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## Pope Francis brings nuance to notion of complementarity

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Synod on the Family  
Perspective

In 1979-81, in a series of general audience talks, Pope John Paul II introduced into Catholic theology the notion of complementarity, which soon became a foundational idea in his and magisterial teaching on human sexuality. In 2014, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith hosted a three-day interfaith colloquium entitled "The Complementarity of Man and Woman in Marriage." Pope Francis' opening speech to the colloquium opened up the possibility for thinking anew about complementarity as a foundational sexual anthropological idea.

Since the concept will continue to be a substratum of discussions at the upcoming Synod of Bishops on the family, a comparison of the ideas of both popes on complementarity is of theological interest.

For John Paul, first, complementarity means that two realities belong together, producing a whole that neither is nor can be alone. He develops this notion along culture-based masculine/feminine gender lines, which he presents as biology-based.

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In *Familiaris Consortio*, published in 1981, he presents this gender-based masculine/feminine complementarity as a "natural complementarity," which in marriage creates between a man and a woman an ever richer union on all levels of the body, the character and the soul, and reveals to the world the new communion of love given by the grace of Christ.

This "natural" complementarity is divided into heterogenital and reproductive complementarities. Heterogenital complementarity is the physically functioning male and female genital organs; reproductive complementarity is those organs actively reproducing.

John Paul maintains that while a married couple must complement one another heterogenitally, they do not have to actually reproduce if they have serious reasons for not doing so and they observe all Catholic moral precepts. Infertile couples and couples who choose not to reproduce for serious reasons can still enter into a valid marital and sacramental union.

Heterogenital complementarity is necessary for "natural" complementarity and, therefore, homosexual couples cannot enter into a valid marital union.

Second, in his 1995 letter to women, John Paul speaks of "ontological complementarity," which the doctrinal congregation calls "affective complementarity."

This type of complementarity is at the root of John Paul's theology of the body and the sexual human person because it intrinsically links biological and personal complementarity between a man and a woman. God creates woman and man complete in themselves, but, for forming a couple, they are incomplete. Their incompleteness is made whole in their marital union, where wife and husband mutually complete one another in a "unity of the two," physically, psychologically, ontologically, not only in their sexual acts but in their day-to-day marital lives.

Complementarity is a principle that illuminates an "honest anthropology" based on "the nature of the subjects themselves who are performing the act."

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In a marital union and the sexual union of the spouses within that union, masculine and feminine elements are ontologically and affectively linked in a unified whole. Because homosexual partners do not bring feminine qualities if they are gay, or masculine qualities if they are lesbian, there is no possibility of complementarity or moral sexual acts.

Third, John Paul and the magisterium condemn homosexual acts on the grounds that they violate heterogenital and reproductive complementarity, but they never explain if and why they also violate personal complementarity, other than to assert in the Catechism of the Catholic Church that homosexual acts "do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity."

It is legitimate to ask, however, if they proceed from a personal complementarity and if they can contribute to an ongoing and truly human complementarity.

The magisterium offers no answer to these specific questions, but committed, loving homosexual couples have answered them from their experience by showing that they do experience affective and communion complementarity in their "unity of the two" lives, including their mutual just and loving sexual acts. That reported experience has been verified by reputable scientific research.

These experiential and research reports highlight John Courtney Murray's principle that the understanding of any human reality is preserved from ideology by close contact to concrete experience. The claim of John Paul and the magisterium that homosexual acts do not proceed from a genuine affective complementarity is wide open to the accusation of being a hypothesis unsubstantiated by practical experience.

## **Spirit-giftedness**

Francis opens his treatment of complementarity with a generic description, which "refers to situations where one of two things adds to, completes, or fulfills a lack in the other," importantly adding that complementarity "is much more than that."

He provides four nuances for us to think theologically about that "more."

The first nuance is a scriptural nuance: a reference to Paul's Letter to the Corinthians, which celebrates that "the Spirit has endowed each of us with different gifts so that -- just as the human body's members

work together for the good of the whole -- everyone's gifts can work together for the benefit of each."

For the followers of Christ, Francis says, this Spirit-giftedness is the "deepest meaning" of complementarity and the essential root of what he calls the "ecological harmony" of human relationships. All complementarities emanate from this fundamental Spirit-giftedness, which impels humans to create harmony and unity, to overcome division and exclusion, to acknowledge and affirm the Spirit-created varieties of human relationships with God, neighbor, and self.

Francis correctly emphasizes that the complementarity between a man and woman is a (not the) "root of marriage and family," and that the "contribution of marriage to society is 'indispensable.' "

Given the crises in both contemporary marriages and families, this positive affirmation of marriage as an anthropological and theological expression of the harmony of God's creation is a necessary and welcome prophetic statement. But the complementarity of woman and man is only one of the many harmonies of which both St. Paul and Francis speak.

Francis' second nuance, an emphasis on complementarity as a dynamic and evolving idea rather than a "simplistic idea that all the roles and relations of the two sexes are fixed in a single, static pattern," is critical. It reflects a shift from a classicist to a historically conscious worldview.

A classicist worldview asserts that reality is static, fixed and universal. The method utilized, anthropology formulated, and norms taught in this worldview are timeless, universal and immutable, and the acts condemned by those norms are always so condemned.

A historically conscious worldview fundamentally challenges this by positing that reality is dynamic, evolving, changing and particular. The method utilized, anthropology formulated, and norms taught in this worldview are contingent, particular and changeable, and the acts judged by those norms are morally evaluated in light of evolving human knowledge and understanding.

John Paul and the magisterium use the term *complementarity* in a classicist way, defining it to reflect traditional and culturally determined gender roles grounded in the physiological distinction between male and female.

Along with many Catholic faithful and theologians, we detect gender stereotypes in magisterial documents where femaleness is defined primarily in terms of motherhood, receptivity and nurturing, and maleness is defined primarily in terms of fatherhood, initiation and activity. Ontological, biological motherhood and fatherhood can be granted, but any claim of ontological naturalness for gendered psychological qualities ignores the culturally defined nature of gender, and so fails to adequately reflect the complexity of human persons and their relationships.

Experience shows, for instance, that some men are more nurturing and some women more dominant and analytical, and that within a relationship there may be two dominant people or two nurturing people. Do we really want to claim that these two people do not complement each other in any way?

Francis' speech reflects a historically conscious and dynamic view of complementarity. "Complementarity will take many forms," he argues, "as each man and woman brings his or her distinctive contributions to their marriage and to the formation of their children -- his or her personal richness, personal charisma."

This historically conscious approach to complementarity reflects the best of the Catholic theological tradition in dialogue with experience and the social and biological sciences.

Francis' third nuance addresses the "ecological crisis" plaguing marriage and family. "Ecology" is originally a biological concept referring to the relations between living organisms and their environment, but it has been extended in our time to include relations between human groups, the social patterns those relationships create, and the material resources available to them.

Francis clearly has in mind this contemporary meaning of ecology, the inclusion of the idea of complementarity in that human ecology, and the role of complementarity in the present crisis in that ecology.

He invites us to reflect upon complementarity in light of how social sins limit its full realization and impact in order to "foster a new human ecology." Social sins that create a social ecology that restricts the full impact of complementarity on everyone include poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, discrimination, patriarchy and every other social reality that frustrates, and does not facilitate, human dignity and relationship. The invitation the pope issues is to find a fuller and more dynamic definition of complementarity that simultaneously exposes those threats to social, marital and familial harmony and responds to them.

### **Engaging reality**

Francis' fourth nuance of complementarity is a focus on family as an "anthropological fact," which cannot be qualified "based on ideological notions or concepts important only at one time in history."

Worldwide experience shows that family is defined and influenced culturally, historically, socially, and legally. While one can certainly conceive and present an "ideal" notion of family like one man, one woman and their children, the history and reality of family are much more complex. There are now single-parent families, stepparent families, adoptive-parent families, foster-parent families, polygamous- and monogamous-parent families, and same-sex parent families.

In each of these cases, "family is family," and we must engage the reality we find, not what we would like it ideally to be. We must also evaluate the nature of the relationship between parents and their children based on sound scientific evidence, not on unjustified speculative prejudice.

This legitimate demand for evidence can be required of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' 2006 statement on homosexuality. Speaking of a homosexual inclination, the bishops note that it "predisposes one toward what is truly not good for the human person." The predisposition is toward homosexual acts that are "not ordered toward the fulfillment of the natural ends of human sexuality," and therefore "acting in accord with such an inclination simply cannot contribute to the true good of the human person."

The statement that homosexual acts, by definition, cannot contribute to the good of the human person seems to contradict the scientifically proven relational experiences of committed, monogamous homosexual couples.

Lawrence Kurdek has done extensive research on gay and lesbian couples and notes the following characteristics when comparing these relationships with married heterosexual couples: Gay and lesbian couples tend to have a more equitable distribution of household labor, demonstrate greater conflict resolution skills, have less support from members of their own families but greater support from friends, and, most significantly, experience similar levels of relational satisfaction compared to heterosexual couples.

Not only do empirical studies challenge magisterial claims that homosexual acts, by definition, are

detrimental to the human person and human relationships, such studies also challenge the doctrinal congregation's claim that, "as experience has shown, the absence of sexual complementarity in these [homosexual] unions creates obstacles in the normal development of children ... [and] would actually mean doing violence to these children." That unsupported claim is contradicted by experience and scientific analysis.

While Francis' speech focused on complementarity as it applies to man and woman in marriage, the four nuances he introduces open up the possibility of ongoing theological and anthropological reflection on the idea and its relevance to all human relationships. The challenge is to discern the implications of these nuances for a historically conscious sexual ethic and an evolving notion of complementarity that seeks ecological harmony in human relationship and is relevant to the lived reality of sexual persons.

We welcome Francis' spirit of openness and dialogue, and we pray that it will inform the 2015 Synod on the Bishops on the family and be embraced by the whole church so that it can offer to marriages and families and to a variously divided world an example of human ecological harmony and the positive outcomes that result from it.

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