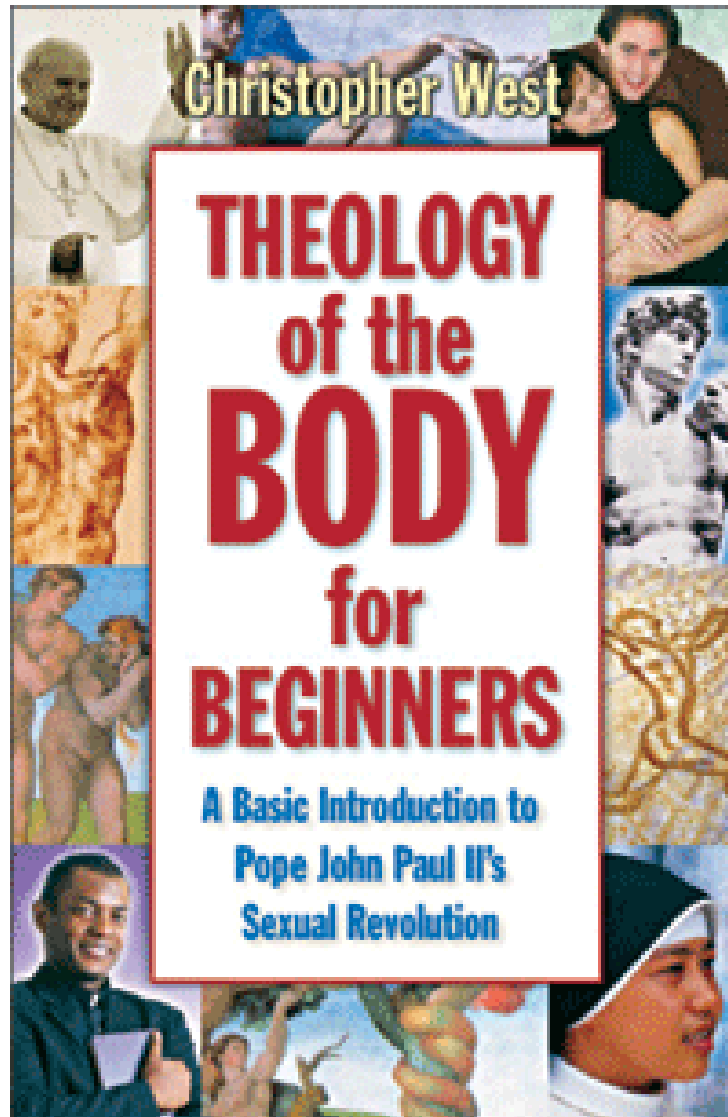


A Summary of Theology of the Body for Beginners by Christopher West



Theology of the Body for Beginners: A Basic Introduction to Pope John Paul II's Sexual Revolution by Christopher West.

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About the Author

Raised Catholic, Christopher West almost left the Church over the issue of contraception. But he discovered John Paul II's Theology of the Body and has since become a well-known promoter, educator, and speaker on this life-changing subject. He is a graduate of the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family in Washington, D.C. He has worked in the Archdiocese of Denver as the Director of the Office of Marriage and Family and is currently a member of several theological institutes. He has given talks all over the world and keeps up a busy speaking schedule. He, his wife, and three children live in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

General Overview

Did you ever think of the body as theological? The body itself reveals man's call to love as God loves. This truth is core to the theology of the body and sheds light not only on marriage, but also on celibacy, the Eucharist, and other issues. In this book, Christopher West demonstrates that "[l]iving according to the truth of our embodiment as male and female takes us to the heart of the Christian life" (126).

Chapter One: What is the Theology of the Body?

Theology of the Body is the title given to the 129 general audiences delivered by John Paul II between 1979 and 1984 dealing with "human embodiment, particularly as it concerns sexuality and erotic desire" (1).

Far from rejecting the body as bad, the Church teaches that, in some way, the body makes visible the mystery of God. This is the idea of body as sacrament. Christopher West cites John Paul II's thesis for the Theology of the Body. "The body, in fact, and it alone," the Pope says, "is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It 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 (Feb. 20, 1980)" (5). Since the body can speak to us of God and also since God Himself became incarnate, we can "speak of the body as a theology" (6).

The most common analogy Scripture uses to speak about God's relation with His people is the marital analogy. Because of the vast difference between God and man, the analogy must not be taken literally; however, of analogies, "John Paul II believes the spousal analogy is the *least* inadequate" (11). The body speaks to us of God in two ways. First, the love between a man and a woman images the life-giving communion of love between the Persons of the Trinity. Second, drawing from Ephesians 5, "sexual love is meant to image the union of God with humanity...The Church receives [Christ's] love and attempts to reciprocate it" (9). In addition, the union of the sexes "foreshadows" (9) the Eucharist. The Eucharist, in turn, "sheds definitive light of the meaning of man and woman's communion" (10).

Sex is something of momentous import. It is connected with the ordering of civilization, the meaning of life, and the proclamation of the mystery of God. This is why God's archenemy is so busy distorting our sexual relationships. John Paul II's theology of the body calls men and women to live the truth of their sexuality and provides the Church's teaching with a "fresh theology [that]...corresponds perfectly with the deepest yearnings of our hearts for love and union" (15).

This correspondence of teaching with human experience is known in philosophy as the "subjective" approach. With this approach, John Paul II reflects on Scripture and "invites us to embrace our own dignity" (16). This shifts the emphasis "from *legalism* to *liberty*" (16). The pope's theology of the body is structured to answer two questions.

Part I responds to the question "What does it mean to be human?" (16) in three stages:

(1) Our Origin (before the fall), (2) Our History: (the fall, and life afterwards) and, (3) Our Destiny (resurrection).

Part II asks, “How am I supposed to live my life in a way that brings true happiness?” (16). It likewise contains three sections: (1) Celibacy, (2) Marriage and, (3) Ethics. West’s book follows this structure.

Chapter Two: Before the Fig Leaves: God’s Original Plan for the Body and Sex

The Scripture passage starting off the Theology of the Body is Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees: “For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so (Mt. 19:8)” (19). Accordingly, the pope takes us back to the beginning, to Genesis, and West invites us to find the “echo” of man’s original experiences – solitude, unity, and nakedness – in our own hearts.

Original Solitude In original solitude, which is before the creation of woman, man discovers that he is different from any other creature; he is a *person*, that is, he is made in God’s image and gifted with freedom. Freedom not only sets man apart from the animals, but also makes love possible. Adam was given freedom to choose love. Adam realizes he’s called to love, love of God and love of neighbor.

Original Unity When Adam sees Eve, he cries out, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!” (Gn. 2:23). “Adam is fascinated with *her body* because, as the Pope points out, this ‘at last’ is a body that expresses the person” (24). Because of the body’s sacramental dimension, Adam’s union with Eve is spiritual as well as physical. Now Pope John Paul II “presents a dramatic development of Catholic thinking. Traditionally theologians have said we image God as individuals, through our rational soul.” John Paul II states that we image God “through the communion of persons which man and woman form” (25).

Original Nakedness The nakedness of Adam and Eve was characterized by the absence of shame. This is because both were free from lust and from fear of another’s lust. Instead, “[i]n their nakedness, the first man and woman discovered what the Pope call the ‘the nuptial meaning of the body.’ The nuptial meaning of the body is defined as ‘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)” That is, Adam and Eve’s unashamed nakedness reveals that they are free to express gift-love. We are all called to live the nuptial meaning of our bodies, called to gift-love, whatever our vocation.

Chapter Three: The Entrance of the Fig Leaves: The Effects of Sin and the Redemption of Sexuality.

This saying of Christ’s is “severe.” “[E]veryone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Mt. 5: 28)” (33). The woman could even be his wife! “[L]ust obscures in each of us God’s original plan for sexual love,” (34) but Christ came to redeem us.

God gifted Adam and Eve with the ability to share in His life and love, but they doubted His gift when they ate from the tree. “In the moment they reject their *receptivity* before God and *grasp* at their own ‘happiness,’ they turn their backs on God’s love, on God’s gift. In a way, they cast God’s love out of their hearts” (36). Without the spirit of God’s love in them, they must hide and protect their bodies from each other. Lust has entered the human heart.

Jesus Christ calls for a new ethos, that is, for a transformation of the heart. God gives us the gift of grace; we must believe in the gift. Christ did everything He could to prove God’s love for us, even giving Himself up to death for us and leaving us the Eucharist. “[The] sacraments make Christ’s death and resurrection a *living reality* in our own lives” (44). If we are open, God will transform us.

West now addresses the travel towards purity. As John Paul II says in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, a pure look is one that respects the nuptial meaning of the body. Though purity may have to begin with negation (e.g. avoidance of temptation by, for example, *not* looking), it should work towards this positive vision (i.e. seeing God in the body). Movement towards the positive vision is facilitated by commitment “to a progressive education in self-control of the will, of the feelings, of the emotions” (49). Neither indulgence nor repression, but rather surrender to Christ must be the answer to our temptations. Fasting, prayer, and self-evaluation are good and helpful in this regard.

Chapter Four: Beyond the Fig Leaves: The Resurrection of the Body

Our bodies will be with us in heaven! “To the degree that creatures can, we will share – body and soul – in God’s eternal exchange of love. And this ‘great mystery’ is prefigured right from the beginning in man and woman’s ‘exchange of love,’ that is, in and through their ‘one flesh’” (55). Our sharing in God’s love is our destiny. We will still be male and female in heaven, but as Christ says in Matthew 22, we will not marry. Marriage is an icon. In heaven, we will have the real thing.

“In the beatific vision we will *know* God and He will *know* us...We will *participate* ‘fully’ in God’s divinity and He will *participate* fully in our humanity” (59). This exchange fulfills the nuptial meaning of the body. “[W]e will also live in self-giving love and communion with all the saints” (61-62). But remember that analogies are imperfect; “[h]eaven is not some eternally magnified experience of sexual union on earth” (61). Heaven is “eternal ecstasy; unrivaled rapture; bounteous, beautiful Bliss” (64).

Chapter Five: Christian Celibacy: A Marriage Made in Heaven

We have completed the first part of the Theology of the Body which was dedicated to answering the question of who we are. Now we seek to answer “How ought I to live in order to be happy?” Of our two choices – marriage and celibacy – we look first at celibacy.

Our choices are not between indulgence of lust (marriage) and repression of lust (celibacy). We are *all* in need of redemption from lust. Celibacy must not be a choice made out of contempt for sexuality, but, as John Paul II states, “must flow from a ‘profound and mature knowledge of the nuptial meaning of the body’” (73).

Also in this chapter, some misunderstandings generated by a misreading of St. Paul are clarified. For example, no, marriage does *not* justify lust. And yes, celibacy is “better” than marriage “not because of celibacy itself, but because it is chosen *for the kingdom*” (71). For each of us, our own vocation is best.

The marital and celibate vocations illuminate each other. From married people, celibates learn “fidelity and self-donation.” “Furthermore, the fruit of children in married life helps celibate men and women realize that they are called to a fruitfulness as well—a fruitfulness of the spirit” (72). Celibacy “skip[s] the earthly sacrament of marriage in anticipation of the heavenly reality” (66) and reminds couples that their marriage is an image of this reality. Celibates uphold the preciousness of sexual union, demonstrating, by their sacrifice, that it is of great value.

The chapter concludes with the unusually virginal marriage of Joseph and Mary. “As a married couple, they were given the exceptional calling to live their sexuality according to its ultimate meaning – total self-donation to God” (75). This self-donation is what brought Jesus to earth. It’s what we’re called to imitate.

Chapter Six: Christian Marriage: Imaging Christ’s Union with the Church

How we ought to live in order to be happy is answered simply thus, “to love as God loves, in ‘sincere self-giving’” (77). For this, marriage is the ordinary vocation, but it must be lived as God ordained if it is to bring happiness.

“Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. Wives, be subject to your husbands...” (78. Eph. 5:21-22). This infamous passage of Ephesians 5, on which the Pope bases his discussion of marriage, is given an amazing interpretation in light of the theology of the body. A husband and wife’s subjection to one another means that “both spouses realize and live the nuptial meaning of their bodies, which calls them to mutual and sincere self-giving,” with Christ as their model (81). Pure spouses know “in their hearts” that their union “proclaims the union of Christ and the Church” (81). Lust becomes unimaginable.

Ephesians 5 calls the husband especially to Christ’s self-sacrificial love. In the spousal analogy, the husband images Christ while the wife images the Church. “Marriage ‘corresponds to the vocation of Christians only when it reflects the love which Christ the Bridegroom gives to the Church, His Bride, and which the Church... attempts to return to Christ’” (83-84). What about the submission of the wife? West puts it this way: “Wives, put yourself *under* (sub) the *mission* of your husband.” What’s the mission of the husband? ...“Husbands, love your wives *as Christ loved the Church.*” Therefore, what St. Paul means is “Wives, allow your husbands to *serve you*” (84).

Living marriage in this light is transformative. Through our struggles, we are made holy. Because sacraments exist to unite the Bride-Church to the Christ the Bridegroom, “John Paul II observes that marriage serves as the model or *prototype* of all the sacraments of the new covenant” (86). Sacraments symbolize our unity with God; *they also accomplish it*. St. Paul’s genius “brought these two signs together [the “one flesh” union of marriage and the union of Christ and the Church], and made of them one great sign – that is, a great sacrament,” a sacrament which reveals the meaning of life: “to love as Christ loves” (90).

West describes the love of Christ as free, total, faithful, and fruitful. “If we can speak the truth with our bodies, we can also speak lies” (92). “Ultimately, all questions of sexual morality come down to one very simple question: Does this act truly image God’s *free, total, faithful, fruitful* love or does it not?” (93)

Chapter Seven: Theology in the Bedroom: A Liberating Sexual Morality

The major issue dealt with in this chapter is contraception. But first, John Paul II reflects on the Song of Songs and the book of Tobit. The former demonstrates that love never violates the one it loves and the latter that love which looks to God is stronger than death.

Humanae Vitae, the encyclical which shocked the world, called for a “total vision of man and his vocation” (HV, n. 7). This is what John Paul II has given us in the theology of the body. Keeping in mind the importance of marriage as a sacrament, “the deepest *theological* reason for the immorality of contraception” is that it turns marriage into an “anti-sacrament” (103, 104). “Rather than proclaiming, ‘God is life-giving love,’ the language of contracepted intercourse says, ‘God is *not* life-giving

love’” (104). Contraception makes the marriage vows a lie and is damaging to the spouses’ relationship, regardless of whether or not they know it. Poison, for example, will kill you, even if you don’t know that it is poison.

This does not mean a dozen kids for everyone. It means “responsible parenthood” (106).

It means self-control. Abstinence and Natural Family Planning (NFP) are both licit and highly successful methods of avoiding pregnancy if one has just reasons for doing so. The key difference between contraception

and NFP is that while NFP uses a God-given period of infertility, contraception puts the power over life into human hands “just like the deceiver originally tempted us to do – and [makes us] like God” (109).

Chastity, though difficult, is “positive and liberating” (110). It helps us grow in “*self-mastery* which is training in human freedom” (CCC, n. 2339). “It enters into Christ’s death and resurrection. As lust dies, authentic love is raised up” (111). While contraception excludes the Holy Spirit, chastity is open to the Holy Spirit. With the help of the Holy Spirit and with the help of the sacraments, it is possible to live God’s plan for marriage.

Chapter Eight: Sharing the Theology of the Body in a “New Evangelization”

“[T]here will be no renewal of the Church and of the world without a renewal of marriage and the family. And there will be no renewal of marriage and the family without a return to the full truth of God’s plan for the body and sexuality” (117). John Paul II’s theology of the body forms a vital part of that renewal and provides us with a compelling message to offer others.

The term “new evangelization” refers to evangelization aimed, for the most part, at Christians who have lost the understanding of their faith. The new evangelization seeks to present treasured truths in a way and language that modern people will find attractive. Theology of the Body is a perfect starting point because everyone is interested in sex. Theology of the body teaches us that the “mystery of love and communion isn’t something ‘out there’ somewhere. It’s right here – it’s bodily (120). The common human desire for love and communion points to our desire for Christ and for heaven. The task of the new evangelization is to untwist twisted desires and to lead us to Jesus.