirit, third gender, and all, or none, or combinations of any of these categories. Actually, as it stands, it is said that there are more than 70 different genders being peddled in the marketplace of genders now!

23. The Catholic Church teaches that each individual needs to accept the objective reality of his body. Any treatment or therapy provided for the individual should uphold this aim.

    Because our bodies are made in God's image and likeness, it is to be treated with respect and dignity. Just because our bodies belong to us, this does not mean that we have the private right to treat it in any way we desire. The way in which the body is treated ought to reflect respect for its Giver.

    CCC 364: "The human body shares in the dignity of 'the image of God': it is a human body precisely because it is animated by a spiritual soul, and it is the whole human person that is intended to become, in the body of Christ, a temple of the Spirit:

    Man, though made of body and soul, is a unity. Through his very bodily condition he sums up in himself the elements of the material world. Through him they are thus brought to their highest perfection and can raise their voice in praise freely given to the Creator. For this reason man may not despise his bodily life. Rather he is obliged to regard his body as good and to hold it in honor since God has created it and will raise it up on the last day."

    Laudato Si, 155: "Human ecology also implies another profound reality: the relationship between human life and the moral law, which is inscribed in our nature and is necessary for the creation of a more dignified environment. Pope Benedict XVI spoke of an 'ecology of man', based on the fact that 'man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will'. It is enough to recognize that our body itself establishes us in a direct relationship with the environment and with other living beings. The acceptance of our bodies as God's gift is vital for welcoming and accepting the entire world as a gift from the Father and our common home, whereas thinking that we enjoy absolute power over our own bodies turns, often subtly, into thinking that we enjoy absolute power over creation. Learning to accept our body, to care for it and to respect its fullest meaning, is an essential element of any genuine human ecology. Also, valuing one's own body in its femininity or masculinity is necessary if I am going to be able to recognize myself in an encounter with someone who is different. In this way we can joyfully accept the specific gifts of another man or woman, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment. It is not a healthy attitude which would seek to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it."

24. By extension, we may say that the teachings of the Catholic Church regarding homosexuality also apply to the sexual practices of those who claim to fall outside the categories of binary genders. The Church declares that sexual acts between people of the same gender is "intrinsically disordered" (meaning that they contradict nature's design). There is no "sexual complementarity", no real sexual partnership, between anything other than the relationship between a man and a woman.

    CCC 2357: "Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex.

It has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that 'homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered.' They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved."

25. The Church recognises that there are many people in society who struggle deeply with such an experience. Such people should be respected and not be unjustly penalised or discriminated against. Even more so, there should not be any sort of physical or verbal violence against sufferers of such a sexual orientation. The fact that homosexual acts are immoral cannot be used as a justification for violence or unjust discrimination in any form.

    Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons, 10: "It is deplorable that homosexual persons have been and are the object of violent malice in speech or in action. Such treatment deserves condemnation from the Church's pastors wherever it occurs. It reveals a kind of disregard for others which endangers the most fundamental principles of a healthy society. The intrinsic dignity of each person must always be respected in word, in action and in law."

26. The Church does not agree with opinions that people with same-sex attractions cannot help themselves being so, and that they are therefore to be allowed to express themselves in ways that are most natural to them.

    Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons, 11: "It has been argued that the homosexual orientation in certain cases is not the result of deliberate choice; and so the homosexual person would then have no choice but to behave in a homosexual fashion. Lacking freedom, such a person, even if engaged in homosexual activity, would not be culpable.

    Here, the Church's wise moral tradition is necessary since it warns against generalizations in judging individual cases. In fact, circumstances may exist, or may have existed in the past, which would reduce or remove the culpability of the individual in a given instance; or other circumstances may increase it. What is at all costs to be avoided is the unfounded and demeaning assumption that the sexual behaviour of homosexual persons is always and totally compulsive and therefore inculpable. What is essential is that the fundamental liberty which characterizes the human person and gives him his dignity be recognized as belonging to the homosexual person as well. As in every conversion from evil, the abandonment of homosexual activity will require a profound collaboration of the individual with God's liberating grace."

27. Regardless of their subjective sense of self, people with same-sex attractions are called upon to live chaste lives, and if they are Christians, to unite their sufferings to the sacrifice of Christ for the redemption of the world. There are also certain spiritual disciplines that they should cultivate, such as having deep but chaste friendships, as well as an intimate relationship with God through prayer and the Sacraments. The Church affirms that if they are faithful to this call to chastity, they can attain Christian perfection.

    CCC 2358: "The number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible. This inclination, which is objectively disordered, constitutes for most of

them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided. These persons are called to fulfill God's will in their lives and, if they are Christians, to unite to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross the difficulties they may encounter from their condition."

CCC 2359: "Homosexual persons are called to chastity. By the virtues of self-mastery that teach them inner freedom, at times by the support of disinterested friendship, by prayer and sacramental grace, they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection."

28. Notice that the Church does not declare that homosexual inclinations (or any of the sexual inclinations that have been described above) make a person more sinful than otherwise. However, the Church points out that this tendency does gravitate towards morally wrong actions, and this needs to be honestly acknowledged. The Church also recognises that many people will experience this as a lifelong struggle, and does not demand that they become "normal like everybody else". She propagates that all people are called to lives of chastity, and for those who experience same-sex attractions, this involves abstinence from sexual acts with people of the same gender.

Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons, 12: "What, then, are homosexual persons to do who seek to follow the Lord? Fundamentally, they are called to enact the will of God in their life by joining whatever sufferings and difficulties they experience in virtue of their condition to the sacrifice of the Lord's Cross. That Cross, for the believer, is a fruitful sacrifice since from that death come life and redemption. While any call to carry the cross or to understand a Christian's suffering in this way will predictably be met with bitter ridicule by some, it should be remembered that this is the way to eternal life for all who follow Christ.

… The Cross is a denial of self, but in service to the will of God himself who makes life come from death and empowers those who trust in him to practise virtue in place of vice."

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