

A romantic couple embracing in a soft, sunlit setting. The man is on the left, leaning towards the woman on the right. They are both smiling and looking down at each other. The background is a warm, golden glow with bokeh light effects.

THE
THEOLOGY
OF THE BODY

made simple

ANTHONY
PERCY

DISCOVER JOHN PAUL II'S
RADICAL TEACHING ON SEX,
LOVE, AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

Theology of the Body Made Simple

Anthony Percy

Foreword by Professor Kenneth Schmitz



BOOKS & MEDIA
Boston

Introduction

The *Theology of the Body* is a new and fresh approach to the human body and to sexual morality. *Theos* is the Greek word for “God,” and *logos* is Greek for “word.” Theology, therefore, is “a word about God,” or the study of God. Theology is also the study of all created things. God is light, says St. John. The light of God shines upon our minds and hearts, giving us a clear vision of God himself and all that God has made. John Paul II has studied the human body, therefore, with the aid of the light God grants us.

Normally we are accustomed to think of and study the human body from other angles. For instance, we can study the human body from the perspective of health, biology, physics, chemistry, and even economics. These approaches are useful. But when studied and considered in isolation, they tend to be incomplete. They need to be understood in a wider and more generous context so that the truth of the human body may

shine forth. The pope does this, in a new way, by studying the human body from God's perspective.

Method and Content

What is the method and content of this new approach? John Paul II has a simple method. The pope starts with the Word of God. He relies heavily on the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Then he introduces and uses human experience to develop his teaching. As we will see, the Bible and human experience go together well.

The content of the Theology of the Body has two parts, with three chapters in each part.

PART ONE

The Words of Christ

CHAPTER ONE

Christ Appeals to the Beginning

CHAPTER TWO

Christ Appeals to the Human Heart

CHAPTER THREE

Christ Appeals to the Resurrection

PART TWO

The Sacrament

CHAPTER ONE

The Dimension of Covenant and of Grace

CHAPTER TWO

The Dimension of Sign

CHAPTER THREE

He Gave Them the Law of Life as Their Inheritance*

Because everything else flows from it, I will focus exclusively on chapter one of the first part of the *Theology of the Body*. In this first part, the pope develops four original experiences and then goes on to develop four qualities of the human body. This is the fundamental content of the *Theology of the Body* teaching, and it is quite extraordinary. Once you grasp the content of this very first chapter, you will be able to read and comprehend the rest of the pope's teaching.

There are four chapters in this book. Chapter one looks at the original human experiences. Chapter two examines the qualities of the human body. Chapter three discusses sexual morality, and chapter four speaks about the mercy and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Reading the chapters in order will help you understand the topic better.

* This division of the parts of the *Theology of the Body* is based on John Paul II's original Polish manuscript, recently discovered in the John Paul II Archives and published in the new translation of *The Theology of the Body* (Michael M. Waldstein, trans. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006 [www.pauline.org]).

When and Where Did the Pope Give This New Teaching?

The pope taught the *Theology of the Body* from September 5, 1979, to November 28, 1984. People who come to Rome to visit the ancient city often want to catch a glimpse of the pope. One way of doing this is to get a ticket to what is called a “Wednesday audience” in St. Peter’s Square. People assemble, and the pope comes out to give a brief talk, bless them, show them his love, and encourage them in their Christian lives. Pope John Paul II used these occasions to teach us about the meaning of the human body and sexuality.

Why the New Teaching and Approach?

A famous Catholic writer, G. K. Chesterton, wrote in the 1920s that there was *more madness coming out of Manhattan than Moscow*. In 1917 the Communist Revolution had taken place in Russia. But another revolution was erupting. It was, and is, more subtle and, in a sense, far more dangerous. Chesterton was referring to the sexual revolution. It was underway back in the 1920s, and he foresaw that it would present an enormous challenge to society.

Can there be any doubt that Chesterton was right? In London, a recent study of nine thousand students with an average age of thirteen found that one in every fourteen of those surveyed had had sex by age thirteen.

Interestingly, 36 percent of the girls and 32 percent of the boys regretted their loss of virginity.

As we look around and witness the enormous pain and suffering caused by broken marriages and sexual promiscuity, there can be little doubt that we have a problem. As a father of four teenage children said to me recently, “They are taking our kids off the shelf, and the kids are not being put back on it.”

Of course these problems are not new. Sexuality is a paradox. It is a marvelous but difficult reality. Yet difficulties and problems are good for us. Problems present a challenge—an opportunity. We are, therefore, living in a *favorable time*. We can try something new. This is what John Paul II has done with his *Theology of the Body*.

In times past the Church simply stated her sexual teaching. She always taught that sex before marriage, masturbation, adultery, contraception, deviant sexual fantasies, etc., were sinful and harmful acts. Popes, bishops, priests, nuns, and parents would speak the truth on sexual issues. People were simply asked to trust the teaching without a lot of explanation. This worked when an atmosphere of trust prevailed in the Church and in society in general. But since the 1960s and the “age of liberation,” this approach has proved quite unsuccessful. People now view most institutions—especially the Church—with a good deal of suspicion. Clearly, our time calls for a new approach.

In addition, in times past the sexual teaching of the Church was not always presented positively. On many occasions, it was conveyed simply as a series of imperatives beginning with the words “don’t do this.” Positive reasons why people should not sleep together before marriage or look at pornography, for instance, were not always forthcoming; promoting the fear of sexual sin was the main tool the Church had at her disposal. It was effective to some extent, but now this approach does not carry much weight.

John Paul II addressed these critical concerns with his *Theology of the Body*. He introduces us into a new understanding of the human body and sexuality. His approach is positive, reasonable, and conversational.

Sex Is Important

Helping people—particularly teenagers, young adults, and young married couples—see the truth of sexuality is a priority. Helping people enter marriage as virgins is important. The Bible says we are temples of the Holy Spirit—and sin, including sexual sin, attacks that reality. Sexuality is an important matter. TV, movies, and magazines confirm this; in a sense, they are obsessed with it. Sex matters; it is an important dimension of our lives. No one can deny it.

But where does sex fit into our lives? What values are associated with it? Is it intimate and sacred? Or is it

simply “a casual indoor sport”? Pope John Paul II believes that sex means something. But the pope is not reacting to the sexual revolution; rather, he is responding to it. Remember that the revolution began quite some time ago, and the Church is like everyone else: she needed time to think things through and reflect on the real causes of the problem. This is what John Paul II has done.

Where does sex
fit into our lives?

How to Understand the Church’s Sexual Teaching

This book is not a textbook. If you are looking for a textbook, then you could consult the following books: *The Christian Meaning of Human Sexuality* by Father Paul Quay, S.J.; *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*; *Love and Responsibility* by Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II); and a document by Pope Paul VI called *Humanae Vitae*. An excellent book on the broader questions of morality, faith, sacraments, and prayer is *Catholic Christianity: A Complete Catechism of Catholic Beliefs based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church* by Peter Kreeft. A comprehensive study of John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* can be found in *Theology of the Body Explained* by Christopher West (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2003 [www.pauline.org]). And, of

course, don't forget the primary text written by Pope John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body* (Michael M. Waldstein, trans. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006 [www.pauline.org]).

Of particular note is the document *Humanae Vitae* ("Of Human Life"). Pope Paul VI wrote it in 1968, and it caused quite a stir. It is well known for its opposition to artificial contraception. *Humanae Vitae* is about that and much more. It is short and easy to read, but many people who find aspects of the Church's teaching on sexuality difficult have never had the opportunity to read Pope Paul's booklet. Upon reading it they often experience a change of heart. Try reading it. You can find it on the worldwide web. Just search for *Humanae Vitae*.^{*} These resources, and hopefully this book, will provide a good introduction to sexuality. In addition, a discussion group with friends might be a good way to facilitate understanding.

^{*} Also available as a booklet from Pauline Books & Media (www.pauline.org).

Chapter One

The Original Human Experience

Some people have called the *Theology of the Body* a “revolution.” George Weigel, author of *Witness to Hope*, a biography of Pope John Paul II, claims that the *Theology of the Body* is a “theological time bomb waiting to go off.” In this chapter, I will outline the basic method the pope uses in his *Theology of the Body*. Then I will introduce the four original experiences Pope John Paul II develops. You are probably already familiar with Original Sin, but you may not have heard of the other three original experiences. These three other original experiences constitute part of the “theological time bomb.” In chapter two we will discover the other parts of the “time bomb” when we examine the qualities of the human body. Now let’s look at how the pope develops his *Theology of the Body* and follow his method.

The Bible and Human Experience

In the *Theology of the Body*, the pope makes extensive use of the Bible and human experience. First, he uses the Bible, which is the word of God. God actually speaks to us in many ways. Above all, he speaks through his Son, Jesus Christ. The four Gospels tell us about Jesus' life. In addition—and this is important—they make Christ present to us now, in the twenty-first century.

When we read the Bible, we are not just reading a historical book. We are reading something much more dynamic, something that is putting us into actual living contact with Jesus Christ. So when we read of the death of Christ, we are mysteriously present at that event. Christ is really dying for us now. Therefore, in the Bible, he speaks to us now. Read the Bible this way, and it will change your life. Read it like any other history book, and you will miss the point completely.

Second, John Paul II relies on human experience. The Bible and experience go together. For instance, we are asked: "How do we know Jesus Christ?" We answer: "We know him through the Bible and through personal experience." We read the Bible and experience Jesus in prayer—he is real and living. He is like no other.

In addition, we experience him in and through our friends, family, teachers, sports, work, nature, etc. If we are Catholic, we experience him in the community of

the Church and in the sacraments. In the Eucharist we literally eat his body and drink his blood. In all these ways we experience the crucified and risen Jesus Christ. Experience is important for John Paul II. We will see this as we read and discover his *Theology of the Body*.

“The Beginning”

Let’s start with the Bible. John Paul II begins with this passage from the Gospel of Matthew 19:3–12.

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” He answered, “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’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.” They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?” He said to them, “For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from *the beginning* it was not so. And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for unchastity, and marries another, commits adultery; and he who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”

The disciples said to him, “If such is the case of a man with his wife, it is not expedient to marry.” But he said to them, “Not all men can receive this saying, but only those to whom it is given. For there are

eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it.”

When Jesus spoke these words, divorce was common. Jesus’ words surprised the disciples, and they sur-

The world at the time of Christ, and at the time of the early Church, was not unlike ours. Yet Christ did not hesitate to speak the truth.

prise us also. Remember, too, that marriage was not common in the Roman Empire. The marriage rate was so low that on several occasions Roman emperors decreed that men should marry. Roman men preferred to stay single and enjoy a life without commitment. In addition, abortion was common, as was infanticide, contraception, and homosexuality. The world at the time of Christ, and at the time of the early Church, was not unlike ours.

Yet Christ did not hesitate to speak the truth. In fact, in responding to the Pharisees’ question, Jesus raises the stakes. He speaks not only of marriage, but also of celibacy—something virtually unheard-of in the ancient world. He speaks of it as accepting a gift given. Some people will be asked to live a celibate life;

they will feel the call of God to forsake all, follow him, and be totally free to build his kingdom. This, too, surprised the disciples and also surprises us.

I have highlighted the phrase “the beginning” in Jesus’ reply. What is “the beginning”? It is described in the first book of the Bible, the Book of Genesis 1:1, 27: “In *the beginning*...male and female [God] created them.” So “the beginning” means the creation of man and woman. But it also means more.

Jesus immediately goes on to quote from Genesis 2:24: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.” God created Adam and Eve with the intention that they would become “one flesh.” God created them with a view to an intimate unity whereby they would share their very lives.

To reflect more on this idea of intention, think of many of our common activities. A person turns on the computer and makes a new file to write a letter for a job application. Or perhaps he or she is writing a paper for high school or college. People start out with a purpose—with an intention. This is exactly what God does with us. In the Bible this intention or purpose is referred to as “the beginning.”

God creates us with an intention in mind. In the passage cited above, Jesus reveals to us his Father’s intention: men and women are called to be either married or celibate. Either way, the call is a gift from God.

Most people are called to be “one flesh” with a person of the opposite sex. Others—a few—are called to be celibate. But in both cases—marriage or celibacy—the calling is a gift from God.

Neither marriage nor celibacy is something we humans invented. Rather, God gives us marriage and celibacy as a gift. Many people today have never heard of such an idea, or perhaps they have forgotten it. Either way, it is our privilege to introduce the idea or remind them of it.

The “Theological Time Bomb” Explodes!

Before I explain the four original experiences, let’s stop here to recognize the “theological time bomb” that the *Theology of the Body* contains. Suppose we are asked to complete this phrase: “Original ____.” What do we answer? My guess is that we, and most people who have received an adequate Christian education, would respond: “Original Sin.”

With Pope John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body*, the response is radically different. The response becomes:

Original Solitude;
Original Unity;
Original Nakedness;
Original Sin.

Pope John Paul II does not want to deny the truth and reality of Original Sin. That would be absurd. But he wants to take us back to “the beginning”—to what God intended. John Paul II wants to take us back before Original Sin existed. He wants to do this precisely because Jesus Christ took us back to “the beginning.” Only in this way can we see the real meaning of human life and human sexuality.

So using the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis, the pope develops three original human experiences called Original Solitude, Original Unity, and Original Nakedness. These occur before Original Sin. The important point for us to remember is this: we, too, have access to these original experiences precisely because Christ grants it to us. We are already familiar with the experience of Original Sin. We have had, and will continue to have, an experience of failure and sin. But now in the *Theology of the Body*, Pope John Paul II makes it clear that we can have the positive experiences of Solitude, Unity, and Nakedness, too.

Having these positive experiences is precisely what Christ wants us to do. He wants to take us back to “the beginning” so we can discover the real meaning of the human body and human sexuality—i.e., the meaning of life. Herein lies the “theological time bomb.” Christians know the reality of Original Sin, but they have not been given a vivid awareness, through a rich and penetrating catechesis, of the experiences that

occurred *before* Original Sin. By taking us back to “the beginning,” Christ desires to give this to us, and his desire is now expressed through Pope John Paul II. He desires that, like Adam and Eve, we will have the experiences of *Solitude*, *Unity*, and *Nakedness*. This truly can spark a revolution.

In the beginning,
we were not broken,
but whole.

Thus our relationships with
each other were
also peaceful and
intimate.

What, then, do we find happening before Original Sin? We find two chapters in the Book of Genesis in which God and humanity are on *intimate* terms. In other words, we experienced a great peace with God, and our relationship with him was intimate and true. Furthermore, we knew ourselves intimately, and we experienced ourselves

as integral people. We were not broken, but whole. Thus our relationships with each other were also peaceful and intimate. By going back to “the beginning,” we can see what God intended and had in fact established at the beginning of time. This is how John Paul II develops the four original experiences.

To develop the first three experiences of Original Solitude, Original Unity, and Original Nakedness, John Paul II focuses on Genesis 2:15–25. (Take a close look at the italicized words.)

The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die." Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a *helper* fit for him." So out of the ground the LORD God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and *brought them* to the man to see what he would *call* them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every beast of the field; but for the man there was *not found a helper* fit for him. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and *brought her to the man*. Then the man said, "*This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh*; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and *cleaves* to his wife, and they become *one flesh*. And the man and his wife were both *naked*, and were *not ashamed*.

Original Solitude

The Bible contains two accounts of creation. The first one is Genesis 1:1–3. The second account is Genesis 2:4–24, and it begins where the first account ends.