

Marquette University  
**e-Publications@Marquette**

---

Theology Faculty Research and Publications

Theology, Department of

---

1-1-2007

# The Scriptural Foundations of *The Theology of the Body*

William Kurz

Marquette University, [william.kurz@marquette.edu](mailto:william.kurz@marquette.edu)

---

Published version. Published as a chapter of a book entitled *Pope John Paul II on the Body: Human, Eucharistic, Ecclesial: Festschrift Avery Cardinal Dulles*. Eds. John Gavin, John M. McDermott. Philadelphia: St. Joseph's UP, 2006: 27-46, [Publisher Link](#). © 2007 Saint Joseph's University Press. Used with permission.

## The Scriptural Foundations of *The Theology of the Body*

---

*William S. Kurz, S.J.*

The use of Scripture by the pope has been treated in an earlier Jesuit conference by Archbishop Terrence Prendergast. His conclusion can provide a good starting point for this paper:

In conclusion, the role of the magisterium in the life of the church, as we see it in the writings of Pope John Paul II, is to point to the wholeness of the believing community's experience.... there is no cleavage between the Christ of the synoptics and the Jesus of the Fourth Gospel... the merciful and loving God of the Old Testament and the God revealed in Jesus and in our world today.<sup>1</sup>

Similarly, he concludes that the pope reads Scripture within the vital context of Catholic truth, life, and documents: "The major liturgical, patristic, systematic, conciliar and magisterial documentation are witness to the integrity, the wholeness of the tradition. So too are the Scriptures which John Paul II loves to quote frequently and at length; these traditions are one with the Scriptures which they try to embody and actualize in each new set of circumstances of ecclesial life."<sup>2</sup>

Implied in the pope's exposition of the faith through Scripture is what Prendergast refers to as the overarching "discrimen" or "imaginative act" through which the pope interprets Scripture. It is "wholeness" (vs. "separation" or even distinction).<sup>3</sup> Without doubt, the pope employs the criterion from Vatican II's *Dei verbum* of reading individual biblical passages within the interpretive context of "the unity of Scripture."

One more judgment of Prendergast should be mentioned. The pope clearly exhibits a general awareness of basic biblical methods and consensus positions, but he seldom relies on them. In fact, "the higher the authoritative level

of the teaching given, the less likely the pope will be to allude to scriptural theories.”<sup>4</sup> Instead John Paul II maintains a generally pastoral focus: in the words of Scripture, the pope hears God revealing his truth equally through every biblical witness. Most of the pope’s uses of Scripture typify a pastor teaching his flock from Scripture: what is God saying to us today in Scripture about this topic?

### CRITICISMS OF POPE’S USE OF SCRIPTURE IN *THEOLOGY OF THE BODY*<sup>5</sup>

Not all critics accept without challenge the pope’s pastoral utilization of Scripture. Explicitly with respect to the pope’s use of Scripture in *Theology of the Body*, one critic has been Luke Timothy Johnson. In “A Disembodied ‘Theology of the Body’: John Paul II on Love, Sex, and Pleasure,”<sup>6</sup> Johnson gives mixed assessments regarding the pope’s way of reading Scripture. He admits that the pope is careful with the text and generally does not misrepresent the passages on which he puts his primary focus. He faults him rather for selecting and extrapolating from particular texts without sufficient grounding.

Johnson mentions three principal concerns. First, the pope does not treat all the biblical evidence relevant to a topic. Second, he does not deal with some difficulties in the selected texts, such as the “except for *porneia*” clause in Mt 19:3-9. Third, he moves directly from an ancient narrative to ontological conclusions about the essential human condition. Johnson’s further insistence that Gn 2 be read along with Gn 1 seems malapropos, since the pope actually does that. Moreover, at the root of this objection against the pope’s insistence on the Genesis account of human sexuality seems to be the fact that this does not leave adequate wiggle room for contemporary discussions countenancing homosexual experience. Most of Johnson’s other objections seem to pertain less to the pope’s way of reading biblical texts than to contemporary applications and issues.<sup>7</sup>

### MY “WAY OF PROCEEDING”

As the title of my paper mandates and indicates, my goal is the more general one of exploring the biblical foundations of *Theology of the Body*, rather than of directly responding to even such representative criticisms. Partly this investigation will involve explaining and evaluating the approaches toward Scripture in this set of papal instructions. Mostly it will try to unpack the biblical foundations of the pope’s project by a personal reexamination of some biblical passages that are particularly crucial to the papal theology of the body.

It is to be hoped that this process can contextualize critical judgments within a positive exposition of the pope's pastoral treatment of Scripture. Like the pope's approach, my perspective will go beyond merely historical critical analyses to take account also of pastoral ways of consulting and utilizing Scripture as a whole in order to discover God's biblically revealed teachings about the meaning of the human body in the context of marriage, sexuality, and male-female relationships. To indicate what it means to utilize Scripture as a whole, it seems important for clarity's sake to relate the pope's uses of Scripture in *Theology of the Body* to traditional distinctions between the literal and spiritual senses of Scripture.

#### LITERAL AND SPIRITUAL SENSES AND *THEOLOGY OF THE BODY*

Even though it does not explicitly discuss this papal work, a book that might help justify the broader context of biblical interpretation presumed by *Theology of the Body* is a newly published monograph from CUA Press by David Williams. In *Receiving the Bible in Faith: Historical and Theological Exegesis*, Williams suggests ways to treat Scripture that respect and utilize both historical exegesis and theological interpretation. How in practice can the classical and modern approaches to Scripture function together? His answer has two prongs. First is the dual intentionality of the divine and human authors. (With the help of Bernard Lonergan he defends the continued significance of authorial intention against post-modern literary objections.) Second is application of Scripture to contemporary concerns with the aid of a Christocentric framework.<sup>8</sup>

Most discussions of the literal sense of Scripture limit the relation of that sense to the intention of only the human author of Scripture. Yet *Dei verbum* from Vatican II reaffirms Catholic doctrine that Scripture has not only human authors but God as its primary author. How does one determine the intended meaning of the divine author for any particular passage? Since the literal meaning of any word or statement is always affected by its context, when that word or statement is read not only as part of an individual biblical author's writings but within the broader context of the complete Christian canon, even its literal meaning will be affected by this change of context. Therefore Williams looks for the intentionality of the divine author primarily within the biblical canon, which is the fuller context for every individual biblical book (a context which the individual human authors could not have fully foreseen). In respect to *Dei verbum*, n. 12, he suggests that the divine author's intention must be considered part of the literal sense of Scripture. This

seems a significant change, at least in emphasis, from most Catholic scholarship and probably also from most understandings of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*.<sup>9</sup> If the literal sense of Scripture is equated primarily with the results of historical critical exegesis, as much recent Catholic and ecumenical discussion has tended to limit it (at least in practice if not also in theory), then the meaning of the literal sense in contemporary discussion will in fact differ significantly from the meaning of the "literal sense of Scripture" on which most of the classical discourse is based, as in pre-moderns like Origen and Aquinas. Williams refers to classical authors' concerns as follows:

We saw above, in Origen and Aquinas, the bedrock Christian conviction that Scripture reveals and makes known to us what God wishes to be known.... at a minimum it seems to require a dual agency at work. In addition to the communicative intention of the human or humans involved in the writing of a given text, we must also acknowledge the communicative intention of God. How these two intentions are related to one another is far from clear, but there is a *prima facie* case to be made that they are not simply identical.<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, restriction of the literal sense to the results of historical exegesis has less than optimal pastoral consequences. In effect it freezes the literal meaning wholly within the ancient past of the time of writing. The gap between this ancient literal meaning and the contemporary life and belief of the church remains too great for most preachers and teachers to bridge effectively. Not surprisingly, neither does this restricted interpretation of the literal meaning seem to correspond to the ways in which John Paul II consults Scripture to construct his pastoral and theological arguments.<sup>11</sup>

Although he proceeds from a different starting point and outlook, perhaps Joseph Fitzmyer may approximate some of the considerations expressed by Williams's desideratum that the notion of the literal sense be extended to include the intentionality of the divine author. Although Fitzmyer insists on historical criticism as the avenue to the literal sense, he expands historical criticism beyond what most critics presuppose by the term. Using the qualifying phrase, a "properly-oriented historical-critical interpretation of Scripture," Fitzmyer contends that the literal sense that is its goal includes a message not only for the past but for contemporary Christians. Citing *Dei verbum*, n. 12, he defines a properly-oriented historical interpretation as "the use

of that method with the presupposition of Christian faith that one is interpreting the written Word of God couched in ancient human language, with a message not only for the people of old, but also for Christians of today.”<sup>12</sup>

“This characterization of the written Word of God demands that there be a basic homogeneity between what it meant and what it means, between what the inspired human author sought to express and what he expressed, and what is being said by the words so written to the church of today.”<sup>13</sup> Fitzmyer suggests that the Biblical Commission recognized this by referring to the “dynamic aspect” of the text, which cannot “always be limited to the ‘historical circumstances’ of its composition.” Though that dynamic aspect can lead to the spiritual sense (as in applying a royal psalm to Christ), “this aspect is a quality of the literal sense, because it expresses the openness of the text to a broader extension of meaning.”<sup>14</sup> Though it proceeds from a different starting point, this claim seems to have a similar result to Williams’s expansion of the literal sense to include the intention of the divine author.

Williams reserves the spiritual sense of Scripture for interpretation and application of Scripture for today.<sup>15</sup> His combination of an expanded notion of the literal sense of Scripture with the use of spiritual senses to apply Scripture can be used to shed light on how the pope uses the entire biblical context in continuity with Church teaching to articulate his pastoral biblical interpretations and reflections on the theology of the body.

Williams insists that application to the interpreter’s situation must be an actualization of the biblical witness to the present; it is not an alternative understanding of the text itself. That is, the spiritual sense must extend the literal sense, not create a new meaning. The spiritual sense is founded on the dual authorial intention (of human and divine authors), but it is focused by present concerns. “In order to be an extension rather than a creation of meaning, individual uses of the spiritual sense must share in the intended subject of the text even as they explore aspects of that subject going beyond the scope of authorial intention.”<sup>16</sup>

## THE POPE’S BIBLICAL *THEOLOGY OF THE BODY*

In *Theology of the Body*, it is clear that the pope is meditating on Scripture as the original fountain of God’s revealed wisdom for the meaning of life today. The pope teaches his flock from Scripture—what God is saying to us today in Scripture about this topic. Nevertheless, despite some charges of proof-texting, the pope’s use of

various biblical passages cannot be reduced even primarily to a gathering and arguing from proof texts. Rather, he presumes both in himself and in his expected audience some familiarity with Scripture as a canonical whole. He presumes their acknowledgement of Scripture as a primary source, along with Christian experience, of traditional Church teaching on the meaning of the body, sex, and marriage through the centuries. He assumes a basic unity in biblical teaching on such fundamental matters. That is, he presupposes in faith that God will not fundamentally contradict himself within his own biblical revelation. These presuppositions concerning the unity of Scripture are important keys to interpreting Scripture according to the Spirit by which it was written, as that interpretation is mandated by Vatican II's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei verbum*, n.12.

The pope's biblical teaching on the body is situated within the broader biblical context of the meaning of God, creation, humanity, and life in general. His theology of the body is part of the biblical world view, the biblical presentation of creation and redemption in salvation history. The pope "imagines the world as the Scripture imagines it," to use an apt expression from Luke Timothy Johnson in his section of *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship*. The pope views both Scripture and experienced reality within the perspective of a "biblical worldview," as I express it in my section.<sup>17</sup>

#### EXPANSION OF THE CANON AS CONTEXT: A "CATHOLIC BIBLICAL WORLDVIEW"

However, for Catholic interpreters, including the pope, the biblical worldview embraces not only teachings drawn directly from the written canonical Scripture but also as these are interpreted and contextualized within Catholic tradition and the many uses of Scripture in the life of the Church. The expanded context within which to read and interpret any particular biblical passage is not merely a kind of "naked canon," in some *sola scriptura* sense. The Bible is also consulted within Catholic traditions of interpretation, doctrines, and use of Scripture from the patristic era until today.<sup>18</sup> Such an expansion of context raises obvious questions about how to maintain methodological controls on biblical interpretation so broadly understood. We might ultimately have to admit that interpretation is more an art than a methodologically exact science. Or we might even have to admit that in practice most biblical interpretation is confessional interpretation from within the interpreter's denominational interpretive context. In addition, further clarification than is possible here is needed to show how such an

expanded literal sense might relate to the “fuller sense,” to re-readings or actualizations of Scripture, and even to various understandings of the spiritual sense.<sup>19</sup>

## OVERVIEW OF THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY

The seminal and foundational authority for the pope’s biblical worldview is found in the combined canonical Genesis accounts of creation and the Fall in Gn 1-3. Gn 1-2 provide the classic expression of God’s original plan in creating the material universe. In this original plan God creates humans as his images and gives them authority over the development of the material world. However, Gn 3 recounts the fall of humans from intimacy with their Creator and from authority over the rest of material creation because they rebel against God’s objective for them within his plan for creation. Most of the rest of Scripture relates and describes God’s contingency plan of salvation for reconciling rebellious human creatures to himself, their Creator. This plan culminates in the Incarnation of the Son of God and his reparation of the breach between God and humans.<sup>20</sup>

The pope’s tenacious emphasis on the importance of the phrase, “*in the beginning*,” for biblical interpretation is seldom appreciated and often overlooked, even by some of his professional exegetical critics. Taking his interpretive cue from an exchange between some Pharisees in the Gospels trying to trap Jesus, Pope John Paul II emphasizes the unanticipated difference between our current situation, which has been badly muddled by sin, and God’s original plan for humans “in the beginning” when he created them.

Criticisms of John Paul’s “unrealistic” and idealized focus on Genesis and on “abstract human nature,” as well as of his failure to consider the nitty-gritty conditions under which marriage is lived today, miss this point. As Jesus had done before him, the pope is suggesting that today’s “realistic situation” in respect to, for example, divorce and “pastoral” responses to it, exists only “because of the hardness of your heart.” These situations and responses did not prevail “in the beginning.” Therefore they do not conform to God’s original plan in creating humans male and female to “increase and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it” (Gn 1:28), and in order that husband and wife “shall become one flesh” (as Mt 19:5 cites Gn 2:24).

On the one hand, the pope interprets the details of this foundational narrative of human creation with utter earnestness. On the other, he integrates these details from the text with his extrabiblical phenomenological and philosophical reflection on the meaning, nature, and action of human persons *qua persons*. Such



philosophical reflections relate to a deeper foundational level than sociological observations of concrete human behavior. Although they might appear “abstract” and divorced from the realities of daily living, philosophical generalizations provide valuable principles and guidance for making sense of the conflicting maze of contemporary experiences and theories.

Thus the pope reads Scripture, not as a professional specialist in exegesis, but as a trained philosopher. He also reads it as a pastor relying on a good deal of personal experience with young married couples, in addition to the institute of natural family planning which he maintained in his Krakow diocese. Still, he is aware as well of the basics of exegesis.<sup>21</sup>

#### BRIEF SYNOPSIS OF BIBLICAL PASSAGES TREATED IN *THEOLOGY OF THE BODY*

*Theology of the Body* collects the pope’s instructional homilies in two parts: Part One includes “The Original Unity of Man and Woman: Catechesis on the Book of Genesis,” and “Blessed Are the Pure of Heart: Catechesis on the Sermon on the Mount.” Part Two, “Life according to the Spirit,” has five subsections: “St. Paul’s Teaching on the Human Body,” “The Resurrection of the Body,” “Virginity for the Sake of the Kingdom,” “The Sacramentality of Marriage,” and the pope’s concluding “Reflections on ‘Humanae Vitae.’”

The pope introduces “Original Unity of Man and Woman” with a Gospel passage relating to the indissolubility of marriage. Christ rejects divorce and remarriage on the grounds that “in the beginning” God created marriage to be lifelong and indissoluble (Mt 19:3-9, esp. v. 8). The reference in this saying to a more perfect situation “in the beginning” recognizes that much of the Old Testament treatment of sexuality and marriage has taken place within a setting of a fallen human race and of consequent concessions to human sinfulness. In *Theology of the Body* the pope reflects on scriptural narratives that provide some revelatory clues to the original created status of humans in their sexuality (i.e., as “very good”) before the contemporary fallen and impaired situation that resulted from their sin.

As Christopher West also pointed out, Johnson’s critique and the pope’s analysis are grounded in two very different starting points, which are inadequately acknowledged by Johnson. Whereas Johnson’s arguments are based primarily on contemporary experience of sexuality, the pope, not without justification, treats contemporary experience as fallen, distorted, and not adequately revelatory of God’s creative intention. This is why he tries instead to follow Jesus’ lead in trying to

recover in God's revelation in Genesis the primordial created goodness and meaning of sexuality, before human rebellion and the consequent debasement of sexuality from its original goodness in God's created order.<sup>22</sup>

The pope's subsequent analysis in the second section about purity of heart focuses on the Sermon on the Mount, especially on Mt 5:27-28, which likens looking at a woman lustfully to committing adultery with her in one's heart. The negative characterization of lust and of shame at one's nakedness and of sexual domination lead the pope back to Gn 3 and to the harmful human consequences of rebellion against God. The pope's biblical meditations on adultery focus on the sixth commandment (as quoted in Mt 5), in light of patriarchal regressions from original monogamy (e.g., of Abram, Jacob, and David in Gn 16, 30, and 2 Sm 11). The pope briefly considers how adultery is treated in the Law and the prophets, first in the legislation of Lv 20, then in Hos 1-3 and Ez 16, where it comes to symbolize the violation of the people's covenant with God.

To comprehend lust and concupiscence and the unequal treatment of men and women, the pope turns to wisdom writings, such as Prv 5-6 and Sir 23, 26, and 31, before returning to the sermon in Mt 5. He supplements the Sermon on the Mount with the treatment of lust based on the "threefold lust" of 1 Jn 2:15-16: "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world" (2:16). This "threefold lust" contextualizes sexual lust along with other worldly forms of human seizing and grasping, as for possessions ("lust of the eyes") and for power ("pride of life"). To compare moral and ritual connotations of purity, the pope briefly compares Mt 5 with Lv 15, 18, and 12. Overall, his reflections on purity of heart (narrowed because of the marital context to sexual purity) concentrate especially on Mt 5 in light of Genesis, Leviticus, patriarchal narratives, prophets, and some wisdom passages for comparison and contrast.

In Part Two, Pope John Paul II's meditations on St. Paul's treatment of the human body focus especially on Romans and Galatians; on 1 Thessalonians (esp. 4:3-5); and on 1 Corinthians (esp. 12:18-25 and chap. 6). The pope's reflections on the resurrection of the body began, as did Part One on Genesis, with Jesus's response to a controversy in the Gospels. This time Jesus was responding to the *reductio ad absurdum* in the Sadducees' cynical question about the woman who married seven brothers.

Whose wife will she be in the resurrection (Mt 22:24-30 and par.)? To rebut the Sadducean denial of bodily resurrection, Jesus emphasized the power of the God who is God of the living, not of the dead. To refute their absurd example

of seven husbands, Jesus asserted that humans neither marry nor are given in marriage in heaven. Since humans will no longer die, they will not have to replace themselves with offspring, as they now do on earth. Note the obvious and pastorally vital implication that without the prospect of reproduction, there is no rationale for sexual activity in the afterlife. This common-sense observation seems to relativize the ultimate anthropological significance of contemporary emphasis on and preference for the unitive over the procreative purpose of sex.

Furthermore, in the resurrected life the discord between physical and spiritual will be overcome by the total permeation of the body by the spirit (*TB*, 241) in a spiritualization which can even be termed a divinization of man (*TB*, 241-42). For eschatological man will be in perfect communion and face to face with God (*TB*, 243). When the pope turns to the resurrection in St. Paul (*TB*, 249), he not surprisingly meditates primarily on Paul's explicit treatment of the resurrection in 1 Cor 15.

The pope's reflections on virginity or celibacy for the sake of the kingdom first meditate on the comment in Mt 19:10-12 about being eunuchs for the kingdom of God. Then they turn to Paul's treatment of virginity and marriage, especially in 1 Cor 7. Finally they shift briefly to the redemption of the body via Rom 8.

The pope bases his meditations on the sacramentality of marriage on Eph 5 (*TB*, 304-26, 330-68), with an inserted comparison to the prophetic text of Is 54:4-10 (*TB*, 327-30) and of course with Gn 2, as well as in comparison to Mt 19 and 5 (*TB*, 344-47), before returning to 1 Cor 7 (*TB*, 347-48), Rom 8 (*TB*, 348-49), 1 Jn 2:16-17 (*TB*, 349-51), Mt 22 and par. (*TB*, 350-51), and the prophetic tradition (Hosea, Ezekiel, Is 54: *TB*, 357-63).

The pope briefly reflects on the Song of Songs (*TB*, 368-75) with comparison to 1 Cor 13 (*TB*, 374-75), then on Tb 6-8 (*TB*, 375-77), before returning in his conclusion to Eph 5 (*TB*, 378-80). The final section of this homiletic collection applies the preceding biblical meditations to *Humanae vitae*. Because that section is based on the text of *Humanae vitae*, it follows its order and structure, rather than that of biblical texts. This essay will have to limit itself to Part One.

## PART ONE:

### ORIGINAL UNITY OF MAN AND WOMAN (CATECHESIS OF GN 1-3): BIBLICAL ANTHROPOLOGY "IN THE BEGINNING" VS. NOW

Major clues for understanding how Pope John Paul II finds his theology of the body in Scripture are some Gospel sayings of Jesus that contrast moral

pronouncements of his contemporaries with the way God intended human sexuality to function “in the beginning,” as in Mt 19:3-9. There, Jesus’s response to a challenge about divorce contrasts divorce legislation permitted by Moses because of the “hardness of your hearts” with God’s creative intent for marriage “in the beginning.” Contrasts between God’s original plan of creation and the present situation of fallen humanity and sin provide the primary key for interpreting the pope’s use of Scripture in his theology of the body.

The prophetic form of Jesus’ antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount in Mt 5-6 provides the pope alternative access to the contrast between “Thou shalt not commit adultery” and “But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt 5:28). Here God’s will is expressed not by explaining and applying an Old Testament passage, but by direct authoritative dictum: “But I say to you.”

The Gospels emphasize that Jesus’ authoritative pronouncements shocked his contemporaries by going far beyond those of earlier Israelite prophets. Old Testament prophets usually expressed God’s mandates with the statement, “Thus says the Lord.” For Jesus to contrast a biblical command with “But I say to you” implies his own divine authority to speak for God in his own name. The pope will base much of his treatment of purity and chastity in *Theology of the Body* on these prophetic antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount.

In *Theology of the Body*, when the pope first searches in Scripture for God’s original order of creation, he concentrates his biblical study on the creation narratives in Gn 1-2, as they depict the contrast with subsequent alienation of humans from God and his plan in Gn 3. In this, the pope follows the thrust of the Matthean account, in which Jesus explicitly cites Gn 2:24 in relation to the creation of humans in Gn 1:26-27. “Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?’” (Mt 19:4-5). This contrast between sexuality and marriage in the order of God’s good creation, from their present condition as damaged by the Fall, relativizes much of the moral casuistry with respect to sex and marriage both in the time of Jesus and today.

The pope’s investigation and use of Gn 1-3, like that of the patristic writers, the New Testament, and undoubtedly Jesus himself, treats those passages as God’s scriptural word. The Genesis accounts of creation and Fall set the stage for the rest of the canonical biblical witness to God’s revelation of the meaning of life and

reality. Although the pope's primary focus is on the literal sense of Gn 1-3, I suggest that he at least implicitly presupposes an expanded meaning of the literal sense beyond the intention of the human author(s) to include also the message and intention of the divine author. Thus, on the level of the human authors, John Paul II distinguishes between two accounts of creation, which he calls the Yahwist and Elohist accounts. However, he also follows the process already evident in the New Testament interpretation of the Old, namely to seek the message of the divine author in Gn 1-3 within the context not only of both accounts but also of the entire biblical canon, in continuity with the ways in which earlier believers have read it.

Using a process already exemplified by New Testament authors, the pope finds in the literal details of Gn 1-3 lessons for contemporary application. In this case, the pope emulates the rejection of divorce by Jesus in Mt 19:3-9 on the basis of Genesis. The creation accounts are applied to the controversy at hand to demonstrate that God intended and created marriage to be monogamous and indissoluble (*TB*, 25-27).

*Theology of the Body* also exemplifies a kind of close reading of an individual biblical text similar to that which is found in patristic interpretations. Both the Fathers and the pope observe minute details in the biblical account (often the same details). Both reflect on these details in light of their own personal and pastoral experience and their training—theological, philosophical, rhetorical, as the case may be.

The influence of their personal perspectives on the interpretation that both the patristic authors and the pope carry out can find thematic background explanation in reader-response criticism, which explicates the important role that readers' prior understandings play in the interpretation of texts. Because the pope's experience and training from the twentieth century differs so much from the experience and training of the ancient patristic writers, his insights and interpretations of the biblical text demonstrate more modern and contemporary forms of thinking than theirs. For example, the pope's insights show traces of personalist phenomenology, historical criticism, and Thomistic ontology, whereas the patristic authors incorporate more Hellenistic rhetoric, Platonism, and allegory in their interpretations.

The biblical accounts of creation and the Fall have been among the most frequently contemplated texts in Scripture. Even non-believing philosophers and psychologists acknowledge the extraordinary insight that these chapters provide into the meaning of the universe and of the place of humans within it, of the problem of

evil, of sin with its consequences, and of alienation between man and woman and between humans and God.<sup>23</sup> Thinkers from the first century until now have found in Gn 1-3 insightful responses for contemporary questions about anthropology, the human body, and sexual ethics.

Using the approach I recommended in *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship*, let us focus on the same Genesis accounts as the pope, bypassing questions about sources and historicity. Rather, let us ask what these narratives contribute to a “biblical worldview.” That vision of reality can then provide a context within which to identify some fundamental principles by which to explain the meaning and purpose of human sexuality.<sup>24</sup>

The pope grounds his biblical anthropology especially in the biblical concept of creation. Especially as Gn 1-2 is interpreted by John’s prologue and other New Testament passages, canonical Scripture depicts an unbridgeable abyss between God as Creator of everything (by his word alone) and all creatures in the world, including humans. There is only one God, who has no rivals in power. Humans depend on God even for their very existence. However, among creatures of earth, God gave humans preeminence, because he created them “in his image” and granted them dominion over all other creatures in this world.

Gn 3 explains that this original situation did not continue, because humans were not content to be first among creatures on earth. Instead they chafed at their limits as creatures and wanted to “be as God” (or “as gods”), themselves knowing good and evil. Since before the first sin, evil did not even exist on the earth (tradition speaks of a pre-adamic sin of Satan and his angels), this primeval human desire amounted to wanting to decide for themselves what is good or evil, right or wrong, rather than having even God command them not to do this or that (e.g., not to eat of this or that tree). The fundamental truth in this biblical lesson is that the essence of original sin (and actually of sin in general) is a human desire for autonomy, to be free from commands even of their creator God.

Gn 3 reveals that the result of this rebellious choice was not their desired equality with God, but rather alienation from the God who had created them and had freely offered them his friendship. In addition to the primordial ontological chasm between Creator and creature, humans now experienced fear of God’s punishment and tried to hide from God. The same account reveals that humans had become alienated not only from God—they had also become alienated from one another.

The primal form of intra-human alienation in this account was that between male and female, whom God had created to become “two in one flesh.”

Earlier, Gn 2 had shown Adam rejoicing in the presence of the woman as “bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh.” After they disobeyed God’s commandment, Adam turned against his wife and blamed her (and blamed even God for giving her to him) for the sin and its aftermath.

Originally the man was meant to leave his parents to become one with his wife, and the two were living in one another’s presence “naked but without shame.” After the fall their relationship became cursed and perverted into lust and domination, and they hid their shame with loincloths. Even dominion of humans over lower nature was damaged, so that man would no longer with minimal effort tend and eat fruit from the trees in the garden, but would earn his bread by the sweat of his brow from a rebellious earth that yielded mostly thorns and thistles.

Finally, because humans had rejected God’s offer of intimacy, which would have gratuitously spared them from the natural necessity of dying, *adam* would return to the *adamah*. Man would return to the dust from which he came. Meanwhile, fear of death would become a major hindrance to humans and an instrument for the devil’s purposes.

Of special import for the theology of the body is the debasement of sexual functions and male-female relationships. In place of the “nuptial meaning of the body” by which man and wife were intended to become “two in one flesh,” lust and male domination and oppression of women and mutual male-female hostility have come to prevail. (Now perhaps the most extreme rejection of God’s design comes in the newly contrived circumstance of state-sanctioned male-male and female-female “marriages.”) Life-threatening labor in childbirth has replaced much of women’s unmitigated joy in her realization, “I have begotten a man with the help of the LORD” (Gn 4:1).

Not only would nature rebel against humans as humans had rebelled against God, but in reaction humans would try to dominate nature as if it were a mere mechanism, instead of tending to it with reverence as God’s property over which they have delegated authority. When, as Paul remarks, one’s own body rebels against his or her spirit (Rom 7:23), humans would in turn try to dominate their body completely as if it were an object separate from themselves or a mere instrument for pleasure or other purposes. Contraception, sterilization, abortion, and in vitro fertilization (IVF) have recently become primary forms of this total control over one’s body and reproduction. The term “sexual revolution” appropriately exemplifies today the biblical portrayal of perennial human rebellion against God’s commands and authority. The focal point of this rebellion is explicitly God’s plan of creation in making humans male and female with the commission to “be fruitful and multiply,

and fill the earth and subdue it” in their marital partnership (Gn 1:28).<sup>25</sup>

Whereas Gn 1 provides a comparatively objective perspective on human creation in the context of the creation of the world, Gn 2 gives a more pictorial account of human creation. This version facilitates the pope’s natural interest in personalistic phenomenological exploration of human creation, since the higher proportion of subjective elements in this second narrative provides more occasion for him to focus on human subjectivity. In the anthropomorphic portrayal of God forming “the man” (*adam*) from pre-existent dust (*adamah*) and breathing into him the breath of life (Gn 2:7), the pope’s canonical interpretation, in light of Catholic traditions of interpretation, envisages God creating an individual spiritual soul within each new human person.

This second account focuses on the man (*adam* [*anthrōpon*] or *Adam*) who is formed from the earth in Gn 2:8. He is portrayed as solitary and presumably lonely in God’s remarks (“It is not good that man should be alone; let us make for him a helper or partner suitable for him” [Gn 2:18]). As precritical readers like the patristic and medieval authors tended to do, the pope finds in this divine comment a clear reference to the uniqueness and lack of commonality of human with all other living material creatures. Despite Adam’s naming of all the animals, none proved to be a suitable partner “like himself” (Gn 2:19-20), for only into *adam* had God breathed his spirit and only the human was therefore a self with self-awareness.

Only when God fashioned woman from man’s side was Adam provided with a complementary person (and one of the same kind or species) to whom he could personally relate. Only when the *adam* or man saw the woman was there awareness that humankind existed as complementary *ish* and *ishah*, man and “woman.” This sexual awareness of a personal partner elicited a joyful exclamation: “This at last is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh. She shall be called woman (*ishah*) for she was taken from man (*ish*)” (Gn 2:23). The narrator underlines the obvious marital lesson from this story: “Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and cleave to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh” (Gn 2:24). To emphasize the innocent goodness of this sexual relationship, the narrator adds, “The two were naked, both Adam and his wife, and they were not ashamed” (Gn 2:25).

In the beginning of God’s good creation, there was neither lust nor shame in experience of persons as sexual. After these two accounts of human creation, God pronounces his work not only “good” but “very good” (Gn 1:31). From human sexuality was meant to come the entire human family, destined to fill and tend the



earth (as represented by the garden) in a relationship of intimate friendship with God their creator (as symbolized by their friendly evening walks together in the garden, implied in Gn 3:8-9). Humans were created to live in peace and harmony with God, one another, and sub-human nature. There was no hint of lust, domination, alienation, blame, or killing (not even of animals). All these negative facets of sexuality and male-female and human relationships were introduced into human experience as a consequence of human rebellion and alienation from their creator God in Gn 3.

PART TWO: BLESSED ARE THE PURE OF HEART  
(CATECHESIS ON THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT):  
FALLEN SEXUALITY AND COMMANDMENTS PROTECTING PURITY

Although the seminal inspiration for Pope John Paul II's theology of the body comes from the biblical presentation of human nature as originally created by God, it could not be complete without accounting for the human situation after the Fall. One does not have to believe in the complete corruption of human nature to admit how grievously human sexuality has been wounded (see *CCC*, nn. 402-09, 2520). Thus Scripture supplements the picture of human creation with portrayals of human sin and its effects, including its harm to human sexual relationships and marriage. The pope acknowledges such treatments, especially in the Old Testament, but his focus will be on Christ's response to the wounded condition of human sexuality.

As Jesus himself is reported to have done, Pope John Paul II emphasizes that much of the Old Testament casuistry regulating sexual behavior and marriage makes compromises with their wounded condition, such as allowance for polygamy and divorce (*TB*, 133-35). With Jesus in the Gospels, the pope wants to recall contemporary Catholics to God's original meaning and purpose of human sexuality and marriage, as restated and empowered by Jesus. In the interest of brevity, let us limit ourselves to the pope's favorite passage: Jesus's restating of the Law and its more profound implications in the antitheses of the Sermon on the Mount.

RADICALIZING THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT IN MT 5

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus radicalizes the demands of several of the Ten Commandments, including the commandment against adultery. The so-called antitheses in Mt 5 between what Scripture says and what Jesus proclaims provide the fundamental warrant for the pope to interpret the Ten Commandments

on a deeper and more radical level. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt 5:27-28). This radicalizing of the letter of the law against adultery to prohibit even interior (and unexpressed) lust for another has been taken very seriously in the rest of the New Testament and earliest patristic writings and for much of the history of the Catholic Church.

With the sexual revolution in the 1960s, this prohibition of even interior lust as gravely sinful came under severe attack. It was subjected to intense scorn, often under the insulting label of “Catholic guilt.” Still, there is no denying that the progression in Mt 5, which is attributed to Jesus himself, is to interpret the Ten Commandments in ways far more inclusive than the mere literal action mentioned in each commandment (like murder or adultery) to comprehend the interior attitudes and vices (like anger and lust) that lead to those actions. If even the interior passion of lust is condemned by Jesus, a fortiori must all acting out of such lust and thus many aspects of the sexual revolution be considered reprehensible.

This helps account for the criticism and scorn heaped on the pope when his meditations on these statements from the Sermon on the Mount led to his compelling reflections on how lust can demean any partner, even one’s spouse. Lust replaces self-giving love with grasping or appropriation of the other (as in the grasping [at equality with God] in Gn 3 that Jesus’s self-emptying of his divine prerogatives in Phil 2 reversed). Lust loses sensitivity to the gift of the person and to communion of persons that sexual union should embody (*TB*, 126-27). Lust and concupiscence try to possess the other as object for one’s own enjoyment, in contrast to mutual self-giving (*TB*, 130).<sup>26</sup>

In lust no longer is even one’s spouse treated as a person with his or her own subjectivity. Lust no longer reveres the “nuptial meaning of the body” and the rationale of sexuality to bring the “two into one flesh” and to “increase and multiply.” In lust even a spouse can become an object for satisfying one’s own instincts. Lust is an abusive “use” of a human person, who has been created for his or her own sake and as one’s own equal in dignity, as a means of gratifying one’s own sexual desires.

In the context of the Sermon on the Mount, statements that immediately follow this condemnation of lust make clear that this prohibition of lust is not merely some lofty ideal for vowed religious. It is a necessary precondition for everyone’s eternal salvation. “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole

body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell" (Mt 5:29-30). Such dire warnings make it hard to fathom how Christians reading the Sermon on the Mount can persist in rationalizing practices they picked up from the sexual revolution and in participating in such lustful practices apparently without reflection or scruple.

## CONCLUSION

Corresponding to the godlike dignity and the identity of each human as a male or female person, John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* regards the sexual union of male and female as not only a special but even a sacred event. Whereas the sexual revolution trivializes sexuality and sexual behavior with its materialistic, mechanistic, and utilitarian reductionism, the Church teaching office considers union by the complementary sexes sacred and intimately related to our identity since we have been created male and female in God's image. This theology of the body reveals both the nuptial meaning of the body and our human likeness to the communion of persons within the very Trinity.

The biblical foundations of the pope's *Theology of the Body* are discovered not primarily in a historical critical reading of Scripture, but in the pope's pastoral meditation on Scripture as a canonical unity and from a perspective within the history of Christian interpretation. This perspective embraces two millennia of Catholic tradition, the lived and living experience of the truths of Scripture and the Christian faith. The pope reads relevant passages of Scripture very closely, with attention to minute details, as highlighted by many patristic, medieval, and magisterial interpreters before him. His basic awareness of historical-critical exegesis helps him to avoid blatant eisegesis or misreadings of the biblical texts. But he approaches Scripture from an attitude of consulting Scripture precisely as Scripture, as God's revealed and inspired word and guidance for his people and as the Church's book, not primarily as a historical document to be treated academically, or even as a source of proof texts for Church doctrines and moral teachings.



## NOTES

1. Terrence Prendergast, S.J., "A Vision of Wholeness: A Reflection on the Use of Scripture in a Cross-Section of Papal Writings," *The Thought of Pope John Paul II*, ed. John McDermott (Rome: Gregorian, 1993), 69-97, esp. 90.

2. Ibid., 91.
3. Ibid., 85. Compare Luke Timothy Johnson on the Catholic approach as both/and vs. a Protestant either/or in Luke Timothy Johnson and William S. Kurz, S.J., *The Future of Catholic Biblical Scholarship: A Constructive Conversation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 5-8.
4. Prendergast, "Vision of Wholeness," 77
5. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997). See the helpful commentary by Christopher West, *Theology of the Body Explained: A Commentary on John Paul II's "Gospel of the Body"* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2003).
6. Luke Timothy Johnson, "A Disembodied 'Theology of the Body': John Paul II on Love, Sex, and Pleasure," *Commonweal* 128, 2 (January 26, 2001): 11-17.
7. Ibid., 13-14.
8. David M. Williams, *Receiving the Bible in Faith: Historical and Theological Exegesis* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2004), esp. 178. For dual divine-human intentionality, see 179-98; for application, see 198-214; his conclusion is on 214-19.
9. The Pontifical Biblical Commission [PBC], *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (Boston: St. Paul Books & Media, 1993). See the commentary by Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *The Biblical Commission's Document "The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church": Text and Commentary* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1995).
10. Williams, *Receiving the Bible*, 183.
11. Cf. Karl P. Donfried, "The Use of Scripture in *Veritatis Splendor*," in *Ecumenical Ventures in Ethics: Protestants Engage Pope John Paul II's Moral Encyclicals*, ed. Reinhard Hüutter and Theodor Dieter (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 38-59. An interpretation of the literal sense restricted to the message of the human author seems to underlie many of Donfried's criticisms of the pope's use of Scripture. The fact that Donfried explicitly bases many of his criticisms on the PBC's *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* may reinforce the impression that that document often envisions a similar equivalence between the literal sense and historical critical results.
12. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., "Problems of the Literal and Spiritual Senses of Scripture," *Louvain Studies* 20 (1995): 134-46, esp. 139. Fitzmyer goes on to cite L. Bouyer, "Liturgie et exégèse spirituelle," *MD* 7 (1946): 27-50, esp. 30, on how the Word "is not a dead word, imprisoned in the past, but a living word, immediately addressed to the man of today." Though Bouyer was referring to the spiritual sense, Fitzmyer applies the statement rather to the literal sense in what I would call its expanded meaning.
13. Fitzmyer, "Problems," 138.
14. Ibid. For this topic, see also Fitzmyer's commentary on IBC, 114-31.
15. Williams, *Receiving the Bible*, esp. 201-04.
16. Ibid., 202-04.
17. Johnson & Kurz, *Future*; cf. esp. Johnson's chap. 5, pp. 119-42, and Kurz's response, p. 151, and chap. 8, esp. pp. 186-88, 190-202.
18. One example of how Catholic tradition influences biblical interpretation is the traditional use from the earliest patristic times of the creed as *regula fidei*. In his book on the Nicene Creed, Luke Johnson discusses how the creed interprets Scripture. It provides a code for understanding Scripture because it stems from and follows the Bible's basic story line with special focus on how humans are saved through God's work in Christ. The creed also constructs a world as imagined by Scripture to be the Christian vision of reality. Both these credal examples seem to shed light on how the pope approaches Scripture in *Theology of the Body*. (Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why It Matters* [London: Darton, Longman and Todd and New York: Doubleday, 2003], 59-61).
19. See Fitzmyer, "Problems," and his commentary on the PBC's *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, and the discussions of extension of literal meaning beyond circumstances of composition, its dynamic aspect, the faith presuppositions and contemporary awareness of "a properly-oriented historical-critical interpretation" mentioned above.

Although Raymond Brown was initially a major proponent of the "fuller sense," see his strong reservations already in 1968: "The Problems of the *Sensus Plenior*," in *Exégèse et Théologie: Les*

*Saintes Écritures et leur interprétation théologique*, ed. G. Thils and R.E. Brown, BETL, vol. 26 (Gembloux: J Duculot, 1968), 72-81. Cf. the assessment of Brown's approaches in Kevin Duffy, "The Ecclesial Hermeneutic of Raymond E. Brown," *HeyJ* 39 (1998): 37-56. Although Brown appreciated continuity because of the Spirit between Scripture and later developments, to the end he insisted, 50, on a two-stage hermeneutic and resisted distinctively Catholic or Christian single-stage routes to discerning the literal sense as illusions that could lead to eisegesis or fundamentalism.

Although Fitzmyer refers to Andrés Fernández, S.J., as a key early proponent of the *sensus plenior*, Fernández himself considers the fuller sense as a literal sense: A. Fernández, "Sentido plenior, literal, típico, espiritual," *Bib* 34 (1953): 299-326, summarizing conclusion, 326; cf. his explanations, 303-06 (esp. 306), and 321-26.

20. From the perspective of faith, the *Exultet* hymn in the liturgy of the Easter Vigil praises God for the special way in which he repaired the damage of human sin: "O happy fault, *o felix culpa*, which merited to have so great a redeemer!" (Quoted in a reflection on the *Exultet* hymn by Cassian Folsom, O.S.B., "As Easter Draws Near," at <http://www.catholic.net/RCC/Periodicals/Inside/0304-97/liturgy.html> [site visited July 2004]).
21. Cf., e.g., George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Clif Street Books, 1999), 97-98, 101-02 (marriage ministry); 140-44 (*Love and Responsibility*); 196-97 (family ministry); 206-10 (as archbishop, *Humanae vitae* controversy).
22. Christopher West, "A Response to Luke Timothy Johnson's Critique of John Paul II's 'Disembodied' Theology of the Body," is available (as of July 2004) on his website: <http://www.christopherwest.com/article5.htm>.
23. Cf. Paul M. Quay, S.J., *The Mystery Hidden for Ages in God*, American University Studies, Series VII, Theology and Religion, vol. 161 (New York: Peter Lang, 1995).
24. Cf. also the approach in William Kurz, S.J., "Ethical Actualization of Scripture: Approaches toward a Prolife Reading," *Fides Quaerens Intellectum: A Journal of Theology, Philosophy & History* 1 (2001): 67-94.
25. Similarities between dissent about contraception in *Humanae vitae* and the far more comprehensive rebellion against Church authority are described by Paul V. Mankowski, S.J., "The Prayer of Lady Macbeth: How the Contraceptive Mentality Has Neutered Religious Life," *FaRe* 19 (1993), 79-93. St. Thomas Aquinas expressed a strikingly similar judgment 750 years earlier in ST II-II, q. 5, a. 3: "If, on the things taught by the Church, he holds what he chooses to hold and rejects what he chooses to reject, he no longer adheres to the teaching of the Church as to an infallible rule, but to his own will." (Marquette colleague Dr. Patrick Doyle brought this comparison to my attention.) See also William S. Kurz, S.J., "'To Be as God': Biblical Reflections on the Sexual Revolution," *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* 3 (2003): 111-37.
26. This also clarifies an important distinction between seeking pleasure in sex and its unitive purpose of creating communion of persons.