



Theology of the Body for Parish Catechesis: From Womb to Tomb by Katrina J. Zeno

A couple of weeks ago as I was taking a long walk, I passed a man and woman who were roller blading. Actually the man was roller blading and the woman was roller skaing, and I thought, “Wow, that’s interesting. I haven’t seen anyone on roller skates for years.” And then it struck me that the difference between roller skates and roller blades is simply a matter of alignment. Some brilliant person took the classic components of the skate and redesigned them so that all the wheels are in a line instead of a square, thus allowing for new ways of moving and navigating that weren’t possible before.

I think we can say that the theology of the body is something like my skating example. In the theology of the body, some brilliant person, in this case Bl. John Paul II, took what has been present in the classic tradition of the Church and aligned it in a bit different way, thus giving us a new way of navigating within Catholic thought and experience, and especially within Catholic catechesis. That is why my presentation is entitled, “Theology of the Body for Parish Catechesis: From Womb to Tomb.” And to begin, I’d like to recount a true story I heard on a Christian radio program in the United States.

Several years ago, two parents had a daughter who was deaf. When she was about five years old, they had to make a difficult decision – whether to keep their daughter home or send her to a school for the deaf where she would spend the week and come home only on weekends.

Finally, they decided to send her to the school and the reason the father gave was fascinating: He said he wanted her to have a language. He realized that if she didn't have language, then she wouldn't be able to think, and if she couldn't think, then she couldn't choose, and if she couldn't choose, then she couldn't love.

After the daughter had been at the school for a number of months and was home one weekend, the father happened to walk by her room while she was sleeping. He peeked in, and he saw her lying in her bed dreaming. How did he know she was dreaming? Because in her sleep, he saw her spontaneously doing sign language, and he was ecstatic. He knew now that she had language, and because she had language, she could think, and because she could think, she could choose, and because she could choose, she could love.

Blessed John Paul II's "theology of the body" provides a new way of navigating within parish catechesis precisely because it provides a new language, a rich, sacramental language expressed through a sacramental anthropology, that can inform all of our catechesis from womb to tomb and thus be an effective tool for passing on the deposit of the faith to modern-day man immersed in a post-modern culture. Without this rich sacramental language, we can't think sacramentally. And if we can't think sacramentally, then we can't choose sacramentally; and if we can't choose sacramentally then we really can't love because human love, in its deepest essence is sacramental: it makes visible the invisible mystery hidden from eternity in God.

While I already mentioned that Blessed John Paul II's anthropology is a sacramental anthropology, it's actually quite more. It could be described as a Christocentric-Trinitarian-sacramental anthropology – and in this sense it is indeed an "adequate anthropology." *Catechesi Tredendae* ("On Catechesis in Our Time"), no. 6, underscores the Christocentric nature of all catechesis: "We must say that in catechesis it

is Christ, the Incarnate Word and Son of God, who is taught – and everything else is taught with reference to him...”

This central catechetical principle is inscribed in the very structure of the theology of the body. John Paul II’s heading for the first half of the theology of the body (Audiences 1-86) is “The Words of Christ.” And in each of the three panels that comprises this half, John Paul II begins with the words of Christ.

John Paul II briefly summarizes these three panels in Audience 64, section 1: “Next to the two other important dialogues, namely, the one in which Christ appeals to the ‘beginning’ (see Mt. 19:3-9; Mk 10:2-12) and the other in which he appeals to man’s innermost [being] (to the “heart”) while indicating the [reductive] desire and concupiscence of the flesh as a source of sin (see Mt. 5:27-32), the dialogue we propose to analyze now is, I would say, the third component of the triptych of Christ’s own statements, the triptych of words that are essential and constitutive for the theology of the body. In this dialogue, Jesus appeals to the resurrection, thereby revealing a completely new dimension of the mystery of man.”

What a marvelous and concise picture John Paul II provides of his catechetical framework, of his “alignment” of the truths of the faith! His catechetical triptych addresses life before original sin, life after original sin, and life in its eternal, glorified state. This salvation-history structure provides an extensive, catechetical goldmine for RCIA and adult faith formation as well as for grade school and high school programs, all with reference to Christ.

From this Christocentric viewpoint, we could easily assume that the work of teaching the faith, whether through parish religious education programs, parenting, or preaching, is simply to proclaim Jesus Christ, to reiterate, as John Paul II did so

frequently, *Gaudium et spes* 22: “Jesus Christ...fully reveals man to himself and makes his supreme calling clear.”

And yet, if we stopped there in our catechetical labors, our work would be incomplete. In our parish catechesis, the Catholic of the new millennium can awaken and deepen his or her knowledge and understanding of the Catholic faith through a salvation-history approach, but eventually he or she must go further – and this is where the theology of the body is indispensable, especially as it pertains to four central aspects of the faith: the Trinity, gift, the body, and sacramentality. We could think of these as the four wheels of the skate, realigned in a more linear manner.

The first, and therefore most visible “wheel,” is the Trinity. Clearly, Jesus’ mission is always to lead us to the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit. While we are indeed Christians, we must also be good Trinitarians. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in paragraph 234 declares: “The mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith and life. It is the mystery of God himself. It is therefore the source of all the other mysteries of faith, the light that enlightens them.”

Catechesis Tredendae, no 5, echoes this same idea: “...the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only he can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity.”

This, then, is precisely John Paul II’s approach in the theology of the body – to present not just a Christocentric anthropology, but a Christocentric-Trinitarian anthropology. And this is why our catechetical language is so important: If we don’t have the Trinitarian language of God then we can’t think in a Trinitarian manner, and we can’t choose in a Trinitarian manner, and we can’t love in a Trinitarian manner.

I never cease to be amazed how, when I ask people to close their eyes and imagine God in their minds, the most frequent image they see is an old man with a long white beard. If “the mystery of the Most Holy Trinity is the central mystery of the Christian faith and life” and we are made in God’s image and likeness (cf. Genesis 1:27), then who we understand God to be determines everything we understand about the human person. Therefore, one of the most critical tasks of catechesis, and therefore of the theology of the body, is to help people from a very young age to have a proper, dynamic, and even intimate image of a *Trinitarian* God.

I think this, perhaps, is one of the greatest contributions of the theology of the body to catechetics – John Paul II’s repeated reference to God as a Trinitarian communion of persons. To make this Trinitarian mystery even more concrete in people’s minds, I like to describe God in the following way: To say that God is Trinity means the Father pours himself out total gift to the Son and the Son pours himself out in total gift to the Father and the Holy Spirit bursts forth as the fruit of their total, self-giving love.

I find this language provides a tangible image that people can relate to – they can imagine the Father and Son totally pouring themselves out in gift to each other and the Holy Spirit bursting forth as the fruit of their total, self-giving love (or, in more formal language, the Holy Spirit as the bond of Love between the Father and Son).

In composing this description of the inner life of the Trinity, I drew from John Paul II’s other favorite quote from *Gaudium et spes*, GS 24:3 (“Man...cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself”) and made it the centerpiece of my (*albeit* limited) definition of God. As many of us are aware, GS 24:3 is John Paul II’s basic hardware for what he calls the “hermeneutic of the gift,” which is the second wheel in our realigned skate.

While the hermeneutic of the gift is a very scholarly and complicated sounding term, it can be broken down into a very simple visual image: You are a gift! Each person images God, reflects the inner life of the Trinity on earth, by being a gift to God and to others. John Paul II makes this gift character of the body explicit in his apostolic letter, *Mulieris Dignitatum*, no. 7, where he wrote: “To say that man is created in the image and likeness of God means that man is called to exist ‘for’ others, to become a gift.”

To convey this idea to both young and old audiences, I often use the photo image of a majestic, snow-covered mountain whose reflection is evident in the lake at its base. I will cover the mountains and ask: “Can you still see the mountains?” The answer, of course, is yes – in the reflection. Analogously, the same is true of God and our bodies. We can’t see God directly, but we can “see” him through each other, through our bodies. God gave us a body so that we can reflect him by being a gift.

Is it possible, or even desirable, to teach our children about human sexuality, about being made in God’s image and likeness as male and female, from a very young age? Could there be such a thing as the theology of the body for toddlers? Absolutely. The key word is gift: You are a gift. Your body is a gift. God makes a gift of himself to us. We make a gift of ourselves to God and others. You reflect God’s image and likeness in the world by being a gift.

Providentially, children can grasp this idea of making a gift of self from an early age. A woman who listened to my CD series on chastity formation from toddlers to teens, in which I encourage parents to inundate their children with the language of gift, told me a story about how her husband announced to the family that he was going to take them to Taco Bell for dinner and their daughter, about age 4, said, “Can’t Daddy make a gift of self and take us to McDonald’s?” If we have the language of gift then we can think of being a gift, and we can choose to be a gift, and we can love in imitation of Trinitarian,

self-giving love. This is the beauty of the hermeneutic of the gift no matter what our age or state in life.

John Paul II's adequate anthropology, however, is not only solidly Trinitarian emphasizing the gift, it also accentuates the body as central to the Catholic faith. This is our third wheel, one that has been fairly easy to gloss over or even consider as unimportant until John Paul II's theology of the *body*.

One of my favorite statements to emphasize when speaking about eschatological man is: "Get used to your body because it will be with you for all eternity!" And sometimes, especially if I am speaking only to women, there are audible groans and spontaneous negative reactions to the thought of having their same body in eternity. Men, too, are often caught off-guard by this statement. One time, after I spoke to over 100 men in Louisiana, a distinguished-looking man came up to me afterwards and said to me: "Did I miss something? I went to 12 years of Catholic school and I never heard this before." He had never heard of the resurrection of *his* body.

I have to confess that I had a rather inadequate and dismissive view of my body before I steeped myself in the theology of the body and in John Paul II's sacramental language. In my pre-theology of the body thinking and language, I certainly would not have welcomed the thought of my body going to heaven with me. In fact, I was what I call a "closet Platonist." Without even realizing it, like Plato, I regarded the soul as the true nature of the human person and the body as a prison that trapped the soul. My body was regarded as an obstacle to holiness, something I couldn't wait to shed so as to finally be free!

I think many third millennium Catholics are "closet Platonists" without even realizing it, influenced by the many heresies and dualisms that have emerged over the years that denigrate the body and exalt the soul (such as Manichaeism and Jansenism), or

that split the rational part of the human person from his bodily existence (a la Rene Descartes). John Paul II's section on eschatological man can serve as a wake-up call, a bit of a rude wake-up call at times, to invite modern, dualistic man to reconsider his eternal relationship with the body. And although this section treats our ultimate perfection, its present-day impact on catechesis can be tremendous.

For instance, the Blessed Mother's life can be a bit abstract and seemingly irrelevant to many. For some, Mary is kind of like icing on the cake: "Just give me the cake of Jesus and leave the icing of Mary aside." However, when illuminated through the theology of the body, Mary's life becomes a stunning illustration of our ultimate destiny and a powerful counterpoint to our current body-spirit dualisms.

In the apostolic constitution defining the dogma of the Assumption of Mary declared on November 1, 1950, by Pope Pius XII, he quotes St. Bonaventure who wrote the following about Mary: "...we can see that she [Mary] is there [in heaven] bodily...her blessedness would not have been complete unless she were there as a person. The soul is not a person, but the soul joined to the body, is a person. It is manifest that she is there in soul and in body. Otherwise she would not possess her complete beatitude." (no. 31)

In the Catholic Church's liturgical wisdom, August 15, the Assumption of Mary, is celebrated every year, and so every year in our home and parish catechesis we have the opportunity to not only deepen our understanding of the ultimate destiny of our own bodies, but also to realign Mary to her proper place and inspiration as icon of the Church and the exemplar of perfected human nature. The language of theology can aid us in this task.

In addition to new language about the Trinity, gift, and the body that the theology of the body provides, the fourth wheel, which anchors it all together from womb to tomb, is sacramentality.

One of the most exhilarating aspects of sacramentality is that it can be accessed from almost any point in the theology of the body – whether that is marriage, original nakedness, celibacy for the kingdom, concupiscence, eschatological man, etc.

While using John Paul II’s audiences on eschatological man may seem an odd entry point for sacramentality, similar to putting the cart before the horse, it can be a very effective place to start, especially with well-catechized groups or audiences. For instance, when addressing pro-life groups with my presentation entitled, “Heavenly Pro-Life: Our Ultimate Destiny and Why It Matters,” I begin with our heavenly destiny so as to illustrate the sacramentality of the body from an eternal perspective. My central point is this: your body has an *eternal* relationship with your soul that will be perfected in heaven not discarded.

This truth gives monumental significance to pro-life work by highlighting the eternal sacramental character of the body. Every life, and indeed every *body*, is sacred from womb to tomb – from the moment that the soul is infused into physical matter until natural death – because every person has a unique relationship with his or her bodily being, and this relationship culminates in eternity.

While the sacramental character of the body is perfected in heaven, it is first revealed in Genesis 2 where God creates ‘adam from the clay of the ground and the breath of life. From the beginning, the human person is created as a body-spirit unity, as an *embodied* person. John Paul II alludes to the sacramental character of our embodied personhood numerous times in the theology of the body. In Audience 32, section 1, he expresses it this way: “In this, its own distinctive character, the body is the expression of the spirit and is called, in the very mystery of creation, to exist in the communion of persons ‘in the image of God.’”

In fact, one could say that the human body is *doubly* sacramental: my body, which you can see, makes visible my spirit, which you can't see; and I, as an embodied person reveal God.

To integrate the sacramentality of the body into our broader catechetical work, I would like to recommend three approaches: First, refer to Mary regularly, especially her Assumption, to make the abstract concrete and to extend our understanding of the body into eternity.

Second, acknowledge the way our spiritual language sometimes minimizes or discounts the body. For instance, a common saying among English-speaking Catholics is: "Jesus came to save souls." The truth is, he didn't. Jesus came save persons, and as human persons our salvation will not be complete until body and soul are united perfectly forever in heaven.

Finally, bring out the big guns by quoting Pope Benedict XVI, who, in his first encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, wrote: "It is neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves: it is man, the person, a unified creature composed of body and soul who loves." (no. 5)

Why am I repeatedly stressing this fourth point about the sacramentality of the body? Because sacramentality is the polar opposite of post-modern, western culture. Many of us live in a culture permeated by, among other things, materialism – a system of belief that says physical matter, what we can see and measure, is the sum total of reality. And if we go back even a little further, we discover that the roots of materialism draw significant nourishment from a philosophical system called nominalism.

While nominalism may seem like an archaic phenomenon that has no tangible effect on us today, quite the opposite is true. It has caused a train wreck in western culture and, sadly, even in the Church. In brief, nominalism declared that the name of

something is arbitrary; it is simply a convenient way of labeling this or that item. The name does not express or point to any deeper reality nor does it indicate the nature of something.

This is quite serious. If I have no nature, then my existence does not have an inherent meaning or purpose. There is no end, no telos, toward which my life and my actions are ordered. All that remains is to make up the meaning and purpose of life at every moment (how exhausting and potentially wounding!) according to what each individual can acquire and benefit from, whether that be pleasure, money, power, material goods, using another person, etc. This has resulted in, among other things, the birth of “rights” language, which attempts to enshrine personal desires as absolute rights. Materialism, along with relativism and radical individualism, are the logical outcomes of nominalism, of dispensing with nature.

John Paul II’s explicit emphasis on the sacramentality of the body is a direct response to nominalism and the absolutizing of individual rights. As human persons we do indeed have a very specific nature, an embodied rational nature, which perhaps could even be called a sacramental nature. At all times and in all places our embodied human nature is created by God to point to something beyond just the material. We are not relative only to ourselves and to our acquired goods and pleasures. On the contrary, “the body, in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine” to cite one of the most frequently quoted passages from the theology of the body (Audience 19, section 4). Our bodies are created by God to be living sacraments, to make God physically present in the world through our words and deeds.

This is why before we can catechize adequately and fully on marriage or the morality of the marital act, which are the final two panels of the theology of the body, we must first enter through the door of the sacramentality of the body. Indeed, we must be

steeped in John Paul II's adequate Christocentric anthropology that is infused with the language of Trinity, gift, body, and sacramentality.

When we align our catechetical work with the language of sacramentality, then we can think sacramentally, and we can choose sacramentally, and we can love sacramentally – and Catholics in the third millennium will become living sacraments of a Trinitarian communion of Persons, from womb to tomb.