

The Theology of the Body

Historical Background

In 1968 Pope Paul VI issued his prophetic encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in which he reaffirmed the Church's prohibition against artificial contraception – a prohibition affirmed by all Christian churches until 1930. Tragically, *Humanae Vitae's* negative reception created a division in the Church that exists to this day. Paul VI understood that a positive reception of the Church's teaching on contraception, as well as other areas of human sexuality, depended on a healthy understanding of human nature. "It is impossible to understand the Church's teaching in this regard as it is with all the Church's teaching," wrote the Pope, "unless we have a total vision of the human being and of his vocation."

In the divine plan the task of formulating a healthy and balanced anthropology was left to John Paul II. A Christian anthropology is vital, because a defective understanding of what it means to be full human deforms individuals, the family and, ultimately, society as a whole. George Weigel wrote that John Paul II's theology of the body is a "theological time bomb set to go off with dramatic consequences sometime in the third millennium of the Church... It has barely begun to shape the way the Church understands herself and thinks about herself barely begun to shape the Church's preaching and education, but when it does it will compel a dramatic development of thinking about virtually every major theme in the creed."¹

This great accomplishment was the first major instruction of John Paul II's pontificate. In a series of 129 Wednesday addresses given between September 1979 and November 1984, the Pope delivered a profound biblical reflection on the meaning of the human person. Aware that human sexuality is the TNT of life, he demonstrated the profound sacredness of this unique gift. These Wednesday presentations are collectively called the "Theology of the Body" because that was the title given to these addresses by John Paul II.

Definition: The *Theology of the Body* is John Paul II's biblical reflection on God's mystery discovered in the human body.

Human Sexuality

The decided emphasis on sexual love in the theology of the body might seem startling to some people. However, there is much more to sex than the physical acts and passion involved. "The way we understand and express our sexuality reveals our deepest-held convictions about who we are, who God is, the meaning of love, the ordering of society, and even the ordering of the universe."² The theology of the body creatively uses the focus of sex and married love as the springboard to enlarge our understanding of the meaning of human existence.

¹ George Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, 1999, p. 336, 343, 853.

² Christopher West, *Theology of the Body for Beginners*, 2004, pp. 1-2.

Jesus restored mankind's relationship with God in the new covenant, which is expressed in marital and family terms. He exemplified that the meaning of this new life is discovered in love. Indeed, love identifies authentic Christians. "A new commandment I give you that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34; cf. Jn 15:12). The Pope teaches that the vocation to love was imbedded in our bodies when God created the first humans as male and female and called them to become "one flesh" in the covenant of marriage (Gen 2:24). This awesome vocation, which began with the creation of Adam and Eve, reached a transcendent reality in Christ's life giving mission.

Sin is the great distortion. It warps love in all its aspects. This great deception always strikes at the union of the sexes, which is the starting point in the human order of love. It is no accident that the theological rebellion of the last century was obsessed with deformed notions of sex, despite its high sounding platitudes about freedom, conscience and fulfillment. These excesses struck at the very heart of Christianity because, as St. Paul teaches, the union of husbands and wives is inseparably linked with the mystery of Christ and the Church (Eph 5:31-33). The theology of the body properly refocuses the Christian vocation as husbands and wives and leads to the elevated understanding of human nature that is rooted in divine revelation.

Jesus Enters

When the eternal Word became flesh (Jn 1:1), mankind was given the definitive vehicle of encountering God on a profoundly personal level. Jesus declared, "I am the way, the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6). Christianity is not a religion focused on God's union with humanity, a unity that centers on the Word made flesh. In "the body of Jesus 'we see our God made visible and so are caught up in the love of God we cannot see.'"³ The marvel is that Jesus meets us at our level, because as humans we can only encounter God through our bodies. The breathtaking event of God assuming human nature permanently removed God from the detached status of a theological abstraction.

In assuming human nature Jesus hid his divinity to become one with us (Phil 2:6-7), to elevate us to share in the divine life and to become God's family. In Jesus intimate communion with God becomes possible. The divine Word embraced all humanity when he assumed a human body. The staggering reality of the Incarnation is that the God-man made it possible for us to "become partakers of the divine nature" (1 Pet 1:4). Thus at the offertory of the Mass the priest prays the following prayer as a little water is added to the wine, "By the mystery of this water and wine *may we share in the divinity of Christ* who humbled himself to share in our humanity." This stupendous reality is experienced through our bodies.

When the Word became flesh, he came into our world as a male. This was no arbitrary decision. Jesus' sexuality, his maleness, was essential to his mission. He came as the heavenly bridegroom to surrender his body for his bride, the Church. Jesus' birth, passion, death, and resurrection were all bodily experiences. His body was never an obstacle to his relationship with the Father. Rather it was in his body that he expressed his love for the Father and brought

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, # 477; henceforth abbreviated as CCC.

about our redemption. Jesus fully embraced the limitations of his body, as he submitted to the will of the Father for us.

Because human nature is poorly understood, there is a certain uncomfortableness with our bodies in general and with our sexual parts specifically. For example, how many common slang expressions are there to describe the knee, the elbow, the hand or the foot? The answer, of course, is none. Contrast this to the many slang, even vulgar and belittling expressions that are applied to our sexual parts. So in spite of the body beautiful fixation that the media parades before us in various stages of undress, there remains a basic uncomfortableness and ambivalence with our sexuality. This belittling of God's gift is concealed behind the façade of immodesty, pornography, public nudity and promiscuousness.

The *Catechism* teaches "the beauty of creation reflects the infinite beauty of the Creator."⁴ The beauty and dignity of the human body took on a soaring meaning when the Word took flesh and sanctified, even defied the human body. Jesus is a divine Person in the flesh. He was so fully human that St. Paul affirmed Jesus "was like us in every way except sin" (Heb 4:15; 2 Cor 5:21). As a result the *Catechism* proclaims: "The flesh is the hinge of salvation. We believe in God who is creator of the flesh; we believe in the Word made flesh in order to redeem flesh; we believe in the resurrection of the flesh, which is the fulfillment of both the creation and the redemption of the flesh."⁵

The very idea of a theology of the body rests on the mystery of God made flesh. But isn't theology the study of God? How, then, can we speak about a theology, which seems to focus on the human body? The theology of the body does center on God, like all theology, but on God incarnate - in the flesh. Jesus is not only the hinge upon whom all history turns; he is the focal point of theology. However, because the eternal Son of the Father became a man, "the body enters theology through the main door." The Pope teaches: "The body and it alone "is capable making visible what is invisible, the spiritual and the divine."

All human communication is conducted through our bodies. It is how we share our spiritual dimension. This reciprocal sharing through our bodies is called "communion" and "communication," that is, the establishment of a common union. Humans achieve this common union through their bodies. The invisible reality of God becomes visible to us in Jesus Christ, through his body, and in Christ the mystery of God is also revealed in our own bodies. In this sense the human body can be viewed as a sign of the divine mystery, because it points to a reality beyond itself – our loving creator.

Eternal Self-giving

Jesus reveals the mystery of God's eternal self-donating giving of the three divine Persons in the infinitude of love called of the Blessed Trinity. In the words of the *Catechism*, "God himself

⁴ CCC, # 341.

⁵ CCC, # 1015.

is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”⁶ Each Person gives and receives totally and without limit. Love is synonymous with self-giving. St. John informs us simply: “God is love” (1 Jn 4:8). God’s overflowing love is communicated to us through the body. Thus, we speak of a theology of the body, because the mystery of God is revealed through the body.

The bubbling over of the infinite love within the Blessed Trinity, God’s eternal exchange of love, is the cause of our creation. God ardently desired to expand his overflowing love with a multitude of Persons. Thus in the very act of creation God communicates his love and reveals that it is the human destiny to eternally share in that love. This two-part mystery of communion of love in self-donation is revealed in Genesis in the beauty of our sexual differences and in the committed union to become “one flesh” (Gen 2:24).

What Genesis disclosed Christ illuminated. Jesus, the God-man, revealed the depth of God’s love for us in his human body. Therefore it follows that we must understand God’s plan for our body in order to understand His plan for our person, which is to surrender to the eternal Being of Love and radiate that love to others. Distorted notions of the human body ultimately lead to a denigration of the human person and a rupture or, at least, a deformity in our relationship with God.

Crippled Christians cannot adequately reflect God’s love to others. It is only in our bodies that we make visible in the world this eternal mystery of Trinitarian love. What is the aspect of our bodies that allows us to be representations in the world of the mystery of the Trinity, God’s Trinitarian love? It is the revelation that God created humans in His image and likeness, as men and women: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply’” (Gen 1:27-28). Human sexuality, the complimentary differences of the sexes and the call to committed life-giving donation and communion, justifies speaking of the body as a theology. In the human body the eternal mystery of the Trinity and the relationship of Jesus with the Church are revealed to the world.

A Reflection on Original Man – The Way We Were

The purpose of John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* was to give to the world a true vision of man, answering important questions like: Who are we? Why did God create us as male and female? How are we to live? What is our destiny? He begins his consideration with the way we were, that is, a reflection on Original Man before the advent of sin. Because Jesus is always his starting point he begins in the 19th chapter of Matthew’s Gospel.

In this passage, Jesus addresses the question of divorce and remarriage with the Pharisees. He instructs them that Moses allowed divorce because of “the hardness of your heart... but from the beginning it was not so” (Mt 19:8). Using this text as his springboard, the Pope takes us back to “the beginning” in an effort to bridge the way we are, living with a hardness of heart, to the way we were before sin entered the world. Hardness of heart is the condition of the will

⁶ CCC, # 221.

that is closed to God. When humans close their hearts to God's life and love, they are incapable of sharing life and love with their spouses or their children, because they don't have it within themselves to give.

Jesus directs his discussion with the Pharisees "from the beginning" (Mt 19:8), because it is the starting point. Jesus understood that the state of Adam and Eve before sin is the model for all married couples, because it reflects God's original plan. By penetrating human experience beginning with Adam and Eve before sin, the Pope will contrast that reality with our experience after sin. Nevertheless, there is a vital connection between that world and ours. It is the echo in the human heart that resides deep within the soul of every man and woman.

In his penetration of the Genesis account, the Pope develops three experiences that are common and fundamental to the human heart. They are:

1. Original Solitude
2. Original Unity
3. Original Nakedness

Original Solitude

God said, "It is not good for man to be alone" (Gen 2:18). But why is it not good for man to be alone? The answer is found in human nature. When God created the man, he formed his body from the "dust from the ground," but he added a unique spiritual component when he "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul" (Gen 2:7). However, Adam was alone.

Adam tasted his aloneness when he named the animals. He discovered there was no "helpmate fit for him" (Gen 2:18), that is, none of the animals had a soul like his that was created to love and to be loved. The animals were not called to love. They merely followed their instincts. Adam was alone in the most profound sense, because there was no other creature in whom he could pour out his love and receive love in return. Adam's innate longing for love left an echo that still resounds in every human heart.

Animals, in contrast, do not reflect on the big questions. Who am I? Where am I going? What is my ultimate destiny? What is the meaning of my life? Animals don't paint, nor do they compose music or write poetry. The fundamental difference between humans and animals is that humans seek love amid the experience of solitude. It's the longing of every human to share one's inner self - the desire to love and to be loved.

The Original Unity

Man's experience of the original solitude - being alone - finds its fulfillment in the experience of the original unity. Solitude aches for a fulfillment in communion, that is, a common union, with someone "fit for him," otherwise the human person will never fulfill himself. Man's very being calls for union - communion - oneness with another person. The experience of this original

unity is expressed in the book of Genesis by the words “therefore a man must leave his father and mother and cling to his wife and the two will become one flesh” (Gen 2:24).

The “rib” of Eve’s formation (Gen 2:21) indicates that the “woman” (Gen 2:22) is also a human being, different from the animals and made in God’s image and likeness (Gen 1:26). Therefore, like Adam she, too, can only discover her fulfillment in love.

According to John Paul II both the experience of solitude and the experience of original unity are expression of being made in God’s image and likeness. “Man became the image and likeness of God,” he wrote, “not only through his own humanity, as an individual, but also through the communion of persons that man and woman form right from the beginning.” This union reflects God’s inner nature, which is an eternal communion of love and of life in a union of three distinct Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In the original unity, Adam gives his whole being to Eve who is open to receive it. In receiving him, she in turn makes the gift of herself. It is this exchange of self-giving that brings about their common union – a communion of persons. In this original unity we discover a foreshadowing of mankind’s ultimate destiny, which is the eternal communion achieved with the Bridegroom Messiah in the wedding banquet of the Lamb (Rev 19:7-9).

The blessing of fertility, which is linked to procreation, is built on this fundamental union. Thus, sexual union, properly understood, reflects the inner life of the Trinity. This explains the satanic attacks aimed against the body and the resulting culture of death. In order to know what is most sacred in the world, consider that which is most profaned: our bodies – the temple of the Holy Spirit, human life, and the denial of, irreverence toward, and sacrilege of the Eucharist. Satan attacks the greatest good in an attempt to seize it as his own. “Bow down and worship me” (Mt 4:9) is his pathetic plea. The body, which is formed as a symbol of Trinitarian life and love is the battleground.

Original Nakedness

Pope John Paul II begins his final point on his reflection of Original Man with a quote from the second chapter of Genesis: “The man and his wife were both naked and felt no shame” (Gen 2:25). The Pope teaches that this *nakedness without shame* is a key for understanding the original biblical view of men and women. It indicates that the very desire of their hearts was to love as God loves because they had the unspoiled love of God radiating from within themselves. Adam and Eve’s desire for each other was not focused on the other as an object to be used, but on the person to love as God loves. Their longing was to express their love through the gift of self, which is called self-sacrificing love.

Indeed, according to John Paul II, it was precisely to express this reciprocal love that God made them male and female. So God commands them, “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28). In other words, God commanded them to love as He loves, which is with an eternal generation of life and love. Each divine Person gives the totality of his being to the other Persons in an infinite

act of total self-giving and receiving. When God said, "Be fruitful and multiply," his decree meant - live in the image I created you.

Therefore, we discover there is no shame in loving the way God loves, because the focus is not on body parts, but the person of the one loved. So Adam and Eve were naked and there was no shame because the desire of their hearts were pure (Gen 2:25). Their desire was to be a gift in the image and likeness of God, because they wanted to love the way God loves. In their nakedness they discovered the theology of their bodies, the revelation of the mystery of God's plan of self-donating love. They saw the beauty and the goodness of God's plan of love and life. They desired nothing else. They saw and knew each other with all the peace of the interior gaze which creates the total intimacy of persons. In their innocence they saw with their hearts not just with their eyes. Thus, they could perceive the person revealed through the body. They could see the spiritual reality in and through the body. Thus, Adam did not merely see a body, but a person made in the image and likeness of God, a somebody.

There is an important lesson here that resonates with us. Sin has not conquered the goodness of our creation. Therefore, through the eyes of faith, we can see this beauty and goodness in spite of graying and falling hair, wrinkles, too much weight, stretch marks, and sagging and deteriorating body parts. Sadly, we often perceive with the false vision of the world, which focuses on what is superficial and passing. Through grace we can reclaim the divine perspective, which is God's original vision of our bodies.

John Paul II wrote, "Nakedness without shame expresses the fact that holiness entered the visible world." It shows that Adam and Eve were holy. "Holiness enables man to express himself deeply with his own body precisely by means of the sincere gift of himself." Holiness, the Pope points out, is always expressed through the body. Therefore, we can't reject or denigrate our bodies, because holiness expresses God's love through our bodies. Jesus teaches us this lesson when he pronounced the most masculine words ever spoken, "This is my body which is given up for you." This is the gift of self through the body. In their original nakedness Adam and Eve discovered the "nuptial meaning of the body."

The body has a nuptial meaning because it reveals specifically in the difference between men and women the call to holiness, that is, to be a gift in the image of God. According to John Paul II, "The human body includes right from the beginning the nuptial attributes, that is, the capacity of expressing love." That love is achieved when a person becomes a gift, and by means of this gift fulfills the very meaning of his being and existence." Jesus' commandment is to love as I have love you (Jn 13: 34). This call to love as Christ loved is stamped on our bodies. This is the essence of the theology of the body. Neither a man's nor a woman's body makes any sense by itself. Why am I a male? Why am I a female? Is our sexuality some freak of nature? However, in the complimentary and completing nature of the male and female bodies we discover the call to be a gift, the call to remain in the image the Blessed Trinity. The call to be like Jesus, the call to love like God loves, and to surrender our bodies like Christ. It's the call to holiness. It is only as a gift that we fulfill the meaning of our existence.

If we don't live according to the true meaning of our bodies, we ultimately destroy ourselves. This is the culture of death and self-focus in which we live. It is a culture of men and women who are estranged or cutoff from the nuptial meaning of their bodies. Our society has bought into a bogus version of the human person. As a result our culture inundates us with false messages that give a counterfeit meaning to life. The theology of the body dispels this falsehood and exposes the lie.

If one could choose between a real and a counterfeit \$100 bill, we would always choose the real money. However, what would happen if we were indoctrinated with messages that told us the counterfeit money was real? Wouldn't we be deceived to choose what is false? This is the world in which we live.

Christians are called to dispel Satan's lies with the whole truth of their faithful witness. This is accomplished by embracing the nuptial meaning of their bodies by living a life of self-sacrificing love.

Saint Charles Borromeo Catholic Church, Picayune, MS
<http://www.scborromeo.org>

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