


REVISED EDITION

Theology of the Body Explained

——
A Commentary on
John Paul II's
Man and Woman He Created Them

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CHRISTOPHER WEST

Foreword by Michael Waldstein

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CHAPTER 1

Christ Appeals to the “Beginning”

[Cycle 1—Original Man]



THIS FIRST CYCLE CONSISTS OF twenty-three general audiences delivered between September 5, 1979, and April 2, 1980 (TOB 1–23). John Paul II finds a source of great hope for all men and women in Christ’s discussion with the Pharisees about marriage. If conflict, tension, jealousies, and divisions have tarnished the relationship of the sexes throughout history, Christ challenges his listeners to recognize that “from the beginning it was not so” (Mt 19:8). With these words, Christ calls all men and women burdened by the heritage of sin to realize a radical paradigm shift by reestablishing the original unity of the sexes as the norm for all who become “one flesh.”

As the *Catechism* teaches, “According to faith the discord we notice so painfully [in the relationship of the sexes] does not stem from the *nature* of man and woman, nor from the nature of their relations, but from *sin*. As a break with God, the first sin had for its first consequence the rupture of the original communion between man and woman.”¹ Yet the “good news” that Christ came to reconcile God and man means he also reconciles man and woman. “By coming to restore the original order of creation disturbed by sin, [Christ] himself gives the strength and grace to live marriage in the new dimension of the Reign of God.” Therefore, “by following Christ, renouncing themselves, and taking up their crosses...spouses will be able to ‘receive’ the original meaning of

1. CCC, no. 1607.

marriage and live it with the help of Christ.”² Even if the heritage of sin carries with it the entire history of discord between the sexes, the roots of man and woman’s relationship go deeper, and Christ enables us to tap into that deeper heritage.

The Church’s teaching on marriage and sexuality can never be adequately understood apart from God’s original plan, our fall from it, and our redemption in Christ. Many modern men and women find the Church’s teaching on marriage and sexuality untenable because they remain locked in a fallen view of themselves and the world. This narrow horizon makes it easy to “normalize” disordered patterns of thinking and relating. The pain and conflict that inevitably ensue may lead people to yearn for something more, and such pain shows that we are created for something more. But without any reference to God’s original plan and the hope of its restoration in Christ, people tend to accept the discord between the sexes as “just the way it is.”

The following image may help frame our discussion. When we normalize our fallen state, it is akin to thinking it normal to drive with flat tires. We may intuit that something is amiss, but when everyone drives around in the same state, we lack a point of reference for anything different. In Christ’s discussion with the Pharisees, he points them back to man and woman’s “fully inflated” state. In turn, through his penetrating exegesis of the Genesis texts, John Paul seeks to reconstruct the experience of “full inflation.” Just as tires are meant to be inflated, we know that we long for the original unity of man and woman. Pushing the analogy, the good news is that Christ did not come into the world to condemn those with flat tires. He came in love to fill our tires once again with air. To the degree that we experience this “re-inflation” (which is never perfect in this life), we no longer view the Church’s teaching on marriage and sexuality as a rigid ethic imposed from “without.” Rather, we experience it as a liberating ethos welling up from “within.”

1. What Is Meant by “Beginning”?

Men and women of all times and cultures have raised questions about the nature and meaning of marriage. As John Paul observes, such

2. CCC, no. 1615.

questions are raised today "by single persons, by married and engaged couples, by young people, but also by writers, journalists, politicians, economists, demographers, in sum, by contemporary culture and civilization" (TOB 23:2). The questions of modern men and women are charged with problems unknown to the Pharisees who questioned Jesus about the lawfulness of divorce. Even so, Jesus' response to the Pharisees is timeless. In it John Paul finds the foundation for establishing an adequate vision of who men and women are, or—more so—who they are called to be and, thus, how they are called to live when they join in "one flesh."

According to the Gospel of Matthew, the dialogue between Christ and the Parisees took place as follows:

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" [Jesus] 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 no 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." (Mt 19:4-8; see also Mk 10:2-9)

Unity and Indissolubility

Moses allowed divorce as a concession to sin, but Christ can re-establish the original unity and indissolubility of marriage because he is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). Moses' reason for divorce, therefore, no longer holds sway. As the Holy Father says: "That phrase, 'let man not separate,' is decisive. In the light of this word of Christ, Genesis 2:24 [the two become one flesh] states the principle of the unity and indissolubility of marriage as the very content of the word of God expressed in the most ancient revelation" (TOB 1:3).³ But Christ does not merely use his authority to reestablish an objective norm. He invites his questioners to reflect on the beauty of God's original plan in order to awaken their consciences. This original

3. CCC, no. 1644.

plan is stamped in them. “The hardness of their hearts”⁴ has obscured it, but it is still within them. Christ knows that if they traced the “echoes” of their hearts back to “the beginning,” this norm would well up *from within*. They would understand *subjectively* the reason for the *objective* indissolubility of marriage. And if they lived according to this deeper heritage of their hearts, they would desire nothing else.

The same holds true for the many people today who question the meaning of marriage. If we are to provide adequate answers to contemporary questions, we too must take Christ’s invitation to reflect on God’s plan “in the beginning.” For the first pages of Genesis contain “the key to understanding the world of today, both its roots and its extremely radical—and therefore dramatic—affirmations and denials.”⁵

Two Creation Accounts

Many have been surprised by John Paul’s concern to show that his biblical interpretation harmonizes with contemporary methods. For example, he seems to take for granted the modern view that the two creation accounts in Genesis were written at different times by different authors (see TOB 2:2).⁶ The so-called “Elohism” account of Genesis 1 derives from “Elohim,” the term used for God in this account. The “Yahwist” account of Genesis 2 and 3 (believed to be a much older text) is so named because it uses the term “Yahweh” for God.

The Elohist account is loaded with a “powerful metaphysical content,” defining man “in the dimensions of being and existing” (TOB 2:5). In fact, man is the only creature defined in relation to Being itself. He is the only creature defined *theologically*—not with a likeness to the other creatures, but with a likeness to God. “In the cycle of the seven days of creation...the Creator seems to halt before calling...[man] to existence, as if he entered back into himself to make a decision, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness’ (Gen 1:27)” (TOB 2:3). The first phrases of the Bible make it clear that man cannot be reduced to

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the elements of the world. He is certainly a physical creature, but he is also more than that; man is spiritual. The creative tension of the unity of body and soul defines him. This latter point is decisive for a theology of the body. "Man, whom God created 'male and female,' bears the divine image impressed in the body 'from the beginning'" (TOB 13:2). This establishes an "unassailable point of reference" in order to understand who we are (anthropology) and how we are to live (ethics).

Deeply imbedded in the truth of anthropology and ethics is man and woman's call to "be fruitful and multiply." This original divine blessing corresponds with their creation in God's image. As the Prologue noted, the capacity to "pro-create" (not as a response to biological instinct but by the free choice proper to persons) enables them to participate in the creative, covenant love of God. Precisely in this context it is necessary to understand the reality of the good or the aspect of value. With God's affirmation that everything he created is "very good" (Gen 1:31), we can conclude that "being and [the] good are convertible" (TOB 2:5). This means that everything that exists is good in itself. Nothing that exists is evil in itself. Evil, by definition, is always and only the deprivation of what is good. Therefore, to exist—just to *be*—is very good. More specifically, to exist *as male and female* and to bring more males and females into existence ("be fruitful and multiply") is very good. To think otherwise is unbiblical. This philosophy of value (axiology) lies at the foundation of every Christian discussion about creation and about human existence in particular.

In describing man's creation and his call to be fruitful and multiply, John Paul points out that the Elohist account contains only the objective facts and defines the objective reality. On the other hand, the Yahwist account seeks to penetrate man's psychology. In doing so it presents the creation of man especially in its subjective aspect. As the Pope states: "Chapter 2 of Genesis constitutes in some way the oldest description and record of man's self-understanding and, together with Chapter 3, it is the first witness of human conscience"⁷ (TOB 3:1).

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Significantly, Christ referred to *both* creation stories when he directed the Pharisees back to "the beginning." In this way Christ's words confirm that both the objective and the subjective elements of the "one flesh" union are indispensable in establishing a proper understanding of man and woman's relationship. As an exegete seeking to penetrate man's "interiority" in order to confirm objective truth, John Paul will spend most of his time examining the subjective experiences of Adam and Eve from the Yahwist text. By doing so, he brings a dramatic development of thinking to our understanding of the Elohist teaching that man is made in the divine image.

Continuity in the "Redemption of the Body"

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil marks the "boundary" between the state of original innocence (integral nature) and the state of historical sinfulness (fallen nature). Without any direct experience of it, "historical" men and women find it difficult to imagine what life was like on the other side of this boundary. Although we cannot actually cross this boundary, Christ orders us "in some sense to pass beyond the boundary" (TOB 4:1). John Paul emphasizes that there is "*an essential continuity in man and a link* between these two different states or dimensions of the human being." In "every man without exception, this state—the 'historical' state—plunges its roots deeply into his theological 'prehistory,' which is the state of original innocence" (TOB 4:1). Further along in the catechesis he explains that there is imprinted in the experience of fallen man "a certain 'echo' of the...original innocence of man: a photographic 'negative,' as it were, the 'positive' of which was precisely original innocence" (TOB 55:4). Although the negative of a photograph reveals something of the positive image, it needs to be "flipped over" for the colors to take on their true light. Thus even though we have no experience of original innocence, we can reconstruct it to a certain degree by "flipping over" our experience of innocence lost.

If we listen, we can still hear the original experience echoing in our hearts. In fact, John Paul describes this echo as a "co-inheritance" of sin. Sin is only intelligible in reference to original innocence. If sin means literally to "miss the mark," the word implicitly refers to the mark we are missing: original innocence.

When that echo of innocence resounds in us, we experience a deep awareness of our own fallenness, of grace lost. But this should not cause us to despair because it also opens us to the possibility of redemption, of grace restored. How tragic it would be if upon (re)discovering the beauty of God's original plan, we found no way to overcome sin in order to live it. Christ is the way! As we take up Christ's invitation to ponder our "beginning," we must keep in mind that there is *real power* in him to regain what was lost. Yes, we will always struggle with sin in this life because we have left the state of innocence irrevocably behind. Nonetheless, through "the redemption of the body" (Rom 8:23) won by Christ, we can come progressively to live as we were called to in the beginning. John Paul will continually return to this Pauline concept. By "redemption of the body" John Paul does not mean to single out one of the results of redemption. Rather, he intends to summarize the entire reality of Christ's Incarnation and paschal mystery. For John Paul, "the redemption of the body" is redemption itself. Man is always embodied man. Thus, just as a theological anthropology must be a theology of the body, so too must man's redemption be a redemption of the body.

"Precisely this *perspective of the redemption of the body guarantees the continuity and the unity* between man's hereditary state of sin and his original innocence" (TOB 4:3). In other words, if we could not begin reclaiming what was lost, the historical state would be hopelessly cut off from man's original vocation and destiny. The deepest longings of the heart would lead only to despair. But John Paul insists on this hopeful point: Historical man "participates not only *in the history of human sinfulness*, as a hereditary, and at the same time personal and unrepeatable, subject of this history." He "also participates *in the history of salvation*, here too as its subject and co-creator" (TOB 4:3). Herein lies the meeting point of the remarkable gift of God with the mystery of human freedom. In the face of grace lost, God presents us with the sheer gift of salvation, but it remains up to us to accept the gift. As free agents, that is, as persons, we must cooperate with God in our own sal-

vation. Through faith (“openness to the gift”) then, we become subjects and “co-creators” in salvation history.⁸ From this perspective, historical man comes to view the “beginning” (original man) as his true fullness. The gift of salvation gives birth to the hope of returning in some way to the beginning at the end (eschatological man) as a sort of homecoming.

Revelation and Experience

John Paul observes in a footnote that many people see a line of complete antithesis between God’s revelation and human experience. The Holy Father readily recognizes that human experience is inadequate for understanding revelation. But he still affirms it as a legitimate means of theological interpretation and a necessary reference point. “In the interpretation of the revelation about man, and above all about the body, we must, for understandable reasons,” the Pope stresses, “appeal to experience, because bodily man is perceived by us above all in experience” (TOB 4:4). In the second footnote of this same address, John Paul asserts that we have a right to speak of the relationship between experience and revelation. Without this we “consider quite abstract concepts rather than the human person as a living subject.” John Paul’s own teaching is the fruit of a constant encounter between doctrine and life—objective truth and subjective experience.⁹

John Paul wants to unearth the “deep roots” of the Church’s teaching on marriage and sexuality. Those deep roots are found in human subjectivity. Throughout his biblical exegesis, John Paul tries systematically to show how the dimension of man’s personal subjectivity is an indispensable element in outlining a theology of the body. He says that “not only the objective reality of the body, but far more so, as it seems, the subjective consciousness as well as the subjective ‘experience’ of the body, enter at each step into the structure of the biblical texts and therefore require that one considers and reflects them in theology” (TOB 60:1). Here again John Paul seeks to justify his use of the phenomenological method in presenting the faith. We need not be suspicious of the philosophy of consciousness so long as we remain rooted in objective truth. Indeed, the original subjective experiences of man and

8. See *CCC*, nos. 306, 2008.

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CHAPTER 1

Christ Appeals to the “Beginning”

[Cycle 1—Original Man]

THIS FIRST CYCLE CONSISTS OF twenty-three general audiences delivered between September 5, 1979, and April 2, 1980 (TOB 1–23). John Paul II finds a source of great hope for all men and women in Christ’s discussion with the Pharisees about marriage. If conflict, tension, jealousies, and divisions have tarnished the relationship of the sexes throughout history, Christ challenges his listeners to recognize that “from the beginning it was not so” (Mt 19:8). With these words, Christ calls all men and women burdened by the heritage of sin to realize a radical paradigm shift by reestablishing the original unity of the sexes as the norm for all who become “one flesh.”

As the *Catechism* teaches, “According to faith the discord we notice so painfully [in the relationship of the sexes] does not stem from the *nature* of man and woman, nor from the nature of their relations, but from *sin*. As a break with God, the first sin had for its first consequence the rupture of the original communion between man and woman.”¹ Yet the “good news” that Christ came to reconcile God and man means he also reconciles man and woman. “By coming to restore the original order of creation disturbed by sin, [Christ] himself gives the strength and grace to live marriage in the new dimension of the Reign of God.” Therefore, “by following Christ, renouncing themselves, and taking up their crosses...spouses will be able to ‘receive’ the original meaning of

1. CCC, no. 1607.

marriage and live it with the help of Christ.”² Even if the heritage of sin carries with it the entire history of discord between the sexes, the roots of man and woman’s relationship go deeper, and Christ enables us to tap into that deeper heritage.

The Church’s teaching on marriage and sexuality can never be adequately understood apart from God’s original plan, our fall from it, and our redemption in Christ. Many modern men and women find the Church’s teaching on marriage and sexuality untenable because they remain locked in a fallen view of themselves and the world. This narrow horizon makes it easy to “normalize” disordered patterns of thinking and relating. The pain and conflict that inevitably ensue may lead people to yearn for something more, and such pain shows that we are created for something more. But without any reference to God’s original plan and the hope of its restoration in Christ, people tend to accept the discord between the sexes as “just the way it is.”

The following image may help frame our discussion. When we normalize our fallen state, it is akin to thinking it normal to drive with flat tires. We may intuit that something is amiss, but when everyone drives around in the same state, we lack a point of reference for anything different. In Christ’s discussion with the Pharisees, he points them back to man and woman’s “fully inflated” state. In turn, through his penetrating exegesis of the Genesis texts, John Paul seeks to reconstruct the experience of “full inflation.” Just as tires are meant to be inflated, we know that we long for the original unity of man and woman. Pushing the analogy, the good news is that Christ did not come into the world to condemn those with flat tires. He came in love to fill our tires once again with air. To the degree that we experience this “re-inflation” (which is never perfect in this life), we no longer view the Church’s teaching on marriage and sexuality as a rigid ethic imposed from “without.” Rather, we experience it as a liberating ethos welling up from “within.”

1. What Is Meant by “Beginning”?

Men and women of all times and cultures have raised questions about the nature and meaning of marriage. As John Paul observes, such

2. CCC, no. 1615.

questions are raised today "by single persons, by married and engaged couples, by young people, but also by writers, journalists, politicians, economists, demographers, in sum, by contemporary culture and civilization" (TOB 23:2). The questions of modern men and women are charged with problems unknown to the Pharisees who questioned Jesus about the lawfulness of divorce. Even so, Jesus' response to the Pharisees is timeless. In it John Paul finds the foundation for establishing an adequate vision of who men and women are, or—more so—who they are called to be and, thus, how they are called to live when they join in "one flesh."

According to the Gospel of Matthew, the dialogue between Christ and the Parisees took place as follows:

And Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?" [Jesus] 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 no 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." (Mt 19:4–8; see also Mk 10:2–9)

Unity and Indissolubility

Moses allowed divorce as a concession to sin, but Christ can re-establish the original unity and indissolubility of marriage because he is "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29). Moses' reason for divorce, therefore, no longer holds sway. As the Holy Father says: "That phrase, 'let man not separate,' is decisive. In the light of this word of Christ, Genesis 2:24 [the two become one flesh] states the principle of the unity and indissolubility of marriage as the very content of the word of God expressed in the most ancient revelation" (TOB 1:3).³ But Christ does not merely use his authority to reestablish an objective norm. He invites his questioners to reflect on the beauty of God's original plan in order to awaken their consciences. This original

3. CCC, no. 1644.

plan is stamped in them. “The hardness of their hearts”⁴ has obscured it, but it is still within them. Christ knows that if they traced the “echoes” of their hearts back to “the beginning,” this norm would well up *from within*. They would understand *subjectively* the reason for the *objective* indissolubility of marriage. And if they lived according to this deeper heritage of their hearts, they would desire nothing else.

The same holds true for the many people today who question the meaning of marriage. If we are to provide adequate answers to contemporary questions, we too must take Christ’s invitation to reflect on God’s plan “in the beginning.” For the first pages of Genesis contain “the key to understanding the world of today, both its roots and its extremely radical—and therefore dramatic—affirmations and denials.”⁵

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woman prior to sin completely accorded with objective truth. By penetrating their consciousness we find reality reflected there. We find reality *experienced* and given its proper subjective resonance. Following the Pope's lead, we need not fear to open ourselves "to every echo of experience, from whatever quarter it comes." The Pope's approach presents "a standing appeal to all to let experience, [our] own experience, make itself heard, to its full extent: in all its breadth, and all its depth."¹⁰

When John Paul speaks of "original human experiences," he has in mind not so much their distance in time but their basic significance. These original experiences did not take place in history as we understand it. As John Paul uses the word, "history" begins only with the "knowledge of good and evil," whereas the original experiences the Pope reflects on refer to a mysterious "prehistory." Furthermore, he attempts to reconstruct these experiences not so much to determine precisely who man and woman were "then," but to help us better understand *who we are now*—more so, who we are meant to be. In the final analysis, we cannot know the events and experiences of our "prehistory" with any "historical" certainty—that is, not as we understand history today. We know that the human race sprang from one man and one woman, and that through "a deed that took place *at the beginning of the history of man*,"¹¹ they disobeyed God and fell into sin. However, we approach these primeval events and experiences only by pondering "the symbolism of the biblical language."¹²

Explicitly appealing to the contemporary philosophy of religion and of language, the Holy Father states that this biblical language is mythical. He clarifies that the term "myth," however, "does not refer to fictitious-fabulous content, but simply to an archaic way of expressing a deeper content" (TOB 8:2). Thus, John Paul is not conceding to the idea that the biblical creation stories are merely human fabrications. By describing these divinely inspired stories as "mythical," he is simply acknowledging that our "theological prehistory" is shrouded in mystery. Myth, symbol, and metaphor are the only means at our disposal if we wish to enter into the mystery of our "beginning."

Mysterious as our prehistory is, the original experiences of man and woman remain at the root of every human experience. "Indeed, they are

10. Ibid., p. 10.

11. CCC, no. 390.

12. CCC, no. 375.

so interwoven with the ordinary things of life that we generally do not realize their extraordinary character” (TOB 11:1). John Paul focuses on three such experiences: *original solitude*, *original unity*, and *original nakedness*. His analysis takes us to the extraordinary side of the ordinary. The first extraordinary thing we recognize is the depth of original insight that John Paul extracts from one of the most familiar stories in the Bible. The Holy Father brings the Scriptures to life—to each and every human life. By penetrating these original human experiences, John Paul enables us to see that the story of Adam and Eve, far from being abstract, is a story about each of us. His insights resound in us. This is the gift afforded by John Paul’s incorporation of the modern “turn to the subject.”

2. *The Meaning of Original Solitude*

“It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him” (Gen 2:18). These words of God-Yahweh form the basis of the Pope’s reflections on *original solitude*. As we shall see, original solitude will have an ample perspective in John Paul’s reflections.

A Twofold Meaning

To begin with, “solitude” has two basic meanings. The most obvious meaning derives from the male–female relationship. Man is “alone” without woman. But John Paul insists that this solitude has a more fundamental meaning, one derived from man’s nature. He is “alone” in the visible world as *a person*.

It is significant that the first man (ʔādām in Hebrew), is not defined as a male (ʔiš) until after the creation of woman (ʔiššā^h). So Adam’s solitude is not only proper to the male. It is proper to “man” as such, to every human person. As John Paul says, this solitude is “a fundamental anthropological issue that is in some way prior to the issue raised by the fact that man is male and female” (TOB 5:3). It is prior not so much in the chronological sense but “by its very nature,” since it is man’s first discovery of his own personhood. In this way, being a body—being *somebody*, a body–person—“*belongs more deeply to the structure of the personal subject than the fact that in his somatic constitution he is also male or female*” (TOB 8:1).