

**WHAT IS THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY & WHY IS IT CHANGING SO MANY LIVES?, by Christopher West** (© Christopher West. All rights reserved.  
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The sexual embrace is the foundation stone of human life. The family and, in turn, human society itself spring from this embrace. In short, as sex goes, so go marriage and the family. As marriage and the family go, so goes civilization.

Such logic doesn't bode well for our culture. It's no exaggeration to say that the task of the twentieth century was to rid itself of the Christian sexual ethic. If we're to build a "culture of life," the task of the twenty-first century must be to reclaim it.

But the often repressive approach of previous generations of Christians (usually silence or, at most, "don't do it") is largely responsible for the cultural jettison of the Church's teaching on sex. We need a "new language" to break the silence and reverse the negativity. We need a fresh theology that explains how the Christian sexual ethic + far from the prudish list of prohibitions it's assumed to be + corresponds perfectly with the deepest yearnings of our hearts for love and union.

As many people are only now discovering, Pope John Paul II devoted the first major teaching project of his pontificate to developing just such a theology; he calls it a "theology of the body." This collection of 129 short talks has already begun a "sexual counter-revolution" that's changing lives around the world. The "fire" is spreading and in due time we can expect *global* repercussions.

Papal biographer George Weigel said it best when he described the theology of the body as "a kind of *theological time bomb* set to go off with dramatic consequences ...perhaps in the twenty-first century" (*Witness to Hope*, 343).

***A Reply to Our Universal Questions***

By focusing on the beauty of God's plan for the union of the sexes, John Paul shifts the discussion from legalism ("How far can I go before I break the law?") to liberty ("What's the truth that sets me free to love?"). The truth that sets us free is salvation in Jesus Christ. It doesn't matter what mistakes we've made or what sins we've committed. The Pope's theology of the body wags a finger at no one. It's a message of *sexual salvation* offered to one and all.

In short, through an in-depth reflection on the Scriptures, John Paul seeks to answer two of the most important, universal questions: (1) "What's it mean to be human?" and (2) "How do I live my life in a way that brings true happiness and fulfillment?" The Pope's teaching, therefore, isn't just about sex and marriage. Since our creation as male and female is the "fundamental fact of human existence" (Feb 13, 1980), the theology of the body affords "the rediscovery of the meaning of the whole of existence, the meaning of life" (Oct 29, 80).

To answer the first question + “What’s it mean to be human?” + the Pope follows Christ invitation to reflect on the three different “stages” of the human experience of sex and the body: in our *origin* before sin (see Mt 19:3-8); in our *history* darkened by sin yet redeemed in Christ (see Mt 5:27-28); and in our *destiny* when God will raise our bodies in glory (see Mt 22:23-33).

In response to the second question + “How do I live my life?” + John Paul applies his distinctive “Christian humanism” to the vocations of celibacy and marriage. He then concludes by demonstrating how his study provides a new, winning explanation of Church teaching on sexual morality.

We’ll look briefly at each of these different sections of the Pope’s teaching. Of course, in a short introduction such as this, we’re only scratching the surface of the Pope’s profound insights (see resource section to learn more). We’ll begin with his main idea.

### ***Why is the Body a “Theology”?***

According to John Paul II, God created the body as a “sign” of his own divine mystery. This is why he speaks of the body as a “theology,” a study of God.

We can’t *see* God. As pure Spirit, he’s invisible. Yet Christianity is the religion of God’s self-disclosure. In Christ, “God has revealed his innermost secret: God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and he has destined us to share in that exchange” (CCC, n. 221). Somehow the human body makes this eternal mystery of love visible.

How? Specifically through the beauty of sexual difference and our call to union. God designed the union of the sexes as a “created version” of his own “eternal exchange of love.” And right from the beginning, the union of man and woman foreshadows our eternal destiny of union with Christ. As St. Paul says, the “one flesh” union is “a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the church” (Eph 5:31-32).

The Bible uses spousal love more than any other image to help us understand God’s eternal plan for humanity. God’s wants to “marry” us (see Hos 2:19) + to live with us in an “eternal exchange of love.” And he wanted this great “marital plan” to be so plain to us, so obvious to us that he impressed an image of it in our very being by creating us male and female and calling us to communion in “one flesh.”

Thus, in a dramatic development of Catholic thought, John Paul concludes that we image God not only as individuals, “but also through the communion ...which man and woman form right from the beginning.” And, the Pope adds, “On all of this, right from ‘the beginning,’ there descended the blessing of fertility” (Nov 14, 1979). The original vocation to be “fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28), then, is nothing but a call live in the image in which we’re made + to love as God loves.

Of course, this doesn't mean God is "sexual." We use spousal love only as an *analogy* to help us understand something of the divine mystery (see CCC, n. 370). God's "mystery remains transcendent in regard to this analogy as in regard to any other analogy" (Sep. 29, 1982). At the same time, however, the Pope says that there "is no other human reality which corresponds more, humanly speaking, to that divine mystery" (Dec. 30, 1988).

### ***The Original Experience of the Body & Sex***

We tend to think the "war" between the sexes is normal. In his discussion with the Pharisees, Jesus points out that "from the beginning it was not so" (Mt 19:8). Before sin, man and woman experienced their union as a participation in God's eternal love. This is the model for us all, and although we've fallen from this, Christ gives us *real power* to reclaim it.

The biblical creation stories use symbolic language to help us understand deep truths about ourselves. For example, the Pope observes that their *original unity* flows from the human being's experience of *solitude*. At first the man was "alone" (see Gen 2:18). Among the animals there was no "helper fit for him" (Gen 2:20). It's on the basis of this "solitude" + an experience common to male and female + that we experience our longing for union.

The point is that human sexual union differs radically from the mating of animals. If they were the same, Adam would have found plenty of "helpers" among the animals. But in naming the animals he realized he was different; he alone was *a person* called to love with his body in God's image. Upon sight of the woman the man immediately declares: "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23). That's to say, "Finally, a *person* I can love."

How did he know that she too was a person called to love? Her naked body revealed the mystery! For the pure of heart, nakedness reveals what John Paul calls "the nuptial meaning of the body." This is the body's "capacity of expressing love: that love precisely in which the person becomes a gift and + by means of this gift + fulfills the very meaning of his being and existence" (Jan 16, 1980).

Yes, the Pope says if we live according to the truth of our sexuality, we fulfill the very meaning of life. What is it? Jesus reveals it when he says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12). How did Jesus love us? "*This is my body which is given for you*" (Lk 22:19). God created sexual desire as the power to love as he loves. And this is how the first couple *experienced* it. Hence, they "were both naked, and were not ashamed" (Gen 2:25).

There's no shame in love; "perfect love casts out fear" (1 Jn 4:18). Living in complete accord with the nuptial meaning of their bodies, they saw and knew each other "with all the peace of the interior gaze, which creates the fullness of the intimacy of persons" (Jan 2, 1980).

### ***The Historical Experience of the Body & Sex***

Original sin caused the “death” of divine love in the human heart. The entrance of shame indicates the dawn of lust, of erotic desire void of God’s love. Men and women of history now tend to seek “the sensation of sexuality” apart from the true gift of themselves, apart from authentic love.

We cover our bodies not because they’re bad, but to protect their inherent goodness from the degradation of lust. Since we know we’re made for love, we feel instinctively “threatened” not only by overt lustful behavior, but even by a “lustful look.”

Christ’s words are severe in this regard. He insists that if we look lustfully at others, we’ve already committed adultery in our hearts (see Mt 5:28). John Paul poses the question: “Are we to fear the severity of these words, or rather have confidence in their salvific ...power?” (Oct 8, 1980). These words have power *to save us* because the man who utters them is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29).

Christ didn’t die and rise from the dead merely to give us coping mechanisms for sin. “Jesus came to restore creation to the purity of its origins” (CCC, n. 2336). As we open ourselves to the work of redemption, Christ’s death and resurrection effectively “liberate our liberty from the domination of lust” as John Paul expresses it (March 1, 1984).

On this side of heaven, we’ll always be able to recognize a battle in our hearts between love and lust. Even so, John Paul insists that “the redemption of the body” (see Ro 8:23) is already at work in men and women of history. This means as we allow our lusts to be “crucified with Christ” (see Gal 5:24) we can progressively rediscover in what is erotic that original “nuptial meaning of the body” and live it. This “liberation from lust” and the freedom it affords is, in fact, “the condition of all life together in truth” (Oct 8, 1980).

### ***The Ultimate Experience of the Body & Sex***

What about our experience of the body in the resurrection? Didn’t Christ say we’ll no longer be given in marriage when we rise from the dead (see Mt 22:30)? Yes, but this doesn’t mean our longing for union will be done away with. It means it will be *fulfilled*. As a sacrament, marriage is only an earthly sign of the heavenly reality. We no longer need signs to point us *to* heaven, when we’re *in* heaven. The “marriage of the Lamb” (Rev 19:7) + the union of love we all desire + will be eternally consummated.

“*For man*, this consummation will be the final realization of the unity of the human race, which God willed from creation. ...Those who are united with Christ will form the community of the redeemed, ‘the holy city’ of God, ‘the Bride, the wife of the Lamb’” (CCC, n. 1045). This eternal reality is what the “one flesh” union foreshadows from the beginning (see Eph 5:31-32).

Hence, in the resurrection of the body we rediscover + in an eternal dimension + the same nuptial meaning of the body in the meeting with the mystery of the living God face to

face (see Dec 9, 1981). “This will be a completely new experience,” the Pope says + beyond anything we can imagine. Yet “it will not be alienated in any way from what man took part in from ‘the beginning,’ nor from [what concerns] the procreative meaning of the body and of sex” (Jan 13, 1982).

### ***The Christian Vocations***

By looking at “who we are” in our *origin, history, and destiny*, we open the door to a proper understanding of the Christian vocations of celibacy and marriage. Both vocations are an authentic “living out” of the most profound truth of who we are as male and female.

When lived authentically, Christian celibacy isn’t a rejection of sexuality and our call to union. It actually points to their ultimate fulfillment. Those who sacrifice marriage “for the sake of the kingdom” (Mt 19:12) do so in order to devote all of their energies and desires to the marriage that alone can satisfy + the marriage of Christ and the Church. In a way, they’re “skipping” the sacrament (the earthly sign) in anticipation of the *ultimate reality*. By doing so, celibate men and women declare to the world that *the kingdom of God is here* (see Mt 12:28).

In a different way, marriage also anticipates heaven. “In the joys of their love [God gives spouses] here on earth a foretaste of the wedding feast of the Lamb” (CCC, n. 1642). Why, then, do so many couples experience marriage as a “living hell”? In order for marriage to bring the happiness it’s meant to, spouses must live it as God intended “from the beginning.” This means they must contend diligently with the effects of sin.

Marriage doesn’t justify lust. As a sacrament, marriage is meant to symbolize the union of Christ and the Church (see Eph 5:31-32). The body has a “language” that’s meant to express God’s *free, total, faithful, and fruitful* love. This is exactly what spouses commit to at the altar. “Have you come here freely?” the priest asks, “to give yourselves to each other without reservation? Do you promise to be faithful until death? Do you promise to receive children lovingly from God?” Bride and groom say “yes.”

In turn, spouses are meant to express this same “yes” *with their bodies* whenever they become one flesh. “Indeed the very words ‘I take you to be my wife + my husband,’” the Pope says, “can be fulfilled only by means of conjugal intercourse” (Jan 5, 1983). Sexual union is meant to be the renewal of wedding vows!

### ***A New Context for Understanding Sexual Morality***

The Church’s sexual ethic begins to make sense when viewed through this lens. It’s not a prudish list of prohibitions. It’s a call to embrace our own “greatness,” our own God-like dignity. It’s a call to live the love we’re created for.

Since a prophet is one who proclaims God’s love, John Paul II describes the body and sexual union as “prophetic.” But, he adds, we must be careful to distinguish between true

and false prophets. If we can speak the truth with our bodies, we can also speak lies. Ultimately all questions of sexual morality come down to one simple question: Does this truly image God's *free, total, faithful, fruitful* love or does it not?

In practical terms, how healthy would a marriage be if spouses were regularly unfaithful to their wedding vows? On the other hand, how healthy would a marriage be if spouses regularly renewed their vows, expressing an ever-increasing commitment to them? This is what's at stake in the Church's teaching on sexual morality.

Masturbation, fornication, adultery, intentionally sterilized sex, homosexual acts, etc.+ none of these image God's *free, total, faithful, and fruitful* love. None of these behaviors express and renew wedding vows. They aren't *marital*. Does this mean people who behave in such ways are "inherently evil?" No. They're just confused about how to satisfy their genuine desires for love.

If I offered you a million dollar bill and a counterfeit million dollar bill, which would you prefer? Dumb question, I know. But what if you were raised in a culture that incessantly bombarded you with propaganda convincing you that counterfeit was the real thing and the real thing was a counterfeit? Might you be a little confused?

### ***Authentic Sexual Liberation***

Why all the propaganda? If there's an enemy that wants to keep us from heaven, and if the body and sex is meant to point us there, what do you think he's going to attack? Sin's tactic is to "twist" and "disorient" our desire for the eternal embrace. That's all it can do. When we understand this, we realize that the sexual confusion so prevalent in our world and in our own hearts is nothing but the human desire for heaven gone berserk.

But the tide is changing. People can only put up with the counterfeits for so long. Not only do they fail to satisfy, they wound us terribly. Sadly, the truth of the Church's teaching on sex is confirmed in the wounds of those who haven't lived it. Our longings for love, intimacy, and freedom are good. But the sexual revolution sold us a bill of goods. We haven't been "liberated." We've been duped, betrayed, and left wanting.

This is why the world is a mission field ready to soak up John Paul II's theology of the body. And this is why it's already changing so many lives around the world. The Pope's teaching helps us distinguish between the real million dollar bill and the counterfeit. It helps us "untwist" our disordered desires and orients us towards the love that truly satisfies.

As this happens, we experience the Church's teaching not as a burden imposed from "without," but as a message of salvation welling up from "within." We experience the truth that sets us free. In other words, we experience what the sexual revolution promised but couldn't deliver + *authentic* sexual liberation.