



Dear Friends of the Theology of the Body Institute:

I'd like to share with you the full text of TOBI Faculty Member Christopher West's commentary on this past summer's healthy discussion of the Theology of the Body.

As we approach the end of 2009, we are encouraged by how much attention this rich teaching from Pope John Paul II has received. We are excited for 2010 and for the new programs and opportunities we will offer as we work to fulfill our particular mission in the New Evangelization and bring this important work to the whole world.

May God richly bless you,

**David Savage
Chairman of the Board
The Theology of the Body Institute**

The Theology of the Body Debate: The Pivotal Question By Christopher West

When the public conversation about my work unfolded following my appearance on Nightline last May, I did not think it was wise for me to respond until I had submitted the matter to my local bishops. Now that Cardinal Justin Rigali and Bishop Kevin Rhoades have issued a statement, it seems appropriate for me to offer some reflections as well.

First, I want to thank the many men and women - former students, married couples, catechists, theologians, seminarians, priests, deacons, religious, and bishops - who contacted me to offer their encouragement during this time. Your prayers and support were a tremendous gift to me. I would also like to thank those scholars and teachers of the faith who wrote in support of me, especially Janet Smith, Michael Waldstein, Michael Healy, Father Thomas Loya, Matthew Pinto, and, of course, Cardinal Rigali and Bishop Rhoades. Your willingness to speak out on my behalf remains a profound consolation.

Second, I want to thank those of you who offered thoughtful critiques of my work and helpful suggestions on how to improve it. I have taken them to heart. Indeed, I have always weighed my critics' observations carefully and prayerfully. They have helped me refine my approach a great deal over the years and I remain very grateful for that.

That said, much of the criticism that appeared after the Nightline interview significantly misrepresented what I teach. Rumors were repeated so often that subsequent commentators simply treated dubious accusations as fact. Although I do not intend to respond point by point to the various criticisms, it seems I would be remiss as a teacher of the Theology of the Body (TOB) not to reflect briefly on what seems to be the pivotal point of the conversation. It is "pivotal" in the sense that people's perspective on this point pivots them in very different directions when evaluating my work. This point is also critical in as much as it leads us to what I, and many others, consider to be "the pearl" of John Paul II's TOB.

I offer these reflections in a spirit of humility and love for all those involved, not in an effort to "defend" myself. I am well aware that those looking for flaws in me will always be able to find them. I, like every interpreter of the Pope's thought, bring my own personal perspectives, gifts, and shortcomings to the table. That's why I remind my readers and students often to "test everything; hold fast to what is good" (1 Thess 5:21). The same applies to what follows.

Of Which Man Are We Speaking?

The pivotal question as I see it is this: What does the grace of redemption offer us in this life with regard to our disordered sexual tendencies? From there, the questions multiply: Is it possible to overcome the pull of lust within us? If not, what are we to do with our disordered desires? If so, to what degree can we be liberated from lust and how can we enter into this grace? Furthermore, what does it actually look like to live a life of ever deepening sexual redemption?

It is abundantly clear from both Catholic teaching and human experience that, so long as we are on earth, we will always have to battle with concupiscence - that disordering of our passions caused by original sin (see Catechism of the Catholic Church 405, 978, 1264, 1426). In some of my earliest lectures and tapes, I confess that I did not emphasize this important point clearly enough. The battle with concupiscence is fierce. Even the holiest saints can still recognize the pull of concupiscence within them. Yet, as John Paul II insisted, we "cannot stop at casting the 'heart' into a state of continual and irreversible suspicion due to the manifestations of the concupiscence of the flesh... Redemption is a truth, a reality, in the name of which man must feel himself called, and 'called with effectiveness'" (TOB 46:4).

Many people seem to doubt this "effectiveness" and thus conclude that the freedom I hold out is beyond the realm of man's possibilities. From one perspective, these critics are correct. "But what are the 'concrete possibilities of man'?" John Paul II asks. "And of which man are we speaking? Of man dominated by lust or of man redeemed by Christ" (Veritatis Splendor 103)? For those dominated by lust, what I hold out is impossible. But those who enter the "effectiveness" of redemption discover "another vision of man's possibilities" (TOB 46:6).

The Cry of the New Evangelization

I humbly invite all those who question what I teach about liberation from concupiscence to take a closer look at the teaching of John Paul II on the matter (see especially TOB 43:6, 45:3, 46:4, 46:6, 47:5, 48:1, 48:4, 49:4, 49:6, 58:7, 86:6-7, 101:3-5, 107:1-3, 128:3, 129:5). It is a point of utmost importance. Indeed, in a very real way, debates about what we are capable of in the battle with concupiscence take us to the crux of the Gospel itself. "This is what is at stake," John Paul II maintained, "the reality of Christ's redemption. Christ has redeemed us! This means he has given us the possibility of realizing the entire truth of our being; he has set our freedom free from the domination of concupiscence" (Veritatis Splendor 103).

Oh, what a powerful proclamation! If we listen carefully to it, it seems we can almost sense John Paul II's participation in the potency with which Christ proclaimed the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, ... to comfort all who mourn, ... to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of despair" (Isaiah 61: 1-3; see also Lk 4:18-19). John Paul II, it seems, was precisely the herald "anointed by the Lord" to bring the good news of liberation to our sexually enslaved world. Let all who are thirsty come - come and drink the water of life (see Rev 22:17).

What is the alternative to an effective sexual redemption? If man remains bound by his lusts, is he even capable of loving with a pure heart? Marriage, in this view, comes to be seen and lived as a "legitimate outlet" for indulging our disordered desires and the celibate life comes to be seen and lived as a life of hopeless repression. And we end up "holding the form of religion" while "denying the power of it" (2 Tim 3:5). "Ne evacuetur Crux!" - John Paul II exclaims, "Do not empty the Cross of its power!" (see 1 Cor 1:17). "This," he said, "is the cry of the new evangelization." For "if the cross of Christ is emptied of its power, man no longer has roots, he no longer has prospects: he is destroyed" (Orientale Lumen 3).

Mature Purity

The teaching of John Paul II is clear: liberation from concupiscence - or, more precisely, from the domination of concupiscence (John Paul II used both expressions) - is not only a possibility, it is a necessity if we are to live our lives "in the truth" and experience the divine plan for human love (see TOB 43:6, 47:5). Indeed, Christian sexual ethos "is always linked . . . with the liberation of the heart from concupiscence" (TOB 43:6). And this liberation is just as essential for consecrated celibates and single people as it is for married couples (see TOB 77:4).

It is precisely this liberation that allows us to discover what John Paul II called "mature purity." In mature purity "man enjoys the fruits of victory over concupiscence" (TOB 58:7). This victory is gradual and certainly remains fragile here on earth, but it is nonetheless real. For those graced with its fruits, a whole new world opens up - another way of seeing, thinking, living, talking, loving, praying. But to those who cannot imagine freedom from concupiscence, such a way of seeing, living, talking, loving, and praying not only seems unusual - but improper, imprudent, dangerous, or even perverse.

Why, we should ask ourselves, does such a cloud of negativity and suspicion seem to hover over the realm of sexuality? The distortions of sin are, of course, very real. But through the grace of redemption, can our sexuality not become in our practical, lived experience the realm of the sacramental and the holy? Can it not become the realm of a truly sacred conversation? "To the pure all things are pure," St. Paul said (Titus 1:15). But to those bound by lust, even the pure seems impure. Oh, how tragic when we label as ugly that which is beautiful!

Some people say the redemption of the body is something reserved only for the resurrection at the end of time. While it is certainly true that the fullness of our redemption awaits us only in the final resurrection, John Paul II insists that the "'redemption of the body' ...expresses itself not only in the resurrection as victory over death. It is present also in the words of Christ addressed to 'historical' man ... [when] Christ invites us to overcome concupiscence, even in the exclusively inner movements of the human heart" (TOB 86:6).

And here we enter the tension of what theologians call the "already - but not yet" of redemption. The not yet aspect means we must be cognizant of the many distortions of our fallen nature and the ease with which we can be lured into temptations. The already aspect means there is also a power at work within us which is able to do "far more than we ever think or imagine," as St. Paul said (see Eph 3:20). Both truths must be held together.

When it comes to questions of sexuality, it seems that many teachers and spiritual advisors focus almost exclusively on the not yet. We can hear so much about the "dangers" of sexuality that we conclude there is no escape from the ever present risk of sin. John Paul II is very critical of this kind of "determinism in the sexual sphere," as he called it in a pre-papal essay. Such determinism tends "to limit the possibility of virtue and magnify the 'necessity of sin' in this sphere." John Paul II's approach, however, entails "the opposite tendency," as he himself wrote. It upholds "the possibility of virtue, based on self-control and sublimation [which means to raise up, make sublime]" ("The Problem of Catholic Sexual Ethics," Person and Community, p. 286).

The Journey of the Interior Life

Virtue, however, in the full Christian sense of the term, is only possible as we journey through the "purgative" way of the interior life and into what the mystical tradition calls the "illuminative" and "unitive" ways. It is here, in these further stages of the journey, that we discover "mature purity." In the purgative stage, purity basically means "avoiding the occasion of sin" by "gaining custody of the eyes." This is a very important step on the journey. But it is an essentially "negative" step, John Paul II says, in as much as it involves learning how to say no to lustful passions and learning how to abstain from unchastity. John Paul II, in keeping with the authentic tradition of the Church, teaches that there is much more to the virtue of purity than this.

In the language of St. Thomas Aquinas, a person who can successfully restrain himself from sin is "continent" but not yet virtuous. Continence falls short of virtue since virtue presupposes a right desire, and this is lacking in the continent person (see Summa, Prima Secundae, q. 58, a. 3, ad 2). As the Catechism observes, "The perfection of the moral good consists in man's being moved to the good not only by his will but also by his 'heart'" and even "by his sensitive appetite" (CCC 1770, 1775). Human virtues do not suppress or tyrannize our passions. They "order our passions... They make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life" (CCC 1804).

"The task of purity," as John Paul II observed, "is not only (and not so much) abstaining from 'unchastity' and from ... 'lustful passions'." In the illuminative and unitive stages of the journey, we discover "another function of the virtue of purity... another dimension - one could say - that is more positive than negative" (TOB 54:3). In this "positive" dimension, we come to experience "a singular ability to perceive, love, and realize those meanings of the 'language of the body' that remain completely unknown to concupiscence itself" (TOB 128:3). We "come to an ever greater awareness of the gratuitous beauty of the human body, of masculinity and femininity" in such a way, John Paul II wrote, that other people "not only regain their true light ... but, so to speak, they lead us to God himself" (Memory and Identity, p. 30).

This is "the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom 8:21) to which Christ invites us all. Admittedly, it is a very different vision than that with which many Catholics are familiar. Perhaps it's simply that "unfamiliarity" that causes some to doubt its authenticity. For those who have been formed to think primarily in terms of the "dangers" of sexuality and the "constant risk of sin," I invite you to meditate prayerfully on the following hope-filled words of John Paul II. Of course, they refer not only to the sexual sphere, but are certainly inclusive of that sphere, as he indicates.

With the passage of time, if we persevere in following Christ our Teacher, we feel less and less burdened by the struggle against sin, and we enjoy more and more the divine light which pervades all creation. This is most important, because it allows us to escape from a situation of constant inner exposure to the risk of sin - even though, on this earth, the risk always remains present to some degree - so as to move with ever greater freedom within the whole created world. This same freedom and simplicity characterizes our relations with other human beings, including those of the opposite sex... Christ, supreme Teacher of the spiritual life, together with all those who have been formed in his school, teaches that even in this life we can enter onto the path of union with God... [This union allows us to] find God in everything, we can commune with him in and through all things. Created things cease to be a danger for us as once they were, particularly while we were still at the purgative stage of our journey. (Memory and Identity, pp. 29-30)

In Conclusion

One of the most common responses I receive when I present this beautifully challenging and hopeful vision of human life and sexuality is this: I've been a Catholic my whole life - why haven't I ever heard this!? The truth of the matter is that it is rarely taught, a fact that only underscores the urgency of sharing this vision with the world. But we cannot give what we do not have. As Pope Paul VI said in his apostolic exhortation on evangelization, "The Church is an evangelizer, but she begins by being evangelized herself" (Evangelii Nuntiandi 15).

The fundamental message of the TOB is nothing new. In essence, it's what the saints and mystics have been telling us for centuries about the "great mystery" of Christ's infinite love for his Bride, the Church. Yet John Paul II has penetrated that same Mystery with new clarity, new insight, new depth - giving us a new language with which to reach the modern world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Still, relatively few in the Church know enough about John Paul II's "new language" to employ it in their efforts to communicate the faith. It is my hope that the Nightline interview and the spirited debate it triggered will spur us all on as Catholics to study the TOB more intently, "receive" its contents more deeply, and share its liberating message more effectively.

I encourage those who find John Paul II's text difficult to turn to those teachers and authors whose approach you find most helpful in making it accessible. There are so many fine books and resources now available on the TOB, all with valuable contributions to make. I certainly do not claim to be the definitive voice on the subject. Thank God that there are different people and organizations doing this important work! For the approach of others will reach people I never will, just as my approach will reach people theirs never will. What is important is that we make a concerted effort to reach people. The world is starved for the banquet presented in our late Pope's teaching. Woe to us if we do not take it up, make it our own, and share it with the world. Mary, star of the New Evangelization, pray for us!