

Called to Love: John Paul II's Theology of Human Love

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Saints Joachim and Anna, parents of Mary.

From the chapel of Sacred Heart University, Fairfield, Connecticut.

The mosaic was completed by Fr. Marko Ivan Rupnik, SJ and the artists
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NOTE TO THE READER: The following reflections on St. John Paul II's theology of human love, or "theology of the body," are greatly indebted to the book, *Called to Love: Approaching John Paul II's Theology of the Body*, by Carl Anderson and José Granados (New York: Doubleday, 2009). Those interested in a more in-depth introduction to the pope's groundbreaking teaching on marriage, the family and sexuality in the context of the human person's vocation to love are invited to consult that text.

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“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....” (Genesis 1:27-28)

Adam and Eve in Paradise, clothed in glory. From church of St. Mary, Mother of the Church, Maribor-Pobrežje, Slovenia. Image courtesy of Centro Aletti.

God's Plan for Human Love

Educating a Pastor

Before he became Pope John Paul II, Father and then Bishop Karol Wojtyła would often go hiking or kayaking with his many young adult friends. Amid these excursions, he listened as they talked about their desire to live their relationships in a way that would bring them lasting happiness. They shared with him their hopes, fears, difficulties and discoveries in love. Many of these young men and women became engaged, and Wojtyła celebrated their weddings and baptized their children, accompanying them through the challenges and joys of family life. In them, he saw firsthand what he expressed in his play, *The Jeweler's Shop*: “To create something, to reflect ... absolute Existence and Love is possibly the most extraordinary thing that exists.”¹

When Cardinal Wojtyła became pope, he said that these young people taught him one of the most important lessons of his life: “I learned to love human love.”² Then, when he began his pontificate with five years of intense reflection on marriage, family and sexuality in the context of the human person's vocation to love, his “education” – and these young people – became part of the patrimony of the universal Church.

In John Paul II's cycle of 129 weekly catecheses on human love, commonly known as the "theology of the body," the world received the rich fruit of lives such as Jerzy Ciesielski's. One of Fr. Wojtyła's young friends, Ciesielski not only taught the priest how to kayak and shared with him his tremendous *joie de vivre*; he showed him the beauty and the seriousness with which a Christian can approach the decision to marry. After Ciesielski died suddenly in 1970, Bishop Wojtyła recalled the night that Ciesielski decided to propose to his future wife: "I will never forget that evening when he returned from Tyniec, where, in prayer ... he had prepared for the great decision of his life.... From that day, he knew and was fully convinced ... that it was God who had given her to him."³

From such firsthand observations, John Paul II grew in understanding that the Church's teaching about marriage, sexuality, and the human vocation to love is not just a series of "do's" and "don'ts." Such rules certainly exist, but they do not make sense out of context: They are grounded in a far greater and more beautiful understanding of what life means and who the human person is in God's plan. This greater understanding is what gave Ciesielski his infectious joy and his earnestness when deciding to marry. It is likewise what enabled Fr. Wojtyła not just to find the Church's teaching on marriage and sexuality intellectually convincing, but to *fall in love* with human love.

“In the beginning...”

In the Gospels, the way that the Pharisees approach Jesus is very similar to the way many of our contemporaries approach Christianity. They ask Jesus what they think is a strictly moral question: “Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason?” (Matthew 19:3). In the Jewish legal tradition of that time, this meant: for only a serious reason, or for any reason at all? While this question has lost none of its relevance today, it also stands for others: “Is it permissible to engage in same-sex sexual relationships, alter family structures, seek in-vitro fertilization or divorce and remarry? Yes or no?”

The Pharisees may not realize it, but their question is too small. Hidden within it – as in our more contemporary questions – are far greater questions about the nature of the human person and the meaning of love. So rather than responding in terms of what is or is not allowed, Jesus says something that might strike the Pharisees, or us, as strange: “From the beginning it was not so” (Matthew 19:8). He places the Pharisees before the most original and essential fact about humanity: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them” (Genesis 1:27). The whole truth about love begins with these words.

In the face of the many contemporary questions about sexual morality, John Paul II recalled this answer of Jesus. In other words, the pope, too, began his teaching on human love not with society’s “disputed questions,” but with some-

thing much deeper – something that gave his young Polish friends a reason for living, and that he as pope had to articulate for the whole Church and the world. By returning to Christ’s challenge to the Pharisees, John Paul II directed our attention to the creation of man and woman, and God’s plan for human love.

When John Paul II began his theology of human love with an investigation of Genesis chapters 1 and 2, just as Christ referred the Pharisees to the original divine plan, his intent was not to give a scientific account of creation. The Book of Genesis uses figurative language to express profound truths about God, the world he created, and what it means to be a human being.⁴

Christ, who “knows what is in man,” understood that no moral question can be answered, or even asked properly, until we go a step further and contemplate this truth about creation. The answer regarding what we can or can’t do will remain unintelligible until we ask *who* man and woman are created to be. Following his Lord, John Paul II challenges us, too, to go to the deepest level: In pondering God’s Word, we must not limit ourselves to asking for a checklist of “do’s” and “don’ts.” First, we must try to understand what it means to be human.

Only if we set out on this path of reflection and understanding can Christ’s vision of the human person and the world transform our own vision. Starting with John Paul II’s rich teaching on human love, we can set out on such a path of conversion. We can begin to understand who we are and what love is, and so come to see the world as it truly is.

Creation: A Gift

John Paul II noted that the first thing Genesis 1 and 2 reveal to us about God is that he is the Creator.⁵ But what does this really mean? Did God decide to amuse himself by putting together elements like mechanical parts, without really investing his innermost being? Did he make things for no particular reason and then forgot about the work of his hands? Or is there something more going on in the Bible's creation account, in which we catch a glimpse of the nature of God?

The pope gives a decisive answer. He contemplates the act of creation, in which there was at first *nothing* that existed but God. Then, in an act of unfathomable, sheer generosity – “*Let there be...!*” (cf. Genesis 1:3) – there was a cosmos whose beauty and power are a kind of fingerprint of the Creator. Creation “signifies *gift*,” the pope wrote, “a fundamental and ‘radical’ gift ... an act of giving in which the gift comes into being precisely from nothing.”⁶

All other kinds of gift-giving require a giver and a receiver already to be present. But creation is not an ordinary gift: In creating the universe, along with man and woman, God gives the receivers their very existence. Adam and Eve – who, in Genesis, stand for the first man and woman as well as for all men and women – are themselves a gift. Their being has its source in God's generosity, his desire to communicate his goodness. They live “in the dimension of the gift.”⁷

Indeed, the entire universe is a gift, but one that only

becomes intelligible when Adam – that is, the human person – comes into being, created in the image and likeness of God. This creature, unlike the others, can marvel at the universe and echo the judgment of his Creator: “It was very good” (Genesis 1:31). Adam is capable not only of receiving the gift of creation, but of allowing its richness and beauty to provoke a question in him: “Where does all this goodness come from?”

A little like children discovering the world for the first time, Adam can ask “Why?” – or better, “Who?” What does this gift mean and what is its source? He can discover that “the world is mysterious, not because it lacks meaning,” but because it contains so much meaning that he will never exhaust it.⁸ In other words, Adam can *wonder*. The “fingerprint of God” in creation means that this world is always bigger, deeper and more beautiful than human understanding. It calls to man, moving him to search for the origin of all this abundance.

John Paul further observed: “Man appears in creation as the one who has received the world as a gift, and vice versa, one can also say that the world has received man as a gift.”⁹ Because the world appears to Adam as a mysterious gift, “saturated with meaning,”¹⁰ he loves it – and in loving it and serving it, he becomes a gift to the world.

The Body Reveals the Person

When God gave Adam existence and placed him in a world overflowing with meaning, he also gave him a particular

“mode” to welcome this immeasurably generous gift of creation. Alternatively, we might say that a particular “dimension” was given to the human person, which enables him to receive the world as a gift and to be a gift to the world. This dimension of human existence is the *body*.

This way of speaking about the body may surprise us. We live in a society that often reduces the body to its biological functions, or thinks of it as like a complicated machine, the dysfunctions of which simply require the right medication, exercise program, diet or self-help book to remedy. For a long time now, Western society has tended to view the body as nothing more than a material object that we happen to inhabit and that we can use however we like.

If we reflect for a moment, however, it is not hard to see how such a view contradicts basic human experience. My body can't be merely a tool that I use, or a machine that is separable from me, for I *am* my body in a way that I never “am” a tool or machine. When my body suffers, I suffer. When it is hungry or thirsty, I hunger and thirst. When my lips form a smile or my hands reach out to embrace, I smile and embrace – and others understand what I “say” even if I have not uttered a word.

In these examples, we begin to grasp a key point in John Paul II's “theology of the body.” Because he has a body, Adam is like the other animals. Yet, because he has a *human* body, he is also utterly different from them: This body is something unique in the world. John Paul II explained that the human body “expresses the person.”¹¹ It shows forth man, created in the image and likeness of God.

Because of his body, Adam can wonder at the richness of the universe and cultivate the earth that has been entrusted to him, manifesting his person through creative work. He can recognize another body that “expresses the person,” receiving that person with a cry of rejoicing at the goodness of God: “This one at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!” (Genesis 2:23). He can love, entering into communion with another person. Above all, he can “walk in the cool of the evening” with God (cf. Genesis 3:8): He can be the one animal in creation that prays.

The body immerses us in the world in a particular way (i.e., in this place, with these physical characteristics, with these relatives, perhaps with this disability), but this immersion is not a cruel imposition. Rather, it is the way given to us to receive the world and others as God’s gift to us, and to serve it as the gift that God made of us to the world. Our body allows us to encounter and communicate with the world, other people, and God. In other words, it makes communion – the gift of self given and received – possible for us. The bodily dimension of human existence makes visible the fact that we were made for love.

Original Solitude

In Genesis 2, Adam is created prior to Eve and is depicted as being alone among the animals. Embodied like them, he nonetheless does not find companionship in them, for his body, unlike theirs, reveals a *person*, a subject. He can think, wonder and ask about the meaning of things: He has reason. He is free to choose what is good: He has a will.

The physical world, which he discovers through his body, “speaks” to him, but it also impels him to search for meaning. Adam is restless, for he discovers something like a call inscribed in his embodied existence.

God, who reflected before fashioning this creature – “Let us make man in our image...” – made him different from the birds, fish, creeping things and cattle (cf. Genesis 1:20-26). Adam’s body not only orients him toward the plants, animals and things of creation, which he names; it orients him toward hearing God’s word (cf. Genesis 2:16) and toward speech. In other words, this creature, whose body manifests reason and will, is oriented toward dialogue – toward *communion*.

The first communion in which Adam is established when he comes into existence is communion with God. John Paul II taught that Adam alone “is constituted according to the measure of ‘*partner of the Absolute*.’”¹² Man cannot find true companionship in the animals, for he was made for dialogue with Someone else. When Scripture tells us that man is created in the image of God, this means above all that he is created in a “*unique, exclusive and unrepeatable relationship with God himself*.”¹³ This is the fundamental – and fundamentally positive – dimension of the human person that John Paul II called “original solitude.”¹⁴

“Original solitude” does not first mean that Adam was created in the garden without Eve, as if the Creator placed him, unhappy and lonely, in Paradise. Rather, its primary meaning is that Adam is created with a call to communion planted deep within him: He is created for the supreme

happiness of communion with God. St. Augustine expressed this basic truth about human existence in a famous prayer: “You made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”¹⁵

Eve’s arrival will not take away this dimension of original solitude. The solitude of every man and woman before God is precisely what makes them persons, created out of love and called to love.¹⁶ It is what enables them to receive creation as a gift and to become a gift in their turn. Original solitude is at the heart of human dignity.

Original Unity

In Genesis 2, God says, “It is not good that the man should be alone” (2:18). Again, this does not mean that original solitude is a negative experience, making Adam unhappy. Rather, it indicates that Adam cannot fully understand himself or his fundamental relation to God without Eve.

Adam’s experience of the world through his body shows him that the world is a gift. Yet he cannot grasp the depth and breadth of this gift until someone can help him discover that the Giver is not just good or almighty – for the fingerprint God leaves on creation is *love*. This discovery is hidden in Adam’s joyful exclamation, which is in some way repeated every time a man and a woman fall in love: “This one at last ...!” he cries. This at last is another person, created from love and called to love! She is intimately related to me – “bone of my bones” – sharing the same humanity. And she is fundamentally different from me, in a difference that is essential

to the experience of unity: “She shall be called *woman*” (Genesis 2:23). In her presence, Adam begins to understand the call to communion written into his being

In other words, in the presence of Eve, Adam finally understands that he is a man (in the sense of masculine, and not just of generic “human being”). His body bears a call to a loving gift of self, through which he enters into a fruitful and faithful communion of persons. John Paul II explained that this mutual self-gift is based on “masculinity and femininity, which are, as it were, two different ‘incarnations’ ... in which the ... human being, created ‘in the image of God,’ is a body.”¹⁷ Communion-through-difference, in which man and woman not only individually but *together* image God, is the dimension of the human person that John Paul II called “original unity.”¹⁸ This unity complements, but does not eliminate, the human person’s original solitude.

Genesis describes Adam and Eve’s subjective experience of their unity with these words: “The man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed” (Genesis 2:25). This lack of shame is not at all equivalent to “shamelessness.” It is an experience of fullness that human beings lost when they rejected God’s love through sin. John Paul II called this fullness “original innocence.”¹⁹ Such innocence is not naïveté, but rather seeing the other person completely and naturally within God’s vision, without the slightest inclination to manipulate or use. In Eve, Adam saw a being created for her own sake, a child of God, a partner of the Absolute and therefore a true companion. And she saw him in the same way.²⁰

They recognized that their masculine and feminine bodies mark out a path to love: The human body is a call to live “according to the *communio personarum* [communion of persons] willed for them ... by the Creator.”²¹ And if the Creator planted such a call to self-gift and communion in the depths of their being as an essential dimension of their likeness to him, then what must God himself be? John Paul II wrote that because the body is a “witness to creation as a fundamental gift,” it is also “a witness to Love as the source from which this same giving springs.”²²

The Creator is indeed more than good and almighty. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “God who created man out of love also calls him to love – the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being. For man is created in the image and likeness of God who is himself love” (1604).

The Nuptial Meaning of the Body

The first man and woman bear in their whole being – even in their bodies – a call to receive each other and give themselves to one another in a communion that involves every dimension of their persons: physical, emotional and spiritual. It even involves time: their whole lives. Genesis describes this very concisely: “Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24).

Adam and Eve’s masculine and feminine bodies are naturally ordered to receiving each other, becoming a gift for one other and participating in a mutual fruitfulness.

Adam welcomes Eve and receives her as she is created in her femininity; in doing so, he becomes a gift for her. Likewise, in being welcomed by Adam, Eve “welcomes him in the same way, as he is willed ‘for his own sake’ by the Creator and constituted by him through his masculinity.”²³ They discover that their bodies have a *nuptial* or spousal meaning. That is, their bodies orient them to a complete gift of self that is fruitful and enduringly faithful.

This nuptial meaning of the body is not some kind of compulsion or blind instinct; there is no gift without freedom. And yet the freedom involved here is also not arbitrary choice, as if Adam and Eve could have come up with some alternative meaning of their body, or a call to something other than a fruitful and faithful communion of persons. Rather, in the presence of one another, man and woman discover an order to creation: The whole universe – including themselves – is sheer gift. We could just as well say that this order, which surrounds and permeates them, is love.

Man and woman are invited to live in this order by freely receiving one another and giving themselves. In this way, their *being* – their deepest nature – is fulfilled. Together, they discover a truth that the Second Vatican Council would articulate anew for our time: “Man cannot ‘fully find himself except in a sincere gift of self.’”²⁴

John Paul II wrote that the first man and woman “emerged from love and initiate love”; the human person is “rooted in Love.”²⁵ In other words, the nuptial meaning of the body is foundational for human existence. This is true even for those who do not marry, such as persons called to

follow the Lord in a life of consecrated virginity. In a very basic sense, the human person is called, and desires, to love – that is, to make a gift of himself, to exist in communion. No human being can make sense of his existence or experience true happiness outside of communion.

In a beautiful paradox, Adam and Eve’s communion with one another does not eliminate their original solitude; rather, it deepens this original communion with God. The first man and woman discover that the most adequate response that they can give to the Creator’s supreme generosity is to *be for another*, to be gift: to give themselves totally, body, soul and spirit, forever. They are both partners of the Absolute, and God himself gave them to each other as a path to himself. To be true to him, to themselves, and to the gift of creation, their love has to be total and complete.

Setting out together on the path of mutual self-giving, they intuit again, and more deeply, what it means that the Source of the universe is not just good or almighty, but Love. In the call to love written into their bodies, man and woman catch a first glimpse that at the origin of all things is the God who said “Let *us* make man in our image” (Genesis 1:26). God himself is unsurpassable Unity-in-Difference, an unfathomable communion of Love.

The Generative Meaning of the Body

We have seen how original solitude, in which every human being is created in relationship with the Creator, is the abiding foundation for original unity, in which man and

woman together image God. In a way, this is like saying that being children of God – coming into existence already in communion with him – is the abiding foundation of making a gift of oneself. How could we give if we had not first received the gift of existence? How could we learn to love unless we were first loved (cf. 1 John 4:19)?

Original solitude and original unity are, then, two dimensions of the same reality. They both mean existing “in the dimension of the gift,” whether this means the gift we first received or the gift that we are called to become.

Original solitude – that is, man and woman’s primordial communion with God – and original unity – that is, their communion with one another before God – are both deepened in yet another fundamental human experience. When the spouses become “one flesh” (Genesis 2:24), they receive visible proof that their love is greater than the two of them. It is fruitful beyond any work that they do or anything they produce: They become parents.

John Paul II commented that the biblical expression for conjugal union, “to know,” is evocative. In this encounter between two human subjects, man and woman in fact come to a new knowledge of one another, and so help each other to a new knowledge of themselves. A further dimension of their persons emerges. Along with a nuptial meaning, their bodies have a *generative meaning*: They carry in themselves the capacity to become a father or a mother.

The full meaning of man and woman’s experience of unity emerges with time. In nine months, there is a third who crowns their love: a child. The original unity of man and

woman is by nature fruitful, open to receiving and nurturing others. In this way, too, it images – and participates in – the generosity of the Creator. In their child, the spouses have a visible testament that they live “in the dimension of the gift.”

Eve’s joyful cry at seeing the superabundant fruit of their union echoes Adam’s wondering cry at meeting his wife: “I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD!” (Genesis 4:1). Here is something that utterly exceeds any capacity of the spouses to make or imagine: a new subject, a unique and unrepeatable person, another partner of the Absolute. They can take no credit for the being of this child, for like them, he is created from love and called to love, in the inviolable dignity of original solitude. This child who was “gotten ... with the help of the LORD” is made for communion with God.

The love of the parents and the wholeness with which they give themselves is the first revelation to the child that Absolute Love is at the origin of his existence. In time, he comes to recognize this love as a reflection of God himself. The love of his parents reflects to him the Love that called him into being.

In all these fundamental human experiences – original solitude, original unity and discovering the generative meaning of the body – we see that the human person does not show forth God’s image or respond to his “fundamental and innate vocation”²⁶ alone. He always does so in a communion of persons – as a child, spouse and parent – setting out together on a path of love toward God.



“Create in me a clean heart, O God...” (Psalm 51:10)

France Prešeren Publishing House, Ljubljana, Slovenia.
Image courtesy of Centro Aletti.

Fall and Redemption

A Rejection of Love

The Book of Genesis recounts God's first words to Adam: "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden..." (Genesis 2:16). The Creator gives with unreserved generosity. He places Adam in the "dimension of the gift." He also gives one commandment that is meant to help Adam remain in this dimension or order permeating the universe: "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat" (Genesis 2:17).

These figurative images reveal a profound truth. As we have seen, the order of creation is an order of love, and love has to be kept. God's immeasurably generous Word, which called the universe into being and fashioned man and woman in the image of God, asks to be kept. Love requires obedience, that is, remaining in a right relationship to the One who first loved.

As long as Adam and Eve recognize that their own freedom - indeed, their very existence - has come to them as a gift of God's love, they will live in the freedom of the gift. If they break the order of love, saying to God, "We don't want you!" then they place themselves outside the generosity in which the world was made. Because they were made for receiving and being a gift, they also break something deep

within themselves: “For in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Genesis 2:17).

“You may freely eat of *every* tree” but one, God said. The only “tree” from which they could not eat contained the mystery of God’s freedom – and also of man’s freedom, for the human person was created free in order to be able to enter into communion with God. Adam and Eve can remain in a relationship of loving obedience to God, knowing that at the center of their freedom is his freedom, which created and upholds it.

The tempter is subtle. He twists God’s words, as the first lie finds its way into creation: “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat of *any* tree...?’” (Genesis 3:1). Didn’t he give you this commandment not because he is a Giver and a Lover, but because he wants to withhold real freedom from you? He must be stingy, not wanting you to “be like God” – as you will be if you grasp this fruit on your own (Genesis 3:5).

Thus the “serpent” distorts the luminous truth that Adam and Eve had already been created in the image and likeness of God. God *wanted* to enter into dialogue with them. He made them “partners of the Absolute” and upheld their freedom in his. But because he is God and they are not, he has to give them this gift. He has to show them how to live as his “likeness,” and love them with the love that they will then show forth in the world.

The first man and woman listened to the original “master of suspicion.”²⁷ They wanted to know not only good but also evil, and sin showed its ugly face in mankind. Adam and Eve chose not to remain in the order of love. They no

longer wished to receive creation, one another and God himself as sheer gift, and so shattered something in the world and in themselves. Gone was the communion that had filled their days, the glory of God that had covered them and the harmony they had enjoyed with the universe. Scripture expresses this staggering loss with tremendous simplicity: The man and the woman “knew that they were naked,” and they hid (Genesis 3:7-8).

For the first time, they face the possibility of looking at one another selfishly, with eyes that calculate how another human being can be used for pleasure or profit. The meaning of their body is no longer clear; indeed, their bodies seem to rebel against them. They have become like strangers to the world, to one another and to God. John Paul II explained, “What shows itself through ‘nakedness’ is man ... alienated from the Love that was the source of the original gift, the source of the fullness of good intended for every creature.”²⁸

Shame

This alienation – or, given what God intended for man and woman, this terrible Fall – expresses itself in two related experiences: shame and fear.

“Cosmic shame” is what John Paul II called the first kind of shame man and woman feel after the Fall.²⁹ Man and woman sense that they are out of harmony with the universe. Their bodies no longer clearly express their persons, transparently manifesting the image of God. The body has also lost its harmonious relationship with the

physical world. Work is toilsome, a struggle against forces of nature that now threaten existence. The body humiliates with its weakness, disordered drives and clumsiness in expression. Death looms on the horizon, and decay seems to be a final humiliation afflicting not only men and women, but all of existence.

Because the human person no longer spontaneously perceives the world and the body as gift, he is tempted to view the world as an empty collection of things. If once he received the world as a marvelous gift of the Creator to cultivate and care for (cf. Genesis 2:15), now he tends to exploit the world, his own body and other persons, turning all of these to his own ends. He has lost his ability to see God in all things and all things in God. John Paul II wrote, “*Man in some way loses the original certainty of the ‘image of God’ expressed in his body. He also loses in a certain way the sense of his right to participate in the perception of the world, which he enjoyed in the mystery of creation.*”³⁰

Alongside this new imbalance in the human person’s relationship with the world, he harbors an even deeper imbalance within his own heart. This disharmony is what John Paul II called “immanent shame.” “Man’s original spiritual and somatic [bodily] unity” is fractured, and “his body has ceased drawing on the power of the spirit.”³¹ When his body begins to rebel against his spirit, he loses his natural self-possession and self-dominion. He is divided.

This interior “war” has drastic effects on human relationships. Whereas Adam and Eve were once able to build a common world, now they are tempted to domination,

violence, and manipulative desire (cf. Genesis 3:16). They are afraid not just of God, whom they disobeyed, but of each other. The very dimension of human existence that was meant to serve interpersonal communion, the masculine and feminine body, they now look upon with doubt: “Sexual shame ... attests to the loss of the original certainty, that through its masculinity and femininity the human body ... expresses his communion [of persons] and serves to realize it.”³² The love between man and woman is no longer obviously linked for them to God’s love.

Christian tradition uses a specific term to describe these fissures running through men and women after the Fall: concupiscence. Concupiscence is a kind of blindness to the truth of the human person, a distortion of desire that inclines the person toward sin. When the world is no longer understood as a gift from God, who is good, men and women are inclined to measure themselves, other people and things according to a false understanding. The body, which now “carries within itself a constant hotbed of resistance against the spirit,”³³ is all too often inclined to the pursuit of pleasure or profit, not love. In the place of the logic of love, which had been the original order of creation, a logic of domination takes hold.

This is indeed a “Fall” from the beauty of the beginning. The human person “suffered damage in what belongs to nature itself, to humanity in the original fullness ‘of the image of God.’”³⁴ Tradition calls this damage “original sin.” Although original sin caused a fracture in man and in all his relationships, it is not the “absolute criterion” by which we

understand the human person or ethics.³⁵ God's word at creation – "It is very good" (Genesis 1:31) – and the call to love he planted deep within man and woman is too great to be cancelled by sin.

Even shame opens up to a positive meaning. John Paul II noted that in the fallen world, man and woman's sense of shame is not only a measure of disharmony; it also helps them to protect what remains sacred in them. Adam and Eve still bear the dignity of children of God. They are still called to communion with their Creator and with one another, so they "made themselves aprons" in order to protect themselves from a reductive or concupiscent gaze (Genesis 3:7). Reflecting on St. Paul's letters, John Paul II explained: "From shame is born 'reverence' for one's own body, a reverence that Paul asks us to keep."³⁶

Man and woman have not completely lost a sense of their original calling. They are profoundly injured, yet they need not despair. God's word and his fidelity are greater than their tragedy. No sin can eliminate the goodness of creation or the dignity of the human person, made in the image and likeness of God.

Life in the Perspective of Redemption

From the moment Adam and Eve lost original innocence, and so Paradise, humanity lived in hope: God proclaimed a day when the woman's "seed" would crush the serpent, the tempter (Genesis 3:15). In other words, from the moment of

mankind's first "No" to God's love, human history was lived within the hope of redemption. Adam, Eve and all their descendants waited for the day when they would be restored to existence within "the dimension of the gift."

Original sin destroyed the fullness of love that was our first parents' birthright, but it did not sever all access to the original human experiences. The tiny infant still awakens to the wonder of his mother's smile and smiles in return; he comes to an awareness of himself already within a communion of love. Likewise, the child's eyes are still full of wonder as he discovers the world. Men and women who fall in love in a manner deeper than passing infatuation still sense that their bodies bear a call to a complete gift of self.

Of course, Adam and Eve could not retrieve the spontaneity with which they once could express the meaning of their bodies. The body lost its original transparency: Original solitude, original unity and the generative meaning of the body are still at work in people's experiences, but these dimensions are not obvious as they were at the beginning. None of their best efforts to be virtuous can heal the damage of concupiscence.

The situation of mankind was not hopeless, but it had only one hope: Redemption can come only from God. For centuries, mankind waited and toiled. For further centuries, God's chosen people, Israel, prayed in hope, receiving the beginning of God's communication of himself through the Law and the prophets. Finally, in "the fullness of time" (Galatians 4:4), came the unsurpassable expression of the mercy of God: "For God so loved the world that he gave his

only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

The incarnate Son of God took up the meaning of our bodies and lived it in his life, death and resurrection: “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14). Jesus Christ, in whom divinity and humanity were joined in the Virgin’s womb,³⁷ was the Son, the Bridegroom and the image of the Father. In his life, death and resurrection, he took upon himself man’s fractured image and likeness to God and made it whole.

The Second Vatican Council states: “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.”³⁸ In him, the human body was once again what John Paul II called a “primordial sacrament”: a visible and effective manifestation of God’s love in the world.³⁹

The council also said that when the eternal Son became “the perfect man who restored in the children of Adam that likeness to God which had been disfigured ever since the first sin,”⁴⁰ human nature did more than simply revert to its original state. Christ’s body is not only a “primordial sacrament” like Adam and Eve’s. This body is *the* Sacrament from which the Church’s seven sacraments flow: It is divinity “wedded” to humanity, God made flesh. Not even in all the splendor of original innocence could humanity have dreamed of a glory like this: “Human nature, by the very fact that it was assumed, not absorbed, in him, has been raised in us also to a dignity beyond compare.”⁴¹

Christ, whom tradition calls the new or second Adam, fully reveals God to man, and in doing so “reveals man to himself”:⁴² He both fulfills the original human experiences and crowns them in a new and unimaginable way.

Christ Fulfills the Meaning of the Body

When Adam and Eve no longer wished to live in the communion with God that was their “original solitude,” they became blind to God’s Fatherhood. Instead of the relation of trust in which they had been created, they saw in him only a jealous dictator whose freedom competed with their own. They wanted to be “like God” without God, unaware that they were thus terribly injuring their own, real likeness to God. In short, they ceased to be children – not childishly immature, which they became only after the Fall, but mature children receiving every good gift from their Father in heaven (cf. Matthew 7:11).

In his preaching and prayer, his life and his death, Christ manifested that he is the only-begotten Son of the Father. In our weak flesh, he thus perfected the dimension of original solitude, in which every human being was created as a “partner of the Absolute.” Jesus’ disciples heard him pray as no one had ever prayed: “*Abba, Father...*” (Mark 14:36). They saw his trust as he slept through a terrifying storm (Mark 4:38). Finally, one of them heard the great cry with which, in boundless surrender, the dying Son handed back his Spirit to his Father: “Father, into your hands I commend my spirit!” (Luke 23:46).

Adam and Eve had closed themselves off from God. They no longer wanted to receive his gifts. The Son, on the other hand, is so open that even his death is a prayer: Even then, he receives everything from the hands of the Father whom he knows to be good. In Jesus Christ, the human body's very vulnerability not only became an expression of communion with God. It also revealed the source of all communion: the unbreakable love between Father, Son and Spirit in God.

Furthermore, in revealing the full measure of God's love for mankind, Christ shows himself to be the true Bridegroom. In Israel, "the Bridegroom" was a title of the God of the Covenant, who loved his people with an everlasting love (cf. Isaiah 62:5; Hosea 2:16-20). When the incarnate Son gave himself to death for love of mankind, we see what John the Baptist intimated to his disciples. "He who has the bride is the Bridegroom," the Baptist said of Jesus (John 3:29): This title belongs to the Son of God, who accomplishes the "new and everlasting Covenant"⁴³ in his flesh. The Redeemer and Bridegroom of Israel and of the Church, restores and perfects the nuptial meaning of the body.

At first, this may sound strange to us. After all, Jesus did not take a particular woman as a wife. Yet what was his virginity but a complete openness, a willingness to receive the whole of creation and every human being as a gift from the Father? Unlike Adam and Eve, Christ loved without grasping. He wanted to return the world and every person to the Father healed of the injury caused by sin. In doing so, he fulfilled men and women's original calling: He not only received the world as a gift but became a gift to the world.

Indeed, he became a complete gift of self for the salvation of all of mankind

Carl Anderson and José Granados comment on this unexpected fulfillment of original solitude and original unity in the suffering body of Christ, which remains “the most eloquent ‘statement’ of these original experiences the language of the body has ever uttered.”⁴⁴ When he instituted the Eucharist on the night before he died, Jesus said, “This is my body, given up for you” (Luke 22:19): “In pronouncing this simple sentence, Christ fulfills the language of the body, because his words enact the total gift of his own flesh that manifests the Father’s love for the world.”⁴⁵

“*This is my body, given for you.*” In a way, the entire meaning of the body is fulfilled in these words. The body was meant to convey the gift of the person. It was meant to be a “place” of communion that bears fruit for God and the world. We should not be surprised, then, if Jesus’ gift of himself brings not only the body’s filial meaning (original solitude) and nuptial meaning (original unity), but also its generative meaning to superabundant fulfillment.

Eve rejoiced at the birth of one child, “gotten” with the help of the Lord. The Son of God incarnate “seals the covenant in the blood of his cross and ‘sends his Spirit’ (cf. John 19:30) on the Church ... the beloved and fruitful Bride who begets new children until the end of time.”⁴⁶

“Blessed are the pure of heart”: Life in the Spirit

Through his death and resurrection, Christ opened to us the path to become children of God again, and restored to us the possibility of true spousal love. We may think that this fulfillment of the meaning of the body is marvelous, but how can we share in all this when our hearts and our bodies are still scarred by concupiscence? How can what happened in Christ’s body be communicated to us? The distance between our poor ability to love and the love that Christ has shown us seems an impassable gulf.

In fact, this gulf is impassable – were it not for the gift given to us when the Father raised Jesus Christ from the dead. “Into your hands I commend my spirit,” the dying Jesus had cried to his Father (Luke 23:46). When the Father designated him “Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection” (Romans 1:4), this Spirit is poured out on all of mankind. The Holy Spirit, whom John Paul II called “uncreated gift,”⁴⁷ communicates Christ’s experiences to us and attunes our hearts to his love.

The Spirit of God is the Spirit of Love, who restores the broken image of God in us. As we saw, this image had been fractured by sin: The human person is divided in himself, and the effects of concupiscence also divide men and women from one another. The Holy Spirit, on the other hand, is a Spirit of unity, who works to reintegrate the dimensions of love: sensual impulse, emotion and the affirmation of the person’s dignity. Even more, the Spirit helps us to recognize the beloved’s relation to God. He opens our eyes to some-

thing we lost with the first sin: a recognition of God's participation in human love.

John Paul II spoke of this process of reintegration by focusing on two "fruits" of the Spirit in redeemed men and women: purity and piety. These gifts, or virtues, signal the healing of the fractures within the human person and in his relation to the world.

We often tend to think of virtues as following rules, or working toward self-perfection, but as John Paul II pointed out, this is not a Christian understanding. The virtues, such as purity and piety, are gifts of God's love that interiorly transform us. They are "not only – and not so much – 'works' of man, but more a 'fruit', that is, an effect, of the action of the 'Spirit' in man."⁴⁸ They are "effects" of the Spirit of Love in us that make us able creatively and spontaneously to share in God's love.

Purity, the first "fruit of the Spirit" that John Paul II discussed in the context of the redemption of love, is the virtue that reintegrates the human heart, so that its urges, emotions and desires are truly ordered toward love. It is the ability to receive our own body and others' bodies as a gift from God, rather than treating them as things that can be manipulated to yield pleasure or profit. The pope wrote, "Through redemption, every human being has received himself and his own body anew, as it were, from God."⁴⁹ This new awareness of God's gift brings with it a new obligation: We must revere the human body, remaining vigilant in the face of temptations to use or manipulate it so that our hearts may be trained in the art of true love.

From this perspective, purity is not prudishness. It is also not a trait of the weak. Rather, it takes courage to keep one's mind and body uncorrupted in order to give oneself away whole, thus discovering the depths of true love. John Paul II explained, "Purity is a requirement of love. It is the dimension of the inner truth of love in man's 'heart.'"⁵⁰ It allows us to perceive ourselves and others as persons, that is, as irreplaceable subjects created in the image and likeness of God.

Finally, purity allows us to perceive God himself, who is present in human love. "Blessed are the pure in heart," Jesus said – not just because they shall see themselves or other persons properly but because "*they shall see God*" (Matthew 5:8). In other words, purity is inseparable from piety, the gift of the Spirit that makes "the human subject sensitive to the dignity that belongs to the human body in virtue of the mystery of creation and of redemption."⁵¹ It "sees" and reveres God, to whom the body belongs, and who is the source of the call the body bears in itself.



“God who created man out of love also calls him to love – the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1604)

Marriage as a path of return to the Father: Saints Joachim and Anna, parents of Mary. From *Wall of the Divinization of Humanity*, Redemptoris Mater Chapel, Vatican City. Image courtesy of Centro Aletti.

Called to Love

“A sincere gift of self”

To summarize, in his catecheses on human love, or “theology of the body,” John Paul II wanted to give a framework for thinking about the human person, whose very body bears the signs of his original calling. Every human person is made in the image and likeness of God (cf. Genesis 1:26). Since Jesus Christ revealed that the one Creator-God is a communion of Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, this also means that every human being is made in the image of this perfect communion – this source of all love. Made *from* Love, man is called *to* love.

John Paul II undertook a profound re-reading of the creation account in Genesis, to show that while all of creation is a gift and reflects God’s generosity, the human person radiates this generosity in a special way. Man is a *person*, a free, bodily-spiritual subject who can receive the gift of creation from God. Most of all, he can receive another person as a gift and sign of God’s love, becoming a gift in return. In fact, the call to receive and to become a gift in love is written so deeply into the human person that the pope wrote: “Man ... *cannot ‘fully find himself except through a sincere gift of self.’* This is the magnificent paradox of human existence.”⁵²

The body plays a crucial role in this call to receive and to become a gift. The “body expresses ... the person”; in the body, something spiritual, the image of God, becomes visible.⁵³ The human body is a sign that we come from God, who calls us to communion with himself (original solitude) and with one another (original unity). More specifically, sexual differentiation, or existence as a man or as a woman, allows the human person to perceive that even his or her body “bears within it the sign of [God’s] original and fundamental gift.”⁵⁴ The sexually differentiated body is an invitation to a “sincere gift of self,” in an exclusive, faithful and fruitful union that reflects God’s own fidelity and generosity.

As we have seen, sin obscured the call to love written into the human person. Concupiscence led men and women to “misread” the body, ignoring its “language” of total self-gift. But when the Son of God took on a human body and bound himself in an indissoluble covenant of love to the Church his Bride, the “language of the body”⁵⁵ appeared in all its original power.

“This is my body” (Luke 22:19), Christ said in anticipation of his saving passion and death, his resurrection by the Father, and the outpouring of the gift of his Spirit on “all flesh” (cf. Joel 2:28). The Church who receives his flesh broken and his blood poured out for us understands: The body is meant to be given. We are meant to be given. The call to love that the human body bears in itself is ultimately a call to share in God’s love. Man’s fragile “Yes” to love is meant to share in a love that is stronger than death.

In the light of Christ's complete gift of self, into which Christians are baptized, we see everything more clearly: The human person is the one creature in the visible universe who is called to give his life away freely and definitively. His heart would never be satisfied with a vague, temporary or merely emotive half-love. As St. John Paul II and his friend Jerzy Ciesielski understood, man was made for a covenant. In whatever way this is granted to each person – even if it be only in a death accepted with loving surrender – he was made to say: “Forever.”

Marriage and Virginity

John Paul II does not end his catecheses on human love with his reflections on the virtues of purity and piety and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Rather, he contemplates the power of Christ's resurrection and the eternal life already at work in all those who have been “baptized into his death” (Romans 6:3).

The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead in the power of the Spirit was, the pope wrote, “not ... only a manifestation of the life that conquers death – a final return, as it were, to the Tree of Life.” It also points forward: It is “a revelation of man's destiny.”⁵⁵ Man was made for communion with God in “a love of such depth and power of concentration” that it will “completely absorb” and fulfill “the person's whole psychosomatic subjectivity” in heaven.⁵⁷ He was made to share in this final “forever” of love.

But for the baptized who have received the gift of the

Spirit, this future, heavenly “forever” is also at work now. The love of God revealed in Jesus Christ transforms them and informs their lives, shaping them according to God’s covenant. This shaping of human lives according to God’s love becomes most concrete and visible in what tradition calls the two “states of life”: marriage and consecrated virginity. On these profoundly interrelated paths, a man or a woman shares in Christ’s “sincere gift of self”⁵⁸ in such a way that this sharing becomes the all-encompassing form of that person’s life.

When Jesus Christ healed and fulfilled the meaning of the body in his incarnation, restoring man’s full image and likeness to God, he also crowns the fruitful and faithful love between man and woman. Because he “loved the Church and gave himself up for her ... that he might present the Church to himself in splendor” (Ephesians 5:25-27), the marriage of the baptized is more than a sign of God’s goodness. Marriage, the “primordial sacrament,” has become one of the seven sacraments, a true sharing in Christ’s complete gift of himself.

Christian marriage is not only called to *imitate* Christ’s exclusive, fruitful and indissolubly faithful covenant with the Church his Bride; it really *participates* in this covenant. Notwithstanding the spouses’ need for continual conversion, all the joys, hardships and even tragedies of Christian marriage are “inside” the true marriage covenant between Christ and redeemed humanity, which was sealed on the cross.

All of the Church’s teachings on marriage flow from the “redemption of the body”⁵⁹ that was accomplished in Christ’s

passion, death and resurrection. His love is exclusive, expressing his undivided commitment to the Church, his Bride. His love is indissolubly faithful, and upholds our vacillating human loves. His love is fruitful or generative, respecting the body's "language" of total self-gift in all its dimensions.⁶⁰ Finally, his love is the fullness of communion between persons, for through it, he reveals to us the communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit in God. Ever since Christ's total self-gift for the Church, human love has a divine guest – God himself – in its midst.

Through the centuries, countless men and women would be called on a path intimately related to Christian marriage: consecrated virginity, or virginity "for the kingdom." It is worth marrying because the love of a baptized man and woman participates in the indestructible covenant of love God made with man in Jesus Christ. And it is also worth *not* marrying – if God has called one to this path – in order to point with one's whole life to the divine Love that dwells in every marriage. Those whose vocation it is to follow Jesus the poor, chaste and obedient One, live out literally what every Christian is called to live out in spirit. They become living reminders of the God who first loved us and who first called us to love.

Consecrated virginity is not an easy path, but it is a path of joy. Referring to consecrated life, John Paul II wrote that "through the seriousness and depth of the decision, through the severity and responsibility it brings with it, what shines and gleams is love: *love as the readiness to make the exclusive gift of self for the 'kingdom of God.'*"⁶¹

This lifelong witness to the primacy of God, who is to be loved with our whole heart and mind and strength (Deuteronomy 6:4; Mark 12:30), does not ignore the filial, spousal and generative meaning of the body. Rather, it lives these meanings in a surprising way that anticipates their final fulfillment in heaven. As we glimpse in saints such as John Paul II himself, or Mother Teresa, this “exclusive gift of self” for God and through him, for one’s brothers and sisters, is anything but sterile; it is a source of extraordinary fruitfulness for the Church and the world.

[For a more in-depth discussion of marriage and consecrated life, the reader is invited to turn to the following two booklets in the New Evangelization Series, CIS booklets #407: *In the Image of Love: Marriage, the Family and the New Evangelization* and #408: *Following Love Poor, Chaste and Obedient: The Consecrated Life.*]

Go Forth and Live It!

With this exploration of every human being’s fundamental calling to “find himself ... through a sincere gift of self,”⁶² and the interrelated vocations to marriage and consecrated virginity, it should now be clear that John Paul II’s catecheses on human love, or “theology of the body,” is not an abstract doctrine. To the contrary, the theology of the body is meant to become flesh in the lives of men and women. As Fr. Karol Wojtyła learned in the time he spent with his young adult friends in Poland, any true education in love is meant to be lived.

John Paul II's rich development of the Church's teaching on the human person and on human love is profoundly relevant not just to Catholics, but to every man and woman who ever lived, for there is no human being who was not made from and for love. Deep within themselves, all men and women bear the call to love, even if this call is frustrated or wounded by the brokenness of their surroundings. Every human being is made to flourish in a communion of persons, building up through human relationships – and especially through families – a “civilization of love.”⁶³

It is obvious that the world in which we live does not always reflect such a civilization. We live not only in what the prophet Amos called a famine “of hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11) but also in a related famine: a famine of true human relationships and of healthy marriages and families that are the basis of a culture worthy of the human being. In other words, our world is famished for the vision of human love that St. John Paul II received from the Church's tradition and from his young friends, and then gave to the world. This world, in its brokenness, is in need of *witnesses to the truth of love*.

Families play a vital and irreplaceable role in this witness. As John Paul II affirmed repeatedly, the family is the fundamental cell of society and is at the heart of building up a civilization of love.⁶⁴ Families that truly seek to be schools of love, where spouses, parents and children learn forgiveness and grow in their appreciation of the dignity of every human person, are sources of strength not just for family members, but for friends, neighbors and strangers. They help to shape

their social, cultural and political sphere in such a way that these become more of a “home” to the human person.

Consecrated persons who give themselves totally to God and, through him, to their brothers and sisters, bear a singular witness to the truth of love. This is true even if their lives are, at times, completely hidden. Contemplative and active religious, as well as consecrated laypersons who bring the fruitfulness of Christ’s virginal love to every dimension of human life, all point to the divine Love that is at the source of any truly human culture.

Single persons who have not found their way to a definitive commitment and young people have an important role to play in the building up of a civilization of love. They are called to live out their baptismal vow in their various situations, working with the generous love of Christ. Not uncommonly, they must bear unique sufferings with love and patience: It is precisely this love that bears fruit for the world.

John Paul II himself showed us with unquestionable clarity: His greatest work was not writing the catecheses that make up his theology of human love. It was the witness that he, as a Christian, bore with his life. In his life, teaching and even the manner of his dying, St. John Paul II was what each of us is called to be: a living “theology of the body,” a witness to the truth of love.

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“I learned to love human love.”

— St. John Paul II

CATHOLIC INFORMATION SERVICE

This introduction to St. John Paul II’s catecheses on human love, or “theology of the body,” guides the reader through the Pope’s groundbreaking teaching on marriage, the family and sexuality in the context of the human person’s vocation to love. Created in God’s image, every man and woman is called to make a complete gift of self. Everyone is called to share in the task of building a civilization of love.



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