

INTAMS Colloquium 1999

Living the Difference: Gender in Love and Marriage

There cannot be any doubt about it: men and women are different. Today we have an acute awareness, probably more acute than ever before, of the differences between the sexes in virtually all areas of our private and public life. And yet despite this we find it unbelievably difficult to give a clear account of the difference. Of course we are different, but how sex-specific are these differences? Evidence of this dilemma is to be found both in the overwhelming and inexhaustible flow of gender studies and also in our daily life, where the obvious differences are often manifest only in stereotypical remarks ("typical woman", "typical man") or questionable polarisations (for example emotionality versus rationality).

There are good reasons why the specific perspectives of married couples merit particular attention in the area of the relationship between the sexes. Ultimately a woman and a man come to an agreement in marriage as to a living space and a living time, where both individual and sex-specific qualities encounter one another constantly so that the couple "go beyond" them in the Hegelian sense to a community of interests that includes all differences but without obliterating them. The marital model of unity and diversity does not thereby directly provide an answer to the question about the essence of the difference between the sexes, but it does open up a horizon in which difference can be lived: as a personal relation with the other, which is subject to trial, requires permanent commitment and calls for a "spirituality" in which both can find themselves and each other. This does at the very least seem to offer an aid to orientation for the relationship between the sexes.

It was this question that was the focus of a colloquium which INTAMS convened in November 1999 under the title "Living the difference: Gender and Love in Marriage". The aim of the conference was first of all to approach the subject descriptively and to study the situation of the difference between the sexes in marriage from various points of view: through the contrast with historically ascertainable models of the sexes - found in this case in medieval literature (Rüdiger Schnell), with the aid of the differences emerging in psychotherapeutic practice (Alfons Vansteenwegen), and with regard to the expression which the differentiation of the sexes has found in legislation (Kathleen Marshall). The task of evaluating the individual results from the viewpoint of the Christian faith and adding possibly normative elements was assigned to the theologians (Klaus Demmer, Xavier Lacroix and Johan Verstraeten).

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