

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This week, I will be travelling to Pennsylvania for “Theology of the Body II: Into the Deep” (TOB II) conference, given by Christopher West. I thought I’d share a bit about what Theology of the Body is. In the early years of his pontificate, Pope St. John Paul II used his Wednesday audiences to teach about how our bodies point to the truth of who God is (hence, *theology* – study of God – of the *body*). Since we are made in the image and likeness of God, then who we are points to the truth of who God is. St. John Paul said this:

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. (*Theology of the Body 19:4*)

This quote is a powerful reminder that our bodies are not incidental to us; they are not an accident of nature, but point to the invisible reality of who we are and who God is. When people look at us, they must look at our bodies, for they cannot see our invisible souls. When we stub our toes, we don’t say, “The appendage at the bottom of my mobile unit is in pain,” we say, “**OUCH!!!**” (proving that **I** am in pain). Our bodies are us, and we are our bodies. Now, we are more than our bodies (we have immortal souls as well), but our bodies are inherent to who we are. We are ensouled bodies or embodied souls. Our bodies point to the invisible reality of who we are.

Since our bodies make visible the invisible reality of who we are, it means our bodies are not incidental to us. If someone said that he didn’t *feel* he was supposed to have a left arm, and amputated it to make him more “himself,” would that be good? Would that help him become “more himself”? No, it would be a mutilation. When an anorexic teenager thinks she is fat, when really she is unhealthily underweight, do we say that she should continue doing what her inner self feels? No. In both cases, we would think they need help in order to bring their internal view of themselves into alignment with the physical reality. In the same way, when someone is struggling with gender dysphoria. Changing their genitals don’t change the reality of their sex (especially since our sex is more than our genitals – our XX or XY chromosomes are in every gene of our bodies). These people need empathy, of course, not judgment, but they also don’t need to radically change their bodies. They need help, help that may come from counselling, etc., but may also only come from healing from Jesus’ healing love.

Moving on, one key point of John Paul’s Theology of the Body is what he calls the “nuptial meaning of the body.” Nuptial means marital, so the meaning of the body points to marital union. When we look at our bodies, most of our systems could make sense without other people – the Gastrointestinal System makes sense, the nervous system makes sense, etc., even if I were the only human alive. But one system does not – the reproductive system. As an individual, the body’s reproductive system is incomplete – the male sperm or the female ovum only have half of the required genes. To have a full human, you need both sperm and ovum to unite to have the full complement of genes. Even on the visible physical level, the make-up of our genitals make no sense without the other sex. This points to the fact that our bodies were made for that nuptial union.

Why did God make us this way? He didn’t have to, since He made other beings asexual in their reproduction. John Paul points to the truth that the nuptial union is a visible sign of the Trinity. When a husband and wife unite in the marriage act, the two become one flesh. They are united in love, and it is often called “making love” (in our fallen world, of course, it is not always done by husband and wife, nor is it always a love act, but this is how God created it to be. Much like the fact that God made our GI system for eating, but we can overeat, under-eat, or eat the wrong things – in this, as in all things, we can go against God’s plan). This union, this love, is so real that nine months later you may have to give it a name. So two become one, and one becomes three – an image of God as Trinity in unity, unity in Trinity. God made our bodies in such a way that they point to how He made us by love, for love, in love, and that God *is* love. God’s love is gift, and we receive – gift and reception.

Knowing this, we see that the marriage act – which is essential to marriage – is an image of God’s love, which is total, faithful, free, and fruitful (seen from Christ’s perfect love for us on the Cross). It is total – it holds nothing back, for it is total gift of the self to the other. It is faithful – it is “until death do us part” and allows no other love to get in between, and act of love to be shared only between life-long partners. It is free – it cannot be pressured or coerced. It is fruitful – it brings life and love to the other, and is open to the possibility of “third” person coming (a baby). When we look at the Church’s sexual morality in light of this truth, everything makes sense. Does pornography point us to union with another? In masturbation, are we able to gift ourselves to another? Is the hookup culture faithful? Does rape point to gift and reception? Are homosexual acts open to life? The answer to all of these is “no.” This is also why artificial contraception is morally wrong – it mutilates the marriage act so that it is no longer open to life, and it gets in the way of a total gift of self (“I want you... but not your fertility” “I want you... but not your sperm.”).

I know I’ve probably gotten a few people upset, and I don’t have enough space to elaborate on these teachings of the Church. If you are struggling with the Church’s teaching on sexual morality, I would encourage you to continue seeking the truth, especially in the beautiful teaching of John Paul II’s Theology of the Body. Please don’t just “shut down,” but ask why the Church teaches what it teaches. One good resource is Christopher West’s book *Good News about Sex and Marriage: Answers to Your Honest Questions about Catholic Teaching: Revised Edition* (Servant Books).