

Saint John Paul II's Wednesday talks
Philosophical and theological background

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*“Living today the Prophetic vision of Humanae Vitae and Veritatis
Splendor”*

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Introduction

As a seminarian studying in Rome during the early 1980's I would attend the Wednesday audiences of Pope John Paul II in the Piazza San Pietro. At these audiences I noticed that the Holy Father was talking about love, relationships and sexuality. As I would attend each Wednesday I noticed that the Pope was still talking about love and sexuality. I thought to myself, this is unusual, but impressive—a Pope talking so much about sex?

I doubt that any of you could say where you were on October 8, 1980. But I can. I remember it well. I was strolling through Piazza San Pietro listening to a Wednesday audience of Pope John Paul II as he was reflecting on Christ's words in Matthew 5:27-28 regarding lust and adultery committed in the heart. And then I heard his voice boom out: “Even if he were to look in this way at the woman who is his wife, he would commit adultery in his heart.” (TOB 43:2).

I was stunned. Overjoyed. I thought to myself, this is it!!—a Catholic Pope finally has said what every woman, indeed every feminist, has been waiting to hear—to hear from a man-Pope! I thought to myself, “Just wait until this message gets back to America. The women will be thrilled.”

I had given western civilization too much credit. From Italy to America, the media went into an uproar over the Holy Father's statement. “Did you hear that?! Now the Pope does not even want husbands to have sex with their wives!” Modern western civilization could not grasp the difference between a positive, holy *desire*, and the lustful desire of concupiscence.

I also remember where I was on May 13, 1981. I was again in Piazza San Pietro witnessing the assault of the life of St. John Paul II. I also remember well the day that the Holy Father made his first public appearance after a miraculous recovery from his gun shot wound.

As a seminarian, Pope John Paul II's monumental catechesis on the human person, that which he delivered at his Wednesday audiences from September of 1979 to November of 1984, now known as the "Theology of the Body," touched me deeply and personally. Later on as a priest, the Holy Father's thought would profoundly shape the character and fruitfulness of my priestly ministry. Hence, my presence at this symposium.

I was deeply touched by the Holy Father's message because I came from a background in Art. The Pope was speaking my language as an artist—the language of *seeing*—seeing honestly, as God sees, as God created the human person to see. In fact, the last audience that the Holy Father gave prior to the attempt on his life addressed the issue of pornography and the ethos of seeing.

Secondly, I was always fascinated by the mystery of our being made and male and female. I knew there was something very beautiful, profound and crucial about that and I was deeply disturbed at the attack upon that aspect of God's order of creation by the so-called, "sexual revolution."

Thirdly and most importantly, I am a Byzantine Catholic, a member of what Pope John Paul II referred to as the "Easter lung" of the Church. The genius of Eastern Christian spirituality is knowing how to live in the 'both/and'—in mystery. St. John Paul II was retrieving for the Church and for the modern world the one thing that was most lacking—*mystery*. The Theology of the Body presents to us a sacramental-liturgical worldview, a Eucharistic, mystical, indeed in the most fundamental sense, truly "Catholic" worldview.

On that same October 8th, 1980 Wednesday audience, in addition to his statement on husbands and purity of heart toward their wives, the Holy Father put before us the question for the modern world. He said that the very dignity and balance of human life "*...depend at every moment of history and in every place of geographic longitude and latitude on "who" she shall be for him and he for her.*" (TOB 43:7)

In other words, "Why are we man? Why are we woman? And how we can be that for each other? We cannot truly know the how of something unless we first know the why—the real why—the *mystical* why. If modern civilization could get this question right, it can get everything else right.

The Starting Point

St. John Paul II knew that modern western civilization was in a free-fall toward its own disaster. So he went to the area that was most real to the human person, the area in which the post-sexual revolution world had become obsessed—sexuality and the questions of love, relationships and intimacy. St. John Paul II himself was a man who had been ‘in love with love’ all his life.

So great a mystery, so great a cultural obsession as love and sexuality had to have its origins in something that was truly great. To answer the question of ‘who woman is for man and man is for woman,’ St. Paul John Paul II had to start with the adequate understanding of the human person and the right understanding of the God who created so great a mystery as the human person.

In fact, if we were to offer the pinpoint reason for the whole of Pope John Paul II’s Theology of the Body it would be the elucidation of one salient heading and phrase in St. Paul VI’s *Humanae Vitae*—“*A total vision of Man,*” “*...an integral vision of man and of his vocation, not only his natural and earthly, but also his supernatural and eternal vocation.*” (*Humanae Vitae* 7).

The God that we believe in is Trinitarian; Father, Son and Holy Spirit—a union and communion of persons in perfect, eternal and deferential, love. The art of the Church so well communicates and draws us into the mystery of dogma and doctrine. Notice in this icon by St. Andrew Rublev:

The Trinity is depicted using the imagery from Genesis 18 where Abraham is visited by three angels thus foreshadowing the Trinitarian God. The angels are grouped in a circular pattern denoting no beginning and no end. In the very center, in the posture of the Second person of the Trinity, is the image of Eucharist—Holy Communion. In the negative space formed by the interior outline of the Father and Holy Spirit is formed the image of a Communion chalice. The heads of the Three Persons bow to each other in deferential love. Three distinct Persons yet at the same time, One God.

The Second Person of the Trinity, however did something. The Second Person of the Trinity moves out from the Trinity toward His own creation,

while still remaining God, and enters into intimate union with His Beloved Creation. God becomes what He was not while still remaining that which He is. This mystery come to its high point in the human person and in the Church. This is the Great Mystery—the Incarnation.

So Great a Mystery as this cannot be adequately described in words. So we grope for adequate analogies, or metaphors. In the Eastern theology we refer to the Incarnation as the great Kenosis, the self-emptying of God, the Divine Condescension of God. The predominant analogy in the Scriptures, such as in Prophets like Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Hosea, in the Song of Songs and in much of the liturgy of the Church is one of nuptials—a marriage, what Pope John Paul II would refer to as the Spousal Mystery. Marriage comes at the very beginning of the Bible, the first command that God gives to Adam and Eve. The smash ending of the Bible speaks of the wedding Feast of the Lamb.

Again, drawing upon my Byzantine liturgical heritage, you can see that this is an icon called Christ Bridegroom. It features Christ after he has been scourged and crowned with thorns; mystically and liturgically speaking—the preparation for his nuptial union on the mystical wedding bed of the Cross. This icon is strategically placed in Byzantine churches in the sanctuary above a table in which the gifts of bread and wine are prepared in a special Rite of Preparation. The Bridegroom is being prepared for his nuptial union in the Eucharist.

This then is the Great Mystery—the invisible, ineffable, incomprehensible, immeasurable God becomes visible, tangible, intimate, precisely and only through the very physical order of creation that He Himself put in place. Spirit incarnates itself into matter thus making matter sacramental. Spirit and matter are not separated although they remain distinct entities.

Yet, since time immemorial, Evil has sought to dismantle this Great Mystery, through heresies which in one way or another are really heresies about the Body of Christ, especially heresies such as Manicheanism. The Great Mystery is attacked through philosophies and ideologies, that seek to deny the invisible-become-visible. This duality of spirit and matter and with it body versus soul, nature versus person, freedom versus truth, took a certain historical spike in the 16th century with the advent of science as we know it.

Science is good. But for the first time in human history, through scientific methods, mankind could manipulate or control nature. What developed was a scientific-rationalist worldview in which matter began to lose its value, its connectedness with the spiritual.

Disconnected from its spiritual value, nature now becomes something to be controlled, to be dominated by man and manipulated. The essential philosophical expression of this was the 17th century French philosopher Des Carte's; "I think, therefore I am." The spirit and the intellectual was exalted and the physical, the natural became debased. This dualistic worldview later gave rise to a historical progression of "--isms": Nominalism, Positivism, Empiricism, Protestantism, Fascism, Communism, Modernism, Moral Relativism, Secularism. (Even a "Catholi-cism" can be risky!)

For centuries, western civilization has become more and more bi-polar. I recall that my Jesuit training in counseling taught that being bi-polar was a mental disorder. Modern man has raised it to the level of virtue—conservative versus liberal, democrat versus republican, man versus woman, whites versus blacks. And where I live in Chicago the most frightful dualism of them all: Are you a Whites Sox baseball fan or a Cubs baseball fan?!

Philosophical basis

As a philosopher, Carol Wojtyla/Pope John Paul II knew that the mechanistic, deterministic, dualistic philosophical program was contributing to the free fall of civilization. A more integral vision of the human person was needed. He sought to maintain that 'person' and 'nature' are intimately united as is truth and freedom, a subject he would take up in Veritatis Splendor.

He found a positive influence in the work of Immanuel Kant and later in the phenomenologists, especially Max Scheler. These sources helped Carol Wojtyla developed his 'personalistic norm.'

For Wojtyla, phenomenology permits an analysis of ethical facts on the plane of phenomena and experience, a type of spiraling through a subject or looking at it from 360 degrees. Yet, Wojtyla would not dispense with metaphysics. An objective moral order is necessary. Acts must be able to be determined to be good or evil in themselves.

Basis in the Mystical

Over and above all philosophical influences was the influence on Carol Wojtyla of the mystical theology of St. John of the Cross. It would actually be in St. John of the Cross that Wojtyla would discover the principle of personalism, later enriched by the influence of Kant and Scheler.

To modern civilization the word “mystical” implies an unusual almost ‘spooky’ person or experience, as though mysticism was reserved to those privileged few with stigmata or who levitate while the rest of us average persons simply trudge along through life, keeping our feet on the ground.

‘Mystical’ means what is most real, how something of the visible order points to, makes present and even participates in the transcendent, invisible order. If God is a union and communion of persons who enters into a spousal relationship with his own creation and as Scripture testifies, we are made in the image and likeness of that God, then we too are called to become a union and communion of persons, to love spousally. St. John Paul II’s whole point in the theology of the body is that this truth is stamped in the very language of our bodies precisely because they are male and female—sexual.

Reflecting on Genesis 2:23-25 the Holy Father says, “...we clearly grasp, the connection that exists between the revelation-discovery of the spousal meaning of the body and man’s original happiness. The “spousal” meaning is also beatifying, and, as such, it definitively shows the reality of the act of giving...the consciousness of the meaning of the body deriving from this gift—in particular the consciousness of the spousal meaning of the body constitutes the fundamental component of human existence in the world.”

One can understand this “spousal” meaning of the human body only in the context of the person. The body has a “spousal” meaning because the human person, as the Council says, is a creature God willed for his own sake and that, at the same time, cannot fully find himself except through the gift of self (Gaudium et Spes, 24:3) (TOB 15:5).

The mystical, sacramental-liturgical phenomenological vision answers the first part of the great question put before the modern world. “Why are we man and woman?”--it is because precisely through our being male and female we make present on earth the God who is transcendent and immanent

who is a union and communion of persons and who makes a complete gift of himself—who loves “spousally.”

“The body, in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible; the spiritual and the divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it.” (TOB 19:4)

“The fact that theology also includes the body should not astonish or surprise anyone who is conscious of the mystery and reality of the Incarnation. Through the fact that the Word of God became flesh, the body entered theology—that is, the science that has divinity for its object—I would say, through the main door. The Incarnation—and the redemption that flows from it—has also become the definitive source of the sacramentality of marriage...” (TOB 23:4)

Theological basis

The Theology of the Body and its presentation especially on the popular level, is in no way a “sexualizing “of God. Rather, it is, so to speak a, “re-God-ening” of our sexuality. It is about the redemption of the Body through Jesus Christ. It is about retrieving an echo of our Original Innocence before Original Sin while at the same time of turning our gaze toward our ultimate eschatological destiny. It is about seeing mystically and therefore correctly, honestly.

The starting point of the Theology of the Body is the Trinitarian God, the Incarnation and the Spousal love of the Bridegroom Christ with His Bride. Entering into a penetrating, phenomenological-mystical exploration of human sexuality was the very place that the Church has to go in this day and age. But more importantly our sexuality which enables us to love as God loves and to participate in the very interior life of the Holy Trinity is that which makes us most like God even more so than just will, intellect and self-determination. This is the Magisterial contribution of the Wednesday audiences.

The theology of the body, indeed the very soul of the Church, is about the right way to see and in particular for the right way to see man and woman. Notice how in the second chapter of Genesis of all the things that could have served as the crowning statement on the Original harmony in creation, the

Word of God chose the way in which Adam and Eve saw each other in their nakedness, with what St. John Paul II says is that “peace of the interior gaze.” (TOB13:1)

Conversely, in Genesis 3, the crowning statement of the Fall, the rupture in the harmony between all things in creation is, “*Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized that they were naked.*” Now shame and concupiscence enters the picture. Rupture in the entire cosmos happened when the human persons failed to see mystically, Incarnationally, sacramentally. Most especially when man and woman failed to see each other sacramentally, without the “peace of the interior gaze” and instead to see each other, and in turn all of creation, in terms of appropriation or lust. The first man and woman adopted a certain utilitarianism. In his book, “Love and Responsibility,” which was the prelude to his Theology of the Body, Carol Wojtyla says that the opposite of love is not hate but ‘use’ to ‘use’ a person. (utilitarianism.)

The Theology of the body is all about seeing mystically, as is the very soul of our Faith:

“To this fullness of “exterior” perception, expressed by physical nakedness, corresponds the “interior” fullness of man in God, that is, according to the measure of the image of God.” (TOB 12:4)

“Seeing each other reciprocally, through the mystery of creation, as it were, the man and woman see each other still more fully and clearly than through the sense of sight itself, that is, through the eyes of the body.” (TOB 13:1)

“Purity is the glory of the human body before God. It is the glory of God in the human body, through which masculinity and femininity are manifested.” (TOB 57:3)

Structure of the Wednesday audiences

To make a very comprehensive and dense catechesis very simple, one way is to see it as divided into basically two separate trilogies. The first trilogy provides the ‘why’ behind our being human and the second provides the ‘how’ of living truly humanly.

The first trilogy presents the three phases of human history: Original man, (before Original Sin), Historical Man (after Original Sin) and Eschatological Man (our ultimate destiny in the next life.) Original Man and Eschatological Man are the truth about the human person and the truth about God's original plan.

Contrary to common perception, Historical Man is not "reality." It is the reality that we have come to know and in which we trudge through only by default of the Great Fault, (Original Sin.) Historical Man is a certain interruption or intrusion into the Original plan dividing what was an original continuity between Original Man and Historical Man. However, Christ comes into the period of Historical Man infusing fallen creation and fallen Man with the Divine presence and with the redemption of the Body by virtue of Christ's bodily Resurrection from the dead. This is why we can live a certain echo of Original Man and live with hopeful anticipation of Eschatological Man while we are on this earth.

In the second trilogy it is significant that St. John Paul II treats celibacy, or continence for the Kingdom, as an appropriate prelude to treating the sacrament of Marriage and then treating finally the vision of Humane Vitae.

A problematic dualism in modern understanding is that celibacy and marriage are diametrically opposed. The truth is they are two sides of the same coin. As the Holy Father says in his Theology of the Body:

"In the life of an authentically Christian community, the attitudes and the values proper to the one and the other state—that is, to the one and the other essential and conscious choice as the vocation for one's whole earthly life and in the perspective of the "heavenly Church"—complete each other and in some sense interpenetrate. Perfect conjugal love must be marked by the faithfulness and gift to the one and only Bridegroom (and also by the faithfulness and gift of the Bridegroom to the one and only Bride) on which religious profession and priestly celibacy are based. In sum, the nature of the one as well as the other love is "spousal," that is, expressed through the complete gift of self. "(TOB 78:4)

“On the other hand, spousal love that find its expression in “contenance for the Kingdom” must lead in its normal development to “fatherhood or “motherhood” in the spiritual sense...” (TOB 78:5).

In St. John Paul II’s treatment on marriage he offers insight into Ephesians 5 which shows this reading to be anything but an inequality between man and woman as is so commonly the mistaken interpretation.

“Although the spouses should be “subject to one another in the fear of Christ...nevertheless in what follows, the husband is above all the one who loves and the wife, by contrast, is the one who is loved. One might even venture the idea that the wife’s “submission” to the husband, understood in the context of the whole of Ephesians 5:22-23, means above all the experience of love.” (TOB 92:6)

The word honesty or Truth is key to understanding the whole of every moral precept of the Church. Being honest with the language of the body is the very axis upon which Humane Viatae’s moral principle turns. Pope John Paul II explains his Theology of the Body:

“One can say that in the case of the artificial separation of these two meanings in the conjugal act,” (unitive and procreative) “a real bodily union is brought about, but it does not correspond to the inner truth and dignity of the personal communion....Such a violation of the inner conjugal communion, a communion that plunges its roots into the very order of the person, constitutes the essential evil of the contraceptive act.” (TOB 123:7)

Urgency, relevancy and effectiveness of the Wednesday audiences

I conclude by briefly highlighting four areas in which St. John Paul II’s Theology of the Body helped shape my own priestly ministry but more importantly how St. John Paul II’s Theology of the Body, more than ever, is urgent, relevant and effective for our times. Notice that I said, “St. John Paul II’s Theology of the Body” and not just the Wednesday audiences. This is because two of what I believe are the most urgent sections in the text Theology of the Body were never delivered in the Wednesday audiences—the reflections on the Song of Songs and on the book of Tobit.

1. Lust and pornography

In his section titled, “The Ethos of the Body in Art and Media,” St. John Paul II provides us literally with what I believe and indeed have employed as a certain therapy for the problem of lust and pornography which is the silent killer of our times. In both the Theology of the Body and its precursor, “Love and Responsibility,” St. John Paul II maintains that the naked human body, so often a central theme in art, is never an occasion itself for lust. Rather, it is the, “...*reciprocal circuit that takes place between the image and the act of seeing, between the ethos of the image and the ethos of seeing.*” (TOB 63:7)

In his homily at the re-dedication of the Sistine Chapel after its restoration, St. John Paul II says of Michaelangelo’s floor-to-ceiling nudity that the Sistine Chapel is the “*sanctuary of the theology of the body.*” Michaelangelo had the correct, sacramental, Incarnational, redemptive view of the human body.

In my own ministry, especially working with men in the area of lust and pornography, I employ a therapy which I call, “See, pray, and pass on.” This therapy is based upon Pope John Paul II’s work combined with my own experience as an artist wherein we artists spend many hours trying to master the beauty of the naked human body. It is in fact possible to see the naked human body and not lust but rather to see revealed in the body the person and the glory of God.

2. The Two Vocations

Marriage: There are no such things as ‘marriage problems.’ There are only problems in not knowing *why* we are man and woman and *how* to be that for each other. Learning to decode the language of the body clues the the man and woman into how they are hardwired by God, what their legitimate needs are as man and woman and conversely their most fundamental fears as man and woman. So called, “marriage counseling” is simply a matter of insight and praxis of meeting one another’s legitimate needs and avoiding connecting with each other at the level of each others’ greatest fears.

3. Religious life: The scarcity of vocations to religious life and the clergy sex abuse scandal will not be adequately healed unless seminary formation is designed entirely upon a Theology of the Body ethos. This is a formation that helps a young male candidate to see his very manhood in light of his

priesthood and vice versa. Seminary formation cannot have a man running from his sexuality in some form of superficial purity and of keeping “safe.” Rather, seminary formation must have a candidate running headlong into his sexuality but with a Theology of the Body ethos. Such ethos would enable the candidate to see his manhood in light of his priesthood and would integrate together his manhood, mystical fatherhood and husbandhood, celibacy, prayer and Liturgy.

In a word, the priestly candidate, especially the celibate priestly candidate, must be formed to live spousally and this must be real to him. Otherwise his celibacy remains little more than excess baggage, an archaic, counter-productive discipline as the world currently sees it now.

In fact, I maintain, and indeed the studies have proven, that it was yet another dualism that lies as the heart of the clergy sex abuse scandal. For decades in the selection and formation of candidates for the priesthood the mature sexual self-possession of a candidate was seen as relatively inconsequential to the tasks and very character of the priesthood. This false dualism has led to disaster.

4. The Language of Liturgy:

In his undelivered reflections on the book of Tobit, St. John Paul II took his Theology of the Body to a point where it almost seems he expected us to later take up. It is a point that I have taken up and which I use to teach young people and married couples.

“...the language of Liturgy becomes the language of the body (TOB 117:1)...conjugal life in some sense becomes liturgy.” (TOB 117:b6)

The Liturgy of the Church, its art, architecture, gesture, ritual, chant, and text provides the context for the entire mystical meaning of human sexuality. Classic Church architecture picked up the nuptial theme of the Old Testament temple and brought it to the Christian Liturgy and Eucharist.

The language of the body in the one flesh union between husband and wife finds its context in the spousal, self-donative language of Eucharist. The marital bedroom is the sanctuary of the human race and woman's womb is its tabernacle. The relationship of man to woman finds a parallel in the relationship of priest to tabernacle. The Eucharist in turn finds its context in the Cross on Calvary, where the New Adam consummates a mystical marriage with the New Eve upon the nuptial bed of the Cross and mystically re-conceives the human race: "*Woman, behold your son. (Son) Behold your Mother.*" (John 19:26).

Calvary in turn, finds its consummation in the Wedding Feast of the Lamb. From bedroom to Eucharist to Calvary to Heaven--it is one continuous spousal mystery and it is played out in the Liturgy of the Church.

Wherever the nuptial character of Church art, architecture and Liturgy has been preserved there is no cry for women's ordination or of viewing Church practices along utilitarian principles of equality, power, and function.

Conclusion:

The Theology of the Body is a delivery system for the Catholic worldview and here I am not speaking comparatively of "religions." By the term, 'Catholic' I am speaking of a way of seeing, the one and only legitimate way of seeing and living according to that one and only view—the sacramental-liturgical-Incarnational-Eucharistic-mystical worldview which is the very soul of the Church and of our Faith. This is the view that is the 'why' behind all of the Churches guidance and prophecy on all moral issues.

The Theology of the Body is indeed the answer to all of life's questions. When we approach any discipline in life with any other view than the sacramental and mystical, things do not go well. When we approach every discipline in life according to the mystical worldview as proposed in the Theology of the Body, things turn to gold.

Popular presenters of the Theology of the Body will so often say that the most common reaction they receive after presenting the Theology of the Body to any audience and the Church's moral teaching through that lens is what I call a 'holy anger':

“Where was all of this twenty five years ago!!? Why was I not taught this? It could have saved me so much heartache!”

It was the intention of the author of the Theology of the Body that this catechesis on the human person would ease heartache and bring instead joy, freedom and love. There is an imperative, ever more urgent, for the sake of humanity and civilization, for us to carry on the work and intention of this author.

May the Mother of God, Our Most Blessed Lady, protect us in this task and may the Holy Spirit guide us.