

Theology of the Body

Sex and the mystery of God.

Why are people so interested in sex?

Pope John Paul II's bold response to the question has surprised many people.

Human beings are fascinated by sex because sexuality is fundamental to the very meaning of life. Sexuality is not just an 'extra' to life. It is at the core of our origins, our history and our eternal destiny. It is entwined with questions fundamental to our existence: questions about good, about evil, about living and dying, about what it means to be a human person.

In fact, if we are not fascinated by sex, then we should be, says the Pope. Because it is through our bodily experience as male and female that the very mystery of God's life and love is revealed to the world.

Join us in this issue of Landmarks as we explore what Pope John Paul II has to say about the 'theology of the body.'

'Why is the Catholic Church so hung up about sex?'

'The church should stay out of the bedroom!'

'I don't agree with the Pope. I mean, what would an elderly celibate man know about the real issues of married life?'

How often we hear comments like these. In fact, when someone has a disagreement with the Catholic Church it almost always comes down to an issue related to sex or gender. But whether or not people agree with specific church teachings, there is one view we all share: at some level we all know that sex is extremely important.

And indeed it is, says John Paul II in his theology of the body. For a start, none of us would exist without the sexual union of our parents. And the significance of our sexuality does not stop there. Our creation as male or female and our desire for the opposite sex remains central to our entire lives.

Sex is not a comfortable topic for many people. In their discomfort with their sexuality, people tend to go to one or other extreme: liberal abandon or conservative prudishness. On the one hand we live in a 'sex-obsessed' society where images of the naked body are plastered on every billboard. Unrestrained sexual expression cheapens the true value and meaning of sex, says John Paul II.

On the other hand, Christians often express themselves in a 'sexless' way, giving the impression that sex is somehow 'unspiritual,' divorced from the things of God. But this, says the Pope, is just as damaging and wrong. Sexuality is God's gift to be treasured and celebrated.

An asexual church is as unholy and as unredeemed as a sex-mad society.

There is a way through both distortions to wholeness, integration, truth. Christ came to set us free. Life in his spirit is freedom to be truly man, truly woman. If we listen to the depths of the human heart we will hear God's call to life, to love, to the truth of our sexuality.

What is the 'theology of the body'?

Pope John Paul II's 'theology of the body' is found in a series of 129 general audiences given by the Pope between September 1979 and November 1984.

Grounded in biblical revelation, this vast reflection on the human person encompasses topics like sex and sexuality, creation, redemption, eternal life, marriage, celibacy and Christian morality.

The essential point is this: By reflecting on sexual difference—male and female, and our desire for union with the opposite sex—we discover the deepest reality of human identity and we even penetrate to the mystery of the trinitarian God. If we live according to the truth of our sexuality we find the very meaning of life. In fact, every moral question on the planet comes down to a question of gender-relations: Who will man be for woman? And who will woman be for man? Sexuality is not just an 'aspect' of life. It colors everything about life.

man and woman

I. The way it was: original humanity

In the language of *story*, the book of Genesis tells us about humanity before the fall, about the nature of man and woman according to God's design.

In Genesis 1:26 God says, 'Let us make man in our image.' The use of the plural tells us that God is a communion of persons. God is family, relationship. To be created in God's image is to be made for communion, family, relationship. This made-for-communion is the deepest truth of our being and points to three key human experiences:

1. Original solitude. In the creation story Adam and Eve are unique in the created world. As human beings they are radically different to the animals. Birds can make sweet sounds but they cannot compose symphonies. Dogs respond to sexual urges but they cannot make love. Man and woman enjoy all of creation, but man and woman can only find true companionship in one another. Until Eve is created, Adam experiences himself as alone in the world.

2. Original unity. The creation story tells us that Adam and Eve are made for each other. At the core of their beings, man and woman experience a deep desire for unity. This desire resonates in every person. We long to share

ourselves and to be known by another. As human persons we are made to love and be loved. Our masculinity or femininity draws us beyond ourselves to the other. Our attraction to the opposite sex cannot simply be reduced to a carnal instinct. It reveals so much more: the orientation of the human heart, the desire for wholeness, for unity and, ultimately, for God.

3. Original nakedness. This 'made for the other' is visibly revealed through the body. Men and women are wonderfully different! Neither the male nor the female body 'makes sense' by itself. Man is designed for union with woman, and woman for union with man. When that union involves a free and total gift of self, something extraordinary becomes apparent. When, in and through our bodies, we love as God loves, God's glory is revealed! This, says John Paul II, is the *nuptial meaning of the body*. In his gift of self to woman, man finds his true identity. In her gift of self to man, woman finds her deepest meaning. In the creation story Adam and Eve gaze upon each other's nakedness and experience no shame or embarrassment, only wonder and awe at the mystery of God's love. This purity of vision in relation to the human body is what is meant by the phrase 'naked without shame' (Gen. 2:25).

The most basic and intense expression of human community is the union of man woman in the covenant of marriage. This 'communion of persons' reflects the trinitarian life of God.

The gift of sexuality: proclamations from the grassroots

'The night after my husband's father died, I remember putting everything of myself into our lovemaking. It was my way of holding him, healing him in his grief.'

'There's nothing like being held by your spouse. So many of life's stresses just seem to melt away.'

'From my own mother I learned that sex was a dirty word. But my mother-in-law had an entirely different perspective. I was enthralled by the way she spoke of the magic of romance, the beauty of the love between a man and a woman.'

'As a parent I watch my daughters and sons blossoming into young women and men. It is wonderful! Though not without its heartaches. Growing up is a precious—and often fragile—journey.'

John Paul II's theology is described as 'personalist' and 'subjective'. That is, it is a study of the human person from the 'I' perspective. It differs from (and complements) traditional scholastic theology in that it takes as its starting point human experience rather than objective principles.

Abstract principles do not sit easily in the minds of contemporary men and women. People today seek to understand through personal experience. The Pope recognises this and speaks in personalist terms. He has great confidence that the church's teachings about sexuality, if explained in language and concepts accessible to people today, will become self-evident, so deeply are God's laws imprinted on the human heart.

The **revelation** of God

II. The way it is: historical humanity

This original harmony between man and woman was ruptured through sin. The Genesis story tells of the choice of Adam and Eve to disobey God. At the heart of their disobedience is a mistrust of God's gift. *Can God really have my interests at heart? Surely not.* In failing to trust in God's love, they begin to mistrust each other. *After all, if I don't trust God, why should I trust you?* Unable to see God clearly, original man and woman can no longer see God revealed through their own bodies. Now they look upon one another not with awe at the mystery of God but with lust and self-centred desire to manipulate the other. They no longer experience their nakedness without shame. They cover their bodies as a form of self-protection. As they hide their bodies they hide their true selves.

And so sin entered the world. This tragedy has remained with us throughout human history. It is from this tragic predicament that Christ promises to free us, and this freedom involves our sexuality. As God-made-flesh, Jesus sacrifices his body, his whole manhood, on the

cross, redeeming us in and through our bodies. The Good News is that it is possible to live in true freedom as man and woman. To be alive in the risen Christ is to be sexually alive!

III. The way it will be: eschatological humanity

Just as our origins are inseparable from the nuptial union of man and woman, so too is our destiny. God wants to live in intimate communion with us for all eternity. In fact, the final coming of Christ can be described as the eternal consummation of heaven and earth. In the eternal kingdom there will be no separation between the earthly and the divine. Everything will be in complete union in Christ. All that is masculine will be in union with all that is feminine.

Think for a moment of the deepest expression of human intimacy you can possibly imagine. This is just a taste, a mere shadow of the intimacy we will one day share with God. One day we will *know* God. We will see God face to face. Marital intimacy is not done away with in heaven, but fulfilled beyond our wildest dreams. Our bodily sexuality will not disappear in heaven; our bodies will be made gloriously new and our manhood or womanhood ultimately fulfilled.

The body reveals God

The body is capable of expressing the divine. It is through the human body that the invisible mystery of love, hidden in God for all eternity, is visibly revealed to the world.

Are we able to grasp this truth? Can we see the body as a sign of God? What a challenge this is to our spirituality, especially to Christians who for centuries have been plagued by disparaging attitudes towards the human body.

Such distortions are a form of 'impurity,' says John Paul II. Impurity of heart is the inability to see the mystery of God revealed through the body. But blessed are the pure of heart, for they are able to see God's revelation in and through the naked body.

Further exploration of the topic

John Paul II's theology of the body is available in book form (Pauline Books & Media, 1997).

Engaging, simplified explanations of the theology of the body are available through the talks of Christopher West: www.christopherwest.com

The assistance of Christopher West's material in preparing this *Landmarks* leaflet is gratefully acknowledged.

A sensual religion

Catholicism is a very 'earthy' religion. Catholics have a strong sense of sacrament—bodily, physical realities involving sight, sound, smell and touch—through which we encounter the divine.

Thus in the church community we bathe the body in water at baptism. We anoint the body with oil in confirmation. We eat the body and drink the blood of Christ in the Eucharist. And we venerate the one-flesh union of husband and wife in marriage. The nuptial union is the fundamental revelation of God's love to the world, says John Paul II. It is the foundation of the entire sacramental order.

The **language** of love

Marriage

If water is the sacramental sign for baptism, and oil is the sign for confirmation, what is the sign for the sacrament of marriage? Sexual intercourse, says Pope John Paul II. Consummation is where the words of the wedding vows become flesh. Each time a couple make love they renew their wedding vows. And what is the commitment of which the wedding vows speak? A life of love that is *free, total, faithful* and *fruitful*. The one-flesh union involves a *language of the body*, a language which is prophetic and liturgical because it proclaims God as loving and lifegiving and brings about that life and love in the world.

Celibacy

Marriage is not an end in itself, but a sign pointing to the transcendent. So too, in a different way, does the celibate draw attention to the divine presence. Far from being a rejection of one's sexuality, the celibate's manhood or womanhood is channelled

into a radical gospel witness, a bold proclamation that the kingdom of God is here among us. The sexual urge and deep human desire to be husband/father or wife/mother finds non-genital expression through a life spent loving God's people in tangible and lifegiving ways. Celibacy complements the marital vocation. Together they illuminate the love-life of God.

New thoughts about 'old' teachings

John Paul II's theology of the body is a new articulation of an age-old Christian position: the church regards the sexual union of man and woman as sacred and sacramental. In this light we can begin to understand why the church is so firm in its teaching about matters such as pre-marital sex, contraception, IVF... The church says 'no' to such practices, not because it is *against* sex, but because it is radically *for* sex and the total, unreserved, mutual self-giving it expresses within the covenant of marriage.

It is sadly true that the gospel message about the beauty of sexuality has not always been effectively communicated to the ordinary person. This was perhaps one of our greatest failures as a church in the face of the sexual revolution of the twentieth century. The gospel message has also been clouded by distorted views and misinformation spread through the popular press. But the lies are wearing thin, for society's efforts to rid itself of the Christian sexual ethic has reaped tragic results. Through the theology of the body John Paul II offers contemporary men and women a fresh insight into the essence of the gospel message and invites them to reconsider and embrace the full truth about their sexuality.

Think about it

- Am I at ease with my own sexuality?
- In what way does John Paul II's theology of the body challenge or stretch my thinking about spirituality and sexuality?
- What influences—positive and negative—have been part of my sexual formation?
- What do I enjoy about being a man or a woman?
- What sexual hurts have been part of my personal history?

A Prayer: *Lord, lead me to discover and live the full meaning of my manhood or womanhood. By the power of your cross, heal me of any wounds I carry in my sexuality. Bring me to fullness of life and joy in your Spirit. Amen.*

'Be not afraid!'

Given the complex personal histories of men and women, sexuality is a highly sensitive topic. John Paul II acknowledges the universality of the human struggle. Nobody has sexuality perfectly worked out! Redemption is a journey. It takes time.

'Be not afraid!' says the Pope. The gospel, though strong and confronting, is not meant as a condemnation but an invitation to discover anew the gift and freedom of one's sexuality. Christ liberates! If we find ourselves shaken or disturbed by the theology of the body, let's not pull away but enter prayerfully, courageously and honestly into a deeper reflection on this vital topic, confident in the power of God's love to heal and reveal.