

## Theological Lessons of the Abuse Crisis

Sr. Mary Timothy Prokes, FSE

2015 Anglophone Conference, Pontifical Gregorian University

This day brings a twofold awe. First, like hearers of rushing wind on the first Pentecost, we gather from multiple nations of the earth. Never again, in the history of the universe will this same group of persons meet to ponder in the Holy Spirit the ways in which the Church, Body of Christ, is wounded from within by clerical sexual abuse. The second aspect of awe: we begin this day by affirming audaciously that our sharing is done “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

What we are pondering together is immense and complex: the sacred twisted by evil. Having been invited to address “Theological Lessons of the Abuse Crisis,” I find consoling the words of Servant of God Luigi Giussani, quoted recently in the *Magnificat*: **“If I find myself out of my depth, I am sure that in this disproportion Christ will make his glory seen.”**

Among possible descriptions of “Theology,” St. Anselm’s classic definition in *Cur Deus Homo?* seems most apt: Theology, he said, is “*Fides quaerens intellectum*” (Faith seeking understanding). Theology is the study of God in relation to humanity and all creation.

Anglican theologian John Macquarrie averred that a whole theology cannot be confined to the essential basics of Revelation, Scripture, and Tradition. It also has to take into account **experience, reason, and culture**. Theology, then, is never “finished” as faith seeking understanding. Nor can it be whole apart from Christ’s revelation of what it means to be human. As the Second Vatican Council says in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: “. . . **by his incarnation, he, the son of God, has in a certain way united himself with each man. He worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved.**”<sup>1</sup> As St. John Paul II would

---

<sup>1</sup> “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” #22, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Study Edition, Austin Flannery general ed., 1992, p. 923.

emphasize, to know the Divine intent regarding human reality, we need to “look to the beginning.” My comments, limited as they are, bear the desire for theological wholeness.

From the origin of human sin, Divine Love promised the supreme gift of the Woman and her offspring. Evil does not have the last word. From Eden on, sin was followed by the promise of Redemption and divine self-Revelation. How else has the Holy Spirit acted through human history? Our underlying question at this time is: ***Following the exposure of sexual abuse by the ordained, what new depth of faith-understanding is the Holy Spirit desiring to awaken in the Church regarding sexuality, spousal love, the child, celibacy, and the seal of Ordination? It would be no help if the abuse crisis had remained hidden.*** As Pope Francis keeps reminding us, although we are sinners, hope is our song. It is with enduring hope, not rancor, that we ponder theological **lessons** of the abuse crisis.

Most of us are familiar with kiosks in shopping malls. A kiosk contains a map showing the location of shops and points of interest. On the map, an arrow points to a large dot, with the message: YOU ARE HERE. No one cries with joy “Oh good, we are here! We have arrived.” Rather, at the kiosk it is necessary to know a destination, and look for the way. From a map of theological lessons regarding the abuse crisis, I suggest that we visit four. Although closely related, each has a specific focus.

1. **First lesson:** When abstract theological thought and study become DISSOCIATED from real persons, meaning, and action, the disconnection affects all of life, making it vulnerable to evil.
2. **Second lesson:** TRUTH, desecrated in the abuse crisis, must ground faith seeking understanding and its applications in pastoral ministry.
3. **Third lesson:** The abuse crisis has exposed immature, uncertain, and erroneous understandings of priestly identity, awakening the desire for a deepened theology of the priesthood.
4. **Fourth lesson:** There is cogent need for an integral theology of the body that will pervade the years of seminary formation.

All four lessons have roots in the central truth of faith-- the Trinity, in whose image we are created. God is a Communion of Persons united in perfect love – and every human person is called to participate in that union of perfect love.

### **DISSOCIATION OF THEOLOGY FROM LIFE**

**The first lesson, then:** serious moral problems result when abstract intellectual understanding of faith becomes dissociated from real life. One can amass countless data -- even have original insights concerning the faith -- but remain untouched by them in personal life.

A rupture can open between the intellect and the heart, between a mind swift as a Google search – and **a loving, personal encounter with the living Christ**. Immediate access to information in one’s mind or pocket instrument is not the same as knowing relationally. Personal encounter with Christ is the entry into knowing the Mysteries of faith. Think, for example, of the Cure of Ars or a Therese of Lisieux, who could *know* profoundly without advanced theological studies.

Worldwide, there is a paradox. On the one hand, there is an insatiable desire on the part of many **to know more with immediacy and to pursue unlimited choices independently** – unhampered by laws of nature and the true meaning of relationship. On the other hand, there is a desperate desire to be “technically tethered” to others at all times, and unswervingly support trendy causes in the name of equality and tolerance.

We have become a “turned-on” people, and the boundaries of relationship, love and intimacy become increasingly vulnerable to virtually-contrived pleasure through the social media, without responsibility or real union of persons. The desire to be sole arbiter of what is good and desirable and to demand that no one interfere with this so-called right permeates our environment. For example, in the United States in 1992, the Supreme Court issued a majority opinion regarding “Planned Parenthood of Southwestern Pennsylvania vs. Casey, Governor of Pennsylvania, 505 U.S. 883. Within the lengthy written decision is the statement:

**“At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, the meaning of the universe and the mystery of human life.”**

It is the lie out of Eden all over again. In the 1960's, Joseph Fletcher's Situation Ethics gained influence and moral relativism spread. In 2005, Pope Benedict XVI, addressing members of the conclave that would elect him pope, warned "We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desires." In an interview with Peter Seewald, who questioned him about the clerical abuse crisis, Pope Benedict XVI spoke of the intellectual climate of the 1970's, saying: "A theory was finally developed at that time that pedophilia should be viewed as something positive. Above all, however, the thesis was advocated – and this even infiltrated Catholic moral theology – that there was no such thing as something that is bad in itself. There were only things that were 'relatively' bad. What was good or bad depended on the consequences."<sup>2</sup>

Moral decisions could float like flotsam and jetsam on life's ocean.

In his book *Sacrilege: Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church*, Leon J. Podles gives examples of dissociation among abusive priests, who, in turn, evoked dissociation in their victims. For example, one abuser asked an 8-year old boy if he loved God. He told the child "If you love God, there are certain things you have to do."<sup>3</sup> He told that boy that since he was born without clothes he should show his love for God by taking off his clothes "so God will know you're here like when you were born."<sup>4</sup> **Lust in an authority person can divide and compartmentalize knowledge of faith, obedience to an authority figure, and loss of innocence in victims of abuse that mark them permanently.**

Podles says that "The more pious boys, like Michael Gould, had been taught that 'priests are the direct hands of God the Almighty. He was taught that he would go to hell if he did not obey the priest.' Gould therefore felt God's hands torturing his genitals."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, *Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times, A Conversation with Peter Seewald* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), p. 37.

<sup>3</sup> Leon J. Podles, *Sacrilege: Sexual Abuse in the Catholic Church* (Baltimore: Crossland Press, 2008), p. 249.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 395.

Dissociation is not only a serious aberration in sexual abusers. In Dean R. Hoge's book, *The First Five Years of the Priesthood: A Study of Newly Ordained Catholic Priests*, one "resigned priest" spoke of his leaving priestly life and his present situation. I quote part of his account: "My mom was crestfallen about me getting married outside the Church. Now we are active in our parish. Joan does music, and I preach every once in a while. I talked to the pastor and asked if we could use the church for the wedding. He had no problem with that. . . . We are still active in the Church. We receive Communion. Joan is very strong that if you go to church, you receive Communion. My mom and dad think we are very outside the Church and cannot receive Communion. But the priest at our parish has no problem with giving us Communion."<sup>6</sup>

While dissociation is pervasive today throughout the human family, it has brought a number of seminarians and priests to justify abuse, devastating themselves while destroying the innocence, trust, and clarity of faith-understanding of the young.

Those providing seminary programs now must grapple with *dissociation* in comprehensive ways. Not only does it require care in admitting men into seminaries. It involves intense formation centered in Christ *integrated* with a seminarian's wholesome relationships with women, lay men and children. Ivory-tower separation of seminarians from ordinary life can bolster dissociation.

### **Urgency of Truthfulness**

**A Second Lesson:** It is urgent that TRUTH be the foundation of faith seeking understanding. Studies show that the abuse crisis developed from untruthfulness concerning

- A. Sexual activity among seminarians and members of the clergy
- B. Radical untruthfulness in abusive interactions with children, youths, and adults, and

---

<sup>6</sup> Dean R. Hoge, *The First Five Years of the Priesthood: A Study of Newly Ordained Catholic Priests* (Collegetown, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2002), p. 71.

- C. Sadly, untruthfulness on the part of some bishops in their response to sexual abusers in their dioceses. (The recent establishment of a new Judicial Section in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith is intended to rectify what has been learned in this regard.)

Ultimately, TRUTH is the basis of our being created in the image and likeness of God. Not limited to words and images, truth involves the whole body-person, and extends outward to the meaning of all that exists. Many of us live in cultures that no longer *recognize the existence of objective truth*. Often, what is true in fact becomes reduced to what will not offend, evoke a lawsuit, or result in the loss of friends, property, or job.

In an article in the *Washington Post*, Shankar Vedantam reported on the work of Robert Feldman, social psychologist at the University of Massachusetts, regarding the prevalence of lying:

***“Experiments have found that ordinary people tell about two lies every ten minutes, with some people getting in as many as a dozen falsehoods in that period. More interesting . . . Feldman also found that liars tend to be more popular than honest people . . .”***<sup>7</sup>

The first sin of humanity (biblically expressed in figurative language) was rooted in a lie. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* notes of original sin: “*Seduced by the devil, he wanted to ‘be like God,’ but ‘without God, before God, and not in accordance with God.*”<sup>8</sup> Lying, as Genesis 3 tells, is followed by hiding, shame, blame, and self-justification.

Particularly over the last six or seven decades there has been the tendency to encourage lying and “bending the truth” as a way of dealing with public embarrassment, legal challenges, and financial loss. Members of the Church, both clerical and lay, have attempted to save face and deal with embarrassing and pricey legal matters by hiding, or denying what is true of sexual

---

<sup>7</sup> Shankar Vedantam, “Department of Human Behavior,” in *Washington Post* (February 19, 2007).

<sup>8</sup>*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Second Edition, (LIBRERIA EDITRICE VATICANA, 1997), paragraph 398, p. 100.

abuse by ordained men. When exposed in the public square, this lack of truthfulness has magnified the devastation caused by abuse.

Martin Ridge, in *Breaking the Silence, One Garda's Quest to Find the Truth*, writes of an eleven year-old boy's being raped by a priest:

"He hurt terribly, but he was afraid to cry or tell Greene to stop. Afterwards Greene warned the boy not to tell anyone what had happened; it was to be their secret."<sup>9</sup> It is the pattern from the beginning of sin: lying, shame, hiding, blame, self-justification. A ten-year-old girl, raped by a later well-known priest offender, said: "I'm very confused about my faith . . . . I never went back to church after high school. It's a confusing thing when the person who is supposed to be so good – I mean he's next to God when you're so little . . . . I didn't even know what sex was back then, then all of a sudden he does something like that. If you can't trust your priest, who can you trust?"<sup>10</sup> Another victim described the agony caused by this priest in asking: "If God would betray you, who does one turn to?"<sup>11</sup>

Christ, the divine spouse of the Church, described himself as "The Way, the Truth, and the Life." He told the Jews who believed in him: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." (Jn. 8:31-32).

I remember vividly a small poster on the door of my room at a retreat center in the foothills of the Canadian Rocky Mountains: "The truth will make you free. But at first it will make you miserable." **The transparency required by truth is a rock-bottom challenge for us all.** The abuse crisis has taught us the urgency of restoring truthfulness at all levels in the Church, and sharpened our awareness of its significance. For one identified "*in persona Christi*" it is crucial. The healing of those wounded by abuse can only go forward within truth.

### REAL SYMBOL

A **Third theological lesson of the abuse crisis:** It has made visible the results of immature, uncertain, and erroneous understandings of priestly identity and sacramental

---

<sup>9</sup> Martin Ridge, with Gerard Cunningham, *Breaking the Silence: One Garda's Quest to Find the Truth* (Dublin: Gill & McMillan, 2008), p. 43.

<sup>10</sup> *Sacrilege*, p. 271.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

ordination. Without an internalized understanding of these realities and ongoing prayer for the grace to live them, a priest's life will remain shallow and open to aberrations. Christ stressed the importance of identifying one's deepest reality. "Who do men say that the Son of man is? . . . . But who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16: 13; 15)

Jesus used apt metaphors and symbols to designate a person's qualities. After Simon was graced to recognize that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God," Jesus responds: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church . . . . I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven . . ." (Matt. 16: 18 – 19)

Signs and symbols pervade the Church's sacramental life and personal identity. A SIGN signifies or points to someone or something "other" in order to show what is occurring or intended. Signs can also be used to deceive or entice. In secular life, commercial firms have become acutely aware of their responsibility in the use of sign and symbol in advertisements. They may face lawsuits if their products cause harm or death. How carelessly choice words are commercially mangled. The ad for a Penny's credit card says it's "the card that loves you back." Subarus are love machines.

I remember walking into a florist shop where ads were posted on the counter. One brochure had a woman's photo accompanied by the sign: "Forget Her Birthday." Inside were a number of lines on which a man could write the occasions and dates of the year that were important for his wife or significant other. He was assured that he could now forget them because the florist would see that an appropriate gift would arrive for each day listed. He would simply be billed and could forget the reality being signified. Another brochure said: "Send yourself flowers. Only you and your florist will know." Daily, life is punctuated by signs that require our rapid discernment.

SYMBOLS are more complex than signs. The most familiar are conventional symbols – their meaning agreed upon in a given culture and commonly understood. Conventional symbols such as a handshake facilitate social interaction. **Symbolic rituals** are more complex – helping people know how to act in significant events of life, such as weddings and funerals. **Natural symbols** do not need personal interpretation. Fire, water, earth and air convey unspoken meanings.

Suffering follows the deceitful use of signs and symbols. Clerical abusers – in word, gesture, and sacrilegious acts – have scorched the lives of the young, violating not only their persons, but the meaning of sacramental realities, in ways that cannot be simply erased from embodied memories. Cynicism, even revulsion, regarding sacramental life can ensue in the lives of those abused. What an immense field for reparation!

Bread and wine are a combination of conventional and natural symbols. As the liturgy proclaims, they are fruit of the earth AND the work of human hands. The sacraments incorporate BOTH conventional and natural symbols and effectively signify change in our lives.

Theologian **Karl Rahner, however, in his essay on the theology of symbol touches its primordial meaning -- what he termed REAL SYMBOL.**<sup>12</sup> More than mere sign, more than conventional or natural symbol, REAL SYMBOL concerns the ontological truth of a being, expressing what it IS.

Every BEING, Rahner said, beginning with the divine Being of the Trinity, is a plurality within its own unity. Every being – you, a dog, a tree, or the sun, from within its own being expresses its identity. Before we use lesser forms of sign or symbol “out there” -- from within the unity of our own personal being, we are expressed bodily in the world. As human beings, **our body is our Real Symbol.** In God’s original design from the beginning, there is intended to be a wholeness and transparency between our unseen spiritual faculties of knowing, willing, remembering, and imagining, and their outward manifestation in the body.

As Arthur Vogel wrote, we are able to mean what we say and say what we mean *in and through the body.*

“The body we live is not something to which we must give meaning before it is significant for us; it is meaningful to us in the first instance, and becomes a source of meaning of other things because it is the primary location of our presence . . . . Personal

---

<sup>12</sup>See Karl Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” in *Theological Investigations Volume IV: More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966), pp. 221-245.

presence is more than the body, but we are able to know it to be more only through the body and never without the body.”<sup>13</sup>

In sum, a Real Symbol contains what it signifies. The more perfect the integrity of real symbol, the greater its effectiveness. For persons, this means a oneness of inner intent and outward bodily manifestation. Karl Rahner said:

“ . . . the incarnate word is the absolute symbol of God in the world, filled as nothing else can be with what is symbolized. He is not merely the presence and revelation of what God is in himself. He is also the expressive presence of . . . who – God wished to be, in free grace, to the world, in such a way that this divine attitude, once so expressed, can never be reversed, but is and remains final and unsurpassable.”<sup>14</sup>

I reiterate: a Real Symbol contains what it signifies and is not merely a representation or a resemblance. In the sacramental life of the Church it is said that *sacraments signify what they effect and effect what they signify*. How crucial this is for understanding the depths of priestly character! In his book *Reclaiming Our Priestly Character*, Monsignor David Toups explains how, following Vatican Council II, there was uncertainty concerning priestly identity. A faulty post-conciliar theology of priesthood attempted, he said, “to deconstruct the concept of Holy Orders into a simple function of the community.”<sup>15</sup> Toups cites a portion of then-Pope John Paul II’s address to a French Bishop’s Conference in 2003:

“[For] several generations its [the priesthood’s] forms have evolved considerably; the concept of it has sometimes been shaken by the outlook of many priests with regard to their own identity; it has often been cheapened in the eyes of public opinion . . . . Today, the description of this ministry can still seem hazy, difficult to grasp by young people and lacking stability. It is thus necessary to uphold the ordained ministry. It should be given

---

<sup>13</sup> Arthur A. Vogel, *Body Theology: God’s Presence in Man’s World* (New York, Harper and Row, 1973), p. 91.

<sup>15</sup> David Toups, *Reclaiming Our Priestly Character*, Revised Edition (Omaha, Nebraska: The Institute for Priestly Formation, 2008), pp. 103-104.

its proper place in the Church, in a spirit of communion that respects differences in true complementarity, and not one of competition that would be prejudicial to the laity.”<sup>16</sup>

In his Holy Thursday Letter of 2000, then-Pope John Paul II wrote that in all priests he honored the image of Christ received at their consecration, “*the character that marks each of you indelibly.*”<sup>17</sup> In the Prologue of Monsignor Toups’ book, Father James Rafferty speaks of the sacramental moment of Orders, the imposition of hands by the Bishop. Rafferty says clearly: “Each sacrament involves an object, a richly polyvalent symbol that announces a deeper mystery. **The person of the priest is such a symbol**, and the theology of the character opens the imagination to perceive the mysterious truth sacramentally represented in priesthood. There is no priesthood without flesh. This is as true of Christ as for the Church today. Christ’s priesthood exists because the Word has become incarnate.”<sup>18</sup>

How well St. Maximilian Kolbe understood this! When he volunteered to take the place of the father of a family from being starved to death, the military official asked “Who are you?” He responded: “I am a priest.” That was his identity unto death.

Every human person has the immense dignity of being created in the image of the Trinity, created to express bodily a unique identity. A man to be ordained, already indelibly sealed in Baptism and Confirmation, receives a yet deeper indelible seal in Holy Orders. It brings an ontological change, marking him a priest forever. When Church authority legitimately laicizes a priest, he is dispensed from celibacy and recitation of the Divine Office and may no longer administer the sacraments. But the priestly character marking his soul remains forever.

The priestly character is *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ. “It means,” says Father Paul Nwobi, that “through the power of ordination, every priest lives and acts in persona Christi. In the sacrament of ordination, a priest is configured into Christ to be one in and with Him, the head of his Body, the Church.”<sup>19</sup> Father Nwobi stresses that poor formation has been a

---

<sup>16</sup> See Toups, p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 83.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. xxv.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Uche Nwobi, *Poor Formation as a Principal Factor to the Crisis in Priesthood Today* (Bloomington, Indiana: Author House, 2012), p. 154.

principal factor engendering the current crisis in priesthood itself. Formation is a life process. If formation is blocked or denied, a situation of crisis will ensue. The **present crisis**, he writes, is an “invitation event’ calling attention to a need for proper formation, not simply an ‘evil-event’ that demands prosecution and punishment as it is being handled in the Catholic Church today.”<sup>20</sup>

We have witnessed what happens when the Real Symbol of men ordained to serve *in persona Christi* is devastated by lust and deceit, when outward signs of ministry cloak hidden abuse, and sacramental life itself, in some instances, used as a conduit for lewd behavior with innocent youths. Corruption of the best realities, acted-out in the name of God, is the worst kind of corruption.

One great lesson of the abuse crisis, then, is the need to clarify in depth – for both the ordained and lay members of Christ’s Body – the meaning of priestly consecration, and to reform seminary formation consonant with its reality. The ongoing reforms must reach ontological depths of personal and sacramental life, so that the Real Symbol of deacons, priests, and bishops is that of sacred identity in Christ, not that of immature men struggling to assuage sexual desire through abuse of young victims or sexual activity with adults. The divulging of sexual abuse is a painful blessing. It opens the way for divine love to pursue what has been lost, offer the grace of reparation, and open the way to transformation of seminary life.

### **THEOLOGY OF THE BODY**

**A Fourth lesson** is closely associated with those concerning wholeness, truth and authentic priestly character. **It is the cogent need for effective Theology of the Body that pervades the years of seminary formation.** If the body is our Real Symbol, what is it primarily meant to express? Saint John Paul II’s Spirit-impelled series of public audiences between 1979 and 1984 are central here. “The ‘Theology of the Body’ International Alliance” says cryptically:

**“The ‘Theology of the Body’ is St. John Paul II’s integrated vision of the human person. The human body has a specific meaning, making visible an invisible reality, and is capable of revealing answers regarding fundamental questions about us and our lives . . . . John Paul II seeks to present to us the Gospel message of love in a**

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. xi.

**new, deep, and profound way. He knows that love is what all people seek. He goes so far as to say, ‘Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience love and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it.’<sup>21</sup>**

The reason that we have a body expressing our inmost being is that we might have the means to express love authentically. John Paul’s reflections are steeped in Christ’s Person and the truths of God’s divine intent for humanity as articulated foundationally in the Book of Genesis. John Paul said:

*“This is the body: a witness to creation as a fundamental gift, and so a witness to LOVE as the source from which this same giving springs. Masculinity – femininity – namely sexuality is the original sign of a creative donation and of an awareness on the part of man, male-female, of a gift lived so to speak in the original way. That beatifying beginning of man’s being and existing, as male and female is connected with the revelation and discovery of the MEANING OF BODY, WHICH CAN BE CALLED NUPTIAL.”<sup>22</sup>*

Every priest is called *in persona Christi*, to grow increasingly in that meaning of body as total, personal self-gift. This does not happen instantly. In order to BE gift, one must first know what an authentic gift is. What *are* the qualities of true gifts? They are given freely, person-to-person. They are appropriate for the persons and the occasion. Gifts involve sacrifice. A key element of gifts is surprise.

The meaning of gift has been diminished to a great extent, if not lost, for many. How often we hear: “So-and-so has everything. What shall we get him or her?” Or – what do you want for your birthday?” *Gift* is replaced with ordering something (like the florist example I mentioned earlier). Some stores in the United States begin to ask customers in November and December, “Do you want a gift receipt?” It is a receipt to accompany a wrapped gift. If the one

---

<sup>21</sup> “What is Theology of the Body?” at <http://www.theologyofthebody.net>, pp.1 and 11.

<sup>22</sup> John Paul II, “General Audience of January 9, 1980,” trans. Michael Waldstein in *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), p. 183.

receiving the gift does not like it or consider it suitable, they will have a receipt for ready exchange for something they would prefer. The so-called gift becomes an acquisition.

Nothing exceeds the Real Symbol gift of one's body, given freely, appropriately, sacrificially. That is why nothing exceeds the self-gift of Christ in the Eucharist – in the Body and the Blood, living, present, given irrevocably, Christ gives Himself under the appearance of food and drink. As the poet says in another context: “If you were God, would you have thought of that?” *Acting in persona Christi gives to a priest the incredible wonder of speaking the words of Consecration that effect the presence of Christ's true body and blood.* How can he enter this mystery ever more deeply if he does not know the wonder of his own body and the bodies of those to whom he ministers?

We live in cultures where the human body is violated in ever new ways. Many consider the body a commodity, endlessly malleable for financial gain and/or instantly available pleasure. For others, the body is a scientific/technical project for experimentation and enhancement. Those destined to be ordained, or who are already serving as priests, are submerged in a world view that is “anti-body.”

The early Church grappled with varieties of Gnosticism and Manichaeism that considered the body as unworthy, even evil in itself, a burden to be escaped. We are immersed in what is called “virtual reality.” The term is an *oxymoron*, seemingly self-contradictory. As Michael Heim notes, “reality” used to designate what truly exists, a real event, entity, or state of affairs. “Virtual” indicated “being in essence or effect but not formally recognized or admitted.” Now, says Heim, “We paste the two together and read: **Virtual reality is an event or entity that is real in effect but not in fact.**”<sup>23</sup> In a revolutionary change brought about within a few decades, many people on earth are more deeply affected by what is virtual – real in effect but not in fact – than they are by what is real.

It needs to be of profound concern for us, members of the Body of Christ, and certainly for those called to the three levels of ordination. Made *bodily* in the image and likeness of God, we profess a personal, real redemption through the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity. Christ's coming in the flesh is our way, our truth, our life. To lose the integrity of our

---

<sup>23</sup> Michael Heim, *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality* (New York, 1993), p. 111.

body-persons, our real presence bodily in the world, our having a soul-and-body-destiny in eternal life, is indeed to be disconnected beyond technical fixes, and left flailing for pleasure cut off from moral responsibility. There is need to recognize as never before WHY and for what REASONS we are expressed bodily in the world in relation to Christ's self-gift in His Body and Blood. The Church is sacramental, real, concerns Real Symbol. Priesthood needs to be imbued with an ever-deepening theology of the body.

Evil is real. Personal evil is real. All of us have to ask humbly of the loving Trinity the wisdom needed to contend with the evils of addictive pornography, abortion, the laboratory production of life, human trafficking, and futurist's attempts to bypass the body by technological means in a post-human world.

All of us are assaulted daily with anti-body messages. Their effects are real. It is within this chaotic time that the Holy Spirit is awakening us to the reality of our deepest roots. Trinitarian life itself is the basis for understanding the splendor of the body, of chaste living in consecrated celibacy and marriage.

The time of greatest number of abuses by seminarians, priests and bishops in the last century occurred in the decades which immediately preceded the election of Pope John Paul II. The divine meaning and intent for the body became a central factor of his papacy. Advancement in theological insight comes through all of the six factors of a whole theology. Reason, personal experience, and the trends of cultures in the last century prompted John Paul to see the urgency of assisting the entire Church understand WHY we are created in the body, created male and female.

With the questioning of priestly meaning in decades following the Second Vatican Council, there was a generally diminished understanding of sexuality, chastity, consecrated celibacy, marriage, and perpetual commitment. As Pope Paul VI indicated prophetically in his encyclical *Humane Vitae*, once the unity of the love-giving, life-giving aspects of permanently-committed self-gift is severed, there are no boundaries.

We are together in a world Community in danger of losing its human meaning, its capacity for love. There is need to intensify wholistic theology. Not only is it faith seeking understanding – it is also faith seeking real body.

Lines from T. S. Eliot's poem "East Coker," bring us back to the theological kiosk, the map on the road to the future, and the meaning of "You are Here."

In order to arrive there, to arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,  
 You must go by a way in which there is no ecstasy.  
 In order arrive at what you do not know  
 You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
 In order to possess what you do not possess  
 You must go by the way of dispossession.  
 In order to arrive at what you are not  
 You must go through the way in which you are not.  
 And what you do not know is the only thing you know  
 And what you own is what you do not own  
 And where you are is where you are not.

*East Coker*, T. S. Eliot<sup>24</sup>

**Let us proceed with love and hope to "where we are not."!**

Sister Mary Timothy Prokes, FSE, PhD  
 Franciscan Family Life Center  
 2098 Truckerville Road  
 Pocatello, Idaho 83204

---

<sup>24</sup>T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," in *Four Quartets* (New York and London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), p. 29.

From 1979 to 1984, Pope John Paul II delivered 129 public audiences devoted to the gift of Theology of the Body.

Consider his historical moment. In light of all previous atrocities dealt to the human body, none had come close to those perpetrated in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: incredibly violent world wars, a flu epidemic that afflicted millions, the detonation of the first atom bombs, the holocaust, the sexual revolution, the feminist movement that pitted woman against man, relativism in moral life, the rise of post-human efforts to bypass human embodiment. It was in these decades that the questioning of priestly character and the abuse crisis mushroomed. Positive technological advances for communication increasingly encouraged participation in virtual worlds that bypass the realities of daily life and real relationships. Evil romped graphically in the pornography industry. **It was in that context that Saint John Paul II, impelled by the Holy Spirit, gave to the worldwide Church and all who would listen, a profound understanding of the human body.**

Now consider three realities impelled by the Holy Spirit during these decades. They remain largely unopened gifts to be received and internalized throughout the worldwide Church:

1) In 1950, the proclamation of the dogma of the Assumption of Mary, Mother of God, **body and soul into eternal life**; 2) Between 1962 and 1965, the truly miraculous event of the Second Vatican Council, and its four dogmatic Constitutions; and 3) Saint John Paul II's series of Audiences on Theology of the Body.