

DOMINIC'S LECTURE ON THEOLOGY OF THE BODY TO THE 'PURE IN HEART' GROUP

(By Dominic Baster – a parishioner of St Vincent's Parish in Sheffield)

The Parish Priest of St Vincent's is **Fr Paddy Walsh** who sees the profound truth in the Teaching of the Body for Modern Man and Woman.

Hello and thank you very much for asking me to come and say a few words to your group this evening. I really admire you for coming together to discuss aspects of Church teaching and to support each other in the obligation we all have to remain chaste and pure in in heart – in this day and age we are all bombarded with so many contrary messages and there aren't that many inspiring role models out there, so it's so important for Catholics to support each other.

The topic of my talk is Pope St John Paul II's beautiful teaching about the Theology of the Body, and in particular what this theology tells us about the human person. In this 50th anniversary year of *Humanae Vitae*, Pope Paul VI's prophetic encyclical which restated the Church's teaching against the use of artificial contraception, I'm going to propose why that encyclical has proved so controversial and unacceptable to many people – including many Catholics – and how we can embrace its message and its teaching.

Before I say any more, I should say a few words about myself by way of an introduction. I became a Catholic at 18 and read Theology at Oxford before working for a number of organisations, including the Bishops' Conference at one point. I'm now working for a national charity based in Sheffield as its internal communications manager and I'm a parishioner at St Vincent's church. My wife is Kathleen, and we have three children – aged 5, 10 and 12.

I had some knowledge of St John Paul II's Theology of the Body from my time at university, but it was certainly very limited. I knew that it affirmed the holiness of the human body, including our sexual nature, for God created us and, as Genesis says, he saw that it was very good. I understood that this was in contradiction to some schools of thought in Catholic history which presented the flesh as intrinsically bad. This way of thinking is often laid at the door of St Augustine of Hippo, somewhat unfairly

perhaps, because he saw the sexual act as intrinsically unclean because it is through it that original sin is communicated. The Theology of the Body, in this sense, reclaimed the goodness of the body.

However, that's about as far as my knowledge went until my wife Kathleen came across it in the writings and presentations of the American Christopher West.

So, I first came across Theology of the Body in detail seven or eight years ago after my wife Kathleen had encountered it through the presentations of Christopher West – an American writer and speaker some of you may have heard of. As she and then I looked into it in greater depth, we found that it presented a moving, surprising, profound and intensely practical teaching. It made sense of so many things, including why artificial contraception was wrong and even why the priesthood is reserved to men. Basically, we realised that it touched on almost every aspect of Catholic teaching and made clearer sense of it. It is not a dry, theoretical theology but is meant to be lived. It deals with the deepest yearnings of the human soul and is a beautiful reflection on the beauty of God's plan for human love. So, we started a study group here in Sheffield to find out more and discuss it with fellow Catholics, went to conferences to hear prominent speakers, and I ended up writing a CTS booklet about it five years ago.

Now I know that many of you will have some grounding in the Theology of the Body already, and may even have read or glanced at my CTS booklet on it which I wrote five years ago. I thought it would be useful to summarise the teaching in basic terms, however, before turning to a discussion about the human person and *Humanae Vitae*.

So, what is the Theology of the Body then? Well, in simple terms, it's St. John Paul II's integrated vision of the human person. He explains that the human body has a specific meaning, making visible an invisible reality, and is capable of revealing answers regarding fundamental questions about us and our lives. Let's just think about that for a moment. We all say in the creed every week that God is creator of heaven and earth, and we know from Genesis that God created man in his image – male and female, but it's humbling to think that human beings, including their bodies, are the pinnacle of God's creation and can tell us about him. I remember when my wife first wrote a talk about the Theology of the Body, she explained that we can find out more

about God our creator by looking at ourselves in the mirror than by reading countless theology books, and unbelievable as it might seem, there's a lot of truth in that.

The body is like an icon of God, and tells us not only about human love but also about the interior exchange of love within the Trinity. The human body carries within it a sign of the image of God and this is what is meant by the *sacramentality of the body*. John Paul explained that the human body was created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it. That's why we can say that the body is not just *biological*, but *theological*, because it can tell us about God.

And what is this mystery that the body reveals? It is the mystery of divine life – the eternal exchange of love within the Trinity and which every person, all of us here in this room this evening really, is called to participate. This is quite extraordinary, and means that, because we are created in the image of God, we are created to live in relationship with others like God does within the Trinity. Authentic human love therefore reflects and is modelled upon the eternal exchange of love within the Trinity.

So I hope you can begin to understand my enthusiasm for the Theology of the Body, which was truly ground-breaking in so many ways. In fact, John Paul II's biographer, George Weigel, has described it as “a kind of theological time bomb set to go off with dramatic consequences” and “one of the boldest reconfigurations of Catholic theology in centuries”.

Getting back to the nitty gritty, I should explain that the Theology of the Body was expounded principally in 129 general audience addresses delivered by Pope John Paul II between 1979 and 1984 (including a break of some six months in 1981 while he recovered after being shot in St Peter's Square). Themes of it were then taken up and expounded further in other papal documents issued by John Paul II during the course of his papacy. In fact, I think we can say that Pope Benedict XVI's first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* published in 2006 can be seen as a final completion of the Theology of the Body because it explores the relationship between the different types of love in God's plan.

In writing the Theology of the Body, which he did originally in Polish while he was still the archbishop of Krakow, John Paul II intended to present a comprehensive and

coherent defence of Paul VI's teaching in *Humanae Vitae*, but he went far beyond this in presenting a truly comprehensive vision of the human person. He affirmed that our bodies are created in such a way that they carry within them a message calling us to live our lives as a *gift*. This calling to live our lives as a gift is what John Paul II called the 'spousal meaning of the body'. This concept is really central to the Theology of the Body. By 'spousal', John Paul II meant the call to express love by which the human person becomes a gift and, through this gift, fulfills the very meaning of his being and existence. In fact this was taught by the Second Vatican Council in *Gaudium et Spes*, a document John Paul II had influenced as a Council father, when it affirms that "Man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself". This is clearly massively at odds with the prevailing secular view today, in which value seems to come from pleasure and many people are fundamentally selfish. Pope Francis has spoken about the modern culture of the provisional, in which life-long commitment in marriage or in other states of life is frowned upon as simply unattainable. But society has got it wrong here.

A really important point to stress here is that all people, all of us, are called to live 'spousally' in this sense – that is, living our lives as a gift to others – including single people, married people, those committed to celibacy and all those in other circumstances. Each of us is called to give of ourselves completely, as Christ did, and crucially, this is what it means to be truly human.

The spousal meaning of the body, meaning the calling to live our lives as a gift in and through our bodies, can be discerned in the 'language' our bodies 'speak' – perhaps most clearly in our sexuality. Furthermore, the fact that our bodies call us to live spousally gives us a glimpse of the nature of God. We are created as spousal beings because God loves us spousally. One of the things that hadn't really struck me before studying the Theology of the Body is that actually this truth comes across loud and clear throughout the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament there are many references to God wanting to 'marry' his people, and in the New Testament the image of Christ marrying his Church is extremely poignant in St Paul's letter to the Ephesians, where Christ takes the Church as his bride "with no speck or wrinkle... but holy and faultless". Heaven is described in the Book of Revelation as a marriage banquet. Of course, the supreme spousal act of history was Christ's death for us on cross, when he became one of us even so far as experiencing suffering and death for us. It was also through this supreme self-gift that Christ revealed man to himself.

The spousal nature of our bodies also call us to communion with others, a concept John Paul II calls the communion of persons. Just as God is a communion of persons within the Holy Trinity, so are we called to live in communion. John Paul II stressed that a person does not image God fully on his or her own, but when he or she is in communion with another. “In the image of God he created him,” Genesis says, “male and female he created *them*.” This is why marriage can be considered the primordial sacrament, because the call to spousal union between a man and woman in marriage tells us about the way God loves us, and about the eternal exchange of love within the trinity.

This is all really beautiful and profound stuff, I hope you’ll agree, and John Paul II spent a lot of time expounding the analogy of spousal love in St Paul’s letter to the Ephesians in which he speaks about human marriage but then describes it as a profound mystery when related to the love of Christ for the Church. We can see how tragic it is, then, when the profound power of this analogy is being lost for people of today because of a erroneous and warped understanding of what marriage is. Far from being a life-long bond of fruitful self-gift between a man and a woman through which the spouses image God and reflect the exchange of love within the Trinity, marriage in the secular mind has become a contract of convenience between people of different or the same genders that can be ended at any time. What a corruption this is! I’ll say a bit more about why I think this has happened later in my talk.

So, back to the Theology of the Body, we see, therefore, that the body and not just the soul is created in the image of God, and that there is no conflict between the two. John Paul’s vision of the human person is an integrated one – we are not spirits with bodies, but body-spirit composites. This is by no means a new concept, and indeed it is stressed in the New Testament and in the creeds of our faith. St Paul wrote about our bodies not being our own but having been bought by God at a price, and we affirm in the Apostles’ Creed the resurrection of the body – which means that in heaven we have physical bodies which are in continuity with our earthly bodies. This is why our bodies are revered at our funeral. We are bodily creatures, not souls trapped in bodies. Redemption applies to our bodies and souls – it is not the freeing of our spirits from the flesh. Far from it. What we do in our body is an action of our whole person.

In Christian catechesis, people are used to an emphasis on the spiritual realm but

many people are unfamiliar, and even uncomfortable, with a marked emphasis on the body. This stems from the attitude that our bodies are intrinsically dirty or impure, as I mentioned at the start of this talk. For John Paul II, however, this is a false dichotomy. It is the body that is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and divine. John Paul writes that “[The body] was created to transfer into the visible reality of the world, the mystery hidden since time immemorial in God, and thus to be a sign of it.” This means that the human body, with its masculinity and femininity, has the mystery of salvation written into it. My reaction to this is ‘wow’! But it makes such perfect sense when we reflect on why we are here in the first place. Remember our creation and the type of lives we live are not just random things. God knew what he was about when he created us, and he created us for love. Of course the mark of the creator will be seen in his greatest creation – that’s us!

So, with that I’d like to change tack a bit and, with this holistic vision of the human person – body and spirit together – ringing in our minds, I’d now like to take you back to a Summer’s day just under 50 years ago, to Thursday 25th July 1968 to be precise. It was a day on which Des O’Connor – remember him? – was number 1 in the singles chart, the Beatles’ film *Yellow Submarine* was in the cinema and, rather more importantly, it was the day on which Pope Paul VI released his long awaited and much-hyped encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, surprising the world by saying no to artificial contraception. News bulletins and newspaper headlines around the world shrieked “The Pope says no” and many, many people were genuinely surprised and shocked. It’s hard to really understand now what a big thing this news was to people, and especially to Catholics, at that time. A rather elderly parishioner at my church whom I won’t name but would be on what we might term the liberal wing of the Church, describes this day in 1968 as the saddest of his life! For others, of course, it was vindication of the prophetic role of the papacy.

Even though previous popes had also taught that artificial contraception was illicit (such as Pope Pius XI in *Casti Connubii*), the shock at Paul VI’s encyclical was in large part because the conclusions of a Pontifical Commission on Birth Control had been leaked to the press beforehand. This commission had voted by a large majority in favour of the licit use of artificial contraception within marriage and most people presumed that the Pope would simply follow their line. When he didn’t, it really rocked the boat.

As an interesting aside, the future John Paul II, then Archbishop Karol Wojtyla, had been appointed to this pontifical commission but had been unable to travel to Rome to take part in person so he held his own commission in Krakow which restated the traditional teaching. This is known to have influenced Paul VI's thinking, and it is said that when in *Humanae Vitae* Pope Paul specifically acknowledges the advice he had received from his brothers in the episcopate, he had Karol Wojtyla in mind.

Anyway, as we all know, Paul VI's decision in *Humanae Vitae* was not the end of the matter. Within a few days the *Catholic Herald* ran with the headline "Birth Control Debate Grows" and it is fair to say that the encyclical was rejected by large numbers of Catholics (such as my fellow parishioner I mentioned) and even entire national episcopates – as was the case with the Canadian bishops, for example. Paul VI, who was even pelted with eggs on a visit to the USA shortly after the encyclical was published, was deeply saddened by this rejection, and in fact he never issued another encyclical again. Nearly 50 years later this encyclical continues to be controversial and widely rejected. The question is, *why?* That's what I want to try to answer.

The so-called Sexual Revolution, which was well underway by the 1960s, has changed people's attitude towards the purpose of their bodies. Margaret Sanger, one of its pioneers, proclaimed that "no woman is free who does not own and control her own body" and the thinking behind this statement has influenced even those within the Church. The report of the Pontifical Commission on Birth Control based much of its pro-contraception argument on the notion that it is "natural to man to use his skill in order to put under human control what is given by physical nature". In fact, Paul VI acknowledged the prevalence of this idea in the text of *Humanae Vitae* when he remarked on "man's stupendous progress in the domination and rational organisation of the forces of nature to the point that he is endeavouring to extend this control over every aspect of his own life – over his body, over his mind and emotions, over his social life, and even over the laws that regulate the transmission of life."

In reality, the idea that the body and spirit are at odds with each other and that the goal of human knowledge is to gain mastery over nature is centuries old. It can be traced back in part to the views of the English philosopher and scientist Francis Bacon who believed that the goal of human knowledge should be to achieve power over nature, and to the scientific rationalism of the seventeenth century French philosopher and mathematician René Descartes which reduces the body to "mere matter".

This vision of Descartes, the Cartesian vision, puts body and spirit in opposition to each other so that the body can be regarded simply as a mechanism and an object for manipulation and exploitation. It is widely prevalent today, including among Catholics, and the implication is that we are masters and possessors of nature – including of our physical bodies. I agree with Professor Michael Waldstein who has argued that the main reason why so many people reject Catholic teaching in the area of sexual morality today is that “the nature of sex has become invisible through our Cartesian glasses”. Many people wear this Cartesian glasses without even realising it, so engrained has this way of thinking become nowadays.

So, many Catholics continue to reject *Humanae Vitae* on the basis that our bodies are private things we ‘possess’ and can use as we see fit, leading to the common refrain that “the Church should stay out of the bedroom”. With Professor Waldstein, I contend that it is these Cartesian glasses which are the reason why so many have rejected *Humanae Vitae* and the Church’s beautiful teaching on sexual morality. I also believe that it is John Paul II’s Theology of the Body, and especially its integral vision of the human person, which provides the antidote. In fact, I would go so far as to say that *Humanae Vitae* cannot be properly understood without reference to the Theology of the Body. The teaching in *Humanae Vitae* is that the sexual act has two intrinsic meanings – procreative and unitive – but this continues to be hard for people to grasp because the simple question arises: why is this so? The Theology of the Body answers this question by affirming that the sexual act is not a mere function outside of the person without meaning. Understanding the unitive and procreative meanings of sex is to ‘read the language of the body in the truth’ – and this truth is the spousal meaning of the body. Sex, therefore, has a profound meaning as an expression of the whole human person. Sex is not a mere function outside of the person without meaning because the human person is composed of both body and soul together. The soul does not possess the body, nor do the body possess the soul.

In the sexual revolution, sex was cut loose from the person and our bodies came to be regarded as tools we could exploit for pleasure. One of John Paul II’s key objectives in the Theology of the Body was to defend the traditional Christian holistic vision of the person against the prevailing Cartesian duality. He insisted that human bodies are not meaningless mechanisms placed in the position of an “object” for human power. It

is wrong to think of a radical contrast in man between spirit and body because the body can never be reduced to mere matter.

In affirming the unity of the human person, we remain true to nature. John Paul insisted that man can remain true to the person only in so far as he is true to nature. If he does violence to ‘nature’ he also ‘violates’ the person by making it an object of enjoyment rather than of love. Of course this approach is the absolute opposite of Francis Bacon’s “project” to achieve power over nature and it is important to bear this in mind when it comes to understanding the Church’s teaching against contraception – since a contraceptive act violates nature and, thus, also the person. This is not the case with Natural Family Planning.

Now, returning again to the so-called sexual revolution of the 1960s, it is surely clear to anyone with eyes to see that the promise of this Sexual Revolution has not been fulfilled. Women are now objectified as sex objects as never before, there is a crisis of family breakdown and the abortion rate has rocketed. Sex itself has been cheapened almost beyond recognition in many people’s minds and this certainly has not made people any happier or more fulfilled. People still yearn for love, of course, but cannot see that sex outside of its true context – as an expression of the spousal nature of our bodies in a life-long marriage – will always be ultimately unfulfilling because it’s being misused. The modern generation has been sold a sexual lie.

The Sexual Revolution deprives sex of its beauty and depth by detaching it from the spousal meaning of our bodies. The Theology of the Body, on the other hand, is about the service of “fair love”, as John Paul II put it, and allows love and sex to show their beauty. It tells us that sex is a sign of the radical gift of man and woman to each other and, indeed, of God’s love for mankind.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, says that the message of *Humanae Vitae* is one of love – but people have not realised this because they do not have a right understanding of the body and the human person. Pope Benedict explained that the fullness of a person is achieved by a unity of soul and body, but neither the spirit nor body alone can love, only the two together. If this unity is broken, if only the body is satisfied, love becomes just a commodity.

So, given all of what I've said about the clear teaching of the Church and the beauty of its teachings about love, *why* has Cartesian dualism taken hold so strongly even within the Church so that even Catholics view things with those Cartesian glasses I mentioned earlier? Well, it certainly must be the case that *if* there is an enemy who wants to separate us from God, then that which is most sacred is what He will most violently attack. We see this with so many things – look at how the Evil One has caused scandal within the Church, the Bride of Christ, has undermined the sacrament of marriage – as I spoke about earlier – and led society to remove legal protection from the unborn. The body too is something sacred, for it is made in God's image and bears his message of love, and yet society devalues the body and the pornographic culture twists it. So I do think there is a diabolical explanation to a lot of this the enemy takes that which is supremely holy/sacred and he twists and profanes it. Remember that evil is not a reality in itself. The devil cannot create its own diabolical world. All the enemy can do is mock the holy. The body is holy because it images the Divine, so the battle for man's soul is fought over the truth of his body. If it is through the body "and it alone" that the divine mystery is made visible to us, then this is where the enemies of the divine plan will begin their offensive. And so the battle for man's soul is a battle which is always fought over the primordial truth of his body, causing estrangement of body and spirit.

Christopher West, who I mentioned right at the start of this talk, has said that he believes one of the main cards Satan plays is a Manichean devaluation of the body – and Manichean in this context refers to an early Church heresy which taught that all matter is evil. On the other hand, if we really reflect on the spousal meaning of the body, we see through this play by Satan and realise that Christ's words are an invitation to a pure way of respecting others.

So, to conclude, the main takeaway from everything I've said this evening is that we need to respect our bodies and everyone else's body as sacred icons of the Divine and remember that our bodies are not our own but belong to God. We cannot do what we like with our bodies, and we do not possess them. We are whole people, body and spirit together, made in the image of God and called to live our lives as a gift.

Finally, I'd like to end by reading a prayer from St John Paul II encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*.

Oh Jesus, you proclaim that life finds its centre, its meaning and its fulfillment when it is given up ... We too are called to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters, and thus to realise in the fullness of truth the meaning and destiny of our existence.

We shall be able to do this because You, O Lord, have given us the example and have bestowed on us the power of Your Spirit. We shall be able to do this if every day, with You and like You, we are obedient to the Father and do His will. Amen.