

THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY

Part I, An Introduction

By Jim Seghers

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.

<p>Definition: The <i>Theology of the Body</i> is John Paul II's biblical reflection on God's mystery discovered in the human body.</p>
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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.

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

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

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

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 inseparately 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 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

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

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 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

⁴ CCC, # 341.

⁵ CCC, # 1015.

⁶ CCC, # 221.

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.

The theology of the body has the following divisions. Each of these are discussed in other essays.

Part I – A Balanced Anthropology.

- A. Reflection on Original Man
- B. Reflection on Historical Man.
- C. Reflection on Eschatological Man.

Part II – How Are We to Live.

- A. The Celibate Vocation.
- B. The Married Vocation.
- C. Reflection on *Humanae Vitae*.