



Theology of the Body: A Catechesis into the Fullness of Love

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“To defraud oneself of love is the most terrible, is an eternal loss, for which there is no compensation, either in time or in eternity” (Sören Kierkegaard, *The Works of Love* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 1995], 5-6). With these words, the philosopher Sören Kierkegaard spoke of the worst deception that can happen in life: “to defraud oneself of love.”

This temptation is very strong today. In fact, we can ask two questions: Is it possible to believe in love? Can we discover in love a path that, if followed, leads to happiness? We are in the middle of a crisis that affects the credibility of love. To our culture, love certainly seems funny, interesting, necessary—but not worthy of trust. It does not seem to be solid enough that one can build one’s entire life on it.

These questions are very important for Christian catechesis, because its task is precisely to avoid this

deception. It teaches how to “believe in love” (see 1 Jn 4:16), the love with which God loved us first, brought us into existence, and called us to build a fruitful life.

In order for catechesis to introduce us into the mystery of God’s love, it is necessary to understand its connection to human love. It is here that the theology of the body finds its place: its task is to show the place of human love in the divine plan. The theology of the body is an education about love; it shows the path of love between man and woman, who are called to form a family and become fruitful. It teaches the meaning of being a child, a spouse, a father or mother, and a sibling, and it shows how our identity as human beings depends on these relationships.

Why is this connection between human love and divine love so important? First, it is precisely through love that human life opens up

to the divine mystery. The Greeks had a play on words between “love” (*eros*) and “wing” (*pteros*). They so indicated that love has power to make us fly, to transport us toward heaven. Is it not true that, when we love and are loved, we experience in our life a glimpse of the divine? Every true lover talks about eternity: “I will love you forever; it seems that we were intended to meet from forever.” The Spanish poet Bécquer wrote a romantic poem that expressed this connection between love and the sacred:

Today earth and heaven smile
upon me;
Today the sun reaches the
depth of my soul;
Today I saw her . . . I saw her
and she looked at me . . .
Today I believe in God!
(Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer,
Rimas [San Francisco: The
History Company, 1891], 40)

We may smile at the sudden enthusiasm of the poet, for whom the gaze of the beloved leads directly to belief in God’s existence. But there is some truth in these verses. To fall in love, even if it sometimes runs the risk of infatuation, is one of the few ways in which people today understand the presence of grace (in the form of surprise, gift, gratuitousness, or even fulfillment) in their lives.

From this viewpoint, the theology of the body, by explaining the meaning of human love, performs a crucial task of catechesis. If we want to speak of God’s love, we need to recover again this place in life—human love—that opens us up to his presence.

But there is more. This language, the language of love, is the one used by God to reveal his mystery in Christianity. He loves his people like the bridegroom loves the bride, like the mother her child, like the father his child. The theology of the body, by teaching us what it means to be a child, a spouse, a father, a mother, prepares us to understand the words God himself uses in his Revelation: the Father sends his Son, and the Son gives himself up for his Bride, the Church.

At this point we could ask, Isn’t there a huge distance between God’s pure love and the desires and affections that move our hearts? The answer is yes; and precisely because this is so, the theology of the body is a long process, like every true catechesis. The theology of the body is a true pedagogy of the body. Love, even if it seems to be from the beginning sheer fulfillment (as Bécquer’s poem says, “Today, I believe in God”), is actually a path to be walked. We need time to mature in our love, to become true artists in its expression, to reach our final goal.

Using a different image, we can say that we are like alchemists in search of a formula, the recipe for happiness, which consists in the fullness of love. In order to find the formula, it is not enough to have all the ingredients at our disposal (for example, sexual desire, sentiments and emotions, love for the person and God). We need to put them together in their correct order and measure; we need to patiently mix them with one another. The theology of the body shows us how to achieve the perfect formula.

Our formula has four ingredients. They are necessary elements in the lives of the people we catechize. They are valid for each single stage of the human journey: childhood, adolescence, youth, adulthood, and old age. It is never too soon or too late to teach the theology of the body, because it runs along the entire journey of humanity. Let us consider now these four ingredients.

Sensuality or Sexual Attraction

The first element is physical or sexual attraction between man and woman, which awakens at puberty. This attraction is embedded in the nature of the human person. God has created it and given it to us, so that we understand that our happiness does not lie in us alone. This desire contains a call to go out of our self-sufficiency, breaking the circle of our own isolation. Through this desire, we discover that life starts with a call to love. "It is not good for the man to be alone," says God to Adam in the Book of Genesis (Gn 2:18). Sexuality promises us a glimpse of happiness beyond ourselves, toward true love. Because in this love we glimpse a promise of fulfillment, sexual attraction is a strong and powerful force in human life.

The power of sexual attraction is why this attraction is so easy to corrupt. This happens when we make of it an absolute, instead of letting it point to its true goal. If this corruption takes place, our interest stays centered on our own pleasure and does not allow us to find happiness. A Chinese saying goes, "If someone points you to the moon, do not keep looking at the

finger." To make of sexual desire an absolute is to keep looking at the finger, without allowing it to point beyond itself, toward the moon, that is, toward the greatness of true love.

In talking about sexuality, a clarification is important for our catechesis. Our culture has broken all the so-called sexuality taboos. Today we feel the need to talk openly about everything that has to do with sex. In so doing, however, we are losing something essential: precisely the respect due to the personal mystery of love toward which sexuality points. In fact, there is nothing wrong in dealing with these topics with reverence and modesty, because this is the only way of approaching them truly. This does not mean that we are suspicious of the goodness of sexual desire, but that we want to respect the treasure it hides: sexuality opens up the path toward the beauty of true love.

Affectivity and Sentiments

Sexual desire is able to guide us toward freedom when we combine it with a second ingredient of our formula of true love: affectivity, or the feelings that unite us to the beloved person.

We fall in love when we encounter a person who touches our heart and fills it with sudden happiness. This person becomes for us unique, irreplaceable. His or her presence makes our life shine with light; our world suddenly takes on a different color. What is key to the emotions is that they allow us to enter into the world of the beloved person and to share in it. We seem to live in the sphere of our beloved, to enter into a shared universe.

Emotions are crucial ingredients of love. They enable man and woman to integrate their sexual attraction, without permitting it to become the center of their relationship. Man and woman develop a sense of respect and reverence for each other. Sexuality starts to serve its true purpose, that of making the gift of self possible.

But the lovers need to understand that this feeling is not the whole truth of love. Again, as it happens with sexual desire, we find the danger of making an absolute of what is not—in this case, our emotions. For feelings also hide a risk of egoism, the temptation of measuring everything according to our own sentiments. But love is not only a matter of feeling; otherwise it would extinguish at the first change of mood. It would then be like fireworks: beautiful, yes, but unable to illumine one's path during the night. Feelings are not enough. Another ingredient is necessary, one to which feelings point and which they help discover: affirmation of the person.

The Affirmation of the Person

Feeling only survives and acquires maturity when integrated into a higher sphere, that of personal love. At this point, the lovers are able to affirm each other as persons. They understand that there is something greater than their own sentiments: the good of the beloved, who is worthy of being respected for his or her own sake. They learn to love the other for who he or she is, and not only because of their own feelings toward him or her. Only when the lovers find this dimension of their love do they avoid the risk of creating their own bubble that isolates them from the rest of the

world. Now they know that their love can be stable, beyond their feelings—that it can be fruitful, beyond their own little world.

At this moment, the miracle of love takes place: the lovers become a new being, in which each of them places the other at the center of his or her happiness. Pope John Paul II has explained this point by referring to Adam's sentence in Paradise when he encounters Eve: "This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called 'woman,' for out of 'her man' this one has been taken" (Gn 2:23).¹ The Hebrew text plays with the words "man" (*ish*) and "woman" (*ishah*). Only when God creates woman does the word "man" appear in the biblical narrative. Up to this moment he was Adam, the one who comes from the earth (*adamah*). The point is that man is not really himself until he encounters someone who loves him and to whom he returns love, until he discovers Eve's Thou.

We know of the individualism of our society. It is built on the value of the "I," of one's privacy and self-realization. The theology of the body assures us, however, that this "I" finds itself only in relationship with a "Thou." As a consequence, our catechetical work has to foster the relationships in which each person lives. "No man is an island," says the poet John Donne—no one is a land of the "I." Each person is always

¹ See Pope John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 159-160.

someone's child, someone's spouse, someone's father or mother. When we understand that, our life receives new purpose and meaning. We are ourselves only when we receive ourselves and give ourselves back to the other. We possess only what we learn to receive and to give in our turn. In order for this to be possible, another ingredient remains in our formula: God's presence.

God's Presence in Human Love

Loving our beloved is impossible without seeing him or her in relationship to God. In his theology of the body, Pope John Paul II showed how Adam, in order to receive Eve, needs to see her as God's gift to him, to learn to look at her in the light of God's love.² Adam and Eve have been entrusted to each other by their common Father. This is the meaning of the adequate help Eve becomes for Adam: a help in their common path toward God, the Source of love.

An important moment of God's action in human love is the birth of a child in the family. The spouses understand that this gift cannot come from their own strength or capacity: no human being can create by himself another human life. They grasp then that God was from the beginning present to their love. This is what Eve exclaims in Genesis: "I have produced a man with the help of the LORD" (Gn 4:1).

Only when the spouses grasp that their desire and affection need to grow toward personal love, a love anchored in God, can they give their

yes for always in marriage, because they have found the rock on which to build their communion. Feelings, no matter how strong they are, are not enough. The affections have to mature—through suffering and forgiveness, through common work, through patience, and through joy. The sacrament of marriage will be a point of arrival in their love's maturation. It will also establish a new departure point. Catechists are called to accompany the spouses after the celebration of the sacrament, helping them to see each stage of their life as a path toward God.

An ancient king, so goes the tale, wanted to show to his people the importance of unity in the kingdom. He asked a servant to bring him four ropes and to break them one by one before him. This the servant did with great ease, because the ropes were not very strong. Then the king asked for four more ropes. This time, he intertwined them with one another and offered them again for the servant to break. In this case, no matter how hard he tried, the servant was unable to do so. In the same way, the success of love is possible when the four ingredients we have talked about are integrated into a unity. We are always striving for wholeness: among our desires, affections, personal love, relationship with God. To educate in love is to bring forward the integration of these dimensions, a task that takes our entire life.

This task is impossible without Christ's help. With his Incarnation, Christ became flesh and opened up for us the way of love. The theology of the body is to be always a catechesis on Jesus Christ, from beginning to end,

² See *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 178-191.

for he is the Son of God who, in order to redeem us, became Spouse of the Church, gave his life for her, and thus brought forth the new life of the children of God. To live out of this love of Christ in order to make it visible (sacramental) in the Church is the task of married couples. With Jesus, they go together along this way. Like him, they are the children who become spouses in order to be fruitful in their love, accepting the gift and task of fatherhood and motherhood. The goal of catechesis in the theology of the body is to educate the faithful in the right way of being children, spouses, and parents. (See Carl A. Anderson and José Granados, *Called to Love. Approaching John Paul II's Theology of the Body* [New York: Doubleday, 2009].)

The two Hebrew words for man and woman (*ish* and *ishah*) are different only in the last two letters. An ancient rabbinic tradition notes that these two letters are precisely those used to write the name of God. It is an eloquent coincidence. In the sexual difference between man and woman, God writes his own mystery. For God united man and woman—not so that they would be able to look at each other, but to allow them to walk together, being fruitful in the Church and in society until they reach their ultimate goal: the embrace with the heavenly Father, source and fulfillment of love.

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