

From Domination to Reciprocity

Br. Antoine-Emmanuel, FMJ
frjerusalem.montreal@yahoo.ca

“Male and female he created them.” (Gn 1:27) There is the great wealth of our humanity, but also the big challenge! Do we, the consecrated, have anything to say today about this relationship between man and woman? Better yet: do we have something *to live* that is a sign, a luminous and joyful testimony for our world?

Let's look at the origins of this relationship in the biblical context. In the first days of our creation, original trust reigned. Trust in God, mutual trust between man and woman, who could expose themselves in their vulnerability without shame or fear.

Then came the loss of trust in God and His Word under the instigation of the serpent. The consequence of this defiance is known: “Your yearning will be for your husband, and he will dominate you.” (Gn 3:16) How true this word turned out to be in human history! So many desires and dominations have existed historically in the male-female relationship...

When the Kingdom Begins to Appear

When Jesus, the Word made flesh, appears and when the Kingdom breaks into the “here and now”, what do we see? We see the emergence of reciprocity. Is it not a woman, Mary, who leads Jesus to make his first sign at Cana, also known as the “*arche*” [beginning, origin] of all signs?

In the same way, it is a woman—a Syrio-Phoenician—who leads him to extend his ministry to the pagans. It is a woman, Martha, who leads him to fulfill the ultimate sign that will lead to his Passion. It is a woman, Mary of Bethany who, by anointing him, will preside at the opening of his Passion. It is a woman, his mother Mary, who will be infinitely close to him at the hour of the infinite offering of his Life. It is thus women who allow Jesus to give all that He is. Covetousness no longer has the last word; spiritual motherhood can now unfold.

Conversely, Jesus is indeed the one who leads Mary towards the mystery of her intimate union with the work of redemption, towards the fullness of her motherhood. It is Jesus who leads the woman of Samaria to her full freedom. It is Jesus who frees the adulterous woman accused by men of the Law. It is Jesus who leads Mary Magdalene from the slavery of her seven demons to the freedom of the Gospel. In all that, there is no domination; on the contrary, Jesus gives himself up so that these women may come into their own, in other words, come to their vocation.

Women enable Jesus to give all that He is, and Jesus gives himself up so that women may come to their vocation. Admirable reciprocity!

The Spring of Reciprocity Flows Henceforth

Then came the hour of his Passover, when Jesus definitively took upon himself the drama of covetousness and domination of the sexes. What was already beginning to

appear in his public life, as we have just seen, is now offered to all. The spring of reciprocity now flows like a powerful stream that is offered to our own narratives.

Saint Paul will be deeply moved by this reciprocity and will proclaim this gift in Chapter 5 of his Epistle to the Ephesians, saying to men and women: “Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ.” (Eph. 5:21) He will preach about submission that is the gift of self to the other so that he or she can reach the fullness of their being. The gift of the Kingdom is not the abnegation of the sexes but their baptism in the reciprocity of love. “There can be neither male nor female—for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28)

The Kingdom opens a reciprocal interiority between men and women. That which was never possible, is now possible. It has been offered. It is a fundamental manifestation of the Kingdom, perhaps the most beautiful, the most eloquent. When the cross of the Suffering Servant is received, the model of macho domination collapses; when the Passion of Mary is contemplated, feminist domination collapses as well, because fear no longer reigns. And when one’s gaze plunges into the mystery of the risen New Adam and the New Eve that shares His glory, the follies and errors of covetousness and domination are healed. For it is this mystery that reciprocity comes to its fullness and glory; it is from this mystery that mercy overflows.

Consecrated Life, Laboratory of Reciprocity

If it is true that consecrated life is a laboratory of the “Kingdom’s” own new relations, then, we, as consecrated persons have work to do! It is not the kind of work that *manufactures* the Kingdom in the laboratory; but rather *welcomes* and *cultivates* the gifts of the Kingdom and especially this gift of male-female reciprocity in Christ.

It is no longer the place of men that must be defended or overthrown, nor is it feminism that must be preached or fought against. It is the mutual relationship between men and women that must be plunged into the Paschal Mystery. Consecrated life becomes a laboratory of male-female reciprocity. This is true of the new communities that bring together men and women in various ways. It is true of the new structures in which elderly consecrated men and women live; it is true for all consecrated persons!

How to work in this laboratory? It seems to me that a process—long but fruitful—can be described by these six steps: listening together to the Word that opens us to the Other and to one another; prayer that connects us to the energies of the Kingdom; mercy mutually welcomed and always chosen as a priority; listening and the opening-up of the heart to go outside of oneself and make room for the other; plunging into the kenosis of Jesus to consent to be poor in front of others; the renewed choice of chastity in celibacy, anchored in neither fear nor law or ideal, but oriented towards the Kingdom.

All of this however, cannot flourish except by the ray of God’s grace. Unity and communion comes only through a death of self, which left entirely to human nature is impossible. This laboratory of reciprocity cannot “work” without its principal source, which is the Eucharist. It is in Jesus-Eucharist that all the connections of genuine love are woven on this earth.

Is there a more beautiful prayer than the one made in 1949 by Chiara Lubich¹ and Igino Giordani,² which I would translate as: “Jesus-Eucharist, seal thyself, on the void of

¹ Founder of the *Focolare* Movement.

² Italian politician and journalist, co-founder and key figure of the *Focolare* Movement.

myself and the void of himself (of herself) the covenant that you yourself want.” That is the central focus of the “laboratory!”

For Further Reflection:

Which path does one follow—both personally and as a community—in order to have a taste of this reciprocity that is characteristic of the Kingdom itself?