

The Pope & the Zoologist on the Human Body

Contributed By Nick Chui

When a zoologist and a Pope begin to have similar intuitions, something must surely be right.

Zoologist Desmond Morris, who considers himself a “strict Darwinian” nevertheless can’t help but wonder at the oddity of the human being in the evolutionary scheme of things. In a playful passage in his book, *The Naked Ape*, Morris said that “if we lay out in a long row the skins of the one hundred and ninety-two living species of monkeys and apes, and then try to insert a human pelt at a suitable point somewhere in this long series, wherever we put it, it looks out of place... the legs are too long, the arms are too short and the feet are rather strange. There is another characteristic that cries out for attention: the skin is virtually naked.” Morris continues to observe that “compared with the other primate species, the contrast is dramatic. Nowhere amongst the other one hundred and ninety-two species is there anything even approaching the human condition.”

What has an observation of a zoologist to do with John Paul II’s Theology of the Body? Very much it would seem. In a series of 129 catechesis delivered from 1979 to 1984, John Paul II

developed what Morris has intuited: that the human body, which is necessarily sexual, stands out like a sore thumb from all other creatures because the human being is in reality different not in degree but in kind from other animals. To use a technical term, the human body is ontologically different. The human body, as John Paul II repeated again and again, is not “merely biological” or “raw data”. Rather, it is a “spousal body” with a “spousal meaning”, possessing the “anticipatory signs, the expression and the promise of the gift of self.” What does the Holy Father mean by declaring the body “spousal” and how does he develop his claims? By a deep and penetrating analysis of scripture always with an eye to connecting it to fundamental human experiences.

It would be impossible in this short space to unpack everything that the Holy Father has taught. What follows will not only be scratching the surface but will hopefully spark in the reader a desire to know more.

In his reflections on the story of Adam and Eve in the Genesis accounts, John Paul II was able to identify three fundamentals or what he termed “original” experiences which demonstrates the uniqueness of the human body. The first is what is called “original solitude.” In the second chapter of Genesis, one finds in a mysterious fashion, God, after

having created Man and having brought him to the garden of Eden to till it nevertheless pronounced that “it is not good that man should be alone, I will make him a helper fit for him”. (Gen 2:18). God, to be sure, was present and yet it was God who declared that man was nevertheless alone. Man was to discover this reality for himself when God brought animals for him to name and by the very act of naming them, he realises that their bodies are essentially different from his. There was literally “not a helper fit for him.” (Gen 2:20).

It is good for us living in this modern world to reflect on this. Many of us do not like to be alone. We would feel very uncomfortable if we were told to sit quietly all alone. Yet, it is worth pausing and asking ourselves, why do we feel such? After all, our pet rabbit, when given enough food and drink is happy and contented being alone. But not us. In other words, solitude is a valuable experience. It speaks in a powerful way precisely of the fact that we are unique in the visible world of creatures because of our need for relationship with another.

That was precisely the man’s experience and hence, his cry of joy when God creates out of his own rib, woman. “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen 2:23), the man exclaims. In other

words, this at last is another person whom I can love and I can give myself to. The Pope calls this: the second experience, “original unity”.

Closely linked to this experience the third experience which the Pope calls “original nakedness.” The text of Genesis, immediately after the creation of woman, notes that “the man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.” (Gen 2:25).

Shame was to enter after the first sin. Before that, both man and woman looked upon each other with “the peace of the interior gaze”. They were able to recognise each other, precisely in their masculinity and femininity as a reciprocal gift. They were able to recognise that the meaning of their bodies is spousal. We know, however, that after the first sin, “they realised that they were naked and sewed fig leaves and made themselves aprons” (Gen 3:7). In other words, they felt shame. Their bodies retained their spousal meaning as a reciprocal gift. However, their wills had been profoundly distorted. The desire to be “gift” is now mixed up with a desire to grasp and to treat the other as a mere object for one’s satisfaction. As such, shame after the fall serves a protective function. It is an invitation to modesty, far from it being “a flight from love” it “opens the way towards it” as it attempts to protect the status of the subject as an incommunicable person. Sexual

shame speaks the following language: “value me not only for my sexual values but me as a whole person.” An echo of God’s original plan remains when one experiences sexual shame.

That we need to recover the recognition that our bodies possess a spousal meaning seems a particularly urgent task today. Our bodies are not evil. It is our wills that are distorted and it is our wills that need to be untwisted by the grace of Christ. “Love is victorious because it prays”, proclaimed the Holy Father in his reflections on the story of Tobias and Sarah. Noting that on the night after their wedding, Tobias invites Sarah, whom he calls “my sister” to “pray that the Lord may have mercy upon us” (Tob 8:4). “I am not taking this sister of mine because of lust, but with sincerity. Grant that I may find mercy and may grow old together with her” (Tob 8:7). For Tobias, Sarah was of course his bride, but he was first a brother and one might say vice-versa. They prayed to recognise the spousal meaning of each other’s bodies. We know how the story ended. Tobias did not suffer death like Sarah’s previous husbands but went on to live to a ripe old age with Sarah.

May we today learn to “reread the language of the body” in the light of the full truth of the human person revealed in Christ.

Our services

- Beginning Experience (BE)
- Catholic Engaged Encounter (CEE)
- CHOICE
- Couples for Christ (CFC)
- Couple Empowerment Programme (CEP)
- Individual, Family & Marital Counselling
- Joyful Parenting (JP)
- Life Sparks
- Marriage Encounter (ME)
- Marriage Preparation Course (MPC)
- Natural Family Planning (NFP)
- Retrouvaille
- Pregnancy Crisis Service (PCS)
- School Family Education (SFE)
- The Celebration of Life Programme (COL)



Family Life Society
 Catholic Archdiocesan Education Centre
 Tel: 6488 0278 • www.familylife.sg
 If you have a personal story to share on family matters or values, email to susie@familylife.sg

Theology of the Body for Teens – Sex is in the Master’s Plan

Date : Friday, 10 September 2010
 Time : 9.00am – 4.30pm
 Venue : Church of the Holy Spirit (248 Upper Thomson Road)

When your teens start asking about sexuality and love, someone **will** answer. Be sure your teens find the truth by guiding them to the beauty of God’s plan for relationships and sex.

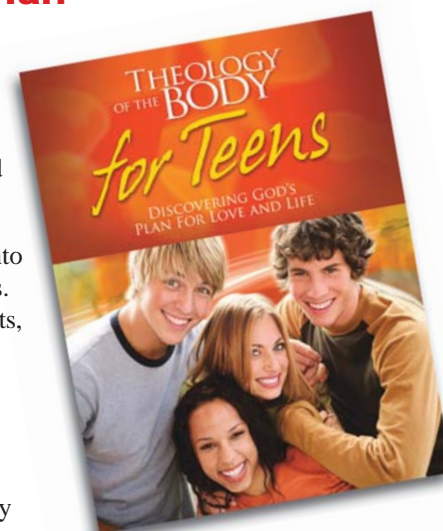
Family Life Society invites parents (also with teenage children having their confirmation), to delve into Pope John Paul II’s revolutionary and powerful “Theology of the Body” especially adapted for teens. **Brian Butler**, co-author of the popular “Theology of the Body for Teens” programme, will share insights, stories, and effective strategies for helping teens experience God’s purpose and design for sexuality.

Theology of the Body for Teens – Training Workshop

For our youth leaders, educators and catechists, Brian Butler will be conducting an exclusive one-day training workshop on

Date : Saturday, 11 September 2010
 Time : 9.00am – 6.00pm
 Venue : Catholic Archdiocesan Education Centre (2 Highland Road)

It will be on how to present God’s plan for love and life through “Theology of the Body for Teens (TOB)” programme. The TOB message is reaching hearts and changing lives all over the world. Come and help bring this message to our teens as they journey through this sometimes difficult stage of their lives.



Sign up today at
www.familylife.sg