



# Humanum

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## The Education of the Sexes

LÉONIE CALDECOTT

In the midst of his encyclical letter on the environment, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis speaks of “human ecology.” He defines this as “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” (*Laudato Si*, 155). He quotes Pope Benedict XVI on the subject: “Man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will.” This reminded me of something that my late husband Stratford Caldecott wrote about education: “The fragmentation of education into disciplines teaches us that the world is made of bits we can use and consume as we choose. This fragmentation is a denial of ultimate meaning. Contemporary education therefore tends to the *elimination of meaning*—except in the sense of a meaning that we impose by force upon the world.”<sup>[1]</sup>

Herein lies the link between education and the issue of sexuality. For denying the ultimate meaning of our aboriginal state as human beings—that we were, from the beginning, created male and female—is going to have a profound effect on how we educate our children. Sexual difference is an essential part of the eco-system that is human society. While there is much talk of diversity in the contemporary debate about sexual orientation, insufficient attention is paid to the fact that if this “diversity” flattens the core dynamic of the family, if it *imposes itself by force on the family*, it affects the functioning of the societal environment. While scientists speak of the necessity of bio-diversity in complex eco-systems such as the rainforest, social liberals translate the concept of diversity into an argument for sexual self-determination in the human race. What is overlooked is that there are natural laws inherent in the very bio-diversity that creates a properly functioning eco-system. As we become increasingly aware of how these systems work, we are impelled to respect those laws. If this is the case with a rainforest, why would the human environment be any different?

In Christian tradition, the fundamental dynamic powering human society is Trinitarian. Another way of putting this is that, for millennia, the encounter between man and woman has had the potential to bring a third person into play. This is why the Catholic Church teaches that the unitive and the procreative aspects of the sexual act cannot be sundered. The causal flow witnessed to by this teaching goes both ways. Just as the unitive drive is incomplete without

openness to life, so the procreative sphere is incomplete without a profoundly ‘unitive’ motivation which endures throughout the process of parenthood. One reason why the message of *Humanae Vitae* has not been deeply received by many may be the fact that everything surrounding the couple—from economic factors to the ‘nuclear’ model of the family—militates against this honouring of parenthood.

In any case, the principle does not only apply to sexuality: it extends (as our present Pope, and his immediate predecessors, have constantly emphasised) to human culture as a whole. We strive for unity—community, in fact—in order to find our place in society. And human self-consciousness finds the deepest meaning of its existence through being creative. For the Christian, aware of a source that goes beyond the human dimension, bringing children into the world is the highest expression of this creativity: it is *pro-creative*. “I have brought a man into the world, with the help of God.” (Genesis 4:1) The immense mystery inherent in this process elicits a sense of awe in the human heart. No wonder then, that the opponents of Christianity wish to lay claim to it. The ferocity of the battle over marriage and parenthood may be a paradoxical compliment from a post-Christian society.

The gratuitous coming into being of that third person in the mysterious union of the couple is at the heart of what HUMANUM is exploring this year. For a human child is not a puppy, to be weaned along with the rest of the litter and sent on its way. He or she will demand an engagement that will last for several decades: the engagement to educate, to “lead out” the fullness of his or her humanity into a mature adult life. For that life to be well-founded, we need to respect the objective reality of the child’s needs, rather than projecting our own agendas onto them. This is where educators must ask themselves what assumptions about sexual ‘liberation’ might be doing to the young. For the instrumentalisation of sexuality impacts directly on the enterprise of education. We are in danger of turning out young people who because they have an uncertain psycho-sexual compass, also lack the emotional grounding which makes for genuine intellectual growth.

If the reigning liberal consensus of our time has, to use a term from Coleman and Walker’s insightful essay in *Communio* (“The Saving Difference”<sup>[2]</sup>), a “homogenizing” effect on both sexual politics and education, it is surely equally true that a crude kind of conservatism will not adequately address the problem. To put it another way, it may be that one kind of oppressive of sexual politics has given rise to another kind: an oppressive reaction that seeks to destroy what the previous model inadequately represented in the first place. In the pedagogical sphere, I have witnessed both ends of this spectrum: parents who cannot establish any boundary whatsoever for their children, thus making it impossible for those children to root themselves in the familial identity which is necessary for individual development. At the other end, I know of parents who are convinced that their daughters need not be educated to the same level as their sons, since their “role” is going to be that of home-makers only. While Elizabeth Kantor is correct in reminding female high school graduates of the dignity and importance of their potential roles as wives and mothers, educating them to the highest level they are capable of is a sure pledge of how much importance we accord to that very sphere. It is in the home that *both* members of a couple will engage with all the resources of their humanity, since bringing up

children takes priority over any economic activity, however necessary to the physical maintenance of that home.

It is worth noting that Edith Stein, one of the most prophetic voices of the 20th century on questions about both education and gender (the volume of her writings on this subject is reviewed in this issue), did not make a crude inference between biology and social role. Whilst emphasising the complementarity of the sexes, and the creative difference between men and women, she also believed that “a common creativity in all areas was assigned in the original order,” and noted that “wherever the circle of domestic duties is too narrow for the wife to attain the full formation of her powers, both nature and reason concur that she reach out beyond this circle.” Stein could assert this precisely because she did not make a dichotomy between the life of home and the wider life of society.

Likewise Pope Francis puts the “facts of life” (as sexual issues used to be called in more coy times) into their wider context:

*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 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 gift of another man or woman, the work of God the Creator, and find mutual enrichment. (Laudato Si, 155)*

The language of encounter and mutual enrichment must surely be at the root of any adequate critique we might make of current trends in the education of the sexes. From inappropriate sex-ed programs aimed at younger and younger children, to the elevation of an individual’s pleasure to the status of a “human right,” it is only a profound anthropological analysis which is capable of responding to the growing crisis. Fr. José Granados’ analysis of how St. John Paul’s Theology of the Body responds fully to the unique historical situation we are facing is essential reading. His book, *Called to Love*, written with Carl Anderson, which is also reviewed in this issue, is still the best introduction to the subject in the English language. [It is perhaps worth mentioning that my late husband, with Ruth Ashfield, wrote a study guide to this excellent book.]

In a time of crisis we need not only prophets and thinkers, but leaders with a clear vision. “We

have gone back to paganism, in which the child had no rights. He was merely an object at someone else's disposal." While Cardinal Carlo Caffarra's recent interview, reprinted in our Resource section, makes for disturbing reading, it is essential that we *be disturbed*. Whilst we must always have compassion on individuals whose life experience does not enable them to relate to the Church's profound anthropological vision, there is a difference between sympathy and patience with those who struggle, and simply letting a short-sighted bus driver run over hundreds of children waiting by the road-side, as a British catechist put it to me recently.

Indeed short-sightedness is the principal hallmark of our current situation. The Pope hit the nail on the head when he said last April (and he repeats his own words in *Laudato Si*) that contemporary secular culture seeks "to cancel out sexual difference because it no longer knows how to confront it." We certainly seem to have lost the plot when it comes to understanding what healthy sexual development might be. Yet we can be thankful for those who tirelessly remind this "culture of death" that, in the end, life and sanity can prevail. J. Budziszewski, in his book *On the Meaning of Sex* (reviewed in this issue), reminds us that "the supernatural purpose of mortal love...is to awaken in us the longing for that greater love which alone can give us all that we long for."

It is this longing that we need to keep in mind at all times—a longing that in truth every child needs to be surrounded by and to feel in their turn. Then we can confront the difficult issues that our current hyper-sexualised culture gives rise to: not from fearful or moralistic motives, but rather from the insurmountable hope we have in a God incarnate, who is a Person, coherent and whole, a reminder of what our humanity really means. And if we seek to be 'alter Christi', we must keep in mind that there are countless people around us whose perspective is compromised by being formed in an ethos which was beyond their control. For we are coping with a cultural crisis of monumental proportions, and it is not one which will be resolved easily. In the meantime, we need to recognise that people struggle, that they suffer, and we need to go out, as the Pope says, to the 'peripheries' where those struggles and sufferings take place. You don't criticise the housekeeping failures of people who live in a slum. You do try to something about the conditions which oblige them to live like that.

"Proclamation in a missionary style," our Jesuit Pope has said, "focuses on the essentials, on the necessary things: this is also what fascinates and attracts more, what makes the heart burn, as it did for the disciples at Emmaus. We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel. The proposal of the Gospel must be more simple, profound, radiant. It is from this proposition that the moral consequences then flow."<sup>[3]</sup>

[1] Stratford Caldecott, *Beauty for Truth's Sake* (Brazos Press, 2009), 17.

[2] Adrian J. Walker and Rachel M. Coleman, "The Saving Difference," *Communio: International Catholic Review* XLIII, no. 2 (2015), 184-91.

[3] Interview in *America: The National Catholic Review*, 30 September 2013. Accessed at

<http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.

*Léonie Caldecott is the UK editor of both Humanum and Magnificat. With her late husband Stratford she founded the Center for Faith and Culture in Oxford, its summer schools and its journal Second Spring. Her eldest daughter Teresa, along with other colleagues, now works with her to take Strat's contribution forward into the future.*

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