

RCIA Newsletter

Keeping in Touch.

No. 9

21st May 2020.

Dear Friends,

The season of Easter moves on towards Pentecost with a brief stop at the Ascension. Jesus had told his disciples that he must leave them before the Holy Spirit could come. This Thursday is the Feast of the Ascension and Holy Mass will be live-streamed from Our Lady of Ransom at 6pm.

This week we have the second part of Fr Tristan's study of "The Theology of the Body" and our Lectio is a reflection on the Ascension from Pope Benedict XVI's book on Jesus.

Take care and God bless

John de Waal

Theology of the Body (Part Two). Fr Tristan Cranfield.

'Male and Female He Created Them'

I said that heaven contains, so far, one man with a body, and one woman – both glorified. This mirrors the original state of humanity's creation – we have always been male AND female. We've all heard the expression "Men are from Mars, Women from Venus"! Well, the Catholic can agree that men and women are not the same. The two sexes are 'for' one another. They fit together, spiritually and physically – each bringing, in general, a slightly different 'take' on reality, slightly different strengths, and finding something in each other that they need. That said, on the other hand, in another way the two sexes are NOT really

from different planets – in their common essence as human beings they are quite equal! In this way, they form ‘one’ creation. The Genesis story shows the **equality** (neither is better than the other) and the **complementarity** (neither is complete without the other, and they are designed for one another) of the two sexes.¹

Gender is written into our nature. The unity of body and soul means that it does not make much sense to talk about being ‘born in the wrong body’ or in the wrong gender. The body is not a tool or a machine to dispose of as I like – it is a God-given and intrinsic part of myself, who am created in His image and likeness; I cannot modify it unnaturally.

The dignity and meaning of sex

We have said that the body is a visible expression of something spiritual immortal – the soul. Being creatures with souls, human beings are designed to know and love God and His creation, which on a natural level they do by loving each other. Human beings are built for communion with one another, which takes its highest, natural form when they give themselves to each other exclusively in marriage – one man and one woman. This communion is, like everything humans do, a spiritual thing first – a unifying of two souls. But as we’ve seen – the human soul is in no way separate from the body! Every ‘spiritual’ activity, like loving someone, is expressed outwardly to them through our actions, which are in the body. So that is why the most intimate bodily action – sexual intercourse – is an expression of the permanent union of marriage. That is why it cannot take place outside marriage without being something seriously wrong – because it becomes like a bodily union without the spiritual communion...it is a violation of what the body is for.

This means that all those who are not married are called to live that virtue we call *chastity*. (We need grace to do this, because our natural impulse to enjoy each other’s bodies can get out of hand, thanks to sin, about which we will say more below.) In a similar way, other acts

¹ Gen 1:27 “So God created man in his own image, in the image of god he created him; male and female he created them.”

Gen 2:18: “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.”

Gen 2:22 “..and the rib which the Lord God had taken from the man, he made into a woman, and brought her to the man. Then man said: “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man.” Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.”

that destroy this purpose of the body being a symbol of unconditional love, and take away that equality and complementarity of the sexes: physical acts of self-love, rape, pornography, homosexual acts, paedophilia, bestiality etc can never be justified. It also means that unfettered sexual activity is not possible or permissible even in a marriage – the mutual respect that man and wife surely must have for one another in their love, means that they will also need often to decide not to have to sex (to live what is called *continence*) for the good of one and the another. Sex is created by God to be an extremely beautiful good – but it is a bodily expression of love, which is a higher good again. Still less is it the highest good of all, which, as we have already said, is communion with God.

Moreover, sex has a special and *primary* purpose in nature, which is to bring children into the world. Of the permanent loving union of marriage of which sex is an expression, children (all things being well) are the fruit. Sometimes physical conditions make having children impossible, which in no way lessens the strength of a marriage. But what is quite different is *preventing* a marriage from being fruitful by using artificial obstacles to prevent conception. Contraceptive chemicals and devices of all kinds destroy the two purposes of marriage: children, and the unity of the spouses, by separating them. Contraceptive sex makes your partner into a tool to be used for your own pleasure, even if both partners consent to it (Allowing yourself to be a ‘tool’ says nothing for your dignity either!) It also turns children into a commodity – something you choose to get or not – rather than being a pure gift. The worst expression of this “commercialisation” of children is abortion – which thinks of getting rid of children as the disposal of things, rather than the murder of other people.

How do we explain the desire of men and women to misuse their bodies? Some of these desires are counted as universally wrong by the society and time that we happen to live in (i.e. paedophilia), some have long been considered wrong and are now to a lesser or greater extent accepted (i.e. cohabitation of unmarried people in a sexual relationship). Some seem to depend on culture (i.e. polygamy in Middle East or Africa, same-sex relationships in North America and Europe) What decides what is right or wrong?

All these activities, and more, come from desires, emotions, and urges, that the person feeling them would say they cannot help. When we feel any emotion, at first it is neutral –

we didn't *decide* to feel that way. But this doesn't mean we are forced to do them. Indeed, we often have a deep desire to do things that we know will only lead to bad actions if we follow them through (i.e. overeating, lying to someone, punching them, stealing and so on and so forth) For some reason, our Western society currently considers sexual desires to be somehow an exception to the rule, in that the mere feeling somehow justifies taking action! Logically, our sexual desires cannot 'define' us any more than any other impulse. Still less can the mere excuse of 'feeling' something be a reason for doing it – we always take into account the type of action that it actually leads to in assessing objectively whether something is good or bad, right or wrong.

Although created good, in their special power of free will, Adam and Eve misused their freedom, their souls, their bodies...and we still bear the effects of this, in that we can desire things that are not good for us, or which contradict the natural order. That is no reason to sanction those desires (sin). Rather, we need *grace* from God that comes from prayer and the sacraments of the Church to rise above them and experience healing. Grace allows us to cultivate those good habits we call virtues, which involves the practice of restraint in our sexual impulses where appropriate, so that our bodies' desires are always serving the act of true *love* for each other as brothers and sisters. That is why the Catholic Church warns people against many bodily acts that our society happens to (currently) encourage or celebrate – because she is the bride of Christ, and shares His mission to *restore* the human race to God by turning away from sin and receiving His eternal life of grace. The Church could not be considered loving if she accepted the fallen state of humanity and our wayward desires as her destiny, even to appear “acceptable” or more appealing to more people – that would be to abandon her children, and to leave them in the dark of falsehood, and eternal loss. Instead, all Christians must love each other, even when we see people fail to live the Church's teaching, being clear and encouraging with them, to bring them to the truth. It is through learning of Christ's death for us even *because* we are sinners, that all of us, no matter our bodily inclinations or history, learn how much we're really loved.

The mystery of celibacy

Some members of the body of Christ are a very particular sign indeed of this destiny. These are so-called consecrated people to *celibacy* and *virginity*: men and women who refrain from the exclusive union of marriage with another human being. Celibates and virgins, through their promise and vows are a sign of what the body is going to become in heaven – its glorification – which they live out already on earth.² These men are priests and religious brothers (monks, friars etc) and the women live various different kinds of calling (religious sisters, nuns, consecrated virgins). Male celibacy is a public statement of being that image of Christ who had no earthly wife, but whose Bride is to be all who receive His love in the Church. Female virginity and consecrated chastity symbolises that the woman is a gift just as the Church is for Christ – a prophet of the future of heaven, where men and women do not marry and engage in bodily sex, because their glorious souls and bodies are totally consummated and inflamed by the love that is all in all gazing on the Blessed Trinity. Together, all Catholics - those called to be married, and those to chaste lives - form a symbol in the Church of the diversity and glory of God's love for mankind, His care in this world, and in the next.

² Matthew 10:13: "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs from the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it."

1 Cor 7:34 "...And the unmarried woman or virgin is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit..."

1 Cor 7:37: "But whoever is firmly established in his heart, being under no necessity but having his desire under control, and has determined this in his heart, to keep as his betrothed, he will do well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better."

Lectio The Ascension. Acts of the Apostles, 1, 1 - 11.

A reflection by Pope Benedict XVI.

After the Ascension of Jesus it is written that the Apostles returned to Jerusalem with great joy, blessing God. How are we to understand this?

It follows that they do not feel abandoned. They do not consider Jesus to have disappeared far away into an inaccessible heaven. They are obviously convinced of a new presence of Jesus. Ascension does not mean departure into some remote region of the cosmos, but rather the continuing closeness that the disciples experience so strongly that it becomes a source of lasting joy.

Before Jesus' departure, a conversation takes place in which the disciples - still trapped in their old ideas - ask whether the time has yet come for the kingdom of Israel to be established.

Jesus counters this notion of a restored Davidic kingdom with a promise and a commission. The promise is that they will be filled with the power of the Holy Spirit; the commission is that they are to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

The question about times and seasons is explicitly rejected. Speculation over history, looking ahead into the unknown future - these are not fitting attitudes for a disciple. Christianity is the present : it is both gift and task, receiving the gift of God's inner closeness and - as a consequence - bearing witness to Jesus Christ.

Let us pray :

Almighty God,
fill us with a holy joy,
teach us how to thank you with reverence and love
on account of the ascension of Christ, your Son.
You have raised us up with him:
where he the head, has preceded us in glory,
there we, the body, are called in hope.
We make our prayer through Christ our Lord.
Amen.

A final thought :

“The presence of ugliness and pain in the world must not blind us to the fact that the good far outweighs the evil. It is ugliness which strikes the eye because it is glaring and exceptional, but goodness is normal and ordinary and the very staple of common life.”

(Fr Martin D’Arcy SJ)