

*The experience of Original Innocence*1. What is Man?

“Lord, what is man that you keep him in mind? or the son of man that you take him into account?” (Psalm 8). What is Man?

The first task that the Theology of the Body undertakes is to try and answer this question, What is Man, to reawaken in us a clear perception of who we are, what it means to be a human being. Human nature has been so wounded and damaged by the hurts inflicted upon us, and let's face it by our own sinfulness, that it's difficult to see with any clarity, maybe even impossible to see with any clarity, who we really are. So we live day in and day out with this diminished and distorted view of what it means to be a human being. And this matters because it affects the way we act. If you think you are an angel you will act like an angel. If you think you are a mere animal you will act like a mere animal. That is why it's important for us to look beneath the sinfulness and woundedness of our humanity to the deep and true centre of who we really are. Cf Eustace in C.S. Lewis *The Dawn Treader* – the beautiful and innocent creature he discovers himself to be under the dragon layers.

So in the Theology of the Body John Paul II invites us to leave behind for a while the messiness and complexity of where we've got to, and to go back to the beginning; to peel back for a brief moment the layers of original sin in our world to see what it is really supposed to be like. To peel back for a brief moment the layers of original sin in our own hearts so that we can see clearly what we really are and who we really are. Our world, our society, gives a very distorted message about what it means to be a human being. We desperately need to rediscover the truth.

For this reason, John Paul takes us back to the beginning, to the opening chapters of Genesis, to rediscover what Man was in the “original situation”. This is something Jesus himself did when he wanted to reveal to his listeners the true nature of humanity. (Matthew 19). I've already mentioned Original Sin twice, and that's already twice too many. The Church has been very good at teaching us about Original Sin and this gives a very lopsided view of what it means to be Man. John Paul redresses the balance. There's something else much more important, he says, and it's called Original Innocence. This is much more key to understanding who we are. In fact, he says, there are three original experiences that are much more fundamental to the true nature of humanity: Original Innocence, Original Solitude and Original Nakedness.

2. Original Innocence

We need to make a distinction between the history of Man (this might include for example the whole unfolding of human evolution), and what John Paul calls our “theological pre-history”, as in the opening chapters of Genesis: the Garden of Eden and man's Original Innocence. Although we don't fully understand the connection between these two (how we got from one to the other), he says that there is this

essential continuity between the two states: He says, ‘the historical state [of man] plunges its roots, in every man without exception, in his own theological “prehistory”, the state of original innocence’. In fact he makes it clear throughout the Theology of the Body that our rootedness in Original Innocence is more fundamental to who we are than the inheritance of Original Sin. This is good news.

3. The Experience of Original Solitude

God brought all the animals to the man he had created and gave him the task of naming them. This was not just to give him something to do in the Garden of Eden, something to while away the hours. It was to be an important lesson to Man. In working through this task of naming the animals he learned something about himself. He experienced that he was in some essential way different from all the other animals. You might say he suddenly felt alone in the world. Cf. *Where the Wild Things Are*. (Maurice Sendak) I’ve no idea whether John Paul ever read *Where the Wild Things Are*, but we do know that he read the Bible, and Genesis in particular. This experience of being in some essential way different from the other animals is what John Paul calls the experience of “Original Solitude”. What was this experience of Original Solitude like? What did it feel like? Well, two things, says John Paul.

a. Original Solitude Positive

Firstly he realizes that there is in himself a certain depth that the other animals don’t have. This is because of the different way he has been created. Genesis 2:7. Having fashioned man from the dust of the earth “The Lord...breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being.” This really is an awesome truth about Man and how he was created. What does it mean? That man needed some kind of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to get him going? Of course not. All the animals including Man had a fully operative respiratory system. It’s not talking about this. We’re dealing here with something altogether different. Whenever the Bible talks about the Breath of God it’s referring to the Holy Spirit. (The divine breath that hovered over the waters at the beginning of creation; the wind that is breathed into the dry bones of Israel in that prophetic vision of Ezekiel; the Day of Pentecost and the wind that rocks the whole house before being infused into the Apostles). All the other animals were just animals. But Man? God breathed into him the Breath of Life. God breathed into him his Holy Spirit.

How did Original Man know this? How did he see that he was different from the other animals? How did he see that he was in fact not just a body, but a body filled with the Holy Spirit? It appears from the Genesis account that he came to this realization in the task of naming the animals. He looked at them, and he looked at himself, and he knew that he was different. Original Man had a clarity and fullness of vision that is no longer accessible or even imaginable to fallen man. He was able, says John Paul, to read the meaning of his body. His perception didn’t get stuck on the visible surface of the body like ours does. Instead his sight penetrated the visible body to the depth of the person. His sight penetrated the visible body to the depth at which the Spirit was the living power guiding and governing him at the core of his being. (TOB 5-7)

Original Solitude Negative

What else was the experience of Original Solitude like? Well, there is another side to Original Solitude, and it's the sense of incompleteness. In the naming of the animals Original Man realises that there is not one among them to which he can make a gift of himself. What's this about? One essential quality that Man is created with right from the beginning is a yearning to give himself to another of his own kind. In fact he experiences himself as incomplete until he has made a sincere gift of himself. This is not just in the Theology of the Body. It has been a constant teaching of Christian dogma. Cf. *Gaudium et Spes* (GS 24). Man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself. Man cannot fully find himself except by giving himself away. He can only find the fulfilment of his being through the giving of himself to one like himself, and this means to another person. This has already taken place on a purely spiritual level in his relationship with God. With the Spirit of God dwelling in man he enjoyed a unique covenant with his Creator, a relationship of persons. To this extent he has already lived as a self-gift to his Creator. But man is also a body. He is (to use Christopher West's expression) a "body-person". His fulfilment can only be complete in the giving of himself bodily to another body-person. When God brings the animals to him to see what he will call them, Original Man sees that none of these is what he's really looking for. There is not one among them to whom he can make a gift of himself. "No helpmate suitable for man was found for him." (Gen 2:20), not one that could help him to become complete. His body does not make him see himself as the same as the animals, but as "alone". (TOB 6).

So there is in the experience of Original Solitude a positive component and a negative one. He experiences himself as a body-person, unique in the world. He also experiences himself as incomplete. "No helpmate suitable for man was found for him."

4. The Experience of Original Unity

So God creates woman and brings her to the first man. And the man exclaims "This at last is flesh of my flesh." (Gen 2:23). As if to say, "Ah, another person", i.e. another one similar to God. He has already read the person-meaning in his own body. Now he reads the person-meaning in the body of this other. Here is one at last who is like unto himself, one to whom, if he chooses, he can make of himself a total self-gift. And she likewise has the freedom to respond to this self gift, to make a reciprocal gift of herself to him. Man's free choice to give himself to woman in the context of Original Innocence – a gift that is without any shadow of self centred motive, a gift that is total, a gift that includes every level of his maleness to every level of her femaleness and vice versa – this is the experience of Original Unity.

John Paul uses the expression "double solitude" and it's not initially clear whether "double" refers here to male and female or to the two aspects of Original Solitude described above, what I've called positive and negative. In fact I think it's the latter. The negative component of Original Solitude, the experience of incompleteness, and the positive component, that he is a person, together lead to finding fulfilment only in the gift of himself to another person, and in particular to another body-person if he is to be fulfilled as a body-person. (TOB 9)

The man and the woman, in choosing to make a total gift of themselves to each other, form a *communio personarum*, a communion of persons. This, says John Paul, is an important sense in which Man is made in the image and likeness of God, not only through his humanity, but also through the communion of persons. Just as Father, Son and Spirit constitute a communion of persons in the eternal depths of the Trinity, so also man and woman may choose to form a communion of persons in their mutual self-gift. And notice that right from the beginning the blessing of fertility descended upon our first parents, thus perfectly imaging the threeness of personhood in the Trinity.

Unity is not only on the surface level of sexuality but in the fullness and depth proper to this unity. (Lapidary formulation).

The experience of Original Solitude is not “cancelled” by the subsequent experience of unity between the first man and the first woman. It remains at the core of his being and at the core of every man. It is an experience more fundamental to his being than the experience of original unity. (TOB 8).

These original experiences are fundamental to understanding what it means to be a human being, fundamental to the question “What is Man?” We can give a scientific answer to this question in terms of his biological and psychological constitution. We can give a historical answer in terms of man’s evolutionary history. We can even give a theological answer (based, for example, on Genesis 1) that is purely objective. But in order to give the full answer to the question “What is man?” we need also to give an account of his subjective experiences – the experience of Original Innocence, the experience of Original Solitude, and the experience of Original Unity. This recognition of the subjective experiences of man is John Paul’s great contribution to the understanding of what it means to be a human being. It’s only by giving an account of his original subjective experiences that we can arrive at what he calls an “adequate anthropology” (TOB 23).

5. A world full of meaning

I’m coming on to the experience of Original Nakedness, but before this you may have noticed that we’ve begun to talk about *meaning* and the *meaning* of the human body – e.g. the “person-meaning” of the body, the *communio* meaning of the body.

This is probably quite a new idea to most of us, that the body is not just a thing, but that it has a meaning. So we need to take a moment over this. The realisation that things can have a meaning as well as a use is not entirely foreign to us. The inspired authors of the Sacred Scriptures were aware that the whole of the created order carried meaning.

*The heavens proclaim the glory of God
and the firmament shows forth the work of his hands.
Day unto day takes up the story
and night unto night makes known the message.
(from Psalm 18 (19))*

Yes, the sun, the moon and the stars, the alternation of darkness and light, the earth and the sky, these all carry a message. They are there not just to serve a purpose but also to convey a meaning. They speak to us of the mysteries of God. In fact the whole created order is packed with meaning. Through the whole created order, and through each new marvel that springs from his creating hand, God is speaking to us, teaching us something about himself and about our relationship with him. Jesus himself constantly pointed to the created world and taught us to understand the meaning of what we saw: Look at the birds in the sky; Look at the flowers in the field; Look at the seed sown in the ground and the harvest, the vine and its branches, the sheep and the shepherd. The visible world is abounding with meaning. Why? Because the Creator has made it that way. He has charged it with meaning. He is not just creating things. With these created things He is speaking to us about hidden mysteries. He's talking to us about himself.

But there is one marvel of creation that surpasses all others for the depth and richness of its meaning: the human body. After he had created the heavens and the earth, the water and the dry land, the seed bearing plants carrying seeds of their own kind, the animals of the sea and the animals of the land, God seems to pause for reflection, "as if he entered back into himself to make a decision" (TOB 2).

*Let us make man in our own image,
according to our likeness... (Gen 1:26)*

The result is the most profound of all his works of creation.

*So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them. (Gen 1:27)*

The human body carries a meaning. In its maleness and femaleness it carries a meaning. Through all the daily interactions of male and female in marriage, at every level of intimacy and in the consummation of their union, the human body carries a meaning. Through the marvel of the human body God speaks. In the union between human male and human female we're dealing with something intensely private and intimate, yet at the same time something held up by God as a message. What is God saying to us through the human body? The Theology of the Body is the answer to this question.

To men and women today the idea that the body has a meaning is almost completely lost. It has no place in their consciousness. The most beautiful interactions between husband and wife, the most loving consummation of their union, can take place without either of them being remotely aware that they are caught up in a larger picture, that with their bodies, unbeknown to them, they are speaking divine language with a very specific meaning: that God is speaking through them.

Were we always oblivious to the meaning of our bodies? No. It was not always so. It was not like this in the beginning. If we are not used to thinking of our bodies as having a meaning it's because we have lost something. We have lost full consciousness, and we lost it way back at the beginning – an innocence, a fullness of perception, a clarity of vision, a complete consciousness of who we are as human beings, a complete consciousness of what we are doing, and a complete consciousness

of the meaning of what we are doing. We lost this. Well, the Theology of the Body is here to reawaken in us the full meaning of the human body.

6. The Spousal Meaning of the Body

This brings us to the central idea in the Theology of the Body, what John Paul calls the “spousal meaning” of the body. The human body carries in its form a “spousal meaning”. Original Man was able to look at his body and to read there the intention of the Creator, that Man is created for self-gift, that Man is created to find his fulfilment in the total gift of self as a body-person. This is made possible (for example) in the total and lifelong commitment of marriage. In the woman he saw there too a body-person like unto himself and yet complementary. With the same clarity of vision he was able to read in the meaning of their bodies the perfect complementarity between them. (Total self gift as a body-person also finds fulfilment in the celibate life for those who are called to it as we shall see in part D. Contenance for the Kingdom.)

Fallen man is not able to read this meaning in the body with clarity, but only partially and dimly. Fallen man is dependent on authority to know the intention of the Creator. Original man was by contrast able to see immediately in the experience of his own human body the full meaning that God intended. Original Man was able to see immediately that this reciprocal self-gift was to be total – for life and at every level of their maleness and femaleness: his strength and tenderness, the wildness of his heart and zeal for a shared adventure in the paradise that God had created for them in the Garden of Eden, his gentleness and care for her; her vulnerability and openness, her welcome and affirmation, her captivating beauty in all the depth of her body and personhood, and her thrill in being led through the same adventure in the Garden of Eden.

At a deeper level, Man was able to see with the same clarity and fullness of vision that this reciprocal self-gift was at the same time God’s gift, that behind their (subjective) choice of reciprocal self-giving was the (objective) giving of the Creator, that behind the self-giving of each to each other was the giving hand of God. (TOB 18). Or to put it another way, God gives the man and the woman to each other. Their choice to give themselves to each other is simply their cooperation with the will of God. Remember that Original Man is imbued with the Breath of Life, the governance of the Holy Spirit in the core of his being, so that his free choice and God’s will are in total accord. They are one.

The human body has “gift” and “self-giving” written all over it, or rather through and through, if only we had eyes to see, in the inner depths of maleness and femaleness. This is what John Paul calls the “inner dimension of the gift” (TOB 19). Male and female made for each other, male and female created to give themselves totally to one another in conjugal union, and God’s giving hand behind this mutual self-giving: All this is contained in the spousal meaning of the body and read with the same clarity of perception with which original man was blessed. As we go deeper into the Theology of the Body the concept of spousal meaning that John Paul attributes to the human body continues to accumulate an ever greater depth of content.

7. The experience of original nakedness

We come now to another original experience, the experience of Original Nakedness. These experiences are called “original” not because of their distance in time but because they have what John Paul calls “foundational significance”. (TOB 11) They lie at the root of every human experience. Every man since the fall is rooted in the original situation described in Genesis. These original experiences are still there at core level in every human being. As said before, ‘the historical state [of man] plunges its roots, in every man without exception, in his own theological “prehistory”, the state of original innocence’. (TOB 4). These original experiences reveal what Man is in his “originality”. They are the answer to the question “What is Man?”

And this includes the experience of Original Nakedness. For fallen Man it is virtually impossible to look upon the naked human body and not, to some degree, fixate or focus on the nakedness itself, to experience nakedness in isolation from the wholeness of the integral person. We look at the naked human body and what do we see? What do we first notice? Nakedness. This was not so for Original Man. For Original Man the nakedness of the human body was not something that they saw, so much as something that they saw through. It was a window onto the depth beneath. The human body in its nakedness was like a window onto the human person, the full depth of the human person. What Original Man saw in the nakedness of the human body *was* the human person in his or her fullness.

*“The man and his wife were both naked
and they did not feel shame” (Genesis 2:25)*

This absence of shame does not indicate a lack of something, but a particular fullness of consciousness and experience, a particular fullness of mutual knowledge, the fullness of understanding, the full apprehending of the meaning of the human body. This is one of the original experiences of Original Man. It cannot be recreated. It is not the same as the experience of nakedness promoted by so called “naturalists”. In that context “nakedness” is like a going concern. The experience of nakedness begins with the nakedness focussed on as an isolated attribute detached from the person. It presumably progresses to a dulling of the awareness as the novelty wears off and the men and women “get used to” seeing each other naked. For original man there was no question of “getting used to” seeing each other naked. Astonishment at the beauty of the human body would be a constant and undiminishing experience, beautiful because it was a window onto the person, beautiful because it revealed to the eyes of Original Man the full depth of the person. For Original Man nakedness would infallibly convey the meaning of the body in all its fullness – the personhood of the body, the image and likeness of God, the possibility of reciprocal self-gift at every level of their maleness and femaleness in conjugal union.

If all this sounds a bit dry and theological let me just say that John Paul draws attention to the wonderful freedom that Original Man enjoyed in living out this mutual self-giving. As fallen men and women we can easily imagine that freedom means the freedom to live according to our instincts and physical urges without moral constraint, or worse the freedom to get what we want selfishly without any cost. John Paul says this is not freedom. Freedom means to live and act according to who we most truly are in the core of our being. Freedom means being free to live out our deepest longing, and our deepest longing is to make a total bodily gift of oneself in

conjugal union at every level of our bodily being. Animal instinct, physical urges and the consequences of the fall, like selfishness, are all in fact the constraints on our freedom. These are the constraints that prevent us from living out this deepest desire. This is what John Paul calls the “freedom of the gift”, another original experience that is now inaccessible to us. We can’t experience what this freedom was like. It was like, the desire to make of oneself a total gift was completely unconstrained throughout their conjugal lives together, completely unconstrained by the impulses of animal instinct, completely unconstrained by the slightest impulse of selfishness. Freedom means self-mastery. Their choice to give themselves to each other was a completely free choice, an act of self-determination springing from the deepest truth about who Man is. (TOB 15)

8. The Gift

We’ve talked about self-gift in conjugal union. We’ve talked about the giving hand of God that lies behind these totally free choices. But John Paul also speaks simply of “the Gift” without further qualification, just “the Gift”. There is something of enormous depth going on behind all this. At one level the gift springs from man’s subjective will, an act of free choice and self determination. At a deeper level it is the Creator himself giving the man to the woman, the Creator giving the woman to the man, God acting objectively through the subjectivity of their human free will. But at the deepest level it’s God giving Himself. God’s giving of the man to the woman and the woman to the man is God giving *himself* to them and to each individually. This is the way God gave himself to man in the original situation.

Man appears in the visible world as the highest expression of the divine gift, because he bears within himself the inner dimension of the gift.
(TOB 19).

In other words, when the man gave himself totally to the woman in conjugal union in the original situation, she experienced not just the man giving himself to her, she experienced God giving His divine self to her. When the woman made a total gift of herself to the man in response, he experienced this as not just her giving herself to him, he experienced God giving Himself to him. It is the way God chose to give himself to Man in the original situation, through the bodily self-gift of the male and female in conjugal union.

In the clarity and fullness of perception, Original Man saw all of this meaning in the human body, not only that man was made for self-gift in conjugal union, not only that behind this mutual self-giving was the giving hand of God, but that in this mutual self-giving is God’s gift of Himself to them.

9. The primordial sacrament

This is why John Paul calls the experience of Original Unity a sacrament. We think of the sacraments as coming into existence with Christ, through his death and resurrection, and that’s correct. But here is a sacrament already in the beginning. John Paul calls it the “primordial” sacrament. A sacrament is a sign of union with God that transfers into the world the reality it signifies. Conjugal union is a sign of

God's self-gift to man – a sign contained in the spousal meaning of the body; but it is also the actual realisation of God's self-gift to Man. It is the original covenant. It is the way God gives himself to Man in the original situation. This will be superseded by God's bodily self-gift to the Church in Christ when, due to the fall, the original covenant fails. But in the beginning this *was* the original covenant, this was the original way in which God gave himself to man and entered into union with him.

The body has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the "mystery hidden from eternity in God"¹, and thus to be a sign of it. (TOB 19).

I.e. to transfer into the visible world what God had willed from all eternity, namely to make a gift of Himself to Man, already in the conjugal union of man and woman and ultimately in the bodily union between Christ and his Church.

10. Knowledge and Procreation

Now the man knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying "I have produced a man with the help of the Lord." (Genesis 4:1)

At this point we stand on the threshold of human history, on the boundary between man's first situation of Original Innocence and his second situation of Original Sin. At this point we can still learn something about man's original situation, though from here on we begin to descend into the distortion and complexity of human sinfulness, and the vision of Original Innocence begins to fade.

Still we have this beautiful expression for the consummation of their conjugal union, "The man knew his wife...". Why does the biblical author use the verb "to know" for the consummation of their union? Because it's not just a surface experience of emotion or sensuality, though it will become increasingly reduced to this with the onset of sin. Although the consummation of their union took place after the fall, they still had the benefit of first perceiving one another in the state of Original Innocence with all the depth and clarity of perception that was possible in this original state. In the daily living out of their bodiliness together, and in particular through the reciprocal gift of their maleness and femaleness at every level subordinate to the act of consummation, he had read the full content of the meaning of her body, both as a woman and as this particular woman in her personal uniqueness; she had read the full content of the meaning of his body, both as a man and as this particular man in his personal uniqueness. The consummation of their union really was a coming together, a summing up, of all this depth of meaning, so intimate and so personal. The experience of original union of this particular man and this particular woman was an act that they experienced as a depth of reciprocal knowledge. The biblical author continues to use the concept of "knowledge" to describe the conjugal act (e.g. Genesis 4:17), though as humanity recedes from this state of Original Innocence with the onset of sin, the depth and intensity of reciprocal knowledge experienced in the conjugal act will become clouded and diminished.

Inserted into this experience of knowledge from this point onwards is the one-flesh union that comes about in the consummation of their union. Also inserted into this

¹ Quotation from Ephesians 3:9

experience of knowledge is the fact of procreation, and from this moment on the call to “be fruitful and multiply” (Genesis 1:28) will always be associated with and consciously fulfilled in the conjugal act. A generative meaning attaches to the spousal meaning of the body. From this moment onwards the knowledge that each experiences in the consummation of their conjugal union includes an experiential knowledge, in the very act itself, of their respective fertility and the fertility of their union.

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