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Co-responsibility between Men and Women in Marriage and Family. Some Anthropological Bases

La corresponsabilidad entre varón y mujer en el matrimonio y la familia. Algunas bases antropológicas

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Abstract

Today there is a generalized opinion according to which there would be equality between men and women in the workforce and the political society to the extent that there is co-responsibility between both of them in domestic tasks. The difficulty in achieving this goal has been due to a certain predominant individualistic culture, from which a model of co-responsibility is proposed that it does not take into account equality and difference between the male person and the female person. The unequal treatment suffered by women in these areas would be better resolved from a culture of loving complementarity between both sexes.

*Keywords: Complementary,
co-responsibility, individualism, love.*

Resumen

Existe hoy una opinión generalizada según la cual habría igualdad entre varón y mujer en el mundo del trabajo y de la sociedad política en la medida en que haya corresponsabilidad entre ambos en las tareas domésticas. La dificultad en alcanzar esa meta se ha debido a cierta cultura individualista predominante, desde la cual se propone un modelo de corresponsabilidad que no tiene en cuenta la igualdad y la diferencia entre la persona masculina y la persona femenina. El trato desigual sufrido por la mujer en esos ámbitos se resolvería mejor desde una cultura de la complementariedad amorosa entre ambos sexos.

*Palabras clave: Amor,
complementariedad,
corresponsabilidad, individualismo.*

Introduction

Co-responsibility between men and women in the family sphere has been the expected point of inflection from which women could finally gain access to the world of professional work outside the home and political society. It is commonly thought that once this social custom is established, the historical negative discrimination that women have suffered will come to an end, hence the importance given to surveys that show results achieved in practice. However, the results of surveys are always far from those expected in achieving this objective. The question then arises, why it is so difficult to achieve such a seemingly fair goal? It seems that the underlying reason for this ineffectiveness is the culture that underlies this policy today, which does not contribute to the proper functioning of co-responsibility.

My thesis is that the weak link in the policies that promote co-responsibility is that they deal with it only from a pragmatic point of view. That is, co-responsibility is taken up only as a means for women to enter the workforce and the political society. Gender equity appears as an undisputed ideal. Understood in this way, it is to say co-responsibility is not based on a core aspect that must occur within marriage: this is the loving complementarity between man and woman, understood not as a diversity of functions that complement each other, but as a harmonization between their equal nature and their diverse personalities. Family life stops being the foundation of social life, but rather it is seen as a hindrance for the participation in this same social life. Thus, the family has been relegated to a status that gives contradictory signals: on the one hand, it cannot cease to exist; but on the other, it is an impediment to what really matters, the participation of women in the workforce and the political society.

The cause of this idiosyncrasy is the individualism that strongly permeates our culture. For this reason, in the first section I will explain how individualism affects the family and, as a consequence, the

practice of co-responsibility. The dangers of individualism for civil society are so evident that Rousseau warns of them, despite being considered one of the inspirers of contemporary liberal democracy. In this line of reasoning, he introduces the family as the basis of a just society in Book V of *Émile* (1964). There, the family is a community that is not immediately political, in which a complementary relationship between male and female exists, based on love. The experience of this community of mutual love allows people to overcome their individualism, and thus, to promote the general interests of society over private interests in the political relationship. Rousseau is a man of the Enlightenment, but in contrast to the patriarchal society of his time, he emphasizes love and complementarity as the primary elements of marriage and family. As a man of his time, he does not promote the participation of woman in politics, but he considers the indirect influence she has on politics through the family. Thus, emphasizing the complementarity between male and female in the family, he lays the foundation for co-responsibility, albeit from a naturalistic point of view. I will address Rousseau's contribution to our topic in the second section.

Rousseau's naturalism can be complemented by another line of contemporary thought, a review of feminism from a Christian perspective that begins with the *Mulieris Dignitatem* (John Paul II, 1987).¹ This has the merit of overcoming, with extraordinary sensibility, the barrier that has been raised between those who consider women from a purely domestic point of view and those who do so only from a professional or political perspective. It does not take empirical data as its starting point, but derives historical exigencies for women and men in the current historical situation from a deeply Christian view. It denounces the discrimination that women have suffered throughout history and a certain cultural conditioning of women that must

1 It seems interesting to introduce this confrontation between Rousseau and John Paul II here, although there is no secondary bibliography to support it. Arguing from very different philosophical standpoints, both argue that the family is the basis of a just society insofar as it overcomes increasing individualism. Of course, in both cases we speak of the family understood as a man and a woman who love and complement each other in marriage, and who are open to the procreation and education of children.

be overcome today. From this perspective, the complementarity between both sexes is manifested as a co-responsibility that arises from the love between both spouses, and as such, is not simply reduced to a division of tasks within the home. I will analyze this position in reference to the previous two in the third section.

Co-responsibility and Individualism

In the past, society was organized in such a way that allowed to link its members together in different ways, and in so doing, consolidated certain social ties between them. Our current society, on the other hand, is organized to undo these linkages in order to guarantee individual independence and rights. This trend is at the foundation of the individualism in which we find ourselves today (Manent, 2004: 226).

The dissociative force of individualism, as described by Pierre Manent, entails that the individual is no longer perceived as part of an objective set of linkages in the social world, which in turn place him in relationship in various ways to the other members of society. Rather, he perceives himself as the only source of all these links, and what is more, as the only legitimate one (2004: 186).

From this perspective, our individualistic democratic society holds as its moral horizon the idea of equal rights. Consequently, the social and economic inequalities of women *vis-à-vis* men surface as the most flagrant denial of the principle on which it is founded (Manent, 2004: 339). Women have then undertaken the struggle to gain the rights that until recently belonged only to men, mainly in order to participate in the workforce and political society. The victories won by women in these arenas have in general been in detriment of their families, which, nevertheless, is the basic cell of society.

According to Claude Habib, the close bond that unites women with their families does not seem to be compatible with individualistic aspirations, which have also broken solidarity with such strong historical associations as the corporation, the parish, and the fief. Why should women be excluded from this legitimate universal «freedom» movement? Women must also be autonomous, even

more so today when marriage is a liberal, «voluntary» contract, and because the right to end this contract and to withdraw from it, always exists (1998: 118-9).

How can this autonomy be achieved if women are made by nature to be mothers and to form a community comprised of her family? The logic of their individualistic aspirations will collide with a natural limit, namely, children, who are the direct result of marriage. The bond parents have with their children is not the fruit of a free contract (Habib, 1998: 119). In other words, the autonomy acquired by women clashes with natural limits, the upbringing and education of children, which affect them in particular because they are mothers, but which also bind their husbands as well.

The solution would therefore be that there be co-responsibility between spouses, understood as the division of tasks within the home. Marriage thus becomes an association between equals, each having the same rights to participate in the workforce and in political society. This arrangement tends then to minimize the difference between fatherhood and motherhood in the care and education of children. The parental experience must also be egalitarian. Apart from tasks that are evidently proper to a woman's motherhood, such as gestation and nursing children, there are no other tasks that are more incumbent on women than on men in the government and administration of the household. The egalitarian distribution of the tasks of the family home has as its aim personal affirmation, the realization of individual potentialities in the context of a career outside the home. The intellectual ability and energy devoted to the family are relegated to the background *vis-à-vis* the career in society (Habib, 1998: 129-33).

The value of motherhood, both physical and spiritual, is greatly diminished when the couple is seen to be an association between equals, because for the woman it entails a burden that, to a large extent, cannot be assumed by the husband, for example, in gestation and nursing. As Habib diagnoses, this type of association should bring each party identical benefits in terms of individual development, material gains, and sexual pleasure. The defect of this type of apparently ideal association is its fragility, on the one hand, and that

difficulty of bringing it about in practice on the other. If each spouse is motivated by her/his private interests, the family is no longer a community. Either of them can, at any time, make an assessment as to if he or she is at a disadvantage, if the other is abusing her/his good will, her/his time, or his/her body (1998: 130).

Habib's diagnosis is perhaps a caricature. We might think that people have common sense, do not follow extreme gender ideologies, and have a more humane vision of the family. However, the caricature clearly reveals the elements of an individualistic ideology that distort common sense. It prevents, and this not infrequently, that the family is considered today to be a community of life and love, the consequence of which should be co-responsibility. It seems to me that as long as male-female co-responsibility in the family is only considered to be a means for women to be successful in professional and political tasks outside home, such co-responsibility is not going to function well.

I propose to criticize this distorted vision of co-responsibility, according to Habib's diagnosis, from two contemporary visions that, although different from each other, shed light on the subject at hand, namely, those of Rousseau and of a review of feminism from a Christian perspective.

Rousseau: Family and Individualism

Making an abstraction of his naturalism, which I do not share, it seems convenient to give Rousseau credit for having foreseen the dangers of individualism in a political society of a liberal democracy. In his *Émile* (1969, Book V), he also introduces the feminine values that would allow this situation to be overcome. The main role of women in the family would have social effects beyond the family itself. He considers the subject of the complementarity between men and women in marriage, which is possible due to the differences between the two sexes.

The human being is, for Rousseau, by nature, an individual, not a sociable being, who is self-sufficient according to the extent of his

own strength (1964: 364-365). He loves himself with a natural and moderate self-love that drives him only to self-preservation, wherein it is beneficial for him to do so (1964: 134-162). This primitive passion can undergo harmful modifications due to causes foreign to nature (1969: 491). This is what happened at the beginning of civil society, as a result of someone taking control over a piece of land and others accepting his appropriation of the same (1964: 164).

Within the society thus initiated, the worker became an owner, inequality developed insensibly between individuals, with self-esteem prevailing among them as a deformation of that innocent self-love of the autarchic man (1964: 171-174). Competition and corruption thus ensued (1969: 493). Since then, in order for individuals to be able to seek the general interest of civil society, they must construct a second nature according to which they would love themselves by loving someone other than themselves (1964: 437-439). But this is very difficult to achieve through politics, where individualistic competition reigns. However, there is a community that is not immediately political, the family, in which said altruistic love exists between spouses and children. The individual who lives out this experience is capable as a citizen to enter into an authentically political relationship (Habib, 1998: 131-134).

Writing always from a naturalistic perspective, Rousseau appeals to nature that made men and women complementary through sexual desire and the purposes of reproduction, which carries with it a moral complementarity (Manent, 2004: 242-243). The latter is developed extensively by the author in Book V of *Émile*. Some main points of the book serve to elucidate our theme further.

First, men and women are equal as a species and according to their powers. However, they are different by sex. The difference between sexes does not in any way lead to the inferiority of women in relation to men. Arguments that one sex is preferable to another, or that they are entirely equal, seem vain to Rousseau. Each sex is more perfect than the other according to the purposes established by nature for each one (1969: 694-695). It is, in fact, just these differences that allow men and women to love and complement each other and make the family a community.

Second, Rousseau considers that marriage must be by mutual consent based on love. The woman has to freely choose her husband. This assumption is in opposition to the deeply rooted custom of the patriarchal society of his time. According to this system, marriages were entered into based on certain social and economic conveniences established by the parents of the spouses, a decision that the woman accepted as the only option in her life (1969: 755). Defending the freedom of the woman to choose her spouse, the family is, according to Rousseau, a community of love. Men who are a part of this community of love are thereby, capable of seeking the general interest of civil society above private interests. Although the woman does not participate in political society, she has a natural talent for governing the male in the context of the family. She rules at home like a minister in the state, allowing her spouse to determine her actions in terms of what she herself wants to do (1969: 766-767).

In Rousseau, it is found, therefore, an appreciation for private life as the foundation of political life. The loving relationship that can come about within the context of the family thanks to the well-educated woman can save the State from corruption. This natural sentiment is necessary to establish conventional ties. The love individuals possess for those closest to them is the basis for the esteem that he will demonstrate towards other citizens of the State. The family is for Rousseau a small homeland, through which the heart attaches itself to the great homeland, the State (1969: 700).

While we do not find in Rousseau a treatment of co-responsibility between men and women at home, we nonetheless do find the love and complementarity that form the basis for said co-responsibility. The relationship between master and slave does not exist between spouses (1969: 764-765), as in patriarchal societies. Women have a key, albeit indirect, influence on the proper development of civil society, thanks to their own talents and freedom.

Although it represents a utopian ideal, Rousseau has the merit of having stood up for certain feminine values unknown by individualistic approaches to co-responsibility. However, it is at the same time fair to reproach him for not having granted political rights to women. Therefore, I will complement these views with another

contemporary thought, that of a review of feminism from a Christian perspective which began with *Mulieris Dignitatem*, as I said in the introduction. Based on the latter, women are able to maintain their main position at home, and exercise their right to participate in public life as well.

Feminism from a Christian Perspective: Loving Complementarity and Co-Responsibility

Let say that contemporary Christian perspective has recognized the discrimination that women have suffered throughout history as a consequence of strong cultural conditioning (John Paul II, 1995: nn.3 and 5). It is therefore understandable that the feminist movement has reacted against these conditions. However, this movement has gone sometimes too far when it has led, in some cases, to freeing women from marriage and family in the case of the practice of extreme gender ideologies. In other cases, even recognizing the need for these institutions, it has relegated them to the status of secondary considerations (Burggraf, 2006: 400), as we saw in the first section. From this last point of view, marriage has been considered to be an association between equals, according to Habib's thesis reviewed in the same section, and co-responsibility has been promoted with the pragmatic aim that women can go out to work outside the home.

By contrast, Rousseau highlighted the role of women in the family and the beneficial impact that a marital union based on love has on civil society. However, he did so from a naturalistic psychological perspective of sexual desire. By failing to consider the right of women to participate in public life, he did not refer to co-responsibility understood as the division of tasks between spouses within the home. That said, he did highlight a reality that is at the core of that co-responsibility, namely, the complementarity between the sexes that is manifested in their loving relationship.

In this section, I want to delve into the theological metaphysical explanation of this complementarity as proposed by a Christian perspective, which carries with it an openness to co-responsibility. The

premise of this Christian perspective is that women's rights are the rights of the person, and not the rights of the individual. The rights of the individual have been defended from an abstract, ideological egalitarianism, which ignores the reality of the person. According to the order of creation, God made man and woman as persons, in his image and likeness (John Paul II, 1987: n. 17), which means to exist in relation to the other «I».²

Man and woman are called from their very origins to live not only «side by side» or «together», but also to live «mutually» one for the other (John Paul II, 1987: n. 7). It is the meaning of the «help» that Genesis (2, 18-25) spoke about. The biblical context allows us to understand this help as mutual help, as it is help between human persons, whose shared nature entails a call to interpersonal communion. Being a person means striving for self-fulfillment, which can only be achieved through a sincere gift of self. The model of interpretation of the person is God as Trinity, as a communion of Persons (*Gen 2, 18-25*).

Now, this interpersonal relationship occurs in marriage as an integration of the masculine and the feminine (*Gen 2, 18-25*). This integration is not a set of different tasks that men and women must each perform, nor does it just have to do with physical or mental differences. It is an ontological difference, from which we can speak of a male person and a female person. It is precisely for this reason that this does not involve a relationship of subordination between them, but rather, one of reciprocity (John Paul II, 1995: n. 7). It is a more radical explanation than that of Rousseau who, as we have seen, affirms the difference between the sexes from a naturalistic psychology of sexual desire.

We must not be afraid of the difference put forth by let say, Christian perspective, because it is precisely from the same that the woman is the complement to the man, and the man is the complement to the woman. Men and women are not individuals who

2 This explanation is a prelude to the self-revelation of the Trine God, that is, of the communion between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the bosom of the Trinity (John Paul II, 1987: n. 17).

associate with each other, but rather, people who complement each other (John Paul II, 1995: n. 7). The injustices that women have suffered throughout history do not have their origin in this difference, but in original sin, which altered the complementarity between the two (John Paul II, 1987: n. 10). The deep injustices that women have suffered due to different forms of the patriarchal society have not occurred because their feminine personality is different from that of male, but because of accepted cultural norms that must be eradicated.

Radical individualist feminism is correct when it criticizes these unjust cultural norms. But this is no longer correct when, in trying to eradicate them, it destroys the anthropological reality of women. It is possible to bring about a proper cultural renewal from a Christian anthropology that recognizes these injustices and, at the same time, takes this anthropological reality into account. This new culture would include the desired co-responsibility, but as a consequence of the loving interpersonal relationship between husband and wife in marriage and family, and not as an individualistic pragmatic end.

The just incorporation of women into the workforce and public policies should not be seen in terms of a simple exchange of the patriarchal cultural model for one wherein women are only personally fulfilled and happy if they are successful in those fields. It would be exchanging a rigid scheme for an equally rigid stereotype. In the latter, the value of private life is relegated to the background, and therein co-responsibility would consist only of a division of tasks between the spouses imposed by civil society. The complexity that co-responsibility carries with it does not fit within this last stereotype.

Indeed, there cannot be a symmetrical distribution of tasks between the spouses within their home, because being a mother and being a father are different personal tasks, although closely intertwined. At its base is the reciprocal gift of man and woman in marriage, which then allows them to give life to new persons. The close contact of the woman with the new person that is being formed within her creates in her an attitude towards her own child and towards humans in general which deeply characterizes her personality.

The man, despite his participation as a father, is always outside the process of gestation and birth of the child, and must, in many aspects, perceive his own paternity from the mother (John Paul II, 1987: n. 7). This greater distance facilitates in the male a more serene action to protect life. It can lead him to be a true parent, not only in the physical dimension, but also in the spiritual sense (Wojtyła, 1987: 355). Because they are parents in common, the man contracts a special debt with the woman, which any program of equal rights must take into account as essential (John Paul II, 1987: n. 17).

In this communion of life and love, the male can recognize and love those talents of the woman that allow her to participate in the workforce or in political organizations. Thus, he will be willing to collaborate in domestic tasks, to facilitate his wife's participation in tasks outside their home, establishing a co-responsibility between them within the home. This co-responsibility, the fruit of mutual love, will allow women to develop their professional and political talents from her own feminine personality, thereby making an important contribution to society. Indeed, the «genius of women» (John Paul II, 1995: n. 10) can contribute to the workforce or political society, together with their professional and political skills. Women have the ability to discover each individual within the masses, to communicate security among those around them, a capacity for intuition that is more realistic than the criteria of functionality and effectiveness, and in so doing give testimony of God's love for each individual person (Burggraf, 1999: 151-152).

However, we must not forget that the female personality inclines women, from the very depths of their being, to be actively present in the family (John Paul II, 1995: n. 9), the place where the virtues of a person are formed and its members acquire their instruction (Ratzinger, 2004: n. 33). Hence, the combination of family and work outside the home assumes, in the case of women, different characteristics than in the case of men. It is therefore necessary to create a new culture in which the work carried out by women in the family is rightly valued in such a way that women who freely wish to do so will be able to dedicate all of their time to domestic work, without being socially stigmatized or economically penalized (Ratzinger, 2004: n. 33).

As John Paul II has said, we must reassess maternal functions from a social perspective. In effect, the need that children have for care, love and affection to develop as responsible, morally and religiously mature and psychologically balanced people, requires time and psychological and professional preparation. The fatigue associated with such a major task has an enormous impact on the development of society. Women's freedom consists precisely in not being discriminated either psychologically or practically because of their dedication to these tasks. The forced abandonment of these tasks for gain outside the home contradicts the maternal mission and is short-sighted from the point of view of society and the family (John Paul II, 1981: n. 19).

From this perspective, co-responsibility in the communion of life and love in marriage will also take on some forms different from those based on individualism. Indeed, as Rafael Hurtado has said commenting on these convictions of John Paul II, social structures must allow the working man to receive a salary for his family (Hurtado, 2019: 68), that is, a salary that is sufficient for the needs of the family without having to make his wife take on paid work outside the home. Alternatively, he can receive family allowances or aid for the mother who is dedicated exclusively to the family (John Paul II, 1981: n. 19). This is certainly a fair and co-responsible redistribution of household chores, which departs from the usual schemes of the reigning individualism, from which a labor market has been established solely based on money, power or success.

We agree that the family is not the exclusive task of women. That said, although the man participates responsibly in domestic chores, the overarching role that women have in them cannot be forgotten. Her specific contribution must be considered in legislation and must be fairly remunerated. Women with an active professional life outside the home, to which they are entitled, cannot, however, be considered to be the only model of female freedom (Burggraf, 2006: 407-408). Co-responsibility must not be understood only as a division of tasks within home that allows women to participate in the workforce and in political society as the only form of individual fulfillment. Co-responsibility is the fruit of a community of life and

love, which takes on different manifestations. One of them is that the man assumes some tasks within home that free up the woman's time, and thus she can dedicate herself to tasks outside home when her professional or political vocation freely assumed requires this of her. Another is for the man to obtain family allowances or aid for the mother through his work, in accordance with fair legislation,³ when she freely undertakes household chores as her profession.

From this perspective, women's freedom is better and more deeply understood, and tense situations are avoided as a result of the same. The latter occur when it is understood that participation in the workforce and political society is the only form that women's freedom and exercise of their rights can be taken. If we do not reflect on a realistic anthropology of women, the latter model can become a predominant cultural norm as unjust or more than that of the patriarchal society that we are trying to leave behind.

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3 This is not the place to discuss the different forms of conjugal society that civil law contemplates in different countries. That is rather the task of comparative law. From this perspective, it is undoubtedly possible to establish conjugal regimes that contemplate that the woman administers the assets obtained by the spouse as social assets when, by mutual agreement, she has preferred to dedicate herself to domestic tasks. It is a path towards equality and co-responsibility between men and women in marriage. A revised feminism from a Christian perspective can, at this point, illuminate legislative reform.

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