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Preaching, Teaching, and Living the Theology of the Body

by

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It is no secret that most non-Catholics, and many Catholics, do not understand the Church's teachings on human sexuality. John Paul II himself pointed this out in his *Letter to Families* in 1994 (no. 12.7). Many see the Church as "out of touch" with the modern world. Some see the Church's teachings as limiting or preventing intimacy between couples. Some even think the Church impinges upon their freedom because of what it teaches about sex. In reality, the world knows far less about the glory of sex than it realizes. In truth, the modern world has drained the body and sexuality of their meaning. This is evidenced by the fact that references to "casual" or "recreational" sex are part of our common vocabulary.

Amidst this sexual banality the Catholic Church teaches what it does about sex, not because it thinks sex is dirty or because it wants to do away with erotic love, but because it knows just how beautiful sex is and how intimate it is supposed to be. In reality, it is the Catholic Church's teachings on human sexuality that will lead us to realize true intimacy, freedom, and happiness. As such the Church's teachings on sex are part of the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Faced with a culture that reacts to Catholic teaching on sex with incredulity at best and vehement and violent rejection at worst, the "theology of the body" of Pope John Paul II gives us the means to explain this part of the Good News of Jesus Christ to a world that so desperately needs to hear it. The *Theology of the Body* is a collective title given to approximately 130 addresses that John Paul II delivered in his Wednesday General Audiences between Sept. 5, 1979 and Nov. 28, 1984.¹ In effect, John Paul II has provided us with an extended catechesis, explaining Church teaching on the human person, human love, human sexuality, and marriage. John Paul II himself said his catechesis on the body could be

called, "Human Love in the Divine Plan: The Redemption of the Body and the Sacramentality of Marriage" (TOB 133:1).

I agree with theologian George Weigel who has stated that the *Theology of the Body* is a "theological time bomb set to go off, with dramatic consequences, sometime in the third millennium of the Church. When that happens, perhaps in the twenty-first century, the *Theology of the Body* may well be seen as a critical moment not only in Catholic theology, but in the history of modern thought."² Yet, Weigel also points out, "Few contemporary theologians have taken up the challenge implicit in this dramatic proposal. Fewer priests preach these themes. A very small, even microcosmic, percentage of the world's Catholics even know that a 'theology of the body' exists" (Weigel 343). Even though interest in the theology of the body is on the rise, these words of George Weigel written seven years ago are still accurate.

Weigel notes that the density of the material in the *Theology of the Body* is one reason why its content is little known and he suggests "a secondary literature capable of 'translating' John Paul's thought into more accessible categories and vocabulary is badly needed" (Weigel 343). Popular authors and speakers, the most prominent of whom is Christopher West,³ are beginning to craft such a secondary literature. In this article I wish to make my own contribution to "translating" John Paul's magnificent gift into more understandable categories suitable for preaching and teaching.

It seems to me that there are four basic principles of sexual morality that can be extracted from the *Theology of the Body* and used to present Catholic teaching on sexuality to almost any audience. I am not suggesting that I have discerned the only four important principles upon which the *Theology of the Body* is built, nor am I claiming that these are John Paul's most important insights. In his theology of the body John Paul II presented a comprehensive theological anthropology that I believe will be mined for centuries to come. The four principles I am outlining in this article deal precisely with sexual morality. I will not touch on some of the other important insights in the *Theology of the Body* such as the sacramentality of marriage, the theology of celibacy, and eschatological existence in the resurrection. I arrived at these four principles or guidelines after struggling with how to present the content of the *Theology of the Body* in a concise and penetrable way to audiences of college undergraduates, Catholic young adult groups, adults attending parish education programs, high school youth gatherings, couples preparing for marriage, and seminarians who want to know how they can distill some of John Paul II's insights to use in homilies and marriage preparation. I have used these four principles in all of these venues and they seem to be principles that many readily understand, relate to, and incorporate into their lives. I offer them here as a

means to help evangelize our culture on the true meaning of sex and to assist all of us in living the theology of the body.

The four principles of human sexuality that I see running through the *Theology of the Body* are:

1. We are not our own.
2. Sex is about a union of persons, not just bodies.
3. Sex is about giving, not taking.
4. Sex is meant to give life and love.

In the remainder of this article I will explain how some of the important content of John Paul II's theology of the body can be explained according to these four principles. Along with the *Theology of the Body*, I will make reference to other magisterial texts from John Paul II's pontificate in which elements of his theology of the body are expressed. It should be noted that these principles fall sequentially from each other and together exist as a unified whole. Although these principles exist in a hierarchy with each subsequent principle depending on the previous principle(s), each of these four propositions is necessary in order to understand Catholic teaching on sexual morality. Taken together, I hope these four principles provide a way of teaching and preaching about some of the most important insights from the *Theology of the Body* to almost any audience.

Preliminary Suggestions

Before outlining the four principles I have drawn from the *Theology of the Body*, it is first necessary to note the overall tone that John Paul II takes in his work. Instead of focusing on the many ways in which the world has departed from God's plan for human sexuality and issuing condemnation after condemnation, John Paul has focused on presenting Church teaching on human sexuality in as beautiful a manner as possible. He provides a wonderful example that in all aspects of evangelization one must speak the truth in love. However, even more especially, when dealing with the sensitive area of human sexuality, John Paul, like a good father, shows us that we must take care to make sure that our approach is positive and provides direction on how to do the right thing without being overly negative and condemnatory for having done the wrong thing. The surest way to close listeners' ears to the good news about sex is to come across as holier-than-thou, wagging a finger and condemning those who are guilty of sexual sins without ever getting around to presenting the truly good news that Christ's plan for sex is. First of all, everyone must humble him or herself and admit that all of us struggle with fallen sexual desires and that

all of us need to continually integrate these desires in order to experience peace and joy. No one can act as if he or she is excluded from this life-long project, because no one is. Everyone can learn from John Paul II on this score since at no point in the *Theology of the Body* does he appear condescending.

John Paul II does presume that the world is opposed to Catholic teaching on sexual morality, but he also presumes that much of this opposition is due to ignorance. He shows that the only way to speak about sexual morality to any audience is to presume that one's listeners simply do not know how truly holy human sexuality is and how truly good are the Church's teachings that lead us to realize sexual wholeness and holiness. He shows us that the first task in speaking about sexual morality is to present the truth in all of its beauty so that people will want to embrace it. This is precisely what he has done in his theology of the body. The *Theology of the Body* is such an attractive work because it appeals to the deepest desires of the human heart. John Paul II forces people to be honest with themselves, to listen to their hearts, and to open themselves up to the Trinity's plan for their lives.

This is the tone that must permeate any presentation of the *Theology of the Body* and it is the tone that must be used in presenting the following four principles. If this tone is maintained it will assist others to see the truth, which is Christ's. The truth can never be wielded like a hammer, but must only be offered in love. Make no mistake that Catholic sexual morality is a set of teachings that many will react to by saying, "This is a hard teaching; who can listen to it?" (Jn 6:60). However if we approach spreading the insights of the *Theology of the Body* in the manner of John Paul II, those who have open ears and open hearts will heed these "words of eternal life" (Jn 6:68). There are many who are hungry and hurting and longing for the *Theology of the Body* without even knowing it. We must present it in a way that they will not only be able to understand it, but will want to live it.

We Are Not Our Own

The first, and in many ways most important, principle of sexual morality that underlies the thought of John Paul II in his theology of the body is, "We are not our own." This principle comes from St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 6:19) and John Paul II comments on it explicitly in his general audience delivered on February 11, 1981 (TOB 56). St. Paul tells us, "Avoid immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the immoral person sins against his own body. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?" (1 Cor 6:18-

19). Commenting on St. Paul's inspired insights John Paul II emphasized that Christ has brought redemption to the entire person – including our bodies! John Paul stressed the fact that because the human body has been joined to God in Christ it has received “supernatural elevation” (TOB 56:4). The fact that the body is destined to be resurrected and participate in ultimate happiness also shows how seriously God takes the human body, and that man “cannot be understood as a state of the soul alone, separated...from the body” (TOB 66:6). Quite simply this means our bodies are holy and they are destined to be with God in eternity! We cannot turn the body into an object or a thing!

Even though John Paul II commented on this first principle at a specific point in the *Theology of the Body*, in many ways it is present throughout the entire project from beginning to end. John Paul II impresses upon his readers that we must acknowledge that everything we have and everything we are comes to us from God. When we realize our complete and utter dependence on God, we realize that we are not our own. John Paul II began his theology of the body by noting that when the Pharisees asked Jesus a question about divorce, Jesus took them back to “the beginning” (Mt 19:3ff.; TOB 1). John Paul II noted that in this conversation with the Pharisees Jesus challenges us “to reflect on the way in which, in the mystery of creation, man was formed” (TOB 1:4) in order to teach us about marriage and what it means to be made male and female.

God created the human person, both male and female, in His image (Gen 1:26-27). In fact, the body and the duality of the sexes is a revelation of God's love inscribed in creation. Man is a unity of body and soul, and in this totality man images God. This means that every man and woman should accept his or her male or female sexuality, because sexuality is a gift that we receive from God.⁴ Sexuality affects all aspects of the person, both body and soul. Sexuality determines our affectivity, how we can relate interpersonally, and our capacity to love and procreate (CCC, no. 2332; TOB 10). Being male and female governs the way in which we form bonds of communion with other people, and makes communion possible (CCC, no. 2332; TOB 10).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “God is love and in Himself He lives a mystery of personal loving communion. Creating the human race in His own image...God inscribed in the humanity of man and woman the *vocation*, and thus the capacity and responsibility, of *love* and communion” (CCC, no. 2331). This means that only in the distinction between masculinity and femininity can love be realized through the body and the love within the Godhead be fully imaged (TOB 9). Thus our bodies play a part in expressing and reflecting the image of the Trinity in which we were made, by allowing us to enter into a communion of persons. John

Paul II said, "The theology of the body...is linked from the beginning with the creation of man in the image of God" (TOB 9:5). Elsewhere John Paul II says, "Man, whom God created 'male and female,' bears the divine image impressed in the body 'from the beginning'; man and woman constitute, so to speak, two diverse ways of 'being a body' that are proper to human nature in the unity of this image" (TOB 13:2). The human body is meant to make God's love visible in the world, and only the human body can express love. It is sexual difference that allows man and woman to unite in a communion of persons in marriage, to express love through a body, and to imitate in the flesh the Creator's fecundity and generosity (CCC, no. 2335). John Paul II went so far as to say, "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 be a sign of it" (TOB 19:4). This means that masculinity and femininity are visible signs of the inner life of God who is the infinitely intimate Communion of Persons (see also TOB 100). Therefore, it is accurate to say that John Paul II is positing a sacramental quality of the human body according to which masculinity and femininity are meant to be visible signs of the invisible Love of the Trinity (see also TOB 87.5).

Thus we belong to God completely, body and soul, and we are meant to image the very Love who God is. This necessarily means how we conduct ourselves is part of the worship we offer God and we must take this into account in our behavior with regard to our own bodies and with regard to the other's body (TOB 19). St. Paul makes it clear in First Corinthians that what we do with our bodies is part of our response of faith. He impresses upon his readers that we do not have the right to do with ourselves whatever we please.

To the modern world this last statement is hard to swallow. It flies in the face of the radical individualism and libertine mentality of our age that equates freedom with the ability to do whatever we want to do, whenever we want to do it. John Paul II recognized that the lack of understanding of human sexuality and marriage stems from this misunderstanding of freedom (see especially *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 6). A concept of freedom that claims to be absolute (i.e. doing whatever one wants) ends up treating the human body as raw datum or a tool for pleasure. Contrary to this counterfeit freedom, which ultimately denigrates the human body and human sexuality, John Paul II stressed over and over again that we are only free to the extent that we embrace the truth that comes from God. True freedom is contingent upon the truth about our nature that comes from God and can never be separated from that truth. Freedom is not the ability to do whatever we want to do. Instead, freedom is found in living in accord with the truth of human nature created by God, seeking to grow in perfection

and perfect love. This definition of freedom cannot be overemphasized with one's audience; in fact, it may be the place to begin.

The fact that we are not our own and that we therefore do not have the right to do with ourselves whatever we please is not harsh or limiting of authentic freedom when we realize that the God to whom we belong knows what will make us happy and wants our happiness more than we do. We must call people to faith and simultaneously call them to realize the implications of faith for everyday existence. Jesus Christ came to redeem humanity and the fullness of the human condition. The Incarnation shows that God intends to redeem the human person to the core. Our bodies and our sexuality are not bracketed off in this work of redemption (see Romans 8:23; TOB 49). In the personal adherence to God that faith is (see CCC, no. 150), Jesus asks us and empowers us to abandon ourselves to the Creator's design for our sexuality; a design He has given us the ability to understand with the light of human reason. In His invitation to follow Him, He asks for all of us, nothing more and nothing less. And He promises to lead us to experience happiness with Him not only in the next life, but here, even amidst difficulties and struggles. If we wish to experience true sexual freedom we must come to the point where we trust that we can do so only by living in accord with God's design, because He created us, including our sexuality. The Church's teaching on sexual morality guides us into the intimacy and the conjugal union for which we all long because her teachings simply safeguard God's plan and call us to remember that we are not our own. And this is Good News because the One to whom we belong loves us more than we love ourselves, wants our happiness more than we do, and knows what will truly make us happy, even in the sexual arena.

Therefore, if we want to experience sexual happiness we must follow God's design. This design precedes us, and is objective. No amount of self-will or rationalization can alter this design. A sane person lives in accord with reality. So much of the sexual libertinism of our age is, quite simply, insanity, because it refuses to live in accord with the objective nature of human sexuality. Modern sexual libertines do not want to acknowledge that there is anything objective and unchangeable about human sexuality. Sex, and the human body, have been evacuated of their meaning and are constantly manipulated by a distorted idea of freedom. Yet, human sexuality does have objective features, ingrained in our nature by God, that the sane man cannot deny. The next three principles, present in John Paul II's theology of the body, recall these features.

Sex Is About a Union of Persons, Not Just Bodies

The first objective feature of human sexuality is that sex is about a union of persons, not just bodies or body parts or biological material. In the

Theology of the Body John Paul II stresses over and over again that sexuality involves the entire person – body and soul. We are an intimate union of body and soul (CCC, no. 364-65) – embodied spirits. The body expresses the person and in this way is a sacrament of the soul, a visible sign of an invisible reality (TOB 7; TOB 12). John Paul II says, “the body is the expression of the spirit and is called, in the very mystery of creation, to exist in the communion of persons ‘in the image of God’” (TOB 32:1). This means what we do with our bodies we do with our persons. Yet, our society acts as if this is not so.

Sexual intercourse is a personal act, not just a bodily act (TOB 10; see also *Humanae Vitae*, no. 9). John Paul II emphasized that sexual union should always be about the person and should never treat the person as a means to an end (*Letter to Families*, no. 12.12). In sexual intercourse, “Man and woman express...the whole truth of their persons” (TOB 123:4). According to God’s design sexual intercourse is meant to be the sacred sealing of a covenant, and the very essence of a covenant is that it is a complementary exchange of persons that involves a total self-giving of one person to another (TOB 105). In sexual intercourse a man and a woman become one, in all of their complementarity and complexity (TOB 20).

John Paul stresses that sexuality affects all aspects of the human person in the unity of body and soul (TOB 10; see also CCC, no. 2332). Sexuality is not just about “parts” but affects all aspects of the person. Man and woman are both created in God’s image and thus possess equal personal dignity (TOB 9; see also CCC, no. 2334). However, their equality does not mean identity or sameness. Each of the two sexes is an image of the power and tenderness of God, with equal dignity though in different ways (TOB 9; see also CCC, no. 2335). Man and woman each image God in their own distinctive way and their sexual difference, which is both physical and spiritual, is directed towards personal complementarity in a “communion of persons” (TOB 9; see also CCC, no. 2333).

Marriage is the only situation in which it is possible to partake in sexual intercourse as a part of a communion of persons because in marriage the spouses hand themselves over to each other completely and permanently through a solemn act of their wills. Sexual intercourse is designed to be the ultimate expression of the mutual consent of the spouses through a body. This means that only spouses have a right to express their love in this way. This is why Scripture and the Church teach us that sex outside of marriage is a false substitute for true intimacy of heart and soul. In sex outside of marriage something is always being held back because people are sharing their bodies without fully sharing their hearts and souls. Even if an unmarried couple thinks they are expressing true love for each other in an act of sexual intercourse, the reality is that they cannot express true love in this act because sex outside of the marriage bond cannot be the

ultimate expression, through a body, of the mutual consent of the couple to give themselves to each other completely. Extra-marital sex is (at best) mutual use of each other's bodies because it promises nothing except what is done in the moment. God calls married couples and only married couples to a life of personal union that includes sexual intercourse. Part of the problem is that many people are exposed to dysfunctional marriages and see no reason why a "committed" unmarried couple cannot approximate or even surpass a troubled marriage. In reality, our society's denial of the intimate connection between sexual activity and the union of persons in the marriage bond has led to nothing but disintegration of persons and the family. Maintaining this link between sex and marriage is the only way to experience true sexual liberation, because it is the only way to experience a "communion of persons."

Sex Is About Giving, Not Taking

True love is self-giving, never self-seeking, and it seeks to give in order to serve the true good of the beloved. John Paul II emphasized over and over again throughout his pontificate (following the lead of *Gaudium et Spes* 24.3) that the human person finds meaning in life and comes to a full understanding of his humanity only through giving himself as a gift to others and to God (see TOB 15). Thus it may be helpful to think of a person as a "being-gift." The human body with its sexuality is likewise a "gift-sign." Freedom is the fundamental characteristic of the person that allows us to live out our being-gift. If we seek the meaning of freedom and why God gave it to us, we see it is our capacity for giving and God gave it to us to be able to give. True freedom is found to the extent that we accept ourselves as gifts from God and experience ourselves as self-giving gifts. True freedom is being a gift according to the truth that comes from God. Also, true intimacy is experienced when we give ourselves as gifts in an act of true freedom, in accord with the truth about ourselves and others. Thus, for sexual intercourse to be an expression of true intimacy it must be an act of self-gift, seeking the good of the other in the context of marriage.

After reading the *Theology of the Body* I became convinced that the concept of "gift" is the key to understanding human sexuality and Catholic sexual morality (see also *Letter to Families*, no. 12.9). God gifts us with our sexual identity. Sexuality itself is intended to provide us with the power of creative self-giving. John Paul II said that the complementarity of the male and female bodies reveal to us that we are made to be gift, to express love for one another, to exist for some one (TOB 14; see also TOB 17). This is what John Paul refers to as the "spousal meaning of the body" (TOB 14); an understanding of which John Paul II said is essential for understanding the purpose of human existence (TOB 18). Sexual

intercourse is thus meant to be an expression of the complete mutual self-giving of spouses to each other. In fact, sexual union is meant to be a window on the total gift of self among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In the *Theology of the Body* John Paul II speaks of a “language of the body.” We are all familiar with the term “body language” but John Paul II is speaking of more. He notes that man needs a body to fully express himself and that his body speaks a “language” (TOB 104). Acts performed with the human body have an objective meaning even if we don’t think they do. John Paul points out that in sexual intercourse the body speaks a language that is objective, and this language is one of complete self-donation and self-gift. It is through this language that spouses experience each other’s entire person (TOB 108; TOB 111-113). Marriage is the only context within which the body can speak this language in truth. In fact, John Paul II says that the essential sign of the sacrament of marriage is the “language of the body” that speaks truth. Any engagement in sexual intercourse outside of marriage is equivalent to speaking a lie with the body. Pre-marital sex, what Scripture calls fornication, falsifies the language of self-gift because the objective language of the body does not coincide with the intention of the spouses. In pre-marital intercourse the body is trying to speak a language of complete mutual self-donation, but it cannot since the couple has withheld precisely this consent from each other. The body is thus put in the situation of speaking a lie.

Perhaps one of the most arresting aspects of the *Theology of the Body* is when John Paul II points out that the self-giving “language of the body” in sexual intercourse is meant to be a reflection of the total self-giving love of the Trinity and of the love of Christ for his Church. In reflecting on Ephesians 5, John Paul II points out that St. Paul teaches us that the bodies of husbands and wives are sacred in their one-flesh union (Eph 5:28). In fact, in the sacrament of marriage the body becomes an efficacious sign of grace, and sexual intercourse in marriage can be a means of attaining grace (TOB 87). Christ gives the grace to spouses to discover the true freedom of being a gift through the spousal meaning of the body to form a life-long communion of persons. In marriage sexual intercourse is meant to be an efficacious sign of the gift of one’s whole self to the other. John Paul II says this “language” should be a liturgical language (TOB 114-116; TOB 117b) of praise and worship and a eucharistic offering of one spouse to the other. This act of self-donation is a sign of the Eucharist, which is the sacramental consummation of the marriage between Christ and His Church (see TOB 92; TOB 99). John Paul II said Christ gives the fruits of redemption and his very self to the Church in an act of spousal donation, “according to the likeness of the spousal relationship between husband and wife” (TOB 94:5). The ultimate goal of spouses is to seek to love each other in every aspect of their marriages as Christ loves the Church, and His love is made

evident in the gift of Himself in the Eucharist. If spouses draw upon this gift of love to be able to be gifts of love in every aspect of their marriages they can experience the freedom of love amidst any difficulty.

John Paul II explained with great eloquence how lust, or “adultery of the heart” (Mt 5:27-28), is a violation of the meaning of sexuality as self-gift (see TOB 24-59; esp. 31, 32, 33, 40). He described how after the Fall, lust almost destroyed the communion of persons that existed between man and woman. Before the Fall, the original man and woman were integrated beings experiencing harmony between their reason and will and their bodies (see TOB 18). This made a full communion of persons – body and soul – possible between them and enabled them to be gift for each other (see TOB 13). After the Fall, man and woman each lost their internal peace (signified by recognition of nakedness in Gen 2:25). Their “communion of persons” was also destroyed by the new desire to dominate the other through lust (one should note Gen 3:16 which speaks about the woman’s desire being for her husband and her husband ruling over her).

Lust seeks to turn the other into an object of sexual gratification. It is a disordered desire for sexual pleasure that seeks sexual gratification apart from true love as a sincere gift of self. Lust violates the person as gift and distorts the spousal meaning of the body. In a world consumed by lust, people too easily move from giving to taking. This lust or adultery of the heart can even infiltrate the marital union and cause spouses to use each other (TOB 42).

However, we are not destined to be overcome by lust in this fallen world. John Paul II points out that if we do not want to be dominated by lust we must grow in self-mastery (TOB 49). As John Paul II said, “Purity is a requirement of love” (TOB 49:7). We must exert the effort to control our desires or they will end up controlling us. We are created in God’s image by being given the capacity to act as his representatives (Gen 1:28 dominion in the garden) through self-consciousness (reason) and self-determination (will). We can become like God, and perfect our freedom, our image, and our nature, insofar as we master ourselves through reason and will, with God’s grace, and exercise our dominion through self-giving. In order to be a “self-gift” we must possess ourselves first (TOB 123; see also CCC, nos. 2338-2347), because no one can give what he does not have. By mastering themselves according to truth and speaking this truth through their bodies man and woman can become a communion of persons (TOB 123). This will involve lifelong effort and self-sacrifice, but the grace of redemption won by Christ makes it possible. What is more, it is worth the effort to realize the deepest desire for intimacy in the human heart. In this life there is no resurrection without the cross. We must receive each other as gifts from God and give God’s love to each other, loving as He loves – dying to ourselves to experience true intimacy and the true meaning of sexuality.

Dominion in the realm of sexual desire involves growing in the virtue of chastity. Chastity promotes the self-mastery that allows one to be a gift. John Paul II makes it clear that lifelong chastity is necessary in order to experience true freedom and happiness. Chastity is often misconstrued as mere abstinence from sexual intercourse or is thought of as sexual repression. *The Theology of the Body* makes it clear that chastity is the virtue that allows us to integrate our sexual desire to become self-gift. Far from being primarily an experience of repressing sexual passion, John Paul II emphasizes that chaste living is a positive experience of joy, growing in purity of heart and fully possessing oneself in true freedom to become self-gift (TOB 58). The virtue of chastity is the habit of controlling sexual desire according to will and reason and thus integrating sexuality within oneself (CCC, no. 2337). Chastity is the virtue that enables us to express true love in our physical displays of affection. Chastity does involve avoiding all illicit genital stimulation and controlling the desire for illicit sexual pleasure (illicit meaning all sexual pleasure that cannot be fulfilled in sexual intercourse within the confines of marriage, which is the only place where a total act of self-giving conjugal love is possible; see CCC, nos. 2351-2356). Chastity is about avoiding actions that play with our senses and our bodies in order to experience true freedom. However, chastity is not a mortification of love, but a condition for true love. Chastity is always about affirming the other person and never about "it feels good" to me. Chastity is ultimately about loving without regrets. Chastity frees us from aggression, selfishness, self-centeredness, and self-seeking. Chastity promotes self-respect and respect of others as being in God's image. Chastity is about respecting ourselves as gifts and living our sexuality according to God's plan. Living a chaste life gives us joy and peace because it makes us truly free to be what a person is meant to be – "self-gift".

Because chastity promotes true freedom it is necessary throughout life and in all states of life (see CCC, nos. 2348-2350). Chastity before marriage is necessary to be able to give oneself as a gift, free from the domination of passions. Chaste living is the only true preparation for marriage. Before marriage, chastity takes the form of abstinence from all willful genital stimulation and sexual pleasure because engaging in these activities cannot be aimed at true self-giving outside of marriage. Abstaining from sex before marriage and from willful genital stimulation shows that we love the other person for who they are and not for how they perform in bed or how they make us feel. In addition, lust or adultery of the heart can exist in a marriage. This means that chastity is necessary during marriage to be able to give oneself as a gift, free from domination of passions. Spouses must never seek to sexually excite each other outside of an act of intercourse. To do so would amount to using the body as a play thing. Chastity is necessary to maintain spousal fidelity and to reveal the

beauty of the other. There is also the virginal chastity of the religious (see CCC, nos. 1618-1620). Freedom and self-donation are what make celibacy a legitimate vocation from God (TOB 77; TOB 79), a vocation that is a sign of life in eternity when we will neither marry nor be given in marriage (see Mt 22:30; TOB 73; TOB 75). Chastity manifested in a life of celibacy testifies to the truth of the person as gift (TOB 15; TOB 80). Thus, celibacy and marriage give meaning to each other because they are both forms of spousal love lived "for" another (TOB 76; TOB 78; TOB 81).

Only by embracing and living out chastity can one rediscover the "spousal meaning of the body," be truly free, truly able to give oneself as a gift in whatever vocation God calls one to, and truly live in the image and likeness of God. John Paul II said, "The inner man must open himself to life according to the Spirit, in order to share in evangelical purity of heart: in order to find again and realize the value of the body, freed by redemption from the bonds of concupiscence" (TOB 58:5). Living unchastely desensitizes us to love, making us takers rather than givers. Unchaste behavior ultimately violates the First Commandment because we are not our own, and giving in to lustful passions is acting as if we have the right to manipulate the human body for our own ends.

In his words about "adultery of the heart" Jesus is telling us that self-mastery to control our desires must be undertaken instead of allowing our desires to control us. John Paul II says we are not to fear Christ's words, which call us to conquer lust in our hearts (Mt 5:28) but instead we should have confidence in their salvific content and power (TOB 43). Christ came to liberate us from lust so that we can experience the freedom of love (TOB 52; TOB 53). Through an ongoing conversion of heart we can experience the redemption of our sexuality. Christ wants to redeem all of us, body and soul (TOB 46). Christ wants to redeem our love by incorporating us into his union with his Church and nourishing us through his sacraments. He makes it possible for us to live a life of self-gift for the other to come to a full understanding of our humanity. This is the "Good News about Sex and Marriage" (the title of one of Christopher West's books) and we must not empty the Cross of Christ of its power. With the help of the grace of Christ, we can respond to his call to be perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5:48). If we want to experience true sexual freedom we must allow our lust to be crucified and invite Christ in to transform and redeem us and purify our hearts. Christ's love must enter the inner sanctions of the heart to enable us to be gift for each other.

Sex is Meant to Give Life and Love

According to God's design ingrained in human nature the total gift of self that occurs through the union of persons in sexual intercourse is

designed for love and life. In his encyclical letter of 1968, *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI pointed out that there are two purposes of the sexual act that anyone can see just by examining it with human reason: procreation (life) and union (love) (see John Paul II's comments in TOB 119). He pointed out that God had established an "inseparable connection...between the two meanings of the conjugal act: the unitive meaning and the procreative meaning" (*Humanae Vitae*, no. 12). Thus, anything that rules out one or the other of these purposes of sex, as it is ingrained in our nature, is contrary to God's design, harmful, and sinful. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that any act that dissociates husband and wife in their act of procreation or any act that dissociates the sexual act from the procreative act is immoral (CCC, nos. 2376-2377). This is the shorthand guide for coming to a moral judgment about any particular sexual act.

The principles of *The Theology of the Body* outlined in this article make it clear why certain sexual acts are outside of Christ's plan. Examples of sexual acts that oppose life would include: homosexual intercourse, masturbation (solitary or with a partner), and all forms of contraception (withdrawal, direct sterilization procedures, barrier methods, oral or injected hormonal agents, intrauterine devices). Examples of uses of sexuality that oppose loving union would include: rape or forced intercourse (which can occur between spouses), incest, molestation, adultery, polygamy or polyandry (because they violate the exclusive nature of the gift of self in sexual intercourse), prostitution, pornography, pre-marital sex / fornication / "trial" marriages (because these unions pretend committed love), and certain reproductive technologies that intend to make or produce a child outside of an act of loving sexual union between spouses (heterologous or homologous artificial insemination, in-vitro fertilization, surrogate motherhood, cloning).

The interesting thing is that if we examine them, any of the uses of sexuality that oppose life also oppose loving union. This is a truth elaborated by John Paul II in the *Theology of the Body*. The morality of the marriage act is determined by the nature of the act and the personal dignity of the spouses. John Paul II highlights the fact that the unitive (loving) and procreative (life-giving) aspects of sexual intercourse are both part of the "self as gift" (*Familiaris Consortio*, no. 32) and cannot be separated from each other in an act of sexual intercourse without doing harm to the integrity of both the act and the persons involved (TOB 118). John Paul noted that a conjugal act artificially deprived of fecundity ceases to be an act of love because the act has been deprived of its full truth (TOB 123). Although bodily union occurs, a communion of persons cannot (TOB 123). Thus, anything that opposes the procreative or unitive aspects of conjugal love expressed through a body is contrary to human nature, the nature of the sexual act, does not promote true freedom, and is sinful. All of

these acts, examples of which appear above, destroy the true meaning of conjugal love and thus the ability to give oneself completely and freely as a gift in a communion of persons.

It should not be missed that John Paul II says his whole catechesis in the *Theology of the Body* can be seen as a commentary on *Humanae Vitae* (TOB 133). John Paul II grounds the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* in the gift of self and the language of self-gift that the body should speak in a communion of persons. In their exchange of consent, spouses pledge to give themselves to each other in their totality. This is encapsulated in the language, "I take you as my wife – my husband" (TOB 103). John Paul II points out that spouses must be aware that by these words they are pledging to be gift for each other in all of their masculinity and femininity to constitute a life-long "communion of persons" (TOB 103). Furthermore, these vows presuppose a language of the body by which the spouses become mutual gift (TOB 103). The words are fulfilled through conjugal intercourse (TOB 103; TOB 105). John Paul noted that if spouses are truly giving themselves completely to each other in the conjugal act, then they are giving all of themselves, including their fertility. If spouses are open to love they will be open to life, because they will be willing to give of themselves to the point that they are willing to allow their love for each other to become embodied in a third person. Contrarily, if spouses refuse life, they are in some way refusing love because they are preventing complete mutual self-donation and short-circuiting the "language of the body." They are refusing to give part of themselves and refusing to receive a part of their spouse. Thus rejecting one's fertility not only rejects life, but it also rejects a total gift of self and thus also opposes love (TOB 123). This means that contraception prevents marriages from being what they are supposed to be; and sadly because our culture has become so accepting of contraception many people do not realize this.

Spouses have the responsibility of maintaining the full meaning of every act of sexual intercourse in both its procreative and unitive dimensions so that the language they speak in sexual union is the language of truth (TOB 105; TOB 106; TOB 118). Truly responsible parenthood is a vocation of service to love and life, involves dialogue with God, and must preserve His plan for sexual intercourse (TOB 129). This is what distinguishes contraception from natural methods of fertility regulation. Contraception is an act that attempts to change and distort an act of sexual intercourse by directly opposing the life-giving potential of the act. Contraception also does not allow for a communion of persons, and thus opposes love, because the fullness of the person is not being communicated. On the other hand, natural methods of fertility regulation (often called natural family planning or NFP) work with God's design of sexuality, not trying to change it (TOB 122). Natural family planning is

natural, not because it uses no artificial devices or drugs, but because it conforms to God's plan for the nature of the sexual act and His plan for the nature of the person (TOB 125; TOB 130). If NFP is used to avoid conception by having intercourse during infertile times, the woman's or man's fertility is fully accepted, cherished, and there is still a total giving of self. Using natural methods of fertility regulation also promotes self-mastery through the practice of chastity and helps the couple overcome lust as well as experience the freedom of self-gift through the spousal meaning of the body (TOB 123).

Conclusion

The discussion of the above four principles is intended to help translate the *Theology of the Body* into a language that can be adapted and used with many different audiences. The first principle highlights that God has ingrained His plan for human love in our sexuality. God's plan is for our good and our happiness. Any difficulties in living out this plan can be overcome through grace. In fact, Christ has come to give us the graces needed to "overcome the consequences of sin and to build the unity of man and woman according to the Creator's eternal plan" (TOB 100:2). This means we can direct our sexuality to express true love and experience true sexual freedom. The second principle stresses that according to God's design the true freedom of sexual intercourse can only be experienced in the union of persons in marriage. In marriage spouses are donating the entirety of themselves, body and soul, to each other through their consent. Marriage is a call to committed and unconditional love, the way God loves. Each spouse not only makes a complete donation of self to the other, but also pledges to receive the other unconditionally in his or her totality. Thus the third principle points out that the "language of the body" in sexual intercourse should always be a physical expression of the wedding vows, the essence of which is complete mutual self-donation and self-gift. Thus, true spousal love is ordered towards giving oneself completely and receiving the other completely, including, according to the fourth principle, one's capacity to generate new life. In short, sexual intercourse is meant to be a free, life-giving gift of one's whole self to the other – a Eucharistic offering of thanksgiving. Anything short of this language is a lie.

The theology of the body is the context within which we must understand the Catholic Church's teachings on sexuality (TOB 59). We must embrace this teaching if we are to realize the dignity of marriage, sexuality, and ourselves. Living the theology of the body is not a program for "great sex" in the worldly sense of heightening physical pleasure. However, even if we stutter at times in speaking truth through the language

of the body, we can experience the intimacy for which our hearts so desperately long. John Paul II exhorted all “who seek the fulfillment of their own human and Christian vocation in marriage...to make of this ‘theology of the body,’...the content of their lives and behavior” (TOB 23:5). If we live this theology of the body we can fulfill the words of St. Paul in his *Letter to the Romans* which implores us “to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship” (12:1). In order to live it, people must first hear it. By offering this schema I hope I have provided one way for more people to let it be heard.

References

1. These audiences were collectively published in English as *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997). A more recent critical edition has been published under the title *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006). In this article references to passages from the *Theology of the Body* (abbreviated TOB) will be to the more recent 2006 edition, citing the general audiences according to how they are numbered in that volume.

2. *Witness to Hope* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 343.

3. Among many articles and lectures delivered on the theology of the body Christopher West has written: *The Good News About Sex and Marriage: Answers to Your Honest Questions About Catholic Teaching* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 2000); *Theology of the Body Explained: A Commentary on John Paul II's "Gospel of the Body"* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2003); and *Theology of the Body for Beginners: A Basic Introduction to Pope John Paul II's Sexual Revolution* (West Chester, PA: Ascension Press, 2004).

4. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (hereafter CCC), no. 2333.