

The Human Body in God's Creative Design

The human body in God's creative design: this is the MYSTERY that Archbishop Richard Smith has invited us to reflect on prayerfully tonight. I do not use the term "Mystery" lightly. In faith, mystery is a truth so profound that we will never completely grasp it. Mystery is a gift to be lived-into at ever greater depth, enlightened by Revelation.

The lived body is not merely a chance mutation in an unfolding universe. Rather, it has been revealed that divine loving intent is involved in the design and creation of the human body – male and female – whatever may have preceded this during billion-fold years of preparation. Only in Jesus Christ has the full potential of the human body been realized – exceedingly beautiful, beyond our limited understanding of beauty.

Think with me, for a moment, on the wonder of the human body. It centers and locates a person in the universe. Sometimes, it is described as a *mid-way point in the material universe*, a living presence, in size, somewhere between sub-atomic particles and the macro galaxies that hurtle outward in the universe. Not static, lived bodies are in constant interchange with the larger material universe. I recall reading in a biology textbook that an ELECTRON from the page that I was reading might *now* be at the far reaches of the Milky Way.

Lovers tell one another that there is stardust in the beloved's eyes – and that is true. Not only in death, but also in life, we need to remember and wonder that "We are dust and unto dust we will return." Precious dust, destined for transformation, resurrection.

As we look down at the earth beneath our feet, we should marvel. In creative design, what seems only dark, inert soil may – through seed and water – blossom in vibrant color, and be taken into our bodies as carrots, or beans – or come through our bodily eyes as daisies or mountain laurel. The wonder is: only by being taken in by us bodily, becoming part of us, can plant and animal life **participate in conscious, willed praise of the Creator**. Teilhard de Chardin once observed that our bodies are not part of the earth that we possess totally. They are the whole of the universe that we possess partially.

Some soil is transformed into wheat, crushed, shaped into hosts, and then **transubstantiated** into the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ. As a poet says in a related context: ***If you were God, would you have thought of that?***

What mystery there is in every moment of bodied life! Pope Benedict XVI notes that in Biblical language the word *body* as in

“This is my Body” – denotes the whole person – “in whom body and spirit are indivisibly one. ‘This is my Body,’ therefore means: This is my whole person, existent in bodily form. What we learn from that is said next: ‘which is given for you.’”¹

It is important to take care in ***speaking*** of the body. We do not “HAVE” a body or “OWN” it. The body is ***our entire being and presence*** made outwardly visible, and capable of relationship. *For what reason such extravagance? What does that mean?*

Theology of the Body

Perhaps no one has reflected more intensely on the meaning and privilege of the lived body than the Servant of God, Pope John Paul II. Prior to his being Pope, he knew from experience how the body was understood and treated during tumultuous decades of

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, in *Benedictus Day by Day with Pope Benedict XVI* (Yonkers, New York: Ignatius Press, 2006), p. 268.

the 20th century – from the burning bodies in the ovens of Auschwitz to the burnt-out bodies of youth through so-called sexual and drug liberations.

On the other hand, John Paul knew the dignity accorded the human body during those same decades -- the Dogmatic Declaration of Our Lady's Assumption, body and soul, into eternal life; the Constitutions of Vatican Council II; and *Humanae Vitae*, the landmark encyclical of Pope Paul VI, concerning human sexuality and marriage.

In 129 Public Audiences from 1979 – 1984, Pope John Paul II laid foundations for his Theology of the Body. He did not invent a new meaning of body. Rather, he brought into new expression the richest insights concerning the meaning of human life as received from Scripture, Tradition, and Magisterial teaching. – and he applied them to the most urgent issues of contemporary life

Like Christ, John Paul said that it is essential to “look to the beginning” to find what has been revealed concerning God's intent in creating mankind as male and female. **Genesis**, Chapter 1, verses 26–28, provides the entry point for receiving God's intent and creative design for human beings.

Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...so 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 God said to them, ‘Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it.

What can it *mean* to be created *bodily* in the image of God? To enter deeper into this mystery, it is essential to ask: “If we are to image GOD – “***Who is God? What is God like in divine inner life?***”

We are not left in darkness in that regard – nor will we ever *totally grasp* the immense dignity and mystery of such a calling. As the Church's liturgy celebrates at Christmas, it was in the “fullness of time” that the Eternal Word became incarnate. The

Second Person of the Trinity came personally to overcome the “human-long separation” from God. Through and in Jesus Christ we have received in-Person the revelation that God's intent and creative design for humanity is ultimate ***union with God – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.***

It is an impenetrable MYSTERY OF LOVE that as bodied persons we are intended for union with the Divine Communion of Persons. In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, it is written:

For by his incarnation, he, the Son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin.²

Particularly at the Last Supper, Jesus interwove prayer to the Father with intimate Revelation concerning the inner life of the Trinity as Personal Relations of mutual, perfect self-gift. This, then, is every person's fundamental vocation: ***to image bodily the Divine Persons, who are forever united in loving mutual self-gift.*** This is the incalculable dignity of what it means to be human – male and female.

Theologically, the word chosen to describe the inner life of God as revealed is ***Perichoresis***. It is a Greek word that has a twofold meaning, making it particularly apt for describing what Jesus revealed of the inner relational life of God. ***Perichoresis*** means that *simultaneously* in Trinitarian life there is a ***mutual, enduring indwelling within one another, and a penetration of, and a being-penetrated by the others.*** At the Last Supper, Jesus spoke personally of this (Jn. 14-17) For example:

Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?...Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me.

² *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, New Rev.. Ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1992), p. 923.

...[T]hat they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you.

St. Paul did not hesitate to remind the early **Church in Corinth** – a small Christian community working out its identity in the raunchy port city given to god and goddess worship -- “Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! .Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Sprit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.” (I Cor. 6: 15, 19-20) Written much later, the **Gospel of John** relates that when Jesus was challenged for cleansing the Temple, he told his accusers:” Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up....but he spoke of the temple of his body.” (See Jn. 2: 19, 21) A temple is the dwelling place of God's presence, a place of encountering God's presence, of worship, marked by fruitful gift-giving. If we are in the state of grace, *our bodies* are living temples – mobile homes where Divine Persons dwell.

It is impossible in this brief reflection tonight, to plumb the depth of insight that Pope John Paul II articulated in his Audiences which probed the meaning of our existence made in God's Image. Perhaps, tasting even one of them together tonight may awaken a desire to read and reflect on all of them. I quote from his Audience of January 9, 1980:

There is a strong link between the mystery of creation, as a gift that springs from divine Love, and that beatifying “beginning” of man's existence as male and female, in the whole truth of their bodies and of their sexes, which is the simple and pure truth of communion between persons. When the first man exclaims at the sight of the woman, “she is flesh of my flesh and bone from my bones,” (Gen.

2: 23), he simply affirms the human identity of both. By exclaiming this, he seems to say, *Look, a body that expresses the "person."*...

The body, which expresses femininity "for" masculinity and, vice versa, masculinity "for" femininity, manifests it through gift as the fundamental characteristic of personal existence. This is *the body: a witness* to creation as a fundamental gift, and therefore a witness *to Love as the source from which this same giving springs*. Masculinity – femininity – namely sex – is the original sign of a creative donation and at the same time the sign of a gift that man, male-female becomes aware of as a gift lived so to speak in an original way. This is the meaning with which sex enters into the theology of the body.³

Capacity for true *self-gift*, then, is the ultimate meaning of the human body. John Paul goes on to call this bodily self-gift "*spousal*." The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms this, quoting John Paul in Paragraph #2331, where it affirms that God is love, and "lives a mystery of personal loving communion." In fact, the *Catechism* says, there is *inscribed* in the humanity of man and woman "the *vocation*, and thus the capacity and responsibility, *of love* and communion."⁴

Further, the *Catechism* affirms the importance of accepting one's sexuality: "Everyone, man and woman, should acknowledge and accept their *sexual* identity. Physical, moral and spiritual *difference* and *complementarity* are oriented towards the goods of marriage and the flourishing of family life," the *Catechism* states. (See #2333) Notice that the *Catechism* does not equate entire personal identity with sexuality. Rather, "acknowledging and accepting" sexual identity as male or female means a healthy integration of the person.

Beginning with Audience 24, Pope John Paul began to apply the integral vision of mankind to marriage, and then celibacy, aware that this calling is lived out in a sin-

³ Pope John Paul II, Audience of January 9, 1980, in *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. and index, Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), p. 183

⁴ See Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris consorti*, #11, quoted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Second Edition (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), #2331.

conditioned, but redeemed world. Neither John Paul, nor the enduring Church, in holding for the true vocation of every woman and man, are naïve concerning the challenges which accompany authentic living-out of the spousal meaning of the lived-body. Pope John Paul's series of Audiences culminates in basic insights of *Humanae Vitae*, the encyclical which had impelled him to develop a Theology of the Body. As Jesus Christ exemplifies, mutual self-gift is sacrificial; it takes commitment, and requires truth, fidelity, and forgiveness.

The very design of the human body manifests its spousal quality, and invites communion of persons. For example, unlike the animals, human beings are upright. Our eyes are designed for communion with the eyes of others. They invite encounter, face-to-face communication.

It is understandable that John Paul began that series of Audiences dealing with contemporary challenges to spousal meaning in a sin-conditioned world, by reflecting on the saying of Jesus found in Matthew 5: 27-28: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery,' but I say to you: Whoever looks at a woman to desire her [in a reductive way, explains JP II] has already committed adultery with her *in his heart*." John Paul saw this to be of key significance for the theology of the body – every word of Christ, he noted, having a vast import.

"Ethos" John Paul said, means entering into the depth of the norm itself "*and descends into the interior of man, the subject of morality*." (See Aud. of April 16, 1980) It is always a matter of the *total body-person* who is called to truthful living in thought, word and deed. This is difficult to hear in a society that tends to view a person as **divisible among thoughts, desires, choices, and bodily activity.**

Adultery stems from within. "Desire," John Paul noted. "as an interior act, *expresses itself through the sense of sight*, that is, with a look, as in the case of David and Bathsheba." Some people were aghast when, in a later Audience, John Paul said :

Adultery "in the heart" is not committed only because the man "looks" in this way at a woman who is not his wife. But *precisely because he looks in this way at a woman*. Even if he were to look this way at the woman who is his wife, he would commit the same adultery "in the heart." (Aud. Oct. 1, 1980)

We are as it were, woven of one piece, body and soul, inner heart and outward act. What Christ and John Paul II were describing is the loss of integrity involved in LUST. To lust is to desire *the use of another for one's pleasure in a manner that treats them as an object*. So that, what John Paul was indicating by saying that a man could commit "adultery in the heart" regarding his wife – was that such desire did not stem from faithful, spousal self-gift – but was the desire to satisfy a carnal urge apart from committed relationship – a "taking" rather than an act of mutual self-gift. Op Ed pages in the United States press ridiculed the Pope's words because of an inability or unwillingness to understand the truth of the whole person and the meaning of spousal love in and through the body.

One writer opined that maybe men in Italy did not lust for their wives – but in the US it was different. "If you can't lust for your wife, for whom CAN you lust?" one writer asked. What John Paul was touching upon is the sacredness of marital mutual self-gift. More than a person casually walking down the street, or a woman seated at a bar, a *spouse* enduring the look of lust from a partner knows a degradation that touches to the interior heart. There is immense sadness in marriage, if lust masquerades as love and there is no effort *or desire* to change.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of the gift of sight in our time. As an inner-city pastor, where children knew much loneliness and abuse, Father Raymond Ellis would tell the children in a first Communion Class, as he looked intently upon them, eye-to-eye: "When we receive Jesus in Communion, we also receive one another. You are already within me because you have come in through my eyes." Such is the beauty of loving sight.

The obverse is also true. Pornographic addiction is one of the great causes of marital dissolution today. It sabotages the very meaning of the human body, sexuality and marriage. What is taken in through the eyes, specifically *invited through the eyes*, touches the inner person, and can vilify the heart.

As mentioned earlier, Pope John Paul II saw the great significance of the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* in relation to the understanding of marriage found in the documents of the Second Vatican Council. Many have heard about, but never read *Humanae Vitae* or come to know how it supports the integrity and dignity of marital love and its fruitfulness, while taking into realistic account the difficulties presented to marital truthfulness in contemporary culture.

We have just marked the 40th anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*, but its message and statement of doctrinal principles remains as valid as the day when Pope Paul VI issued it. Entitled "*Of Human Life*," the encyclical addresses in its opening lines "the most serious duty of transmitting human life, for which married persons are the free and responsible collaborators of God the Creator." (#1) From the outset, it states that while this is a source of great joy, it can also present "not a few difficulties and distress." The encyclical enumerates societal changes and pressure such as: rapid growth in world

population and the temptation of authorities to take radical measures in this regard; the pressures relating to work, housing, and economic concerns; the changing circumstances for women in society; the kind of value and appreciation for conjugal love in marriage; and the *meaning of conjugal acts* in relation to love. New questions arise from these concerns, wrote Pope Paul VI, and they include the harmony and mutual fidelity between spouses concerning the regulation of births.

Doctrinal principles taken up in *Humanae Vitae*, like those which John Paul cited, stem from a “total vision of the human person,” and they express the meaning of responsible parenthood with respect for the nature and purpose of the conjugal act. In Article #12 of *Humanae Vitae*, there is succinctly stated what Paul VI termed a “teaching, often set forth by the Magisterium” and “founded upon the inseparable connection willed by God and unable to be broken by man on his own initiative, between two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning.” Pope Paul VI expressed his belief that people of his day would be “particularly capable of seizing the deeply reasonable and human character of this fundamental principle.” We know that, sadly, that has not been the general response.

In contraception, the body is used to simulate the truth of authentic and free self-gift. Bodily, in the most intimate act of intercourse, contracepting spouses render mutual self-gift infertile in some manner. To enter a spouse's body, sheathed against interchange – or assured that whatever bodily self-gift received is rendered sterile -- devastates a most intimate expression of marital love. Contraception may seem to solve a problem, but it recalls an observation of world planner Buckminster Fuller who said in a more universal context: “When we don't know how to solve a problem, we kill.” In this case, it is a

killing of truthfulness, acted out bodily. Anglican bishop Arthur Vogel said of the body that it allows us to “say what we mean and mean what we say.”

Humanae Vitae shows deep concern for spouses who, for various reasons, need responsibly to regulate the number of births within their marriage. As *Humanae Vitae* states, intercourse in infecund periods is surely responsible if done “with respect for the order established by God.” This differs from contraception. As Paul VI wrote, it is the difference between the “legitimate use of a natural disposition” and “impeding the development” of natural processes. How important that the principles of this landmark encyclical be known by those preparing for sacramental marriage, and for those who face a crucial need to regulate the number of children to be received in their family. Like all other aspects of honest, mutual self-gift, this involves growth in understanding sexuality, faithful patience, and sacrificial love. Precious are the couples who serve as teachers of Natural Family Planning.

The splendor of the human body is lived-out a sin-conditioned world, where concupiscence is fed not only by human weakness, but by blatant messages and legal decisions that disfigure the beauty of God's creative design. You know them, you recognize them.

This moment of history calls for a renewed “John the Baptist spirit,” crying out in the wilderness of contemporary values the truth of the body-person. This wilderness is howling with pornographic imagery, and is increasingly replacing what is real with what is only virtual and changeable at whim. Many commercials treat sexuality as a force that can only be controlled from outside the person or couple – through pharmaceutical or surgical interventions in which the conjugal act is often termed a “performance.”

The beauty we have been reflecting upon can only be sustained when spouses and those vowed in celibacy take responsibility for the **truthfulness of their self-gift**. This requires work, and the virtue of chastity which the *Catechism* describes as “the successful integration of sexuality within the person and thus the inner unity of man in his bodily and spiritual being.” (#2337)

Many find it difficult to understand how a person vowed in celibacy, or an unmarried person, can be **spousal in body**. It may help to realize that even for the most ardent lovers in marriage – actual physical intercourse involves only a limited portion of time. Yet, *all of life is intended as loving self-gift*, and *every relation beyond one's spouse is also called to be life-giving in ways that are appropriate*.

Sometimes we come to *know* this truth in ways we would never have imagined. A few months ago, the husband and father of a family in our area blessed us all with such witness. After several days of intense rain, he was working outside with the youngest of his seven sons – a young man 21 years of age, with Down Syndrome. There is a septic pool on their land, and in the course of their work, the sodden ground gave way beneath the son and he plunged into the septic field. To save him from drowning, the father dove in after him. I don't understand how such systems work, but I have been told that the father had to move the son's body sideways, submerged in the toxic waste, in order to reach an opening. He did this, and then standing below the surface, he held his son up so that the young man's head could rise above the waste-field and be rescued. The father drowned.

He had never dreamed that this would be his moment of most intense life-giving love in his body: total self-gift in one flesh with his spouse. It was not beautiful as we

usually think of beauty, but it was the father's defining spousal act, culminating all spousal moments he had known with his wife and their children, whose bodies they carried: she in her womb, he in his dying arms.

May each of us be blessed in the unique beauty of our own bodies – in whatever way we are called to be total self-gift.