What Is the Theology of the Body?

The most common way of answering this question starts with the origin of the teaching—almost five years’ worth of Wednesday audiences of Pope John Paul II, from 1979 to 1984, on the Trinitarian nature of God and our creation in the image and likeness of the Trinity as bodily creatures. This truth is in no way limited to the Wednesday addresses but is present in the entire body of John Paul II’s writings, both before and after he was chosen as pope.

Another good answer to the question “What is the theology of the body?” lies in the topics covered—sex, chastity, married life, celibacy, Trinitarian love, human dignity, the differences between men and women, and our ultimate purpose in life.

Both approaches answer the question in different ways. But from my perspective, the theology of the body is more than either of these definitions: It is a life-changing tool. It changed my life, as it has countless other lives.

I was first introduced to the theology of the body in graduate school in the year 2000. The teaching does not come easily to most people, and this was the case for me as well. I had to learn the language that John Paul II used in what is called his phenomenological approach—that is, a philosophy based upon
human experiences. Also, John Paul II has a “spiral” approach to teaching this subject matter: He revisits topics from another perspective, looking at them in new ways that build upon what he has previously taught. The teaching is dense, leading many people who try to study it to give up.

Yet I can assure you it is worth the effort it takes to comprehend this teaching. More than anything else I studied while in graduate school, the theology of the body was intellectual candy for me. It gave me insights into God and my own life that were truly exciting.

Coming to understand the basics of John Paul II’s teaching is one thing, but absorbing it deeply is another. I recognized in the teaching a call to conversion, and like every call to conversion, there are only two responses, yes and no.

In the Beginning
Karol Wojtyla was a man who bore some heavy crosses. His only sister died before he was born, his mother died when he was a child, and his only brother died when Karol was just thirteen. Raised by his father, Karol dove into acting and his academic studies. Through it all he maintained a deep prayer life, and in that prayer he discerned a call to the priesthood.

Karol’s pursuit of the priesthood was interrupted by World War II and the consequent invasion of his homeland, Poland. Forced to study in an underground seminary because of Nazi restrictions on the Church, Karol learned what kind of evil man is capable of. He learned this lesson once again when the Communists continued to suppress the Church after the war and to sponsor various atrocities against human life and liberty.

The theology of the body is a response to the false philosophies of the human person that come from fascism, commu-
nism, materialism, nihilism, Manichaeism, dualism, and other misguided theories. These philosophies all fail to understand the worth of every human being and the origin of that worth. The truth of the theology of the body not only transcends these false philosophies but also gives us the antidote to the evils that plague us today.

As a young parish pastor, Fr. Karol became friends with many young people—singles and married couples, some with children. Their experiences of life and human relationships prompted him to meditation and study of the truth about humanity and our nature, particularly our creation in the divine image. Years of study led him to begin a manuscript that he intended to publish, but before he could complete it, he was elected pope. He decided to make his findings the heart of the pontifical teaching he would give the Church.

The theology of the body starts with a novel approach to the first few chapters of Genesis in light of the teachings of Christ. In this examination John Paul II focuses his attention on man’s creation and who man was before, during, and after the Fall, as well as humanity’s ultimate destiny, heaven. Throughout this teaching the pope builds a new Christian anthropology (a teaching about humanity) as well as a deeper understanding of theology (a teaching about the nature of God).

I knew the story of creation well. I had read and heard it dozens of times, as most of us have. But I had never truly seen it with the depth that John Paul II provides. When I first studied the theology of the body, I felt as if I were reading the book of Genesis for the first time, because it came alive through the pope’s insights. I love “lightbulb moments” (think of the cartoon characters having a lightbulb go off when they get a good idea),
and the theology of the body provided a number of them for me, so I thoroughly enjoyed studying it.

The pope begins his focus on humanity’s relationship with God by considering the relationship of God with Adam and Eve. Adam, the prototypical man, is created in communion with God. He walks and talks with God in the Garden of Eden. John Paul II refers to this as man’s “original solitude.”

Yet Adam does not feel complete. His deepest longings are not fully met. In Genesis 2:18 God says, “It is not good that the man should be alone.” In creating humanity God put a deep longing within for communion with others, both God and other humans. This longing is not met by the other parts of creation with which God surrounds Adam—an indication that man is called to something higher than the rest of creation.

Most of us have experienced the longing for God in the restlessness of life, a longing that will never be fully satisfied this side of heaven. St. Augustine’s famous line speaks to the universal experience of this desire: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Yet there is also that desire for human companionship. Thus the Father creates Eve. In her Adam finds fulfillment of his longing for another: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23).

This raises a question: How does communion between humans fulfill a desire for communion with God?

The body, John Paul II teaches, is made to reflect the communion with God for which we are created. Male and female bodies are created to be together in the sexual act as husband and wife, and our souls are made to complement each other in a spiritual communion. There is a built-in complementarity that God
intends, and in this complementarity—in our maleness and femaleness coming together—we find a sacramental reflection of the divine. In our sexuality (being made male and female) and in the mystery of marriage, we find the answers to our deepest questions about ourselves.

This view of human love as a reflection of divine love opened up a whole new world for me. It gave me a deeper understanding of the love God has for me, for others, and for the whole of creation. I could also see clearly that I was called to love others. The value of my being, including the sacred importance of the body, was exposed to me as never before.

John Paul II teaches that, “the body, and it alone, is capable of making visible what is invisible.” The body, in the sexual union of husband and wife, shows the inner working of God in the Trinity. This happens because marital love was intentionally created to reflect the divine love of God.

Within the Trinity the Father always, and for all time, has given himself as a gift to his Son, the Second Person of the Trinity. This gift of love is received by the Son and returned, in full, to the Father. In this giving and receiving we find the definition of love—gift. This gift of self that we call love is, in fact, the Holy Spirit. The Third Person of the Trinity proceeds from the love between the Father and the Son: He is love itself. Hence 1 John 4:8 says, “God is love.”

Married couples echo this Trinitarian love in what Genesis 2:24 calls the “one flesh” union of our sexuality. The male body is designed to be the giver and the female to be the receiver of the man’s gift. The woman reciprocates by giving herself to the man, and he receives her fully.
This gift of love between man and woman is embodied in their children. Just as the love of the Father and the Son is personified through the Holy Spirit, the love of a husband and wife is personified in their children. Thus the love between man and woman becomes a reflection of the divine love of God and raises our sexuality to what it was supposed to be “in the beginning.”

Furthermore, we are called to live out this love by being gifts to others in everything we do. We are created to give ourselves away to our families, our friends, and everyone else we encounter. Ultimately the entire gift of our selves is given to God, who is the supreme giver of the Gift, Jesus.

**In the Present**

Humanity was originally made in this taste of divine love. But even with Eve, the one who fulfills Adam’s longing for communion, the unity of spouses doesn’t last long. Adam and Eve eat the apple. We all suffer the consequences and share in their original sin. Life is not a Garden of Eden anymore.

Before the Fall no shame or lust resulted from Adam and Eve’s nakedness. But once they sinned, shame and lust entered in. So the two clothed themselves, sewing fig leaves together because they lusted for one another.

Shame is a natural protector from lust; it is a necessity in our fallen world. But shame scars our relationships, and the battle between real love and lust still rages in our hearts. Our sinful nature leads us to want to use others, which John Paul II says is the opposite of true love. We have a sinful tendency to grasp and take, which is contrary to what will fulfill our desire to give and receive love. We all experience this tug in our relationships, and we have to fight the tendency to use other people.

But we can recapture the original relationship with God
and others, if not in whole on this earth. This is the case only because Jesus became a gift for us. The Bible tells us in Ephesians 5:31–32 that we are the spouse Christ has come to marry. In this marriage of divine and human, we are called to live out the experience of communion.

John Paul II provides a new understanding of the hope of Christ’s redemption of our bodies and our sexuality. God didn’t leave us to suffer needlessly in our pride, lust, sin, and death. Rather he calls us to find, in relationship with him, redemption of our bodies and renewal of true love, which is the gift of self to both God and other human beings. Capturing and living out this radical view of the nature of humanity is life altering.

God created humans to live with him forever in heaven. This is the ultimate marriage each of us looks forward to. We are all espoused to God if we choose to accept the gift of the Son. Yet God will never force himself on any of us, because he is a gentle lover. He will woo us and call to us but never coerce. It is always our choice, made in freedom, to love God.

Our bodies reflect this future reality in the present but in different ways, through different vocations. Some are called to be single, others to marry, still others to be religious or priests. Yet all of us are called to chastity, that is, the proper ordering of our sexuality in whatever state of life we are.

Chastity is the virtue that sets love free from the slavery of our sexual passions. Chastity does not take away our freedom but rather sets us free to love others. In fact, if we fail to become chaste, we can never truly love another person, and thus we can never truly and deeply love God.

All of us are single for a portion of our lives, and in the unmarried state of life we are called to chaste celibacy. This isn’t a no to sex but rather a yes to divine love and love of others as humans,
not using them as objects for our selfish pleasure. In a more extraordinary way, the celibacy of the priesthood and religious life is a permanent yes to the marriage that we will all have with God in heaven. This is exactly what Christ meant when he said that some are called to give up earthly marriage “for the sake of the kingdom” (Matthew 19:12).

The vocation of earthly marriage also foreshadows the heavenly marriage and, like the priesthood, does so in a sacramental way. Marriage is a sign, or sacrament, of what will happen in heaven. Through the sexual act of husband and wife, the bodies of two reflect the spiritual marriage of Christ and all of us, his Church.

*In My Life*

My study of the theology of the body was challenging. I learned about God, life, myself, sexuality (being made male and female), and human dignity. But I had to do something about it in order to move it from my head to my heart.

This theology of the body has ramifications for every part of the Christian life. My own reflection on it brought many questions to the surface:

- If sex is meant to be something great—a reflection of God himself—then how do I order my sex life?
- If my body isn’t just about pleasure but is integral to who I am as a human, how do I order my sexuality toward the love and worship of God?
- Is my life a gift to my wife, my family, my friends, and others?
- If sex is great, beautiful, and wonderful, how can I redeem the false sense I have that it is dirty, bad, and ugly?
- Am I reflecting God’s love through my body?