

What is the Theology of the Body?

In the early years of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II devoted nearly all of his Wednesday general audiences to expounding a scriptural vision of human sexuality as the *theology of the body*. Starting with a penetrating analysis of the creation accounts in the book of Genesis, John Paul II illuminated the meaning of human love in the divine plan.

The *theology of the body* is John Paul II's timely response to the sexual confusion troubling our culture and our Church. Papal biographer George Weigel calls the *theology of the body* "one of the boldest reconfigurations of Catholic theology in centuries... a kind of a theological time bomb set to go off with dramatic consequences, sometime in the third millennium of the Church."

JP II begins his catechetical instruction with the creation account in the book of Genesis. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and all the plants and creatures and God saw that it was good. God then created man in his image and likeness and gave him dominion over all of creation and God saw that it was very good. All the created material universe is ordered toward man, who is the crown of God's creation.

Man by his nature has a body and a soul. As a being of body and spirit, man expresses and perceives spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols. Man needs signs and symbols to communicate with others (language, pictures, etc.). The same holds true for his relationship with God. As human beings, the way we experience spiritual realities is in and through the body.

Our very bodies as male and female speak a language. The language we speak proclaims the very mystery of God. This is why the Pope speaks of the body as a theology. This language is oftentimes unable to be read and understood given our fallen state.

Although original sin has wounded our nature, it has not destroyed it. The goodness of God's creation is evidenced by the mystery of the Incarnation, where God became man and dwelt among us. As such, our Catholic faith does not negate or mitigate the natural world created by God. On the contrary, our revealed faith teaches that the flesh is the hinge of salvation, that God created the flesh, that in marriage the two

become one flesh, that the Word was made flesh, that we believe in the resurrection of the flesh and that redemption was accomplished by way of the flesh.

Furthermore, natural things such as water, wine, bread, oil etc. are essential parts in the administration and validity of the sacraments. Sacraments are sense perceptible signs (physical realities) that convey spiritual realities (God's grace). Our liturgical worship and church architecture also incorporate many natural things such as incense, bells, music, candles, murals, statues, stain glass windows, crucifixes etc., to raise our spirits and to glorify God.

Man as created by God contains all the elements of the created universe. Mineral, vegetable, animal and spirit are all present within him. Therefore, the human body is the highpoint of God's creation and is in some sense sacramental. The body in fact and it alone is capable of making visible what is invisible, the spiritual and the divine.

In the beginning, before the fall, man and woman were naked and felt no shame. Their bodies and souls were perfectly integrated. Before the fall, the naked body was a witness to love, purity and the sheer goodness of humanity. The first result of the sin of Adam and Eve was shame at their nakedness. This marks the loss of their original innocence, the loss of their purity and the loss of God's full life within them.

In the state of original innocence, Adam and Eve were free from lust in their hearts. They were able to look at the naked body with love and purity. Lust is sexual desire void of the love of God. It is the desire to obtain sexual pleasure from another without regard for the personal dignity of the other. Purity which is the opposite of lust is the ability to see the mystery of the person through the body.

Shame can be either positive or negative. Shame in the positive sense (modesty) protects the dignity of the body from the threat of lust. Dressing modestly indicates a desire to protect the dignity of the body from the threat of lust. Shame in the negative sense (shamelessness) loses sight of the dignity of the body and falls prey to lust. Pornography is the display of the body in a way that elicits lust and treats the body as an object of pleasure without respect for the dignity of the person.

Shame in the positive sense shows that we are not utterly depraved and that we desire to protect the dignity of the body. We experience shame in the positive sense because deep within our hearts we desire love. We want to be looked at as an object of love and not pleasure. Shame then, protects the

dignity of the person who wants to be seen without lust in the heart.

The loss of original innocence manifests itself differently between men and women. Men generally experience their disordered sexual desires as geared toward physical gratification at the expense of women. Women generally experience their disordered sexual desires as geared toward emotional gratification at the expense of men.

True love between a man and woman cannot exist if it is based on lust. The impurity of lust distorts both the sexual life of the couple and the operation of social and economic life. The fundamental cell of society is the family and the origin of the family is sexual union. Distortion of the proper meaning and purpose of the conjugal act within marriage causes the family and society to suffer disunion and disintegration. When the conjugal union of a husband and wife is ordered toward love and life it builds marriages and families that live the truth of love and life. This then in turn builds and sustains cultures that live the truth of love and life.

To know the meaning of true love, we need to know who we really are as human beings. The adequate starting point for this endeavor is to go to Christ, who fully reveals man to himself. In the Gospel, the Pharisees come to Jesus and questioned him about the relationship between men and women, specifically divorce. They say that Moses allowed us to divorce our wife's, what do you have to say? Christ answered, Moses allowed this due to the hardness of your heart, but from the beginning it was not so.

In the beginning God created the earth, the stars, the plants, the animals and finally man. As man, Adam realized that he was a person and alone. God said that it is not good for man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him. Adam knew that he was different from the animals. He discovered that he was a person, a spiritual being and the creation of Eve completed the creation of man.

Male and female completes the creation because it forms a communion of persons. The union of man and woman in the marriage covenant forms a communion of persons. This communion of persons images God because God is a communion of persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Just as the Trinity is an indissoluble union, so the marital covenant is an indissoluble union.

The union of bodies in the marital covenant is an expression of love. Sexual union is how we express in this world the need for spiritual communion. The

human sexual act is meant as a sign of God's love on earth; therefore it is sacramental.

We are called to love as God loves. God created us so that He can give himself to us. Love wants to give itself away. Man can discover his true self only in a sincere gift of self. Man and woman's gift of themselves in the marital act becomes a created version of the gift of love in the Trinity.

The union of two persons in one flesh in the state of marriage belongs exclusively to this age. In heaven man will not be given nor taken in marriage. Earthly marriage is simply preparation for heavenly marriage. The ultimate meaning of the body is not union in marriage but union with God in heaven.

Celibacy points to the wedding feast in heaven. Jesus reveals the celibate vocation in (Mt19: 12). For there are eunuchs, who were born so from their mother's womb: and there are eunuchs, who were made so by men: and there are eunuchs, who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

This teaching was shocking to the Jews – Abraham was told that he would have offspring as numerous as the stars. Marriage was the way the Jews fulfilled the Covenant. A eunuch was an outcast. Someone who could not marry and have children was considered cursed by God.

Celibacy gives up the earthly marriage in anticipation of the heavenly marriage. We can come to understand celibacy for the kingdom by understanding marriage. Both vocations require a gift of self. In marriage, the spouses make a total gift of self to each other producing fruit (children); in religious life the individual makes a total gift of self to God producing fruit (spiritual children).

Because marriage and celibacy are interrelated, when one is devalued so is the other. The sexual revolution has brought about the devaluation of both celibacy and marriage.

The marital and celibate vocations are best understood and exemplified by the marriage of St. Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary. They lived both vocations simultaneously whereby the heavenly reality met with human existence. Their marriage is the marriage of heaven and earth the fruit of which is God made man, the union of the divine and the human, the Word made flesh. Mary and Joseph became the first witnesses of the fruitfulness different from that of the flesh- fruitfulness of the spirit.

*Source: Naked without Shame by Christopher West
A Crash Course in the Theology of the Body*

Michael Dosen

