

January 28, 2018

Theology of the Body Intro

Theology of the Body is a title that was given to perhaps the greatest theological contribution of St. John Paul II. This title refers to the fact that since we are incarnate beings with a body and a soul, we operate in both the physical and spiritual realms of Creation at the same time. In fact, what we do in one effects what we do (or happens) in the other. Therefore, there is inherent spiritual (and therefore eternal) meaning to our physical actions and physical effects to our spiritual ones.

He presented this teaching to the world in a series of 129 lectures delivered as his Wednesday Audiences from September 5, 1979 to November 28, 1984. The Daughters of St. Paul published this series (in English) as a single volume in 1997: The Theology of the Body (Human Love in the Divine Plan). This book was simply an edited transcript of JPII's audiences.

After JPII died, it came to light in wider theological circles that his material was not originally intended to be presented as it was (via the brief catechetical teachings that are the format of the Wednesday audiences). For quite some time during his tenure as Archbishop of Kraków, he had been preparing it as a book for publication. His plans in this regard were thwarted when he got elected pope while he was in the final stages of its composition. Instead of abandoning the project (with little time to write a groundbreaking theology book) he decided to revise and break it into bite sized pieces and presented it in the audiences.

This was both brilliant and a compromise. In the audience format, he could not take the time to methodically present the material with the same precision and thoroughness as if he were presenting it in a book or even an academic lecture series. Therefore, he reordered his presentation in order to be able to present it to a general audience in a less technical and theological/philosophical way. This both popularized his thought and at the same time muddied it a bit.

In 2006, a new book was published: Man and Woman He Created Them. It was born of the fact that although his original (Polish) manuscript was found, in the process of the audiences he had further developed his thought. This means that in order to present his mature teaching, it must not only be re-revised, but his developments must be extricated from the audiences. It was quite a project, but it flows ever so much better when read and studied and is a great contribution to his legacy and our understanding.

This teaching of the Theology of the Body gives a foundation for his vision of the mystery of love as it extends from the Trinity through Christ's spousal union with the Church to the very bodies of women and men. Therefore, moving in the other direction, Marriage becomes an icon of the Trinity.

Fr. Michael