

What is the Theology of the Body?

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Soon after his pontificate began, Pope John Paul II began a catechesis of marriage and celibacy. The catechesis came to be known as the “theology of the body”. The first lecture was delivered on September 5th 1979 and he delivered the 129th audience on the Theology of the Body on November 28th 1984.

What was distinctive about this treatment of sexuality was that it based the teaching on sexuality not in natural law, but in Holy Scripture.

The question about the theology of the body needs first to address “What is Theology?”

Theology means thought and talk about God. Theology is also about ourselves (and everything else) considered in relation to God. That leads us to reflect upon the sources in which the truth of faith is articulated. Often theology is divided into:

- Natural theology or theodicy – philosophical theology – applying the light of reason
- Sacred theology – applying the light of faith
- Systematic theology seeks to determine the relationship between the truths of faith and other propositions which are not revealed.¹

Theology of the Body is the study of human beings as a physical being in our relationship to God and it includes topics such as:

- Theological anthropology
- Creation of humanity
- Incarnation of Jesus
- Eschatology and the body

Theology of the Body is both contemplative and moral. It is contemplative in that it involves reflecting on who we are in relationship to God and it is moral in that it involves reflecting on how we should act given who we are.

Pope John Paul II began his analysis by reflection on Jesus’s comments on divorce which he said:

“Haven't you read,” he replied, “that at the beginning the Creator ‘made them male and female,’ and said, ‘For this reason a man will leave his father and mother

¹ Germain Grisez *The Way of the Lord Jesus Volume One: Christian Moral Principles* Franciscan Herald Press 1983 p3ff]

and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." [Matthew 19:3ff]

Pope John Paul understood this to be a reference to Genesis.

In Genesis 1:27 we read:

“So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.”

and in Genesis 2:24-25:

“For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife,
and they will become one flesh.
The man and his wife were both naked, and they felt no shame.”

In this there is a key metaphysical concept (to do with the nature of being) that human beings exist as a body and that we are gendered.

Important also are the notions of original innocence and the fact that in that state our first ancestors felt no shame and they were equal - both made in the image and likeness of God. They also existed in a state of original unity and innocence – they had no knowledge yet of good and evil.

The significance of the fall through sin – their own choice, is that they began to seek to dominate and own each other and they lost that sense of equal respect for each other.

Jumping forward to the New Testament, we know that by his life, suffering and death Jesus redeemed us from the effects of sin so that through him we can again seek full communion with God.

The phrase the nuptial or conjugal meaning of the body is often used in the Theology of the Body.

The human body, with its sex, and its masculinity and femininity seen in the very mystery of creation, is not only a source of fruitfulness and procreation, as in the whole natural order. It includes, right from the beginning, the nuptial attribute, that is the capacity of expressing love, that love in which the person becomes a gift and - by means of this gift - fulfils the meaning of his being and existence.

In our fallen state we perceive the original innocence before the effects of sin very dimly. The theology of the body seeks to understand what it was that we lost through sin and must be understood from the perspective of our beginning, our beginning in original

innocence, without shame, without sin, created male and female in the image and likeness of God.

Essentially man and woman were made to be a perfect gift to each other. In original innocence woman is given to man by the Creator and received by him as a gift. In giving herself she rediscovers herself at the same time because of the way she is welcomed and received by man *for her own sake*.

We understand that we are made in the image and likeness of God, and God is not one person but three persons in perfect relationship to one another in which each perfectly loves the other, each is a perfect gift to the other and their love is fruitful. They are a communion of persons. Thus in being made in their image and likeness man and woman are made to be a communion of persons freely giving themselves completely to each other in reciprocal relationship and in a way that is fruitful.

Created male and female in the image and likeness of God they form a communion from a state of individual solitude. This is often called the Trinitarian Concept of the "Image of God". In the mystery of creation - on the basis of the original and consistent "solitude" of his being - human beings were endowed with a deep unity between what is, humanly and through the body, male in them and what is, equally humanly and through the body, female in them.

If man and woman cease to be a disinterested gift for each other, as they were in the mystery of creation, they recognise that "they are naked" (Genesis 3). Then the shame of that nakedness, which they had not felt in the state of original innocence, will spring up in their hearts.

Maleness and femaleness of humanity was part of the design of creation "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good" (Genesis 1:31).

That spousal relationship was the primordial sacrament, a visible sign of truth and love which has its source in God, the Creator. The unity of man and woman "in one flesh" is the conjugal mystery in which they give of themselves completely and in that way their relationship is a likeness to the perfect love of the communion of persons that is the Holy Trinity. The sacrament of marriage therefore is itself a sign and a witness to God's love. The love between the persons of the Trinity and the love between God and humanity. Christ refers to himself as the bridegroom choosing the marriage relationship to indicate that gift that he makes to humanity including his willingness to suffer and die for the other, for us.

In this understanding conjugal knowledge is a definitive discovery of the meaning of the human body in which two persons become an unrepeatable female-male "self" each becoming part of the other's knowledge of self. This does not mean the sexual life together of husband and wife. They are not passive objects defined by their bodies and their sexuality. Rather this means that through their mutual gift of love in marriage, man and woman form a new "self".

When we experience shame as man or as woman it is because we are regarded by ourselves or others as an object.

Our ancestors in their original innocence before they were affected by sin, were mutually conscious of their spousal nature as gift for each other and hence in their innocence experienced no shame. They were not objects, but a true and perfect gift to each other.

When with the fall they ceased to give in that disinterested way, they came to view each other as objects of desire and that made their sexuality shameful.

The Theology of the Body thus proposes questions about gender, complementarity and reciprocity.

What is gender?

Gender refers to the properties of belonging to the male or female sex. Sex means either of the main divisions (male and female) into which living things are placed on the basis of their reproductive function. Inherently gender is determined by our capacity to be a mother or a father.

Recognising gender is thus the identification of those properties by which a being may be classified male or female. Whether one is the kind of being who has the biological capacity to mother or alternatively to father offspring is determined in humans genetically by the two sex chromosomes, females are generally XX and males XY.

There are of course some gender disorders such as in children who at birth possess XO, XXY and XYY combinations. The disorders of the X or the Y chromosome include:

- Intersex conditions
- Androgen insensitivity syndrome caused by damaged X chromosome
- Congenital adrenal hyperplasia – hormonal disorder causing ambiguous genitalia in girls and excessive masculinization in boys
- Gender identity disorders

The latter is a mental disorder involving the desire to be, or the insistence that one is of the other sex (as determined by one's biology). It is a persistent discomfort about one's assigned sex or a sense of inappropriateness in the gender role of that sex and often involves significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.²

Sex reflects reproductive function thus the significance of gender is thus in the capacity to be come a father or a mother, and the relationship by which one becomes a mother or a father. Gender is therefore essentially about that fruitfulness by which one becomes a parent. The different capacity for fruitfulness in either fatherhood or motherhood essentially delineates male from female

² American Psychiatric Association *Diagnostic Services Manual IV*.
<http://www.psychiatryonline.com/referral.aspx?gclid=CNGV7LKczKECFRM3bwodF27ncQ>

Gender differentiation is biological in the first instance according to reproductive organs and we recognise physical and psychological properties of individuals which, through experience, we come to associate as differences between the sexes. We are very good at determining human gender at first glance in fully clothed individuals and at distance!

An important fact of our experience of gender is that it is a fallen experience, marred by sin. Thus we tend to experience, inequality and disunity. Gender complementarity is thus poorly developed against a background of individualism. Individualism spawns the desires to dominate, possess, compete against and use. Therefore complementarity seen as competing psychological and physical advantages and weaknesses is mistaken.

The primary questions about gender are to do with our anthropology and the imago dei and the original unity and equality that we initially lost. Redemption opened the door to recovery. In that redemption gender complementarity has a non-exploitative place as loving gift. We recognise man and woman being made for each other and complementarity is our ability to give completely to another and our yearning to express ourselves in that giving.

In the creation of Eve we are told,

“It is not good that the man should be alone. I will make him a helpmate” (Gn 2:18-19)

In the beginning therefore man yearned to give himself.

In the passage, “This at last is bone from my bones, This is to be called woman for this was taken from man (Gn 2:23), Pope John Paul II notes the recognition of another who is like me, another “I” and the unity of two as the personal character of the human being.

This is a dual unity in which human being exist only and always as a masculine or a feminine being. He teaches that “helper” is to be understood reciprocally not subordinately. This is a relationship of identity and difference in which there is absolute equality of each as a being created by God for his or her own sake but different physically and psychologically.

The difference of the sexes belongs to human nature as a being made in the image of God and sexuality not reducible to animality, nor reducible to spirituality.

Spousal love is the principle analogy for every kind of love. The nature of consecrated celibacy and marriage is “conjugal” and finds its expression in being a gift of self.

In his reflection on the notion of “helper” in Genesis 2:18-25 Pope John Paul II teaches that that in the passage, “I will make him *a helper fit for him*”, the biblical context enables us to understand this in the sense that the woman must “help” the man - and in his turn he must help her - first of all by the very fact of their “being human persons”. In a

certain sense this enables man and woman to discover their humanity ever anew and to confirm its whole meaning. We can easily understand that - on this fundamental level - it is a question of a "help" on the part of both, and at the same time a mutual "help".

In his reflection on gender he explains that gender is the intrinsic polarity intended for dual unity – identity and difference converge. Solitary man or woman is whole in him or herself made in the image and likeness of God but yearns for opportunity to give of self to another. Their yearning is bio-instinctual but not merely so. It is free and rational and thus expressive of the *imago dei*. Gender difference yields the opportunity for complete gift of self in imitation of God's love. Complementarity represents that within oneself which may be given beneficially to the other within the unity of mutual love and intersubjectivity.

Yearning to express oneself in gift finds opportunity for complete gift of self in recognising in oneself that which may be given beneficially to the other within the unity of the two which presents itself in a contingent reality within an intrinsic polarity.

That intrinsic polarity is experienced in differences recognised psychoanalytically and physically. Such differences are an experienced but variable mysterious reality. There is great variation between different couples and how their genders are experienced.

The gendered gift of love is Trinitarian. It reflects the reality that there is unity in one divine nature, but there are different persons within that one nature. Difference and unity thus reside together in the Trinity. Jesus was born of woman conceived by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is thus a model for the fruitfulness of the conjugal union. The Trinity is thus the model for conjugal love and thus for the dual unity of gender as identity and difference, and a model for its fruitfulness.

“The fact that man "created as man and woman" is the image of God means not only that each of them individually is like God, as a rational and free being. It also means that man and woman, created as a "unity of the two" in their common humanity, are called to live in a communion of love, and in this way to mirror in the world the communion of love that is in God, through which the Three Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God through the unity of the divinity, exist as persons through the inscrutable divine relationship. Only in this way can we understand the truth that God in himself is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:16).”³

"The Lord Jesus, when he prayed to the Father 'that all may be one ... as we are one' (Jn 17: 21-22), opened up vistas closed to human reason. For he implied *a certain likeness* between the union of the divine Persons and the union of God's children in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that human beings, who are the only creatures on earth which God willed for their own sake, cannot fully find ourselves except through a sincere gift of self".

³ See John Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem* (the Dignity of Women) n. 7 and in the Second Vatican Council document *Gaudium et Spes*, n.24

This gendered gift of love in the nuptial mystery is Christological. It is the mystery of Christ and the Church with Christ as Bridegroom, Church as bride. Conjugal love is also a gift of self as Christ gave himself completely on the Cross.

In the story of the Fall, Tt the woman God said: “. Your yearning shall be for your husband, yet he will lord it over you” (Gn 3:16). Possessiveness and dominance are thus consequences of the fall, the original equality destroyed. Therefore ownership and subordination are not part of original creation but a consequence of failure due to human choosing.

That prompts the question: What was the sin of Adam and Eve?

The Second Vatican Council notes, “Although he was made by God in a state of natural justice, from the very dawn of history man abused his liberty, at the urging of the Evil One. Man set himself against God and sought to find fulfilment apart from God,”⁴

This was then the rejection of God as the source of unity. “Creating man in his image and likeness, God wills for them the fullness of good, or supernatural happiness, which flows from sharing in his own life. *By committing sin man rejects this gift* and at the same time will to become “as God, knowing good and evil” (GN 3:5), that is to say, deciding what is good and what is evil independently of God, his Creator

“Sin brings about a break in the original unity which man enjoyed in the state of original justice: union with God as source of unity within his own “I”, in the mutual relationship between man and woman (“*communio personarum*”) as well as in regard to the external world, in nature.”⁵

God is the source of the man-women unity. Loss of that acknowledgement of God as source is a loss of the sense of submission to each other as a gift given by God as an opportunity to express personality in that mutual gift of self to the other, a loss of conjugality.

Submission to the other in love is then replaced by the desire to possess or to dominate. The yearning becomes a desire to use rather than to give of oneself. Losing focus on God, we lose the meaning of love. John refers to the threefold concupiscence (1 Jn 2:16)

- Lust of the eyes
- Lust of the Flesh
- Pride of Life

Delineating what we were made to be from what we became, equality means that neither is superior, but each is made in the image and likeness of God. Gender complementarity means yearning to give of oneself in a way that relates to the needs of the other and of the dual unity, rather than desiring the other as a mere object of pleasure. Gender creates the

⁴ *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 13

⁵ *Ibid.*

opportunity for complete gift of self expressed in the conjugal union. That conjugal unity has a focus on fruitfulness, not unity for its own sake.⁶

He goes on to say,

“...conjugal love, while leading the spouses to the reciprocal "knowledge" which makes them "one flesh," does not end with the couple, because it makes them capable of the greatest possible gift, the gift by which they become co-operators with God for giving life to a new human person. Thus the couple, while giving themselves to one another, give not just themselves but also the reality of children, who are a living reflection of their love, a permanent sign of conjugal unity and a living and inseparable synthesis of their being a father and a mother.

In relation to the Woman's Rights Movement he teaches that domination by women is not a solution to history of male chauvinism, but instead we need a rediscovery of gendered equality and gendered gift of self.

“The personal resources of femininity are no less than the resources of masculinity: they are merely different. Hence a woman, as well as a man, must understand her “fulfilment” as a person, her dignity and vocation, on the basis of these resources, according to the richness of the femininity which she received on the day of creation and which she inherits as an expression of the image and likeness of God”⁷

Man is not the reference point for “otherness” of woman. The reference point for human personality is the imago dei. Man and woman discover that within that equal personhood of the imago dei they are different and the differences are an opportunity for the gift of self, recognising in oneself that which may be received by the other as truly beneficial.

In *1 Corinthians 11:2-16*, St Paul taught that

- Christ head of every man,
- Man is head of woman
- Man is image of God's glory
- Woman is reflection of man's glory, as woman came from him.
- Man not created for sake of woman, but woman created for the sake of man

In relation to this passage *John Paul II* teaches in the *Theology of the Body* p.382, that the motif of “head” and of “body” is not of biblical derivation, but is probably Hellenistic. In *Ephesians* this theme is utilized in the context of marriage (while in *First Corinthians* the theme of the “body” serves to demonstrate the order which reigns in society). From the biblical point of view the introduction of this motif is an absolute novelty.

⁶ John Paul II *Familiaris Consortio* n.14

⁷ *Mulieris Dignitate* n. 10)

In *Ephesians 5: 22-33* St Paul also taught:

- Defer to one another in obedience to Christ.
- Wives should regard their husbands as they regard the Lord
- Christ is head of the Church and saves the whole body, so is husband head of wife
- Church submits to Christ, wives to their husbands
- Husbands should love their wives as Christ loved Church and sacrificed himself for her

In *Mulieris Dignitatem* n. 24, Pope John Paul II teaches that this passage is rooted in customs of time and should be understood in terms of mutual subjection out of reverence for Christ and that the husband is “head” only in order to give himself up for her.. “Subjection” is not one-sided but mutual.

In *Familiaris Consortio* n. 25 he taught that authentic conjugal love presupposes and requires that a man have a profound respect for the equal dignity of his wife: "You are not her master," writes St. Ambrose, "but her husband; she was not given to you to be your slave, but your wife.... Reciprocate her attentiveness to you and be grateful to her for her love." With his wife a man should live "a very special form of personal friendship." As for the Christian, he is called upon to develop a new attitude of love, manifesting towards his wife a charity that is both gentle and strong like that which Christ has for the Church.

Above all it is important to underline the equal dignity and responsibility of women with men. This equality is realized in a unique manner in that reciprocal self-giving by each one to the other and by both to the children which is proper to marriage and the family. What human reason intuitively perceives and acknowledges is fully revealed by the word of God: the history of salvation, in fact, is a continuous and luminous testimony of the dignity of women.⁸

In the Theology of the Body, Pope John Paul II teaches that love is ever seeking, never satisfied.

⁸ *Familiaris Consortio* n. 22