

# 7 Things You Need to Know About The Theology of the Body

by Emily Stimpson

"A theological time bomb, set to go off with dramatic consequences." That's how papal biographer, George Weigel, described Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body. The description fits. It fits because the Theology of the Body is more than an exposition of the Church's teachings on human sexuality. It is, in fact, the Catholic sacramental worldview, understood, structured, and articulated for a culture plagued by a diseased understanding of man. When properly understood and truly lived, that worldview has the power to transform the way men and women understand their bodies and their souls, their masculinity and femininity, their vocation in this life, and their destiny in the next. So, how do we set off this time bomb? That question was the focus of *Man and Woman He Created Them*, a symposium on the Theology of the Body co-sponsored by Franciscan University this past May.

Organized by Dr. Peter J. Colosi '87, assistant professor of philosophy at Franciscan, and held at the Kartause Maria Thron, home of Franciscan's study abroad program in Gaming, Austria, the symposium brought together authors, scholars, and catechists from around the world to unpack the philosophical and theological implications of John Paul's teachings and to address the challenges of infusing them into contemporary culture. Over the course of three days, presenter after presenter agreed that igniting the Theology of the Body time bomb begins with knowledge of the essentials — what the Theology of the Body is, what it teaches, and what it has to offer contemporary culture. Here, seven of the symposium's presenters share their thoughts on those essentials.

**1. The Theology of the Body teaches that the body expresses the person.** That means that our physical bodies reveal the invisible dimension of ourselves. Our virtues, our spiritual lives, our attitudes of love and charity, our struggles with sin—they're all invisible. You can't paint them blue. But they all get revealed through the body, through our eyes, through our posture, through our gestures. "John Paul II gave us an example of this when he said that he found the mystery of Mother Teresa in her eyes. As surprising as this sounds, our inner lives form our bodies. So when people met Mother Teresa they immediately felt her charity and her servant's heart because of her posture and the look in her eyes. They didn't deduce it. They just felt it. Likewise, just as the visible body reveals the invisible person, what we do with our bodies profoundly affects our souls. A good chunk of contemporary culture rejects that idea. They think, as a radical feminist once said, that 'God doesn't care what we do to our bodies. He only wants us to respect each other as persons.'

In the classroom, I'll share that quote with my students, then ask, 'Isn't it odd that someone who would be consoled by a hug or insulted by a slap, thinks sex, which is a much more physical experience than a hug, is completely divorced from the ability to touch a person interiorly?' That really helps them understand the implications of living a promiscuous lifestyle. They begin to see the immediacy of the connection between their bodies and souls. They see that in the sexual act people reveal more than their naked bodies: They reveal their whole invisible self. And that self, their soul, is touched as much as their body is. Understanding that gives them a much richer and more attractive reason to reserve sexual intimacy for marriage. When they recognize that connection, they want to protect themselves, and they want to be able to share themselves completely with their spouse and only their spouse.

—Dr. Peter J. Colosi '87, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Franciscan University, Gaming, Austria

**2. The Theology of the Body affirms the goodness of sexuality.** Now, there are lots of people who never think of God and sex in the same sentence, unless that sentence begins with the words 'God doesn't like...' When I was younger, you probably could have classified me as one of those people. I wouldn't have articulated it like that, but on some subconscious level, I thought of sex as some sort of necessary evil. Learning about the Theology of the Body, however, redeemed and renewed my understanding of sexuality. It taught me that the sexual union between husband and wife images the spiritual union of the Trinity. That's because it's more than just a physical act. When a man and his wife give themselves to each other in marital union, they're not supposed to give just their bodies, but

their whole selves — their minds, souls, and hearts. It's the physical expression of their communion of persons, a communion of persons that points to the Trinity.

Of course, sex isn't the only way of manifesting the communion of persons. Husbands and wives are called to live as a communion of persons every day of their married lives in hundreds of ways. But the most complete, most embodied expression of that communion comes about in the marital union. It's from that act that new life comes. It's a life-giving communion imaging the life-giving communion of the Trinity. The Theology of the Body also shows how the call to celibacy affirms the goodness of sexuality. It doesn't diminish it. The celibate doesn't reject sexuality, but rather uses it to make a gift of self to Christ and his Church. Love is what drives us to give, whether it be in marriage or in celibacy. Celibacy actually affirms the goodness of the sexual act by sacrificing it for the sake of the kingdom. If sex were something 'bad' then giving it up wouldn't be extraordinary, but rather expected of every Christian. The very goodness of the sexual act is what makes its renunciation by the celibate so valuable.

—Anastasia Northrop, President, Theology of the Body International Alliance, Chicago, Illinois

**3. The Theology of the Body is fundamentally an anthropology**, a five-year reflection based on Scripture on what it means to be a human person made in the image and likeness of God. In other words, the Theology of the Body answers the question 'Who am I?' Because of that, the Theology of the Body is for everyone, not just for married people. The kernel of the Theology of the Body is that we're made in God's image and likeness to be a gift. We're called to give ourselves away in love, and that's expressed through the body. Therefore, at every age and every state in life, the organizing principle should be, How can I give myself away in love? This is exactly the challenge a parent of a two-year-old faces. The terrible twos are all about the child wanting the world to revolve around him because he's discovering he can act upon the world. The parenting task at that point is to redirect the child from thinking, 'The world revolves around me,' to 'I can make a gift of self. I can take turns sharing this toy. Now, does that sound like the Theology of the Body? Not on the surface. But when you teach your toddler to share, that's Theology of the Body in action.

The same thing is revisited with teenagers. They have to learn that if they want to make a gift of self, they need to learn impulse control and develop a spirit of sacrifice. Once again, in the elderly population, a recent widow can feel like life has suddenly disintegrated. She has to rediscover her ability to make a gift of self outside the context of her lifelong marriage. John Paul II called this the spousal meaning of the body. Because the word 'spousal' is there, we think this only applies to marriage, but for him it doesn't. Spousal means this ability to make a gift of self through the body. Therefore it applies to all of us. All of us are called to live the spousal meaning of the body. It's a way of being.

—Katrina Zeno '86, Coordinator, John Paul II Resource Center for Theology of the Body and Culture, Phoenix, Arizona

**4. The Theology of the Body is a defense of Humanae Vitae.** That was John Paul's intent from the beginning. He wanted to root out the dualistic understanding of the human person at the heart of the contraceptive culture and at the heart of the problems that have sprung from it, problems such as abortion and embryo-destructive stem cell research. What do I mean by a 'dualistic understanding of the person'? I mean thinking of a person as simply a conscious subject aware of himself as a self and capable of relating to other selves. According to that line of thinking, the body is just some kind of privileged instrument, not in itself integral to the being of the person. It's just the means by which we experience pleasure and other personal goods.

Now, if that's how you define a person, then some members of the human species aren't persons. Unborn babies, embryos, patients in a coma, even elderly persons with Alzheimer's — none of them meet that definition. They're not subjects aware of themselves as selves. That's how those who hold this dualistic understanding justify getting rid of them. The Theology of the Body unmasks that erroneous dualism by attempting to make people realize that human beings are bodily entities, not just souls temporarily inhabiting a body. It says the body reveals the person; it's the sign of the person; it is the person. It says that a living human body is a person whether it's consciously aware of itself as a subject or not. It's a person because it's a living human body. In more concrete terms, embryos don't have the developed capacity for reasoning and making choices. But they have the radical capacity to do so.

The capacity just has to be developed. And even if once it's developed, the capacity is lost, it's still a human being. A little eaglet doesn't have the developed capacity to soar, but it has the radical capacity to develop it. And even if one day its wings are broken, it's still an eagle. By understanding that, by understanding the Theology of the Body, we can respond to what's driving the great debates over life and bioethics taking place today."

—Dr. William May, Michael J. McGivney Professor of Moral Theology, John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family, Washington, D.C.

**5. The Theology of the Body is rooted in Catholic tradition.** Not everybody in the Church recognizes that. Some think it departs from traditional Catholic teaching on marriage and sexuality, just as some think the Church's traditional teaching has been legalistic and more focused on procreation than love. Those are ideas you can easily get when you study the treatises on marriage written in the supplements to St. Thomas' Summa. Such treatises were written for confessors and priests dealing, for the most part, with legal questions of marriage. You get a very different image when you look in Scripture at the Song of Songs and at the many commentaries written on the Song of Songs. There, you see marriage as the image of the spousal love that exists between the soul and God, between the Church and God. You find a fuller understanding of marriage, one more like the image we see in the Theology of the Body.

Nowhere, perhaps, is that understanding clearer than in the writings of St. John of the Cross. There is a deep continuity between the core vision of love the Theology of the Body presents and the core vision of love St. John presents. He saw the gift of human life reaching perfection in a spousal gift of self to God. This, he believed, was a participation in the life of the Trinity. That same understanding is at the root of John Paul II's understanding of marriage. He talks about the union between man and woman, using the language of John of the Cross, as a gift of self and a participation in Trinitarian life. You also find much continuity between John Paul and St. Thomas Aquinas. Both believe that the nature of things is key to understanding love and marriage. For John Paul, the problem with how the modern world understands marriage has a great deal to do with a wrong understanding of human nature. In other words, he believed the fruit of the scientific revolution was a mechanical picture of man's nature, a vision of man as a chemical machine that just happened to evolve in a particular way. According to that vision, the body has no meaning, what man does with his body has no inner meaning, and so marriage has no meaning. But in the Theology of the Body John Paul says no, the human body in its deepest nature was formed by God, it has a spousal meaning, and the meaning of marriage flows from the nature of man and woman, male and female, created in the image of God.

—Dr. Michael Waldstein, Professor of New Testament, The International Theological Institute, Gaming, Austria

**6. The Theology of the Body has to be lived.** It doesn't matter how much you know about it abstractly if it doesn't connect with your life. But because we live in a world that is increasingly virtualized, it's becoming hard to see how the Theology of the Body does connect with life, let alone how to live it. "You see, the Theology of the Body teaches that each of us is called to be a gift, a gift to one another and a gift to God. This giving and receiving requires real presence. Every other relationship in life besides marriage is called to be celibate, but each still calls for a communion of persons expressed bodily as gift. The increasing virtualization of our world, however, blurs the line between what's real and what's not real. It allows for simulated presence to replace real presence, simulated bodies to replace real bodies, simulated gifts to replace real gifts.

One of the primary ways this happens is through the computerization of our entertainment. Computerization isn't bad in and of itself. I use the computer a lot. But too often people use computers and technology not just as tools to perform tasks, but as means to escape the real world. That escape can be as simple as immersing themselves in the created worlds of others on television and in video games, worlds that present an alternate view of reality and change the way we think life should be. Or it can be as complex as Web sites that allow you to create your own 3-D virtual world.

There is a tremendous disembodiment that goes with these virtual escapes. It can lead us to see the body as unimportant, as simply one more artifact for manipulation. It can make us think that being entertained is the purpose of our life. And it can convince us that life is whatever we want it to be, that what is real and true is

whatever we want to be real and true. If we want to live the Theology of the Body, if we want to live the deeply incarnational Catholic life and faith, we have to reject the substitution of the unreal for the real. That doesn't mean giving up computers or televisions. It just means examining how many hours and for what reasons we're doing those things. Ultimately, our question has to be 'Is what we're doing fostering real relationships in the real world or isn't it?'

—Sister Mary Timothy Prokes, FSE, Professor of Theology, Notre Dame Graduate School of Christendom College, Alexandria, Virginia

**7. The Theology of the Body is the articulation of the Catholic sacramental worldview.** It gives us the correct way of looking at life, of seeing the divine order of creation, then living according to that. How does it do that? By teaching that invisible realities are made visible through the physical world. Everything in the created order points to transcendent realities, to realities beyond itself. Everything points to God. Just as God reveals himself and the life of the Trinity through the human person, so too does he reveal himself through all his creation. Once we know that, we have to act accordingly. How we interact with each other and with our environment, how we pray, how we work, how we legislate and vote — all of that should be impacted. We can choose to approach everything we see, touch, and do as something sacred, touching it with the mindfulness that it's connected to God, comes from God, reveals God, or we can approach it without that mindfulness, without reverence.

Ultimately, the Theology of the Body articulates the mystical foundation of our faith. Now, mystical isn't something that's way out there — saints who levitate and have stigmata. Mystical really means seeing and interacting with things as they are, as God intended them to be, as God intended us to see them. Mysticism is the 'why' behind everything — why we're human, why we're male, why we're female. And unless we know the 'why,' we don't know how to be human. We don't know how to be male or female. That's why we're so injured in those areas in our world today.

The Theology of the Body helps us discover the 'why.' It shows us that the created world, including the human body, is not something to dominate, appropriate, use, and abuse. It's not something bad or unimportant. It's holy. It was made by God and points us back to God. The Theology of the Body calls us to recognize all of creation, and most especially the one-flesh union between husband and wife, as sacramental, as something that reveals God. It calls us to be mystics. Adam and Eve were mystics before the fall. And the Theology of the Body simply calls us back to our true humanness.

—Father Thomas Loya, Host of Relevant Radio's Light of the East

Originally published in Franciscan Way, the magazine of Franciscan University of Steubenville, [www.franciscan.edu](http://www.franciscan.edu).

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