

## **THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY: AN EDUCATION IN BEING HUMAN**

By Christopher West

What if I told you that the key to understanding God's plan for human life is to go behind the fig leaves and behold the human body, naked and without shame? What if I told you that the only way to see the invisible mystery of God is through the vision of the human body in its masculinity and femininity? What if I told you that the Christian mystery itself is simply unintelligible unless we understand the meaning of sexual difference and our call to sexual union?

You'd probably think I was a bit obsessed with sex and naked bodies. You might even think I've been corrupted by our pagan, pornographic culture. Understandable. But what if Pope John Paul II were telling you these things?

Indeed, these – among other things – are what we learn from the first major catechetical project of John Paul II's pontificate known as the "theology of the body." In this collection of 129 audience addresses delivered between September 1979 and November 1984, John Paul developed what promises to be one of his most enduring and important contributions to the Church and the world.

The theology of the body is a scriptural reflection on the human experience of embodiment connected as it is with erotic desire and our longing for union. It's divided into two main parts. First, the Pope develops an "adequate anthropology" based on the words of Christ. In order to have a "total vision of man," we must look to our experience of embodiment "in the beginning" (Mt 19:8), in our history (Mt 5:27-28), and in our destiny (Mt 22:30). In the second part of his catechesis, John Paul applies his distinctive Christian humanism to the vocations of celibacy and marriage, and also to the moral issue raised by Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae*.

Of course, in a brief article such as this, we can only provide a thumbnail sketch of the actual content of the Pope's revolutionary catechesis. We'll begin with his main idea.

### THE POPE'S THESIS

The Pope's thesis, if we let it sink in, is sure to revolutionize the way we understand the human body and sexuality. "The body, and it alone," John Paul says, "is capable of making visible what is invisible, the spiritual and divine. It was created to transfer into the visible reality of the world, the invisible mystery hidden in God from time immemorial, and thus to be a sign of it" (Feb 20, 1980).

A mouthful of scholarly verbiage, I know. What does it mean? As physical, bodily creatures we simply cannot see God. He's pure Spirit. But God wanted to make his mystery visible to us so he stamped it into our bodies by creating us as male and female in his own image (Gn 1:27).

The function of this image is to reflect the Trinity, "an inscrutable divine communion of [three] Persons" (Nov 14, 1979). Thus, in a dramatic development of Catholic thought, John Paul concludes that "man became the 'image and likeness' of God not only through his own humanity, but also through the communion of persons which man and woman form right from the beginning." And, the Pope adds, "On all of this, right from 'the beginning,' there descended the blessing of fertility linked with human procreation" (ibid).

The body has a "nuptial meaning" because it reveals man and woman's call to become a gift for one another, a gift fully realized in their "one flesh" union. The body also has a "generative meaning" that (God willing) brings a "third" into the world through their communion. In this way, marriage constitutes a "primordial sacrament" understood as a sign that truly communicates the mystery of God's Trinitarian life and love to husband and wife – and through them to their children, and through the family to the whole world.

## ORIGINAL MAN

This is what Adam and Eve experienced "in the beginning." The very sentiment of sexual desire as God created it to be was to love as God loves in the sincere gift of self. Since this call to love is the summary of the Gospel, John Paul can say that if we live according to the nuptial meaning of our bodies, we "fulfill the very meaning of [our] being and existence" (Jan 16, 1980). It is for this reason that a man clings to his wife and they become "one flesh" (see Gn 2:24).

In his exegesis of the creation accounts, the Holy Father speaks of this original unity of the sexes as flowing out of the human being's experience of original solitude. Man realized in naming the animals that he alone was aware of himself and free to determine his own actions; he alone was a person called to love. It's on the basis of this solitude – an experience common to male and female – that man experiences erotic desire and his longing for union.

While among the animals there was no "helper fit for him," upon awaking from his "deep sleep" the man immediately declares: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gn 2:23). That is to say, "Finally, a person I can love." How did he know that she too was a person called to love? Her naked body revealed the mystery!

Prior to the rupture of body and soul caused by sin, the body enabled them to see and know each other "with all the peace of the interior gaze, which creates... the fullness of the intimacy of persons" (Jan 2, 1980). Living in complete accord with the nuptial meaning of their bodies, the experience of original nakedness was untainted by shame (Gn 2:25).

## HISTORICAL MAN

The entrance of shame indicates a radical change in their experience of embodiment. It indicates the loss of grace and holiness. “Original man” gives way to “historical man” who must now contend with lust in his heart.

Lust is erotic desire void of God’s love. Hence, if we even look lustfully at others, we’ve already committed adultery in our hearts (see Mt 5:28). Christ’s words are severe in this regard. John Paul poses the question: “Are we to fear the severity of these words, or rather have confidence in their salvific content, in their power?” (Oct 8, 1980).

Their power lies in the fact that the man who utters them is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). Christ didn’t die and rise from the dead merely to give us coping mechanisms for sin. His death and resurrection are efficacious. They effectively “liberate our liberty from the domination of concupiscence,” as John Paul expresses it.

This means if we open our bodies once again to the “breath” of the Holy Spirit, we can experience a “real and deep victory” over lust. We can rediscover in what is erotic that original nuptial meaning of the body and live it. This liberation from lust is, in fact, “the condition of all life together in truth” (Oct 8, 1980).

## ESCHATOLOGICAL MAN

What about the experience of embodiment and our longing for union in the eschaton? Didn’t Christ say we’ll no longer be given in marriage at the resurrection (see Mt 22:30)? Yes, but this doesn’t mean our longing for union (marriage) will be done away with. It means it will be fulfilled. Sacraments are merely earthly signs of heavenly realities. We no longer need signs to point us to heaven, when we’re in heaven.

Heaven is the eternal consummation of the marriage between Christ and the Church. This is what we’re created for. This is the ultimate longing of the human heart. And this is what the “one flesh” union points to from the beginning (see Eph 5:31-32).

Hence, in the resurrection of the body we rediscover – in an eschatological dimension – the same nuptial meaning of the body in the meeting with the mystery of the living God face to face (see Dec 9, 1981). “This will be a completely new experience,” the Pope says, but “it will not be alienated in any way from what man took part in from ‘the beginning,’ nor from ...the procreative meaning of the body and of sex” (Jan 13, 1982).

## THE CHRISTIAN VOCATIONS

Only by understanding who man is originally, historically, and eschatologically can we understand how man is to live. In other words, having outlined an “adequate anthropology,” the door is now opened to a proper understanding of the Christian vocations of celibacy and marriage.

Those who are celibate “for the sake of the kingdom” (Mt 19:12) are choosing to live in the heavenly marriage on earth. In a way, they’re “skipping” the sacrament to participate more directly in the real thing. By doing so, they step beyond the dimension of history – within the dimension of history – and declare to the world that the kingdom of God is here (Mt 12:28). Authentic Christian celibacy, then, is not a rejection of sexuality or a devaluation of marriage. It’s the expression on earth of its ultimate purpose and meaning!

As a vocation to holiness, marriage is meant to prepare men and women for heaven. But in order for it to be adequate heaven preparation, the model must accurately image the divine prototype. The sacramentality of marriage, then, consists in the manifesting of the eternal mystery of God in a “sign” that serves not only to proclaim that mystery, but also to accomplish it in the spouses (see Sep 8, 1982).

All of married life constitutes this sign. But nowhere is this sign more dramatically manifested than when husband and wife become “one flesh.” Just as the body expresses the soul of a person, the “one body” that spouses become in conjugal intercourse expresses the “soul” of their married life. “Indeed the very words ‘I take you to be my wife – my husband,’” the Pope says, “can be fulfilled only by means of conjugal intercourse” (Jan 5, 1983).

## NEW CONTEXT FOR SEXUAL MORALITY

John Paul’s original insights provide a whole new context for understanding the Church’s teaching on sexuality, particularly her teaching against contraception. This is, in fact, the linchpin of all sexual morality. For as soon as sexual union is divorced from its inherent link with procreation, any means to sexual climax can be justified (the sexual revolution of the 20th century has certainly demonstrated this in practice).

Based on the logic of the theology of the body, one can speak of morality in the sexual relationship according to “whether or not it has the character of the truthful sign” (Aug 27, 1980). All sexual morality, then, comes down to this simple question: Does this behavior incarnate God’s love or does it not?

For those who have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit to understand the “great mystery” of nuptial union, contraception is simply unthinkable. Nuptial union is meant to proclaim the mystery of the Trinity – that “God is life-giving love.” In this sense the Pope says the “language of the body” is prophetic. However, an intentionally sterilized act of intercourse proclaims the opposite. It changes the “language of the body” into a specific denial of God’s creative love, making the spouses “false prophets.”

Nuptial union is also meant to be a sacramental sign of Christ's union with the Church. But for sacraments to convey spiritual realities, the physical must accurately symbolize the spiritual. Insert contraception into this picture and (knowingly or unknowingly) a couple engages in a counter-sign of Christ's union with the Church. This is why an intentionally sterilized act of intercourse can never consummate a marriage – it is a contradiction of the very essence of the “great mystery” of the sacrament.

## BATTLE FOR THE MEANING OF LIFE

If, as John Paul teaches, the body and it alone is capable of communicating the mystery of God's love to us; and if there is an enemy of God who wants to keep us from God's love – where, then, would he go to do it? The Church Father Tertullian says that Satan attempts to counter God's plan of salvation by plagiarizing the sacraments. And where better to begin than with the “primordial sacrament”?

Satan's goal is to scramble the language of our bodies. And look how successful he's been. How many people, for example, think that the body and the gift of sexuality are the last places to look for the presence of God?

Much is at stake in our failure to understand the language of our bodies. As John Paul II says, this is obviously “important in regard to marriage.” However, it “is equally essential and valid for the understanding of man in general” (Dec 15, 1982). The theology of the body is, in fact, according to John Paul, the basis of the most suitable education in what it means to be a human being (see Apr 8, 1981). Yes, the battle raging in our Church and our world regarding sexual morality is nothing short of a battle for the very meaning of human existence.

Hence, the theology of the body should not be considered merely a minor discipline among many in the overall scope of Catholic teaching. Again, according to the Holy Father, what we learn by reflecting on Christ's words in the theology of the body “is, in fact, the perspective of the whole Gospel, of the whole teaching, in fact, of the whole mission of Christ” (Dec 3, 1980).

## IN CONCLUSION

The theology of the body is a clarion call for the Church not to become more “spiritual,” but to become more incarnational. It is a call to allow the Word of the Gospel to penetrate our flesh and bones. When this incarnation of the Gospel takes place in us, we see the Church's teaching on sexual morality not as an oppressive set of rules, but as the foundation of a liberating ethos, a call to experience the redemption of our bodies, a call to rediscover in what is erotic the original meaning of sexuality which is the very meaning of life. And this is the first step to take in renewing the world.

As John Paul asserts, man and woman's call to form a communion of persons “is the deepest substratum of human ethics and culture” (Oct 22, 1980). Thus, the dignity and balance of human life “depend at every moment of history and at every point of geographical longitude and latitude on ‘who’ she will be for him and he for her” (Oct 8, 1980). In short, a culture that does

not respect the truth about sexuality is doomed to be a culture that does not respect the truth about life; it's doomed to be a culture of death.

This is why John Paul made the theology of the body the first catechetical project of his pontificate. At the heart of the new evangelization, at the heart of building a civilization of love and a culture of life, is marriage and the family. And at the heart of marriage and the family is the truth about the body and sexuality.

Let us live it and proclaim it. If we do, we will not fall short of renewing the face of the earth!