

Theology of the Body

by

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On 25th July 1968, Pope Paul VI released his long awaited and much-hyped encyclical '*Humanae Vitae*', surprising the world by saying no to contraception. It is well known that this was not the end of the matter, however. Within a few days the Catholic Herald ran with the headline "Birth Control Debate Grows" and the encyclical continues to be controversial and widely rejected. The question is, why?

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, said 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 'Majority Report' of the Pontifical Commission on Birth Control, set up to advise the Pope on this matter, 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 reality, the idea that the goal of human knowledge is to gain mastery over nature is centuries old. The French philosopher Descartes believed in a radical distinction between the human person and the body. This 'Cartesian' vision of the human person reduces the body to 'mere matter' which can then be regarded simply as a mechanism and an object for manipulation and exploitation.

Professor Michael Waldstein has suggested 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 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".

And yet it is clear to anyone with eyes to see that the promise of the Sexual Revolution has not been fulfilled. Women are now objectified as sex objects as never before, there is a crisis of family breakdown, the abortion rate has rocketed and sex has been cheapened almost beyond recognition.

Against this backdrop, a growing number of Catholics are coming to realise that Blessed John Paul II's Theology of the Body presents a moving, surprising, profound and intensely practical counterpoint because it affirms an integrated vision of the human person – body and soul together. Accordingly, the fact that human beings are made in the image of God must apply to our bodies just as much as to our souls. Our bodies are not just biological but also theological because they can tell us about God in whose image they are made.

The Theology of the Body was expounded in 129 general audience addresses delivered by John Paul II between 1979 and 1984 and throws modern secular ideas of love, sex and even the meaning of life on their heads. It was envisaged as a comprehensive and definitive defence of Paul VI's teaching in *Humanae Vitae* but went far beyond this in its scope and ambition. 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".

John Paul II 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 he called the 'spousal meaning of the body'. Crucially, all people are called to live 'spousally' in this sense – including 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 this is what it means to be truly human.

The spousal meaning of the body can be discerned in the 'language' our bodies 'speak'. 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. Throughout the Old Testament we see references to God wanting to 'marry' his people, and finally he becomes completely one with them at the incarnation. Christ's death on the cross is the supreme spousal act of history through which Christ also fully reveals man to himself.

The teaching in *Humanae Vitae* that the sexual act has two intrinsic meanings – procreative and unitive – 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.

The *Theology of the Body* affirms a truly Christian, coherent and God-centred understanding of the human body and reveals a refreshingly positive way of understanding the Church's teaching in the area of sexual morality. It contains many aspects that cannot be mentioned here but, nearly eight years after the death of its author, it is surely the case that its message is more poignant and more necessary than ever.

[\(Back\)](#)



