"Theology of the Body"

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"Aimer c'est tout donner et se donner soi-même." [Thérèse of Lisieux, Pourquoi je t'aime, O Marie!, from stanza 22]

"The theology of the body is not merely a theory, but rather a specific evangelical, Christian pedagogy of the body." [John Paul II: Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body, transl. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), from §122.5, p. 620

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1. Why a theology of the body?
   'Theology of the Body' does not appear among the theological topics traditionally treated by Christians in any period. It is, though, not without some precedent (there is nothing entirely new under the sun, and Christian theologians do not — or ought not — seek novelty as if it were intrinsically valuable), substantially a creation of John Paul II shortly before and during his papacy (1978-2005). Why did he think it important?

   1.1. John Paul II's catecheses
   It is the custom of popes when in residence at the Vatican to deliver brief weekly public catecheses (instructional teachings) on topics of their choice. John Paul II did this on 133 Wednesdays from 1979, the year after he was elected to the papacy, until 1984. These catecheses were devoted to what he called the theology of the body. They were given in Italian, though underlying them was John Paul's earlier writing on the subject in Polish. The talks were published seriatim as they appeared, and were eventually published in book form, all in a variety of languages. The authoritative English version is: John Paul II, Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body, translated by Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006). This supersedes the earlier (1997) English version, which is in many ways unreliable.

   1.2. Fundamental theological anthropology: the acting person
   John Paul's thought, whether theological or philosophical, always began from and returned to consideration of the nature of the person. This was true for forty years before he became pope, and remained true until his death. He was formed in this by exposure to currents of philosophical thought that took the person as their central concern: the work of Max Scheler (1874-1928), among many others, was important here. What John Paul wanted was not, or not only, an account of the person in the categories of the neo-scholastic Thomism that dominated Catholic higher education at the time of his formation in the 1930s and 1940s. He wanted also a scripturally informed, profoundly Christian, theologically suggestive and philosophically precise account of what it is like to be a person — of how, that is, it seems to persons in their fullness to be such. John Paul II's personalism, as it has come to be called, does not reject the more abstract conceptual analyses of Thomism, but it does extend them into areas scarcely considered

by that tradition of thought; and it does so, typically, by using the philosophical resources of phenomenology, combined with a renewed attention to scriptural interpretation.

Theological and scriptural personalism of the kind favored by John Paul II can be applied to many topics: to human persons as workers, as political beings, as worshipers, and so on. In the case of the theology of the body, it is applied to bodiliness, and especially to the sexual aspects of bodiliness. What is it like, John Paul II asked in his catecheses, to be a bodily being of the human sort? What is the significance of the fact that human bodies are sexed and ordinarily capable of procreation? What does a rich and thick account of these matters suggest about the proper order and conduct of sexual life? What the theology of the body offers is an account of these matters as a kind of fundamental theological anthropology.

John Paul's motivations for treating this topic were many. They included intellectual interest: what might the theological and philosophical resources he had at command yield when addressed to this topic? They also included pastoral concerns. His work as a priest with young couples considering marriage and falling in and out of love made him clearly and deeply aware of the depth and complexity of our bodily and sexual natures, and of the effective impossibility of separating consideration of what we are from consideration from these matters. He also became aware, it seems, of the difficulty of making the Catholic sexual ethic in all its richness and complexity comprehensible and convincing in the absence of a detailed fundamental-theological depiction of what it means to be a bodily being. Listing prescriptions (e.g., have sex happily and enthusiastically with your spouse; attend to her/him as gift and give yourself to him/her as reciprocal gift) and proscriptions (e.g., do not have sex with people other than your spouse; refrain from using artificial means of contraception) does not by itself bring comprehension and a full engagement of the person with the ethic being propounded. The prescriptions and proscriptions can easily, just because of their specificity and lack of location in a detailed, nuanced, and beautiful account of human bodiliness, seem like an arbitrary code of law, to be obeyed, perhaps, but not to be loved and lived into and out of with enthusiasm's caress.

John Paul II's theology of the body is intended, pastorally speaking, to provide an account of human bodily being that can show Christians what it is like to be bodily and sexed, and to do so in such a way that the various particular forms that a chaste sexual life can take become both comprehensible and beautiful.

In order to do this, some counter-positions need to be identified. When this is done, the lineaments of the Christian account can stand forth more clearly. The identification and rebuttal of opposed views is far from the main point of John Paul II's catecheses on the body; he is very largely positive in tone, setting forth what it is that Christians should love and think and want rather than what they should shun and avoid. There is, for example, very little discussion of particular sexual sins, even though a clear view of what some of these are and of why they are sins does emerge from the work. Nevertheless, some attention to the essential structure of opposed positions on what it is to be bodily will be helpful.

1.3. Contra biological reductionism

John Paul makes use of a distinction between biologism and naturalism. To think biologically is to think about how the human body works: about its physiology, understood broadly. There is nothing wrong with this: biology is a discipline that arrives at knowledge, and it is unambiguously good to know about the body's make-up and

working. Biology's conclusions are, ideal-typically, descriptive and expressed in the indicative mood: they consist of claims about what the constituents of the body are and how they work (or fail to work) together. To consider the human body's nature, however, is to ask questions that do not fall under biology's purview. Such questions include: What is the body's purpose? Which behaviors serve that purpose and which hinder it? Thinking naturalistically — in terms of its nature — about the body yields claims that are both descriptive (the body images God) and normative (the body ought never to be treated as an object or a tool). Biology and naturalism can co-exist perfectly well. Difficulties arise, however, when one or the other claims complete knowledge of the human body. The biological form of this claim to exhaustive knowledge about the body is biologism, or biological reductionism. Those who perform and defend it think (and sometimes argue) that when the body's constituents and their interactions have been fully described, there is no more to say about the body. This position refuses, in its more extreme forms, any normative analysis of the body, and, thus, any appeal, when considering bodily conduct, to what well-ordered and thus desirable forms of that conduct are like as well, correspondingly, to what disordered and undesirable forms of that conduct are like. Christians should, in John Paul's view, engage in both biological and naturalistic analyses of the body. Unfortunately, the dominant mood of our time on this matter is biologistic: biology has public prestige (and rightly: we know much more about the body than we used to because of the work of biologists), and this disposes many, Christian and otherwise, to think its deliverances final and to respond to normative claims about the body as mystifications. Biological reductionism is a tendency that, if followed, leads toward understanding the body as a morally neutral object without purpose and without deep or essential connection to anything other than itself. Such an understanding, in turn, makes the body into an object to which anything we find ourselves able to do may be done.

1.4. Contra Manichaeism

Manichaeism is an ancient, syncretic religious movement that began in Persia in the third century A.D. It was radically dualist in its understanding of the cosmos. It understood everything material or physical — everything that takes up space — to be fundamentally evil and therefore opposed to the good, which was identified with the spiritual. Salvation depends, therefore, for bodily beings such as ourselves, on rejecting and transcending the body. For Christians, this view is not acceptable. It contradicts the fundamental Christian understanding of the material order, which is that it is good because God loved it into being out of nothing. Manichaeism implies either that God is responsible for evil, or that there is an evil principle in the world independent of God; both conclusions contradict standard-issue Christian doctrine. The view that the body is evil just because it is physical has another unacceptable result: it leads to, or at least sits well with, contempt for the body. That contempt can take a radically puritanical form, in which the body is seen as an opponent to be conquered and, finally, destroyed or abandoned; or it can take a radically indulgent form in which all bodily appetites are indulged without restraint because what the body does has no moral significance. In either case, contempt for the body is in play. Manichaeism is, for most contemporary Americans, lively neither as word or movement. Its deep dualism, however, is alive and well. Very many of us are functional Manichees even if we have never heard of the prophet Mani or his movement: we hate our bodies, or we indulge them, because we think of what they do and what they are as irrelevant to what we do and are. It is in part

against these forms of contempt for the body that John Paul II developed his theology of the body.

1.5. Contra Cartesianism

The seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes was also a dualist, but not of a Manichaean kind. For him — and still more for his epigones — mind and matter are fundamentally different substances, and human beings are identified, in their essence, with their minds, which is to say with what is mental about them. Such a view makes it difficult to account for or explain the mind-matter connection; but, more basically, it makes our bodies inessential to us. Bodies are not understood to be evil, as in Manchaeism; but because they are inessential — because we are, on a Cartesian view, most essentially mental — considering them is unimportant for coming to an understanding of what we are and should do. The body can easily, then, be thought of as an irrelevant appendage to which anything at all can be done. Here too, as with Manichaeism, the result can be puritanism or licentiousness. There are affinities between biologism and Cartesianism, as well: Cartesians are likely to be drawn to the view that a complete account of the body can be offered by describing its physical properties and principles, and that such an account is morally and teleologically neutral. Cartesianism has been an important influence upon the development of biologism.

1.6. The language of the body

Each of the three positions just briefly described (biologism, Manichaeism, Cartesianism) sits well with contempt for the body. Each of them also easily disposes those who hold it to think of their own bodies principally or solely as an instrument of their desires, and to treat the bodies of others in similar fashion. By contrast, John Paul II's theology of the body understands all bodies — our own and those of others — to speak a language whose vocabulary, syntax, and grammar makes instrumentalism an ill-formed utterance. The Pope means that the body is communicative, and not just because we can speak and write. We gave (or, better, are) bodies that speak to ourselves (if we can learn to hear and understand), and to others (with whom we come into contact), of what they are and what they are for. That metaphorical speech is the language of the body. We, because we are free agents, can train our bodies in such a way that their movements are well formed, beautiful utterances; we can also train our bodies so that they inflict violence (metaphorical and actual) upon ourselves and others. When we do the former, our bodily (and thus also our sexual) actions are conformed to the creative purposes of the triune Lord who made them; when we do the latter, our bodies become increasingly conformed to absence and lack.

2. Body

Human bodies — yours and mine — speak to their Lord responsively. They also speak to one another reciprocally. The task that John Paul II set himself in his catecheses was to depict and analyze this speech, and to make it seem beautiful to those who speak to one another in this way.

2.1. The spousal body

John Paul II places much emphasis upon the fact that in Genesis the Lord is depicted as having from the beginning created human beings as spirit-breathed and sexed bodies. He also recalls that, in his response to the pharisaic question about divorce, Jesus himself

takes up again this theme of the originary creation of human beings as sexed bodies. The fundamental meaning of the sexed body is, for humans, that we are oriented physically toward other human beings. We certainly all — or almost all — actively seek physical intimacy with others; and that intimacy is always to some degree sexual. This is what the Pope means by the spousal nature of the body: we are made for sexual union with those of the opposite sex — male if we are female; female if we are male. (The term sponsale in Italian was rendered into English as "nuptial" in the earlier English versions of John Paul II's catecheses, and that rendering is often found in discussions of the theology of the body in English; following M. Waldstein's version, "spousal" will be the preferred term in these remarks.) This readiness for and ordering toward sexual union does not mean that all adult human beings do or should find and be a spouse; neither does it mean that there is anything lesser or imperfect about those who live some or all of their adult lives as celibates. What it means most essentially is that it is a fact about our bodiliness that it is created for such a spousal union, and that this fact is evident (even if not unambiguously) in the complementary physical differences between males and females.

The spousal nature of our bodiliness, John Paul II argues, is depicted in Genesis as, first, implied by Adam's original loneliness: he can find no helper or intimate among those nonhuman living beings who inhabit the world. He needs — is ordered to and passionately seeks — an intimacy impossible to find among them. Then, the spousal nature of his body is shown explicitly by Adam's recognition of Eve as bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, the one with whom he can find spousal intimacy by becoming one flesh.

The body is, then, ecstatic, which is to say, following the strict etymological sense of that word, that it stands outside itself (ek + stasis), being neither self-sufficient nor capable of fulfilling itself without intimacy with bodies other than itself. The body seeks and finds, in one way or another, communion with other bodies, and in doing so it shows itself as made in the image of the Holy Trinity, which is itself, as John Paul II often writes, itself a communio personarum — a community of persons. It is at this point that the Pope introduces one of his more creative theological speculations: that the divine image is found most completely not in the individual human being, but, rather, in the mutual intimacy — the ecstatic communion — of male and female human beings. This does not mean (although some interpreters have read it so) that the image of God in the human is most fully evident in the consummated act of heterosexual intercourse. Rather, it is a generalization of the thesis of Adam's radical incompleteness without Eve (and of Eve's without Adam). If Adam is completed as a human person only when his sexed bodiliness finds its complement, then it follows that the divine image in him finds its completion in the same fashion. Complementary ecstatic relatedness has many modes other than the fully conjugal; and so, the image of God in human persons is present in equivalently many odes. The significance of this position for the theological grammar of the faith is that it makes ecstatic sexed bodiliness essential to human existence: from the beginning until the end.

2.2. The fallen body

John Paul II's depiction of the sexed body is structured according to the order of the history of salvation. That is, it begins with the body in its original, created condition (from the beginning), and moves from there to the body in its fallen state. Originally, the sexed body's desires for its complementary other are without shame, full of delight, and thoroughly responsive to the physical presence of the other as gift. Eve, for Adam, is a matter for wonder and desire and pleasure, as he is for her. But with the fall, their mutual

desire becomes disordered. Shame in the face of that disordered desire threads itself deeply and seemingly inextricably into the fabric of what they want from one another. They find themselves eager to cover their nakedness, and their need for one another becomes as much painful as delightful.

This fallen condition is what we still find ourselves in. We as often wish to possess our beloved others as to receive them as gift, which is to say that our desire for them is often concupiscent, seeking dominion rather than intimacy. It is not too much to say that since the fall, and even though Christ has redeemed us, all desire for our complementary others is inflected with a concupiscent grasp for dominion.

Even this does not exhaust the damage brought about by the fall. It is also the case that the desire for intimacy prompted by our own profound incompleteness — evident most clearly in our sexed bodies — has been deranged. Originally, as created and not yet damaged, those desires had direction and order: for the male, they were directed toward the female; and for the female, they were directed toward the male; and that without need for explicit catechesis or other formation. Vestiges of that original directedness remain in us, and with a good deal of force: the vast majority of human beings find their formed sexual desires to be directed toward their complementary others. But not all do. The urge for intimacy can, since the fall, become focused upon almost anything, from close simulacra of its proper objects, such as adult human beings of the same sex, to more distant ones, ranging from children to animals to inanimate objects of various kinds. These derangements of desire — taking "derangement" here in its proper etymological sense of removal from the place where it belongs, uprooting from the soil properly nourishing to it — are multifarious; each preserves some of the goods proper to such desire as it originally was and as it will eventually be again; but each also lacks some such goods, and the more extreme derangements of desire may preserve very few.

Some Christians — and even some interpreters of John Paul II's theology of the body — seem to think that all deranged desires (ecstatic desires for intimacy separated to a greater or lesser distance from their proper objects) are more concupiscent than their non-deranged cousins. They think, that is, that all desires for intimacy focused upon the properly complementary other (heterosexual desires, that is, if the modern jargon must be used) are less damaged and less concupiscent than, say, desires deranged in the direction of intimacy with same-sex partners, or with children, or with animals. But no such hierarchical ordering is easily derivable from John Paul II's thought on these matters. The proper thing to say is that all deranged desires lack a good that does belong to their non-deranged cousins: that is, exactly the good of being directed toward their proper object. So saying, however, is perfectly compatible with the claim that some deranged desires are less concupiscent — less aimed at dominion's control — than some non-deranged ones. It may be, then, that some whose desires are homosexually focused are less concupiscent than some whose desires are principally or exclusively heterosexual. Not only might this be so; empirical evidence strongly suggests that it is so.

The fact that our desires for intimacy are fallen is evident, then, in both their concupiscence and their derangement. That they are fallen gives a special importance to the education of desire — to the provision of instruction and example that will form the desires of the young in such a way as to minimize their inflection by derangement and concupiscence. Adam and Eve did not need this, but we do; and we do because the fall's effect upon our sexed bodiliness has been to open it to formation in any direction whatsoever.

2.3. The redeemed body

The body is, for John Paul II, spousal from the beginning, concupiscently possessive because fallen, and also transfigured by the redemption given it in Christ. Before the coming of Christ, the derangement of bodily desire could be disciplined in the direction of its proper end, and to some extent refocused upon its complementary other. The principal locus and sign of this disciplined focus was the Lord's covenantal gift of himself to the people of Israel, a locus and sign that continues. With the coming of Christ, that discipline was extended in two directions: by intensity, in the direction of transfiguration (Jesus' own pre-resurrection transfiguration and the glorification of his post-resurrection body in his ascension serve as the principal prefigurings of this); and spatio-temporally, so that it becomes available to all. This is one of the major senses in which Christianity can properly be understood as Judaism for the Gentiles.

The partial participation of the bodies of Christians in Christ's transfigured and glorified body does not mean that Christians are, by way of baptism, free from the concupiscent derangement of bodily desires, sexual or other. But it does mean that the spousal nature of their bodies, evident (if not unambiguously) from the beginning, can now be understood more fully, as participatory in Christ's spousal relation to the church. Christian spouses can — even though they rarely do, and never without ambiguity and failure — model their marriages upon Christ's ecclesial marriage, and in that way begin to find their sexual and sensual lives transfigured by grace. Desire's transfiguration (not its removal, not its reduction in intensity, not the erasure of the pleasure that accompanies its play: those reductions and erasures would be stoical responses, not Christian ones) is a central element in the process of sanctification — perhaps the constitutive element.

John Paul II likes to write of the ethicization of the erotic as a way of describing this process of desire's transfiguration. By this he means, in considerable part, that erotic desire's horizons are opened to a new horizon, that of the point and purpose of eros, and its rooting in the very nature of the person. This opening and deepening can be characterized as an ethicization because it brings with it a sense that the delights of an indulged eros do not and cannot justify or explain themselves, and that any such justification and explanation requires discrimination between acceptable and unacceptable forms of erotic play. Some forms of such play accord with our bodily nature, and some do not. The former are the fully delightful, opening always into deeper and more powerful channels; the latter are dead ends, eventually damming desire's flow and making it stagnant. Discrimination of the one from the other is an ethical matter.

Such discrimination does not come naturally, and the Pope emphasizes in his catecheses the importance of attention to the formation of bodily desire. One mode of its formation is exemplified in John Paul's Wednesday catecheses on the matter: that is, formation by explicit and didactic instruction. This is important, indeed essential: the Church cannot do without it. But most people, Christian and otherwise, do not respond easily or deeply to such instruction by itself. Explicit catechesis, to be effective — truly informative, that is — must be understood as an essential ornament to the more fundamentally formative practices of the Church, which in this case are two: the liturgy; and the witness of Christian people whose bodily lives exemplify the meaning and purpose of our bodiliness. The liturgy, by its rhythms of self-gift and self-withdrawal, the stammer of the lover's confession of unworthiness as he (and she) approaches his beloved with the open-handed offering of himself, provides the template for and deep structure of our bodily desires for one another. Over time, and with repeated exposure, the bodily reciprocal gift of spouses to one another takes on the liturgical form of

Christ's gift of himself to the church and her constitution by loving reception of that gift. Mary's willing acceptance of the gift of Jesus — fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum (let it be done to me according to your word)— may serve here as fundamental type. The liturgical discipline of desire is supplemented by the living witness of those — Christian and other — whose bodily gifts of themselves to others, whether as spouses, celibates, or martyrs, makes evident to the world what a well-catechized body is and does.

None of these means of disciplining and ordering deranged bodily desires can bring us to the full and radiant glory of what it is to be bodily. That awaits the resurrection. But each of them contributes to the body's redemption.

2.4. The glorified body

Our bodies — in this like Christ's — are glorified in the resurrection, when we shall be no less bodily than we are now, though our bodiliness will certainly be deeply different. The details and particulars and texture of what it will be like to be bodily resurrected and to live with/as a resurrected body necessarily escape us almost completely. We must remain deeply modest about our capacity to know such particulars in this as in every other properly eschatological matter. John Paul II affirms just two principles with respect to the glorified bodiliness of the resurrection. The first is that the sexed and spousal nature of our bodies remains there, but is perfected. As we are spousal in body from the beginning, so we shall be at the end. The second is that there will be no marriage in heaven, a point the Pope derives from Jesus' answer to the question about whose wife a much-married woman will be in heaven. Jesus says that there will then be no marrying or giving in marriage, and the Pope takes this to mean at least that there will be no conjugal sex in heaven — and, by implication, no procreation. Matters are less clear with respect to desire. The grammar of the position suggests that the spousal desire of males for females and females for males finds in heaven its fulfillment and highest pitch of intensity. But what this will be like exceeds our grasp altogether.

3. Gift

A thread connecting almost every element in John Paul II's theology of the body is the idea of gift. For the Pope, gift and grace are equivalent and interchangeable: all gift is grace and all grace is gift. There is no ex professo treatment of the idea of gift in the catecheses on the theology of the body; but enough is said about it in discussions of particular topics to which it is applied to make it easy enough to see John Paul II's understanding of the term.

Gifts are unmerited, unexpected, and create no obligation on the part of the recipient. They also provide for their recipients something those recipients could not have provided for themselves. For a gift to be received as such, all that is necessary is an act of grateful acceptance, for which the Eucharist (the word means just that) provides the paradigm. Such an act acknowledges what is given exactly as gift, and permits it to be enjoyed as such. There are many ways of refusing a gift. Wishing no part of it, you might simply reject it,. Or you might take it, but commit yourself in the manner of your taking to treating it as something other than a gift. Perhaps you take it as something well deserved and long expected; as something more properly your own than its giver's; or as something whose acceptance binds you to a reciprocal return, which is to say as one element in a contract. And there are other possibilities. What they have in common is the transformation of the gift into something other than what its giver gave. This way of thinking about the gift implies that it is not enough for a gift to be given; it must also be received. Gifts do not force themselves upon their recipients; were they to do so, they would not be gifts.

God is the prevenient and supreme giver according to this understanding of the gift. Indeed, in the strict and proper sense there are and can be no other givers because no creaturely givers and no creaturely gift can do more than approximate the purity and perfection of the divine gift. Human gifts cannot in practice — and to take just one instance — altogether extract themselves from the economy of exchange and contract. Divine gifts can, because God owes us nothing and needs nothing from us, while at the same time being generous enough to have brought us into being ex nihilo. The theology of gift in this precise sense informs the entire theology of the body. This is not to say that the theology of the body is co-extensive with the theology of gift; it is to say that John Paul II's theology of the body is an application of his theology of gift, and cannot be separated from it.

The body as spousal and ecstatic is itself gift in the full and precise meaning of that word. Like all gifts, in order for it to be received as a gift it must be accepted with gratitude. In the case of the body, this means at least the acknowledgment that the body has a nature (spousal, ecstatic, and so forth) of surprising, delightful, and quite unexpected dimensions. To be human — bodily, sensual, sexed — is already to find oneself incomplete, ordered to a complementary other and yearning for that other without having oneself done anything at all to bring this state of affairs about. To receive the body as gift is to receive oneself as gift (recall that there is and can be no such thing as an unembodied or disembodied human person), and as a kind of gift that is drawn to intimacy with complementary others. This is perhaps surprising enough. More surprising still is the fact that the intimacy toward which bodily human beings are called and pulled (our desires are weighty; they drag us toward their objects) is not one of simple additive closeness or joining, in which two separate things are brought into proximity by their passion for one another, like iron to a magnet or a hummingbird to sugar-water. It is, instead, an intimacy that requires us to give ourselves away to the beloved, to offer ourselves to her (or him) as a gift modeled participatorially upon the gift God has given to us preveniently. We of course do not bring our beloveds into being ex nihilo as God has brought us; but we do something analogous: we constitute our beloved as a beloved by becoming his (or her) lover. To ratchet up the intensity of the gift still one stage further, we bring ourselves into being as beloveds (and, hence, as lovers) by giving ourselves away to those whom we love. Some gifts can be received only if they are at once, and by way of non-identical repetition of the initial gift (and here again the non-identical repetitions of the liturgy serve as the informing paradigm), given away; and the gift of the spousally ecstatic body is, for human beings, the most intense case of this.

Receiving the gift of the spousally ecstatic body appears to bring obligations with it — not least that of giving away what you have received. Does this not contradict what I wrote above about the non-obliging and non-contractual nature of the gift as such? Not exactly. An exchange that belongs to the realm of the contract is constituted by expectation of return; a gift brings with it the possibility of its rejection and misuse, from which various more or less unpleasant and damaging results will follow. But using the gift as given — conforming, in this case, your bodily actions and desires to the spousal and ecstatic nature of your body — is not a contractual requirement. It is, rather, an expression of gratitude, the kiss of love freely returned to the one who has kissed you. Similarly, a refusal to respond with gratitude is not an offense against contractual requirements for which there are itemized and offense-specific punishments. It is more like refusing the medicine your doctors give you: the effects may be negative, but they are not punishments; and the medical gift comes with no obligations.

All God's gifts are excessive in the sense that the infinite gratitude that would belong to their proper reception — infinite because of the infinitude of the giver — is not possible for creatures, who are necessarily finite. This excess makes creatures restless. We know, if inchoately, that the ecstatic bodiliness we have been given cannot find satisfaction in even

the most radical self-gift to another creature. This restlessness and anxiety may, if properly catechized and liturgically formed, lead us to see in our gifted bodiliness and intense bodily desires an anticipation of the beatific vision in which we shall know as we are known, and in which, therefore, we shall become capable of fully returning the gift of ourselves to its giver. But the inadequacy and unsatisfactoriness of our self-givings here below may also — and this is the usual case — lead us into the vanity of attempts to stimulate and increase the intensity of our desires and their physical satisfactions. The excessiveness of the divine gift of sexed bodiliness finds its malformed image in the endlessly phantasmagoric imaginativeness of our attempts to find final sensual and sexual satisfaction in the creaturely. We fail at this, as we must; but this does not prevent us from doing it, and the baroque range of human sexual activity (rape, fetishism, bestiality, necrophilia, and so drearily on through the list of human sexual derangements, most — even all — of which are found only among humans) itself provides evidence for those who can see it of the divine origin of our sexual natures. We would not be capable of such imaginative self-damage were the sexuality with which we have been gifted not of an intensity explicable only by the infinitude of its giver. But it is important to be aware that the derangement of our desires remains with us, Christian or not, and that it takes strange forms.

4. Sex

I've been writing so far, as John Paul II also often does, of sexed bodiliness and of desire for union with the complementary other in abstract fashion, without attention to the particular bodily performances in which it may be enacted. It is now time to do that, in order to see what the fundamental theological anthropology that belongs to the theology of the body might mean for our understanding of particular acts and patterns of action.

4.1. The conjugal act

The paradigmatic act in which ecstatic spousal bodies express their desire for one another is, in John Paul II's thought (and here he does no more than recapitulate the long tradition of Catholic reasoning about these matters), that in which the lovers' bodies join in such a way that procreation's possibility is performed. The man, that is to say, desirously and intentionally ejaculates inside the woman's vagina; and the woman, equally intentionally desirous, receives that ejaculation as gift. The lovers' bodies are joined physically as this happens, which is why the word "conjugal" is appropriate; and the conjugal act will ordinarily have been preceded and will be followed by many other expressions of intimate desirousness by both participants. The desire of lovers for one another is ordered to this act — which is to say that it has this act, whether oft-repeated or rarely so — as its summit and goal. The conjugal act is the most physically intimate act of which human beings are capable; and in this it participates most fully in the self-gift asked for by the divine gift of sexed bodiliness.

The conjugal act, so understood, has two registers of meaning. The first is unitive: it makes the lovers one flesh, and in so doing joins them in other ways as well — as bound together by emotion and desire, and as participating in their joining in Christ's spousal love for the Church, a love which has no end and which cannot be destroyed or removed by anything human beings can do. The second is procreative: the conjugal act is sometimes actually procreative in that it produces a pregnancy; and when it is not — and this is by far the more common case, for many reasons — it manifests in its very form what it means for two human beings, two beloveds in complementary form, to join together in such a way as to bring another beloved, a child, into being.

These two registers of meaning belong together in the conjugal act. Together they make it what it is, and the extent to which one or another of them is intentionally muted or attenuated by lovers is the extent to which those lovers damage themselves as lovers by deliberately performing a simulacrum of the conjugal act. It is as if, in doing these things, they declare love for one another with fingers crossed behind the back: what they say sounds like a verbal caress ("I'll love you forever"), but is in fact so only in form, having been emptied of reality by the mind's reservation. The unitive register can be muted in many ways: one lover can use the body of the other for sensual pleasure or the exercise of power without thereby intending or enacting anything approaching intimacy. Rape is an extreme case of this, but there are many other possibilities. The procreative register, too, can easily be muted, most obviously by the use of contraception (on which more below), but also in other ways. Intentional erasures or mutings of these kinds damage the act by making it to some extent a simulacrum of itself; and they have in common a deliberate withholding of the gift of oneself as lover from the beloved.

No conjugal act, whether in marriage or outside it, is perfect. Each is more or less damaged by the kinds of self-withholding just mentioned. This is because we are redeemed but not yet glorified. The ideal type of self-gift evident in the perfect and undamaged conjugal act serves, then, as a regulative ideal for Christian spouses — a counsel of perfection, that is — which cannot be fully attained here below. Just as there are no perfect marriages here below, so there are no perfect conjugal acts. The realization that one's own self-givings and those of one's beloved fail to be perfect should no more be cause for despair than the realization that one's prayers and acts of self-denial are far from perfect. The regulative ideal, once it is understood, can be inspiring, and can serve as a constant encouragement and instructor. To see things in this way should prevent the twin errors of a hyper-scrupulous despair ("I'll never manage that so I'll give up the idea"), and a new licentiousness born of just such despair ("Since I'm going to fail at that, it doesn't much matter what I do").

4.2. Other bodily intimacies & their meaning

It is sufficiently obvious as almost not to need saying that spousal intimacy is not exhausted by conjugal acts. Even the most sexually avid lovers are unlikely, over time (so empirical studies suggest), to engage in conjugal acts more than a few times a week, and the average for the long-married is certainly much less. But this is not to say that lovers who perform conjugal acts rarely or never share no physical intimacies. They of course do: there is hand-holding and kissing and hugging; there is the exchange of intimate glances; there are various ways of caring for and supporting the beloved in bodily ways; and there is the intimacy of sleeping together — going to sleep and waking together in the same bed — without performing conjugal acts. What significance do these things — John Paul II calls them, variously, "manifestations of affection" and "gestures of tenderness" — have in the theology of the body?

This is a topic that the Pope does not much develop in his catecheses. It is, however, an important one, because it presses us to think about the entire range of human bodily intimacy, and about whether it is easily possible to distinguish sexual intimacies from non-sexual ones. One guideline for doing this, very formal but not without use, is the thought that a gesture of tenderness is sexual just to the extent that it is understood by those who perform it as an anticipation of, a memorial of, or a form of participation in the conjugal act. Thinking of things in this way indexes gestures of intimacy to the established repertoire of particular pairs of lovers; it does not permit an easy categorization of such gestures into the sexual and the non-sexual by external

observers. A particular kind of caress or kiss might, for one couple, be clearly anticipatory of conjugal acts to come; while what looks like effectively the same thing might have no such connection for another couple. And, manifestations of affection between those who have no conjugal relation, neither remembered nor anticipated, will often be indistinguishable to observers from such manifestations shared between those who regularly perform conjugal acts together.

The importance of these matters for the theology of the body is manifold. First, there is the point that even though these gestures of affection do not represent self-gift with anything like the same intensity that conjugal acts do, their fundamental logic is the same. They too — the casual hand-holdings of male friends (a cultural norm in much of the world), the hugs exchanged between siblings, the air-kisses of the casually acquainted, the frequent bodily intimacies shared between parents and children — belong to the ecstatic bodiliness of human being, and they too can be performed as gift or as something very much opposed to gift. Second, there is the point that within marriage, as also outside it, much of the physical intimacy we exchange is not ordered to conjugal acts. And third, there is the important point, in constant need of re-emphasis, that it is not easily possible to determine by simple observation what significance gestures of intimacy have in the lives of those who exchange them.

4.3. States of life

John Paul II's theology of the body is a piece of Catholic theology. This means that it is located firmly within the tradition of Catholic thinking about sexual acts and the sexual nature of the body, and although it makes creative contributions to that tradition, it nowhere calls it into question. Among the deliverances of that tradition, assumed and deployed by the Pope, is the idea that there are some universal features (chastity, continence) of a well-ordered sexual life — some, that is, that do or should belong to all of us — and some that are specific to particular states of life (celibacy, marriage). John Paul II places these older doctrines in the context of the theology of the body, and in doing so develops them.

4.3.1. Chastity (continence)

Chastity is a virtue, which is to say a good habit. With respect to sexual matters, it is the virtue of purity. That in turn is, very roughly, the habitual direction of the sexual appetite toward its proper object — the complementary and spousal other — and the constraint of that appetite in the direction of proper moderation. A name for that constraint is "continence". John Paul II acknowledges that earlier Catholic theology has sometimes treated both the sexual appetite and the conjugal act toward which it is ordered as intrinsically problematic, and has therefore erred, at least rhetorically, in the direction of advocating the discipline of desire toward absence, and the ideal marriage as one in which there are no conjugal acts, and no gestures of affection tending toward them. His preferred position is to say that, between spouses, conjugal acts are a gift and a delight — while of course always still subject to concupiscent possessiveness to a greater or lesser extent — and their performance a good proper to marriage for which no apology or shame is necessary. In what, then, do marital chastity and continence consist? In the progressive disciplining of the excessive and deranged sexual appetite toward accord with the theology of gift as already discussed. If the ideal-typical conjugal act is fully unitive and fully procreative, then marital chastity will mean the development over time of the capacity to give oneself conjugally to one's spouse without damaging that gift by the

kinds of self-withholding discussed above. Marital continence is the self-restraint sometimes needed to foster and support that habit. It may mean sometimes deliberately abstaining from conjugal acts, or from particular practices that tend toward objectifying the spouse's body (recall the discussions above of Manichaeism, Cartesianism, and biologism) and thereby making response to her (or him) as gift impossible or difficult. It will be a matter of discernment, of the exercise of prudence, to determine for each couple what such practices might be. Temperament has a good deal to do with these matters, and what might be perfectly acceptable practices for one couple might for another be inadvisable. Adornment of the body makes an interesting test-case for thought about this. In principle, there is and can be nothing wrong with it: making the body smell or look or feel desirable need be nothing more than a loving response to what God has given. But adornment can obscure what it adorns, and become thereby an idol, a replacement for what should be desired. Perhaps this happens when a husband can desire his wife only when she is dressed in certain clothes, or only when she wears a certain perfume. The general point, in any case, is that although marital conjugal intimacy is an intrinsic good and a matter for celebration and delight, it can easily become unchaste and incontinent — just as, to take an analogical case, the desire for food may easily do. That is why chastity and continence are as much proper to the lives of spousal lovers as they are to those of celibate monks. It is among the errors of some interpreters and popularizers of the theology of the body to depict it as removing the necessity for chastity and continence from the sexual lives of spouses. It does not do this; it does reconfigure how marital chastity and continence are thought about.

4.3.2. Celibacy

To be celibate is to live without conjugal acts and also without their close simulacra. Unlike chastity, celibacy is not something required or appropriate for all human beings. Quite the other thing: few have a vocation to celibacy, and it may seem that the theology of the body, with its emphasis on the spousal and ecstatic nature of the body, might call the vocation of celibacy into question altogether. But in fact this is not so: John Paul II, following the tradition of the Church, gives a prominent place to that vocation: celibacy is the form chastity takes for the unmarried. It has, in terms of the theology of the body, a double significance. First, those who live as celibates provide a visible anticipation of what a sexed and ecstatic bodily life will be like in the world to come. There, since marriage has come to an end and with it the conjugal acts which are its special gift and mark, our ecstatic bodiliness will not involve such acts. The celibate life here below participates anticipatorily in that condition. Second, celibacy recapitulates and participates in the celibacy that was characteristic — though differently — of the lives of Jesus and Mary. Celibates, then, do not renounce their spousal bodies and do not, as stoics would, seek a mode of bodily existence in which ecstatic desire for the complementary other is erased. Instead, they transfigure that desire, opening it outward to the many rather than focusing it exclusively upon the one as spouses do.

4.3.3. Marriage

Marriage is where conjugal ecstatic intimacy belongs, and is thereby the state of life in which the double register of meaning belonging to that intimacy — unitive and procreative — finds its meaning and locus. It is a sacramental state of life, entered into freely by the spouses and celebrated by them. It images and is founded upon

Christ's sacramental love for the Church, and is rooted in the fundamental theological anthropology narratively limned in the creation account of the Book of Genesis. Adam and Eve find one another as spouses, and the spousal nature of each of their bodies is fulfilled in their conjugal intimacy. This is the figure and type of all spousal intimacy. Marriage is, further, indissoluble: like baptism, once it has been done it cannot be undone, which is to say that the spousal relation is an eternal one (which is not to say that it will always be accompanied by conjugal acts). Conjugal acts can of course occur outside sacramental marriage; perhaps, statistically speaking, most of them do. Such acts may preserve many, even most, of the goods proper to such acts: they can be unitive and procreative, they can show loving intimacy, they can even be a partial image of the love of Christ for the Church. It is also the case that conjugal acts that occur within a sacramental marriage may lack some or all of the goods proper to such acts: they may be concupiscently possessive and violently destructive. It is therefore not possible to order extra-marital and marital conjugal acts in a simple hierarchy of goodness. However, this does not alter the fact that, for Christians, conjugal acts (and their close simulacra) performed outside sacramental marriage always lack a good they might otherwise have, which is to say the good of public participation in the divine economy. This is true no matter what other goods particular marital conjugal acts might have or lack. Marital chastity and continence, therefore, consist in significant part in renouncing conjugal acts (and their close simulacra) with anyone other than the spouse. In that ecstatic chastity, and in the intimacy of conjugal acts performed over the course of a life, spouses find the spousal nature of their bodies come as close to fulfillment as is possible here below.

5. Controversial & pastoral questions

The theology of the body stands in deep contradiction with the sexual norms, legal and moral, of most democratic states at the beginning of the third millennium. John Paul II's catecheses on the subject have little to say about these contradictions, mostly because he wants to depict the theology of the body as a gift and a blessing rather than as a weapon in contemporary controversies. There are however occasional glancing comments on some of our contemporary difficulties; and in the very brief remarks that follow I draw upon those, while also extending them. What I write in this concluding section of my remarks stands at a greater distance from what the Pope teaches than what I wrote earlier, and should be read in clear awareness of that fact.

5.1. Representing the body

The human body may be represented in many ways: in words, in images, and even in music. The theology of the body suggests that some modes of representing the body, and certainly some ways of using such representations, contradict the nature of the body as gift. This is most obvious when images of the body are intended and used as stimuli for sexual response. Most commonly, drawings, photographs, or filmed images of the female body are used by men to stimulate sexual appetite and as aids to masturbation. The theology of the body has something to say about this. If our bodies are spousal, made for ecstatic union within sacramental marriage with the bodies of our complementary others, then using representations of bodies in these ways is both absurd and damaging, encouraging a mode of bodily response to the desired other that scarcely approaches even the minor dignity of being a simulacrum of conjugal intimacy. This,

however, though true as far as it goes, falls far short of providing a set of criteria that make it easy to distinguish appropriate from inappropriate representations of the body. Under what circumstances, and in what ways, should the naked human body be represented? When, if at all, may human bodies performing conjugal acts be represented? These and other questions like them need to be given serious thought in the terms given by the theology of the body. I do not think that this has yet happened.

5.2. Marriage (& divorce)

In the democracies of the West, and increasingly in the rest of the world, marriage is understood as a form of contract, and one of an unusual kind: dissolvable at the will of either party. On such an understanding, divorce is not only possible but relatively easy, and is now very widely practiced. This understanding of marriage contradicts in almost every significant particular the sacramental understanding of marriage sketched above. That sacramental understanding is intimately intertwined with the anthropology of the theology of the body, just as the contractual understanding is indissolubly connected with a broadly cartesian and biologistic anthropology. This creates difficulties, conceptual and practical. At the root of them lies a conceptual and linguistic confusion: the term "marriage" is now so equivocal — meaning on the one hand a contract and on the other a sacrament, on the one hand a state of life dissolvable at the will of either party and on the other one incapable of dissolution at all — that a strong case can now be made that the same word should not be used for both states. A further case can be made (though I will not here make it) for the desirability of separating the churches' marriage-practices from the legal arrangements of secular states. It is clearly the case that the prevalence of divorce makes no sense if the theology of the body is taken seriously.

5.3. Contraception

Catholic teaching on this matter (teaching not widely endorsed by other Christians) is, briefly, that intentionally removing or barring the procreative register of meaning from conjugal acts is illicit. This teaching, much older than John Paul II's theology of the body, is illuminated by that theology at least in the sense that the theology of the body makes clear what such intentional removal is: it is a partial refusal of the mutual and ecstatic self-abandonment in which conjugal acts ideal-typically consist. To decide to withhold the possibility of conception — of bringing a new life into being — from one's conjugal acts is to withhold something of oneself from one's spouse. There are complications here, and difficulties; it is clear that one of the tasks for those who will in the future be working to apply the theology of the body to the moral teaching of the church is precisely the fuller articulation of what that theology means for contraceptive practice.

5.4. Homosexuality

It is now almost a cultural norm for us to think in terms of sexual identities: we are, we are likely to think, gay or straight or bisexual or transgendered or pedophiliac, or what-have-you. This is a peculiarly modern way of thinking, not clearly evident before the late nineteenth century. Before that, most thought about human sexuality was in terms of kinds of act, discriminated according to kinds of partner or object (human, nonhuman, same-sex, other-sex, animate, inanimate, and so on), or according to what is done or not done (penetration or not; ejaculation or not; use of violence or not; and so on). According to this way of thinking, all human beings are capable of any of these acts, and many will engage in a range of them during the course of a life. The question, "Are you gay?"

belongs to those who think in terms of identity; the question, "What do you do?" belongs to those who think in terms of acts and the habits that go with them. The churches — or at least the Catholic Church — tend to think in terms of acts, tendencies, and habits rather than identities; and the theology of the body, together with the understanding of human desire's excess and derangements that accompanies it, grounds and explains this way of thinking. If, as John Paul II claims, our bodies are constitutively and non-negotiably spousal and ecstatic, then it is true that we act in accord with what we are when we enter into either the married or the celibate state as these have been briefly described above. Any other mode of sexual life is, more or less, a derogation from those states, and productive of damage as a result. It is the excess and derangement of human desire that explains the vast range of human sexual acts. Among the interesting and as yet unexplored questions raised by the theology of the body for (for example) homosexual acts, whether between males or females, is the extent to which those acts should be understood as simulacra of the conjugal act. Must they be so understood? Or is it possible to understand them as gestures of intimacy and manifestations of affection, as these categories have been briefly expounded above? I hazard no position on that question: it is a rich and fruitful avenue for further exploration.

For further study

The fundamental text is: John Paul II, Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body, translation, introduction, and index by Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006). ISBN 0819874213. The outline given below is keyed to the section-numbers of the Waldstein translation.

Outline of JP-II's Text

1. Original body (§§1-23)
2. Fallen body (§§24-43)
3. Redeemed body (§§44-63)
4. Glorified body (§§64-72)
5. Continent body (§§73-86)
6. Married body (§§87-117b)
7. Married sex (§§118-133)

Catholic magisterial documents which serve as background to or elucidation of John Paul 2's catecheses on the theology of the body. All these can be had, usually in several languages, from the Vatican's website, www.vatican.va (search on titles).

- Pius XI, Casti Connubii [1930]
- Paul VI, Humanae Vitae [1968]
- John Paul II, Familiaris Consortio [1981]

For exposition of the fundamental text, Michael Waldstein's lengthy introduction to the new translation is the place to start. You might then turn to Christopher West's Theology of the Body Explained: A Commentary on John Paul II's *Man and Woman He Created Them* (rev. ed.; Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2007). You should treat this work with some care, however; helpful though it is on many matters, it has a tendency toward idolatry of the family, and especially toward an idealization of the nature and possibilities of married sex.

Scholarly works I've found helpful (there is also an extensive bibliography in the Waldstein translation of the fundamental text):

- Scola, Angelo. The Nuptial Mystery. Translated by Michelle K. Borras. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2005.
- McAleer, G. J. Ecstatic Morality and Sexual Politics: A Catholic and Antitotalitarian Theory of the Body. New York: Fordham University Press, 2005.