

A Brief Consideration of Human Sexuality Through the Lens of The Theology of the Body

1. Introduction

Pope St. John Paul II's Theology of the Body (TOB) presents a lens through which to articulate an authentic view human sexuality. The goal of this paper is to explore the nuptial and eschatological dimensions of human sexuality through the lens of TOB. Our discussion will proceed as follows: 1) A brief exposition of the thought of Pope St. John Paul II's view of the human person; 2) An account of the nuptial and eschatological dimensions of human sexuality based on TOB; and 3) A discussion of relevance for the renewal of an authentic view of human sexuality. We will conclude with a brief summary of our exploration.

2. Theology of the Body and the Human Person

A. The Anthropology of TOB

As we begin our discussion it is important to note that Pope St. John Paul II's TOB was intentionally articulated in opposition to Cartesian dualism, which has led to a deficient view of the nature of man, as an attempt to present a true view of human anthropology.¹ John Paul's TOB can be described as his presentation of an "adequate anthropology" of the human person.² What is meant by adequate anthropology is an understanding and interpretation of man that is

1 Jarosław Kupczak, *Gift & communion: John Paul II's Theology of the body* (Washington, D.C: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 6.

2 *Ibid.*, 5.

founded on that which is essential to the nature of man.³ The starting point for John Paul, and thus our starting point, is the creation account we find in the opening chapters of Genesis. Based on this starting point, he asserts that a full understanding of man is impossible if we limit ourselves to the categories of the created order.⁴ From this, we can say that the adequate anthropology articulated by the TOB is one that presents man in his reality as a supernatural being, and describes him in terms that are based in revealed truth.

B. John Paul's 3-Fold View of History

As will become clear as we proceed with our discussion, John Paul's TOB is presented against the backdrop of a particular construct of history in which John Paul distinguishes between three related but distinct theological ages of human history. He described these ages as the beginning, the time of the man of threefold concupiscence, and the time of the resurrection.⁵ According to John Paul, these three ages encounter each other and come into conflict in the heart of every man.⁶ As we proceed, we will occasionally center our discussion against the backdrop of this particular view of history.

C. Man and Woman - In the Beginning

One of the most significant aspects of the anthropology set forth in the Theology of the Body is the reflection on the relation between man and woman.⁷ John Paul begins his reflections

3 Ibid.

4 Kupczak, 5.

5 Ibid., 80.

6 Ibid.

7 Angelo Scola, *The nuptial mystery* (Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 2005), 6.

by considering man in the beginning, at the first stage of his theological history. The precise starting point of these reflections is the two-fold creation account found in the opening chapters of Genesis (cf. Gen. 1:27, Gen. 2:18-25). These two accounts converge in the revelation of man as a creature who is created in the image and likeness of God. John Paul posits man's reality as being in the image and likeness of God as the foundation of all Christian anthropology.⁸ Because man's being the image and likeness of God is the foundation of all Christian anthropology, it is also the foundation for an authentic understanding of human sexuality.

From the Creation account, we can demonstrate that the nature of man, as made in the image and likeness of God, is oriented towards existing in relationship with another. Adam and Eve, as the first man and woman, express a principle of dual unity that involves an intrinsic polarity due to their sexual differentiation.⁹ Four key points, relevant to our discussion of human sexuality, derive from this dual unity:

1. Relation and identity

Man exists always and only as masculine or feminine, and as such always has before him the reality of another way of being human which is inaccessible to him. From this, we can say that the human person is in this sense contingent, and thus needs another in order to be fulfilled.¹⁰ We can also assert that man is not simply an individual, but a person who is constituted such by both relation and identity.¹¹

8 Scola, 7.

9 Ibid.

10 St. John Paul II, and Michael Waldstein, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston, MA: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 45.

11 Scola, 7.

2. Trinitarian Image

The reciprocity of man and woman is the basis of the communal dimension of man as a creature.¹² John Paul describes the primordial community of Adam and Eve as a “communion of persons,” saying that describing them as a community is insufficient.¹³ The nature of their communion is found in their mutual self-giving to one another, made possible through their dual unity. As a communion of persons, Adam and Eve are not just an image of God but become an image of the Holy Trinity.¹⁴

3. Trinitarian Analogy

Because man’s sexual differentiation as man and woman is essential to being in the image and likeness of God, sexuality itself is an essential part of man. As such, human sexuality is of an entirely different order than animal sexuality, and cannot be reduced to, or equated with, such. In addition, God’s image in man is not purely spiritual, but is manifested in the body. The inclusion of sexual differentiation, as part of the image of God, allows us to posit, in a very restricted sense, an analogy between man and woman, and the relations within the Trinity.¹⁵

4. Nuptial Meaning of the Body

Spousal love, because of both its sexual nature and its inherent character of gift in both a spiritual and physical sense, is the greatest exemplar of every kind of human love,

12 Ibid., 8.

13 St. John Paul II, 162-3.

14 Kupczak, 49.

15 Scola, 9.

and a privileged metaphor of man's relation with reality. We can go a step further and say that the two-fold expressions of human sexuality, marriage and virginity, are both conjugal in nature. This truth is based on the fact that each of these aspects of human sexuality is an expression of a complete gift of self, and brings us to the reality that the human body has a conjugal, or nuptial, meaning that has been inscribed in the personal makeup of man and woman from the beginning.¹⁶

These four key truths - relation and identity, Trinitarian image, Trinitarian analogy, and the nuptial meaning of the body, are all elements that we find in man in the first age of his theological history. Any authentic articulation of human sexuality must take these four elements into account, as they are fundamental to the human person and to human sexuality. Though evident as an essential part of the nature of man "in the beginning," they become obscured in the fall.

D. After the fall - The Time of Threefold Concupiscence

Gen. 2:25 described man in his original state as "naked and unashamed." This description is indicative of a state of innocence that is named by the TOB "original innocence." In this state of original innocence, there is a perfect correspondence between the intellect and the will.¹⁷ Because of this correspondence, man is able to fulfill his nature as a person made for communion, because he is able to give himself to another as a gift. The fall, recorded in Genesis

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid., 75.

Chapter 3, destroys man's state of original innocence, and ushers in the age of the threefold concupiscence.

As a result of the fall, man's original sexuality becomes flawed. He loses the natural ability to enter into communion, and the union of man and woman becomes marked by lust and domination (cf. CCC 400). Adam loses his loving and innocent abandonment to the other and makes his own will his ultimate end, asserting it in opposition to the will of God. Sexuality itself does not become evil, but it loses its purity and its nature as an expression of self-gift and union.¹⁸

In Gen. 3:16 the Creator begins to pronounce sentence on Adam and Eve, and reveals in more detail the nature of sexuality deprived of its original nuptial character. As sexuality will no longer be under the control of a perfectly aligned intellect and will, it becomes an expression of the desire to dominate the other. Through this domination, the other is deprived of his personhood, and reduced to the level of object, making the communion for which man was created impossible. The two-fold expression of domination, according to scripture seems to be reduced to woman's power expressed through seduction, and man's power expressed directly and brutally.¹⁹ That which was meant to serve as an expression of an inner spiritual unity and actualize a communion of persons through the one flesh union (cf. Gen. 2:24) has now become an instrument of objectification of others.

Having begun this section with a consideration of man's original innocence, and the lofty reality of the nuptial character of human sexuality, we have ended with a consideration of man after the fall, which obscures the true meaning of the body nuptial character and thus the nature

18 Ibid., 76.

19 Ibid., 77.

of human sexuality. We now turn to a discussion of the third theological age, that of the resurrection. Although properly speaking the resurrection of the body is an eschatological reality, the age of the resurrection begins in this life through the grace of the redemption. As we will consider in our next section, an authentic view of human sexuality is rooted in the reality of the redemption, its restoration of human nature in general, and of human sexuality in particular.

3. Towards the Resurrection- A New View of Human Sexuality

A. Man Restored - Trinitarian and Christological

In our previous section, we discussed the reality of man as created in the image and likeness of God. In addition to the fact that man is created rational and free, man be said to be created in the image of God because he is 1) constituted as a separate and distinct person, 2) possessed of a unity based on a common humanity, and 3) called to live a communion of love.²⁰ As the image of God considered in this particular way, man and woman are created to mirror to the world the communion of love that subsists in God, and through which the three divine Persons love each other in the intimate mystery of the one divine life.²¹

Vatican Council II's *Gaudium et Spes* teaches that Christ fully reveals man to himself and makes his ultimate calling clear (GS 22:1).²² We can look to the Incarnation to shed light, not just on the nature of man, but also on the sexual dimension of man as the dual unity of man and woman. In doing so, we find that the Incarnation, through the hypostatic union, becomes a place

20 Ibid., 28.

21 Ibid.

22 Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Northport, NY: Costello Pub. Co, 1992), 922.

of encounter between God and humanity. This union is a type of spousal or conjugal union, because it is based on a supreme act of self-emptying and a self-donation.²³ The Incarnation, because of the hypostatic union, refashions the dual unity of man and woman and become its new foundation.²⁴ The Incarnation is not just about our salvation, but also about our redemption.

B. The Redemption of the Body

Throughout his reflections, Pope St. John Paul II uses the term “redemption of the body,” taken from Rom. 8:18-23. In this passage the “redemption of the body” refers to the effect of grace on the human person, who has been marked by the threefold concupiscence spoken of in the First Letter of St. John (cf. 1 John 2:16). John Paul articulates the formula “the ethos of the redemption of the body” to call attention to the fact that Christ’s grace has an impact on the human body itself by a two-fold transformation of the spirit and the human heart.²⁵ As we mentioned in our previous section, the human heart is the place where the three theological ages of man encounter and come into conflict with one another. Through the transformation of the human heart, man is able to begin to live not as one subject to the threefold concupiscence, but as one who is living according to the age of the resurrection, even if in the visible world he is still living in this present age. This transformation of the human heart begins with purity of heart as spoke of in the Beatitudes (cf. Matt. 5:8).²⁶

John Paul observes that there are two ways to understand purity in the New Testament, one general and one specific. In the general sense impurity is identified with sin and purity is

23 Scola, 11.

24 Ibid.

25 Kupczak, 70.

26 Ibid.

identified with holiness.²⁷ In his reflections, he presents Matt. 15:18-20 and Gal. 5:16-23 as illustrations of purity spoken of in the more general sense.²⁸ In the more specific sense of the word, purity is presented in contrast to sexual impurity.²⁹ Gal. 5:16-23, referenced above, presents a more detailed and specific listing of what behaviors constitute purity and impurity, and includes the sins of fornication, impurity, and licentiousness. We can thus see that in the context of TOB, the purity that is called for is one that is sexual in nature.

John Paul further clarifies the nature of Christian purity under the ethos of the redemption of the body by referring to 1 Thess. 4:3-7.³⁰ In this passage, St. Paul presents a two-fold formulation of purity, both negative and positive. The negative formulation of purity is to “abstain from fornication,” which has to do with restraining the impulses of the desires of the sense. The positive formulation lies in “keeping the body in holiness and honor,” which is in fact a return to the ethos of creation, and the perception of the whole of the human body within the context of the mystery of creation before the fall, in which everything ‘was good’ (cf. Gen. 1:12).³¹

We can now say that purity is oriented towards the dignity of the human body and the manner in which man’s masculinity and femininity is expressed through the body.³² We can also say that the ethos of the redemption of the body leads us towards the ethos of creation, and by extension towards the ethos of the new creation, whose ultimate expression is found in the resurrection. Through the redemption of the body, we are enabled to once again express human

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid., 71.

29 Ibid., 70.

30 St. John Paul II, 343.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid., 349.

sexuality in light of the ethos man “in the beginning,” but also to live it in a completely new and more excellent way.

C. The New Nuptial Meaning of the Body

Christ’s self-donating love, expressed by the voluntary embrace of death on the cross, and his resurrection inaugurate a new kind of fruitfulness in which the sexual reciprocity and fecundity of Eden are surpassed.³³ The character of this fruitfulness is first seen in the image of the Church flowing from the wounded side of Christ, which is an analogy of the creation of Eve from the side of Adam during sleep (cf. Gen. 2:21-22). From this we can assert that the relation between Christ and the Church is in some analogical sense nuptial.³⁴

John Paul confirms this nuptial reality through his commentary on the “great mystery” of Eph. 5:21-32, a passage which presents the two-fold analogy of Christ as the Bridegroom of the Church, and the Church as the body of Christ the head.³⁵ In developing the symbolic meaning of this passage, John Paul affirms that the masculine symbol of the Bridegroom, referred to Christ, expresses the spousal character of the love between God and the Church.³⁶ A corollary to this is that the Church as bride, and through her all human beings, is called to be the feminine symbol in the relationship.³⁷

Through the order of redemption, and through the analogy of Christ and the Church as bridegroom and bride, the concept of sexuality is expanded in a mysterious way into that of

33 Scola,78.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 80.

36 Ibid., 30.

37 Ibid., 31.

nuptiality, which can no longer be said to refer exclusively to the relation between man and woman, as it has become a way of viewing the relationship between God and man.³⁸ This is not an entirely new development, as in the Old Testament the prophets use nuptial symbolism to describe the relationship between God and his people (cf. Isa. 54:4-6, Isa. 62:1-5, Ezek. 16, Hosea 1-3). Building on and completing this imagery, the New Testament, in Rev. 19, speaks of the wedding feast of the Lamb as a way of describing the definitive nature of paradise. This imagery leads us to conclude that the nuptial character of the body, through the ethos of the redemption of the body, is ultimately eschatological in nature.

D. Eschatological Dimension of Human Sexuality

John Paul's reflections on the eschatological dimension of human sexuality are drawn chiefly from the New Testament account of Christ's discussion with the Sadducees over the levirate (cf. Mtt. 22:24-30; Mark 12:18-28; Luke 20:27-40). Calling attention to Christ's response that "God is not a God of the dead but of the living," John Paul states that this statement can only be understood if one admits the fact that life does not end with death.³⁹ Luke's account of this exchange tells us that Christ builds on this affirmation of the reality of eternal life, and goes on to assert that in the resurrection the body's masculinity and femininity are retained (cf. Luke 20:34-36). The fact that sexual distinction remains in the resurrection demonstrates that the ultimate end of human sexuality is something other than natural procreation, and transcends earthly life. In this context, John Paul speaks of a new

38 Ibid., 80.

39 St. John Paul II, 384.

“spiritualization of man,” in which the body is entrusted to the spirit in a new way, and in which the tension between flesh and spirit experienced by historical man no longer exists.⁴⁰ This then is the ultimate realization of the age of the resurrection, and the final stage of man’s theological history.

4. Relevance for marriage today

The act of the Redemption imparts to the relationship between man and woman an entirely new quality, which is shown forth most clearly in the sacrament of marriage. Because of the two-fold analogy of Christ and the Church and husband and wife (cf. Eph. 5:21-33), these two mysteries become so closely linked that they can no longer be interpreted in isolation from one another, and we can say that Christ himself has indissolubly joined the man-woman relation.⁴¹ This new reality is the reason that sacramental marriage, in which a husband and wife constitute a one-flesh union, expresses the salvific will of God.⁴² From this perspective, we can conclude that it is critical to defend and strengthen Christian marriage today more than ever.

A. Affirmation of the God Who is Trinity

While the foundation of our discussion on the authentic nature of human sexuality has been rooted in both Trinitarian and Christological imagery, we begin the conclusion of our discussion with a focus on the relevance of the Trinity, as it is only by a recovery of an understanding of man from a Trinitarian perspective that an authentic notion of the human

⁴⁰ Ibid., 389.

⁴¹ Scola, 13.

⁴² Ibid.

person, and thus of human sexuality, can be recovered.⁴³ A culture that does not accept the revelation of God as Trinity is incapable of understanding sexual differentiation in a positive sense, or the reality of man and woman as persons who are diverse yet united. A disordered view of sexuality ensues, and sex not only becomes either taboo or trivialized, it is also reduced to something that is seen as a characteristic only of man qua animal.⁴⁴ In order to renew a proper understanding of human sexuality, the groundwork must be laid in asserting clearly the reality of the God of Jesus Christ, whom we know by revelation to be a Trinity of persons.

B. Training in Virtue

The sexual sins listed in Gal. 5:16-23, referred to earlier, are contrasted with the “fruits of the Spirit,” which can be spoken of in the context of the TOB as “mastery.”⁴⁵ Mastery is described as a virtue that concerns continence or moderation (*temperantia*) according to the formulation of classical ethics, which described mastery as a virtue that concerns continence in the area of all desires of the senses, above all in the sexual sphere, and thus it is the antithesis of the sexual excesses referred to in this passage.⁴⁶

The “ethos of redemption of the body” invites man to realize and live the spousal meaning of the body. Through mastery and God’s grace, man can live the interior freedom that results from mastery over the three concupiscences referred to earlier, and can give himself as a gift to another.⁴⁷ This ability to give completely to another is a basis for living in a communion

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴⁵ Kupczak, 74.

⁴⁶ St. John Paul II, 341.

⁴⁷ Kupczak, 69.

of persons. As mastery is required to overcome the threefold concupiscence, training in virtue is necessary in order to live the ethos of the redemption of the body.

C. Affirmation of the Indissolubility of Marriage

What flows from the joining of Christ to the man-woman relation is the character of indissolubility. This particular characteristic constitutes the very core of Christian marriage, and makes Christian marriage a vocation in the true sense of the word. Through indissolubility spousal love reaches its highest point and displays its greatest dignity.⁴⁸ The Church, in her preaching, teaching, and witness, must continue to affirm the indissolubility of Christian marriage.

5. Conclusion

We have presented a consideration of Pope St. John Paul II's Theology of the Body as a lens through which to articulate an authentic view human sexuality. During the course of our consideration we have explored the nuptial and eschatological dimensions of human sexuality. We have done so through providing 1) a brief exposition of key elements of the thought of Pope St. John Paul II as regards the human person, 2) an account of the nuptial and eschatological dimensions of human sexuality based on TOB, and 3) a discussion of the relevance of these topics for the renewal of an authentic view of human sexuality.

48 Scola, 13.

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