



Back to the Garden

Theology of the Body from Eden to Today

by Edward P. Sri



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All references in this column to John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* are taken from the 1997 edition, published by the Daughters of St. Paul.

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There is much excitement today, especially among the young, about John Paul II's "theology of the body"—the 129 catechetical addresses he gave between 1979 and 1984 that have revolutionized the way many theologians now teach about love, sexuality, and marriage.

However, while lay Catholics initially may respond with much enthusiasm to the ideas they've heard about the theology of the body, many of those who actually dare to read these addresses quickly find themselves overwhelmed by the depth of John Paul II's philosophical, theological, and indeed mystical thought on this topic.

In this short article, I will offer a brief overview of some key features of the theology of the body that will make this monumental work a bit more digestible and practical for lay readers. Though not intending to offer a comprehensive picture, I simply will highlight five aspects of the theology of the body that relate to themes we have already seen developed in John Paul II's earlier work, *Love and Responsibility*.

"The Law of the Gift"

In an age when many individuals approach their relationships as ways of seeking their own pleasure, interests, or gain, John Paul II constantly reminded us that such self-assertion is a dead end that will never lead to the love and happiness we long for. Human persons are made for self-*giving* love, not a self-*getting* love, and they will

find fulfillment only when they give themselves in service to others.

This "law of the gift," as it is called by Catholic commentator George Weigel, is written in every human heart. And in the beginning of the theology of the body, John Paul II alludes to how it is based on man being made in the "image" of the Triune God (Gen. 1:26). Since God exists as a communion of three divine Persons giving themselves completely in love to each other, man and woman—created in the image of the Trinity—are made to live not as isolated individuals, each seeking his or her own pleasure and advantage from the other. Rather, man and woman are made to live in an intimate personal communion of self-giving love, mirroring the inner life of the Trinity. In the end, human persons will find the happiness they long for when they learn to live like the Trinity, giving themselves in love to others.

Original Solitude

Here, John Paul II reflects on God's statement about Adam in Genesis 2:18: "It is not good for man to be alone."

At first glance, this statement seems odd. Adam is *not* alone. God has placed him in a garden with water, trees, and vegetation. And He has even put Adam alongside other flesh-and-blood creatures just like him—the animals. Yet, even though there are many other animal creatures with bodies in the garden of Eden, Adam is still in some sense described as being "alone."

This tells us that there is something about Adam that is not found in other bodily creatures. By noticing how he is different from the animals, Adam comes to realize that he is more than a body—that he has a spiritual dimension. As a body-soul creature, Adam is unique. There is nothing else in creation like him.

And this poses a problem. If Adam is made to live the “law of the gift”—to give himself in a mutual relationship of love—then Adam, at this stage, is in a certain sense incomplete. He is not able to live out the law of the gift yet, for there is no one else like him to give himself to as an equal partner—no other human person, no body-soul creature, like him. This is why God says, “It is not good for man to be alone.”

John Paul II explains that man only finds fulfillment when he lives in a relationship of mutual self-giving, living not for himself, but for another person. “When God-Yahweh said, ‘It is not good that man should be alone’ (Gen. 2:18) he affirmed that ‘alone,’ man does not completely realize this essence. He realizes it only by existing ‘with someone’—and even more deeply and completely—by existing ‘for someone’” (p. 60).

Original Unity

In response to Adam’s solitude, the Lord creates another human person, Eve, to be his wife. “Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh’” (Gen. 2:23). John Paul II notes how this is the first time man manifests joy and exultation. Before this moment, he had no reason for rejoicing, “owing to the lack of a being like himself.” But now he finally has someone to give himself to in this unique way. In ecstatic response, he sighs “At last!” for now he is able to live out the law of the gift and thus becomes who he was meant to be through his union with her.

Next, John Paul II reflects on how man and woman “become one flesh” (Gen. 2:24). He notes how this oneness in flesh does not refer merely to a bodily union, but

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points to a deeper spiritual union, a union of persons.

Recall how a human person is not just a body, but consists of body and soul. John Paul II expounds on how this union of body and soul in a person sheds light on human sexuality. The body has a language that is able to communicate something much more profound than information or ideas. What one does in his body reveals his very self, the “living soul” (p. 61). The body expresses the person and makes visible what is invisible, the spiritual dimension of man (pp. 56, 76).

This has dramatic implications for understanding sexual intercourse. The marital act is not meant to be merely a physical union. It is meant to express an even deeper *personal* union. Since the body reveals the soul, when man and woman give their bodies to each other in marital intercourse, they give *themselves* to each other. Bodily union is meant to express a deeper spiritual union. The physical intimacy is meant to express an even more profound personal intimacy (cf. p. 57).

John Paul II calls this unique language of the body “the nuptial meaning of the body.” He says our bodies have a nuptial character in the sense that they have “the capacity of expressing love, that love in which the person becomes a gift and—by means of this gift—fulfills the meaning of his being and existence” (p. 63).

In this light, we can see that the body will be an important arena in which the drama of relationships between men and women will be played out—for better or for worse. We can approach the bodily union of sexual intercourse as a means to deepening personal communion in marriage. Or we can engage in sexual intercourse primarily with our own pleasure in mind and without any regard for the body’s capacity to express self-giving love—in other words,

without any regard for the nuptial meaning God has given to the body.

Put starkly: A man can view sex as a way of deepening his personal union with his wife, giving himself completely to her and expressing his total commitment to her as a person and to what is best for her. Or he can approach sex merely as a physical act with some woman who happens to give him pleasure—without any real commitment to that woman’s well-being. Instead of being truly committed to the woman *as a person* and to her good, such a man is committed to the woman in that moment primarily for what she provides him: his own sexual satisfaction. Such a denigration of sex, which is pervasive in our culture today, certainly is a far cry from the beautiful nuptial meaning God has given to the body.

Original Nakedness

What does it mean when Genesis 2:25 says Adam and Eve were “naked and not ashamed”? Shame involves fear of another person, when we’re not sure we can trust that person. We fear being used or being hurt, so we are afraid of being vulnerable in letting others see us as we really are.

Originally, Adam and Eve were not ashamed. They each had complete confidence, trust and security in their relationship. Their bodily nakedness pointed to an even deeper *personal* “nakedness” in which they felt free to bare their souls completely to each other without any fear of being used, misunderstood, or let down. Adam and Eve understood “the nuptial meaning of the body”—not just the body at face value, but the body’s capacity to express love and the communion of persons.

How were they able to have this ideal relationship?

Imagine living in a relationship in which there were absolutely

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no selfishness. You knew that your beloved was always seeking what was best for you, not just his own interests. He truly viewed you as a gift that was uniquely entrusted to him and he took this role seriously with a profound sense of responsibility.

This is the kind of relationship Adam and Eve had in the Garden. Before the Fall, sin had not yet entered the world, and human persons had self-mastery over their passions and appetites. Thus, with total purity of heart, they each were free from selfish desires and approached each other with reverence, seeking the good of the other and never viewing the other merely as an object to be used.

John Paul II explains that Adam and Eve saw each other with a supernatural perspective—with “the vision of the Creator” (p. 57). In other words, they saw each other the way God Himself saw them. Adam saw not just the beauty of Eve’s body, but the whole truth of his beloved as a person. And just as God rejoiced in creating man and woman by saying, “It is good!,” so Adam would have looked upon his wife with a profound sense of awe and wonder, seeing her as the daughter of God who had entrusted herself to him in marriage. Likewise, Eve would have accepted Adam interiorly as a gift and responded to him with similar love and responsibility. “Seeing each other, as if through the mystery of creation, man and woman see each other even more fully and distinctly than through the sense of sight itself. . . . They see and know each other with all the peace of the interior gaze, which creates precisely the fullness of the intimacy of persons” (p. 57).

In this kind of environment of complete mutual love and responsibility, personal intimacy could flourish. In such a relationship of total security and total trust in the other person—when there is no fear of being used or hurt—one feels free to give himself as he really is, knowing that he will be welcomed and fully received as a gift. “The affirmation of the person is nothing but acceptance of the gift, which . . . creates the communion of persons” (p. 65). Thus, originally man and woman did not experience the walls of shame in their relationship. They had no fear that the other would use them, hurt them, or ever reject them. Free from sin, they were free to love. In a relationship of total reciprocal love, the walls of shame are not necessary. Indeed, as John Paul II explains, “immunity from shame” is “the result of love” (p. 67).

Original Shame

However, once sin entered the world, man lost the self-mastery necessary to keep selfish desires from growing in his heart and poisoning his relationship. Wounded by original sin, man finds that it is no longer easy for him to control his passions and appetites. No longer does man easily look upon his wife with “the vision of the Creator” (“It is good!”). No longer does he easily see her as a *person* who has been entrusted to him and as a gift which he longs to serve with selfless love and responsibility.

Now his heart’s love for her is tainted by selfish desires to use her. He begins to view her primarily in terms of her sexual value—the value of her body or the value of her femininity—as an object to be exploited for his own sensual or emotional pleasure. He no longer easily sees her value as a *person* to be loved for her own sake.

Imagine the shock Adam must have experienced at that first moment in which he felt the effects of original sin in his life. John Paul II says it is as if Adam “felt that he had just stopped . . . being above the world of” the animals, which are driven by instinct and desires (p. 116). Almost like the animals, Adam now finds himself powerfully swayed by his desire to satisfy his sexual desires.

No longer mastering their passions, man and woman tend to approach each other with selfish and lustful hearts. That’s why Adam and Eve instinctively conceal their sexuality from each other the moment sin and lust enters their lives (p. 117). They each no longer have total trust that the other is truly seeking what is best for them. They instinctively know that their beloved may use them. Thus, the biblical account of the Fall tells us that right after Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, they were naked and ashamed (Gen. 3:7).

The introduction of sin shatters the original unity of man and woman and hinders personal intimacy in their relationship, for now the defense mechanism of shame enters their relationship. “This shame took the place of the absolute trust connected with the previous state of original innocence in the mutual relationship between man and woman” (p. 120).

John Paul II explains that the original unity of Adam and Eve dissolved at the Fall because, without the total mutual selfless love and trust, they no longer felt free to truly give themselves to each other: “Having facilitated an extraordinary fullness in their mutual communication, the simplicity and purity of the original experience disappear. . . . That simple and direct communion with each other, connected with the original experience of reciprocal nakedness, disappeared. Almost unexpectedly, an insuperable threshold appeared in their consciousness. It limited the original giving of oneself to the other, in full confidence in what constituted their own identity” (p. 118).

Back to the Garden?

As sinful creatures constantly battling concupiscence, we may never be able to return to the ideal relationship of pre-fallen Adam and Eve. However, there is hope. Through Christ’s redemptive work in our lives, we may begin to experience the healing of those disordered passions that keep us from the great trust, love, and personal communion that God wants us to experience in our relationships. The more the Holy Spirit transforms our selfish and lustful hearts with the total self-giving love of Jesus Christ, the more relationships between men and women will begin to recover something of the original unity of man and woman and the nuptial meaning of the body (cf. p. 213).

