

RCIA Newsletter

Keeping in touch.

No.8

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Dear Friends,

This week the main summary of our talk is by Fr Tristan on : “The Theology of the Body”. It is offered to you in two instalments - part one this week and part two next week. Many thanks to him. As well as this I am very grateful to Caroline for her notes on “St Paul’s list of Resurrection Appearances” in the form of a Lectio. I hope you continue to stay safe and to find the content of these newsletters stimulating and of interest.

God bless

John de Waal

The Theology of the Body

A brief summary by Rev. Tristan Cranfield, for the RCIA group in Eastbourne (May 2020)

Every Wednesday (outside of lockdown anyway!) the Pope gives an audience in St Peter’s Square where, as, well as greeting the many pilgrims that come from all over the world, and giving them a blessing, he also gives some teaching on a particular subject of his own choosing. When he was pope, St John Paul II used many years of these Wednesday talks to sketch out the Catholic understanding of many subjects to do with the dignity of the human person: love, gender, sexuality, marriage, virginity, celibacy and so on...which thereafter came to be known by the name “Theology of the Body”.

Why does the Church claim to have particular wisdom about such a thing? Surely she should concern herself with the soul, and not with the body? In fact, in a truly Catholic understanding, the two go hand in hand. Human beings – God’s special creation, made in His own image (see the first 2 chapters of the Bible) – have

both a soul and a body. In this way, they are unique among all the things God has made – something spiritual, unseen (the soul) expressing itself in something material, fleshy, and fragile (the body).¹ My body is not *me* entirely – I am my soul too, and the body serves the soul, the immortal part; there is more to me than meets the eye! Neither is my body is not merely like a vehicle, with my soul in the cockpit (that would make me a bit like a zombie!) Rather, the body is an utterly essential aspect of *me* and, in a way, my soul made visible. It is as a bodily creature that I relate to the world around; that I sense, know, love, desire.

My body of course, is a material thing – made up of millions of material cells, that arise from the fusing of genetic material from an ovum from my mother and a sperm cell from my father; whereas the soul is spiritual, immortal and thus must be created directly by God. Funnily enough, it is modern science that has helped the Church understand that body and soul are thus together and one and inseparable from the moment of the fusion of sperm and egg, the moment of conception (in centuries long gone, Catholics believed the same thing about the soul, but they didn't know enough about the body to know how *immediately* in the womb we really do become ourselves!) Any biologist will tell you that there is no difference in *what* we are from the moment of conception, to growing and developing into a little foetus, a baby, a child, an adult...the same genetic ingredients are there unfolding to make you '*you*' and me '*me*'. And so the same must be said of the soul – it has been one with the matter since the very start. The two are never separate throughout my earthly life. Although when I die, my body and soul will separate from one another (the body decaying and the soul living on, immortal) in fact they are meant for one another. Somehow even the souls who are in heaven (like St Peter, St Agnes, St Luke...any saint in fact!) who are *completely* happy, still lack something because they do not have their bodies, which makes them fully who they are. I should say: they do not have their bodies *yet*...because we believe, like Jesus, that all flesh will rise again.²

The Resurrection of the Body

Jesus' Resurrection shows that the body has a very special destiny as part of mankind fully redeemed from sin. Death (caused originally by sin) is totally overcome, and through God's own power, the human body and soul that Jesus assumed are re-united. Something very special happens to the body of Christ thanks to all the

¹ Genesis 1:7: "then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living being."

² John 11:23-25 - "Jesus said to [Martha], "Your brother will rise again." Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day. Jesus said to her: "I am the Resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet he shall live and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die."

sufferings he voluntarily underwent for us – it is flooded with the sinless beauty of His human soul and the bright glory of His divinity. It is “glorified”.³

In heaven at the moment, there are not just happy souls – but two bodies as well: one male, one female: Jesus (God and man) and Our Lady (Mary, the Mother of God). Jesus’s rose into heaven in His body (the Ascension, which we celebrate nine days before Pentecost) and Mary’s body is given her eternally too, because, thanks to her Son, she was totally without sin too (Her transfer into heaven is called “the Assumption”, and we celebrate it on August 15th). The fact that heaven has become a place of human bodies is amazing, and shocking – it helps show us what a dignity and glory our own bodies on earth are, why they must be considered “temples of the Holy Spirit”. The bodies that we will have after the general resurrection will surely be quite different to our bodies now, free from all natural constraints of time and place, and from the unnatural effects of sin that we currently feel: pain and death. We cannot say much more about it, than what we can see from Jesus’ glorious body when appears to His disciples after Resurrection, and to heed the word of St Paul, who muses that our current bodies must be compared to our glorious bodies as a seed is to a flower.⁴

³ Matthew 17:2 “And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun and his garments became white as light”;

John 17:5 - “..and now Father, glorify thou me in thy own presence, with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made.”

Luke 24:36-39 - “As they were saying this, Jesus himself stood among them, and said to them “Peace to you”. But they were startled and frightened and supposed that they saw a spirit. And he said to them “Why are you troubled and why do questionings rise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself; handle me and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have.”

John 20:19 - “On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them “Peace be with you.”

Acts 1:6-11 - “And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes and said: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heave? This Jesus who as taken up from you into heaven, who come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.”

Acts 7:55: “But [Stephen] full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God; and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened and the son of man standing at the right hand of God.”

⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:37-38 “And what you sow is not the body which is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body.”

1 Cor 15:51 “Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound and dead will be raised imperishable and we shall all be changed.”

Phil 3:20-21: “But our commonwealth is in heaven, and from it we await a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power which enables him even to subject all things to himself.”

The Body and the Church

The Church is Herself a body. This is not just a fanciful image, but a reality that we glean from Sacred Scripture.⁵ We have already seen how Christ gave the human person a special dignity by becoming human himself and taking on a body – He shared in what we do, from the best: eating, drinking, fasting, worshipping, delighting in smell and touch, enjoying time with friends, working hard, travelling – to the worst: suffering, sweating, weeping, and enduring the torment...all in the body, which he still retains. (Even in heaven his wounds are visible on his hands, feet and side.) But in becoming one of us, He was also naturally to be the Head of us – and all who share in His grace through Baptism receive the commands and impulses that flow from the Head, just like the limbs and organs of the body. Each member of the body plays a different role in the whole: hence baptised people are not all “one of a kind” but assume different vocations: marriage, priesthood, religious life and so on and so forth.⁶

The care of the body

Our bodies are so important that the Catholic Church teaches that everything should be done to support and sustain our life on earth – especially with regard to using all the benefits of science and modern healthcare. Each person is unique and loved by God. Having said this, we are aware that our eternal destiny is not in this life, but in heaven with God – meaning that the greatest evil that can afflict us here on earth is not suffering or bodily pain, but sin itself (even when sin might seem quite pleasurable!) “Do not fear those who harm the body, but can kill the soul” warns Jesus.⁷ The body is how we perform a sacrifice of love to God, using it to glorify Him – thus Jesus gave His Body for the life of the world on the Cross, and still gives that same Body to his disciples to eat in the Mass. The words whereby He changes bread into His Body for food: “This is my Body, given up for you” – express how we should approach the gift of our bodies.

Catholic healthcare, then, looks at the whole person, body and soul, and so keeps us able to love and serve God happy and healthily on earth. Our bodies are not to be abused with narcotic drugs or excessive consumption, but to be looked after, so we can be a means of service to our brothers and sisters, and worship God in the sacred liturgy, which requires all of our participation, body and soul.⁸

⁵ Colossians 1:18 “He is the head of the body, the Church”

1 Cor 12:13-13: “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are on body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit, we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and all were made to drink of one Spirit.”

Ephesians 5:29 “For no man ever hates his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body.”

⁶ 1 Cor 12:20, 27: “As it is there are many parts, yet one body...Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the Church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues.”

⁷ Matthew 10:28

⁸ Romans 12:1: “I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.”

Because soul and body are one, but are not identical, we do not believe that a defect in the body somehow reflects the inner quality of the soul. Disabilities and illnesses are not first and foremost punishments from God; given what we have said above, it is far happier to be deprived of some bodily perfection than to be in a state of sin.⁹ Those Catholics who follow the teachings of the Gospel are passionate about the happiness and safety of physically and mentally disabled people, and welcome their presence in the Church as a sign of God's desire to sanctify and elevate all forms of human life that are open to his love. Even people with serious mental deficiencies can be baptised and be fully in communion with the Blessed Trinity – the Holy Spirit dwells in them, just as He did in any of us when we were baptised as babies.¹⁰

Care of those at the end of life is also a concern for Catholics, as is evidenced by looking at the huge numbers of religious orders that have existed for this purpose throughout history. We cannot choose the end time of our life (like our birth, it is a gift specially given, at the right time, by God).

Lectio - From the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians - Chapter 15, vv 1-10. (Caroline Rother).

The Resurrection of Christ

15 Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also; it was as though I was born when no-one expected it.

⁹ For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with

⁹ John 9:1-12: "His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus replied: Neither this man nor his parents sinned," said Jesus, "but this happened so that the works of God might be displayed in him."

¹⁰ Galatians 4:6 "Because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'"

me. ¹¹ Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

In this passage we see Paul set out what might be called the first “kerygma” or Creed, building on the resurrection tradition widely accepted at the time and making it a firm belief. For what Paul does is draw implications for the resurrection of all Christians from the Resurrection of Jesus.

To give it some context, Paul was addressing the recently established Christian community of Corinth, some of whom had begun to say there was no rising of the dead. (This denial may well have been due to their concept of the body as a hindrance to the soul’s activity - a Greek and Platonic concept). Paul’s answer was that the bodily resurrection of Christ, as lies at the heart of all apostolic teaching, had been witnessed by the apostles, by others too and not least, though last, by Paul himself. Paul wanted to reinforce strongly to them that this was the faith that they had embraced and believed when they became Christians, but he takes a step further now and in the verses following this passage, adds that all the dead will be raised and that the Resurrection is for all a bodily resurrection too. (1 Cor 15: 12-19). This passage has therefore become a “centrepiece in the argument about the reality of the Resurrection of Jesus”.

The fact that Jesus was seen by Paul is something very important too. We know that Paul had once been a persecutor of Christians but had a dramatic conversion on the road to Damascus. The reason this is so important is that of the New Testament writers, Paul is the only one who claims to have had a personal (one to one if you like), witness of the risen Jesus, speaking directly to him. Paul reiterates several times that Jesus died, was buried, rose and appeared to up to 500 people and this is now embedded in resurrection tradition. It would appear, however, that his own vision of Jesus has acted to fuel his expectation of the raising of the dead “in the body” - albeit a changed or transformed body, just as Jesus’ was. Later in this Chapter 15, Paul is seen almost to chastise the Corinthian community for their unbelief - see vv 35-38.

As seen earlier, Paul is adamant in that now famous statement that if Christ was not raised then our gospel is null and void and so too is our faith. For Paul the resurrection is the crowning event of salvation history and man’s victory over sin, Satan and death. As Adam brought death to the world, so Christ brings resurrection from the dead and we then, as Christians who are incorporated in Christ by our Baptism, share in His risen life.

Resurrection therefore for Paul is not something abstract but a great symbol of hope - and so it remains and must be for us today. We profess as we believe that Jesus, Son of God, had to suffer, to die and rise again so that our own hopes are fulfilled in Him. What greater hope can there be?

So let us praise God with Paul, “proclaiming that death is no longer to be feared now that its sting has been removed; Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

Teach us dear Lord, the habit of the upward look which seeks for help in time of need, wisdom in time of doubt.

Give us the grace of gratitude for
The colour of a sunset
The scent of a flower
The sound of music
The touch of a hand
The insight of truth -
constantly, O blessed Lord.

We offer this prayer in all the holy names of God. Amen.

A final thought : “...the world looking at the Church, does not see Christ, it sees only us.” (Frank Sheed)