

## **Retranslating the Theology of the Body**

Interview With Michael Waldstein

GAMING, Austria, JUNE 2, 2006 - A new, forthcoming translation of Pope John Paul II's theology of the body may help to address key questions about love and sexuality, says a Catholic scholar.

Michael Waldstein, the founding president of the International Theological Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family, and a member of the Pontifical Council for the Family, is expecting to see his new translation of the theology of the body published this September.

Q: What is particularly revolutionary about John Paul II's ideas of the human person and sexuality?

Waldstein: In his preface to the new translation, Cardinal Schönborn singles out three striking theses that are relatively new in Catholic magisterial teaching.

One, the image of God is found in man and woman above all in the communion of love between them, which reflects the communion of love between the persons of the Trinity.

Two, in God's design, the spousal bodily union of man and woman is the original effective sign through which holiness entered the world.

Three, this sign of marriage "in the beginning" is thus the foundation of the whole sacramental order.

I am not sure though whether "revolutionary" is quite the right word, because John Paul II's roots in the tradition are so deep and he stands in such substantial continuity with it.

In the introduction that I wrote for the new translation I show that John Paul II is deeply rooted in St. John of the Cross, in particular in the Mystical Doctor's spousal understanding of Christian life. On his deathbed, when his brothers prayed the traditional prayers for the dead, St. John of the Cross waived them off and asked them to read the Song of Songs.

Of course there are many tributaries to John Paul II's vision of sexuality, but at the very heart of his vision, John Paul II unfolds the implicit theology of marriage in St. John of the Cross. When Karol Wojtyla was 21, before he entered the seminary, he learned Spanish to read St. John of the Cross in the original, and seven years later he wrote his dissertation under Garrigou-Lagrange about his favorite poet and theologian.

In comparison with much theological writing about marriage in the Catholic tradition, which approached marriage often from the point of view of law -- to help confessors and those who had to judge marriage cases -- John Paul II's approach is decidedly "personalistic" and focused on the actual experience of love. He himself helped to form this fresh vision of love during Vatican II and it is the predominant form of his thinking in the theology of the body.

He explains that in some streams of the Catholic tradition sex itself got blamed for the trouble it seems to cause so many people because of the intensity of the pleasure.

The theology of the body rejects that mechanism of shifting the blame from the heart to sex. John Paul II is radically anti-Manichaeism. Human sexuality is good, created by God as a "language of the body" to express love, to express the gift of self between man and woman.

Q: What are some of the main themes emphasized in this new translation?

Waldstein: I try out to bring out in the introduction that the theology of the body responds to a split between the person and the body as seen in the history of philosophy.

It goes back to the reconstruction of knowledge for the sake of power over nature in Francis Bacon and Descartes and the scientific revolution they spearheaded. We owe the "scientific" rationalist way of looking at nature to this ambition for power.

John Paul II is very conscious of this history and of the modern split between person and body. He explicitly attempts to overcome it. There are many passages in which he says, directly against Descartes, that the human person "is a body," not just "has a body."

The human body with the sexual language created by God has a deep kinship with the person. The sentient body is created for the person as an expression of personal love.

In fact, the body is immediately and directly personal, because the person "is a body." A great Thomist, Charles De Koninck, came up with a variation on Descartes' famous statement: "Sedeo ergo sum, I sit therefore I am." This is much in the spirit of John Paul II.

It was important to get the passages about the relation between the person and the body absolutely clear. They were a bit obscure in the old translation.

One theme is very decidedly de-emphasized in the new translation, namely, lust. In the existing English translation, Jesus says, "Whoever looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" -- Matthew 5:28, following the Revised Standard Version.

John Paul II's translation is much closer to the Greek original. It has "Whoever looks at a woman to desire her." The difference is important. Desire can be good or bad; lust is a vice.

In the Italian text of the theology of the body, you can find the word "lust" -- lussuria" -- four times. You can add six instances of lustful -- "libidinoso" -- and 11 of "libido" for 21 defensible instances of "lust."

In the existing English translation, you have "lust" 343 times. That is a massive multiplication of "lust." The reason is the RSV translation of Matthew 5:28 -- "looks lustfully."

When John Paul II discusses Jesus' words in detail and repeatedly uses the word "desire" -- "desiderare" or "desiderio" -- in agreement with his own translation -- "looks to desire" -- the existing English translation tries to preserve the connection with the term "lustfully" and often translates "desire" as "lust."

It multiplies "lust" further by frequently using it to translate "concupiscenza." But concupiscence is a wider concept than lust. Sexual concupiscence is only one of its species. The multiplication of "lust" introduces a note of pan-sexualism that is foreign to John Paul II.

Q: Has the target audience changed from the original translation? Would the average lay person find this text easy to read, or is it more of a scholarly work?

Waldstein: The target audience is the universal Church. The theology of the body is a catechesis designed for the universal Church, for everybody, though in different ways.

It is a difficult work, though it has many passages that are fantastically powerful, poetic and clear. John Paul II seems to have written it as one would write a theological journal: with all the philosophical and theological resources available to him.

Vatican II says about preaching and catechesis that they are the primary means for a bishop to exercise his teaching office. In accord with that principle, the ordinary magisterium of the Pope consists mainly in his preaching and catecheses.

It is clear that John Paul II intended these catecheses for the universal Church. In that way, the theology of the body is for everybody. Since it is a difficult text, there needs to be much work of explaining and popularizing.

At the other end of the spectrum, in the academic world, the theology of the body has not been studied much. My Introduction is an attempt to open up the text a bit for academic study.

In the theology of the body John Paul II was really wrestling with the fundamental questions of our age, the question of progress, of the nature of science, of technology and its good as well as dangers, etc. It is a powerful contribution to the debate about those questions and deserves a hearing.

Q: What kind of long-term impact do you foresee for this theology of the body on the world?

Waldstein: The love of people for John Paul II has grown tremendously in the years since he first delivered his catecheses. One could see the outpouring of love after he died.

In his theology of the body, John Paul II left us the core of his great vision, a vision focused on the mystery of love that

reaches from the Trinity through Christ's spousal relation with the Church to the concrete bodies of men and women.

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