

**Christopher West Interview with Father Tomasz Jaklewicz, Gosc Niedzielny,  
Krakow, Poland April 26, 2018**

**FATHER TOMASZ: You have heard this question many times but you are not known as well in Poland. How did you discover the Theology of the Body?**

CHRISTOPHER WEST: I became a student of the Scriptures when I was 20 years old. It was 1990 and I was really in search of an understanding of why God made us male and female. And over a period of three years, from 1990-1993, as a prayerful student of Scripture, I came to see what I now call this spousal vision of the Bible that it begins with a marriage and ends with a marriage, and right in the middle is the Song of Songs. And I came to understand the imagery of Christ the Bridegroom and the Church as the bride. And I came to understand the Eucharist as the consummation of this mystical marriage. And I began to understand heaven as the marriage of the Lamb, and the union of man and woman is meant to foreshadow the eternal marriage. And I remember speaking with other Catholics at the time trying to share with them what I was learning. Most people looked at me like I was crazy and I didn't know what I was talking about. But it was really setting me free of many years of addiction and dysfunction in my life.

And I'll never forget the day because it was my sister's 20th birthday, which was Sept. 26, 1993. And she had one of her high school religion teachers at my parent's house for dinner. I know she was trained in theology so I wanted to ask her if she thought what I was saying was correct. So I shared some of what I just shared with her and her response was, "Oh, you must have read John Paul II's Theology of the Body." I said, "No I haven't. What is that?" She said, "You haven't read it? Well you're talking just like the pope." And I said, "You're kidding me? The pope talks about sex like this? Talks about marriage like this?" She said, "Oh yes, you must read it," and she told me where I could get it, and it used to be published in English in these four little volumes. It has since been published in one volume. I devoured these four little volumes, and I knew I wasn't crazy. Not only was it confirmation of what I had been learning, but it took me to a whole new level of understanding. And I really felt like I was holding in my hands, Father, the cure for the world's cancer. And I knew I would spend the rest of my life studying it and sharing it with the world.

**This was the moment when you decided to become a missionary?**

I knew it, I felt a calling. Yes.

**So it was in 1993. So this year is 25 years. How can you explain your mission? How do you understand your mission now?**

John Paul II spoke in very scholarly terms, in academic terms, and it's very important that he did, but it needs to be translated into a language that the common person can understand. So I consider my work and my mission putting it into a

language, analogies and metaphors and images and words that those who aren't educated in theology can understand. I've written several books over the years and authored many educational programs that you can watch on video. We have a new online course that is available. I was also co-founder of an institute in America for further studies, for a little bit more academic study of Theology of the Body. And people travel from around the world to take courses at the Theology of the Body Institute.

## **You travel all over the world. What's the feedback? Is your work fruitful or too difficult?**

The number one thing I hear is, "I went to Catholic schools my whole life and never heard this. Why not?" It is life changing to hear the vision of John Paul II. It is profoundly transformational. And just as the parable says, you scatter the seed and it falls on fertile soil sometimes and rocky soil other times. So it's not like there's a 100 percent wonderful response because this is the gospel message and the gospel message has the element of the cross. That's a challenge for us. The cross is always a challenge. But those who I believe are seeking – those who have questions about the modern world and concerns about the direction it's going in – they respond very positively to this vision. When the teaching of John Paul II is put in a language that normal people can understand, it is nothing short of life changing.

## **And some people say, "Why is this teaching called the Theology of the Body and not merely the theology of love?"**

Yes. This is because the Word was made flesh! Love has been made flesh! The theology of love that does not deal with the body is an abstraction. The source and summit of our faith is the body of Christ given up for us; the blood of Christ shed for us. We are saved by his body and his blood. And if we abstract love from the body then we have disincarnated Christ. We see Saint John himself in his first letter say, how do we recognize the antichrist? He is the one who denies that Christ has come in the flesh. Our whole faith is in the incarnation of divine love and that we are made in the bodily image of divine love. Male and female he created them and blessed them saying "Let them be fertile." The new commandment Christ gave says "love one another as I have loved you." How did Christ love us? "This is my *body* given up for you." So Saint Paul tells us that the body is meant for the Lord. But he also tells us that the Lord is meant for the body. This is the mystery. Not only are our bodies meant for the Lord but the Lord is meant for our bodies. The incarnation was always a part of the plan of God. John Paul II says that the incarnation was in the mind of God from all eternity. And so it is the word made flesh that we proclaim.

Theology of the body, it is very important to understand, is not just a collection of talks which John Paul II gave on sex and marriage. Theology of the Body is the very logic of our faith; it is the logic of the incarnation. If we believe in Christmas, we believe in Theology of the Body. So Theology of the Body is not just for married

people. Theology of the Body is for *everybody*. If you have a body, this theology applies to you.

**But for John Paul II it was the theological reasons for which he spoke about the body. In your talks you make a somewhat dangerous comparison of John Paul II to Hugh Hefner, which some people in Poland think is going too far.**

Yes. Those who misunderstand what I've said as a comparison think so. However, it's not a comparison. It's a contrast. And it is very important to recognize that it is a contrast. The only comparison, if there is one, is that both men were responding to puritanism – a sort of Manichean approach to the body. But their responses were quite different and this is where the contrast is. Hugh Hefner's response was to indulge in lust and to normalize lust. John Paul II response is the redemption of lust, the redemption of the body, and the redemption of sexuality. So both were responding to a fearful approach to the body, but what John Paul II says is that what we need is a redemption. Many people think that Christianity holds out redemption *from* the body, but what Christianity truly holds out is redemption *of* the body. This is very, very important.

If you look at the world today, Father, we see that the sexual revolution began with an idolization of the body. But inevitably, as is the way any idol goes, first you worship the idol but then you come to hate it. You despise it. Eventually everything we idolize, we hate. Why? Because the idol can never provide what we want it to provide. The sexual revolution promised us that uninhibited sexual expression would lead to perfect happiness – would lead to heaven on earth. But it hasn't. It's led us to a living hell. Why? Let me put it this way: hell is the heaven we create when we don't believe in the heaven God wants to give us. And so John Paul II describes original sin as a doubting of God's gift. We don't believe in the heavenly fulfillment God wants to give us so we go out and try to create our own fulfillment. That turns into hell. That's why worshipping the body and sex turns into a hatred of the body and sex. This is what we see in the world today. We see that men and women are hating their bodies to the point that we see women are having their breasts surgically removed [because they want to be men]– to the point that we see men are having their genitals surgically removed [because they want to be women]. This is an all-out hatred of the body.

We can learn a lesson from the iconoclastic heresy. People in the Eastern church had the tradition of venerating the icon, but it led to a certain imbalance where the veneration became a kind of idolatry of the icon. And that created a real imbalance, so one imbalance bred the other imbalance. So the idolization of the icon became an iconoclasm, where people said that you cannot worship the icon so we are going to burn the icon. The church had to intervene and say, "We do not worship the icon nor do we burn the icon. We venerate the icon." This gives us a window into what John Paul II did in his Theology of the Body. The culture is worshipping the body and there are many in the church who want to reject the body in a kind of iconoclastic heresy. But John Paul intervenes with his Theology of the Body and he says we do not worship the body nor do we demean the body, because the body is an icon. It is a

window to an infinite and eternal reality. So we have yet to really see the fruit of what John Paul II did. It may still take hundreds of years.

**Some people, especially pastors, religion teachers, and parents, don't know how to battle this constant mainstream message of sexual indulgence. It seems that many of them don't know the proper response and even the teachings of John Paul II seem too complicated, too high-level. What is your advice for these people who feel that they are losing their children? What can give them hope?**

So here's my analogy that I often use. And again, it's important to transform these teaching of John Paul into images and analogies that people find helpful. We all have this hunger; we're all looking for something. God put that hunger in us. St. Augustine said it the best: "You have made us for yourself O Lord, and our hearts are restless till we rest in you." But most people grow up thinking that Christianity is a starvation diet; that Christianity says, "Your hunger is bad. You need to repress that and just follow these rules." This is not our faith. But if we think it's our faith and we think our faith is against our satisfaction, then we're going to turn to the secular culture which knows that we are hungry creatures; which knows we are creatures of passion and desire. And the secular culture will say, "Here! Bring your hunger over here and have immediate gratification!" I call that the Fast Food Gospel. So if a parent is looking at his child and saying, "I see that my child is going off to the fast food," it's probably because your child thinks Christianity has nothing better to offer. But our faith *is not* a starvation diet. I learned from John Paul II that our faith is an invitation to an *infinite, exquisite banquet of love*. And if we do not know that about our faith, we do not know what our faith is.

And so I would say to parents, come to the banquet yourself! Because you cannot share the banquet with your children if you are not eating from the banquet yourself. Come discover what our church really believes and teaches! It is not just a list of rules. Come discover what the saints have always said about the spousal reality of Christ the bridegroom and his love for the church. And we will discover that Christianity holds out to us answers to the deepest questions of our hearts.

I'll close with this thought. If it's a contest between the starvation approach and the fast food approach, which one is going to win? The fast food is going to win. But if it is a contest between the banquet and the fast food, the banquet wins. So Jesus says, go out into the main streets and invite everyone to starve? No. He does not invite us to starve! He says, go out into the main streets and invite them *to the wedding feast*.

**Yes, it sounds very good and I don't mean to be pessimistic, but when you look at the statistics of divorce and abortion . . . all this cultural death, what do you say?**

Where does death come from according to my analogy? You can die from starvation but you can also die from food poisoning. What we are going through as a culture is

the fallout of all the fast food we've been eating. If that is your diet, you will die. This is why marriages are dying. This is why families are crumbling. This is why our culture is a culture of death. But let us look and try to understand what death itself is. By definition, death is the separation of the body and the soul. A culture that separates the body and the soul is dead. So we're back to your earlier question: why not just the theology of love? It must be a Theology of the Body because only a theology which unites love with the body, which unites spirituality and sexuality, can bring a culture of life. Our faith is always the *integration* of body and soul. Christ came in the flesh, died in the flesh, and rose *in the flesh* to redeem our *flesh*! Only such a vision can save us from the death we are facing.

And we could look at it like this, Father. Marriage in our day is being scourged. It is being mocked, it is being crowned with thorns, it is being spat upon, it is being crucified, and it will die. It is dying. But here is the good news: there is a resurrection. And it's a resurrection *of the body*. When it's as dark as dark can be ... what happened on the day Christ died? An eclipse of the sun. It was dark. If we place our faith in ourselves to solve this problem, we're doomed before we even start. But if we place our faith *in Christ* who will raise the body from the tomb. . . as in the eastern icon of the resurrection, Christ reaches into the tomb and pulls Adam and Eve out, reuniting them. This is our hope. God is working a mighty, mighty resurrection by allowing this crucifixion to happen. For some mysterious reason we don't know, he's allowing this to happen. But through the resurrection he is going to unite male and female.

**But the question is, why is this beautiful Theology of the Body, which has transformed your life and the lives of many, still so undiscovered in the church? Some say it's out of date, we need something more, etc... It is clear that this is the truth and yet why have so many priests and lay people never heard of it?**

We are facing a profound crisis in the church, and if you look at history, whenever there's a council there's usually about 100 years of post-conciliar chaos. We're only halfway through it. We're only 50 years out. But this Theology of the Body, I am convinced, is the full flowering of what the council taught. It really is based on two key teachings from the council from *Gaudium et spes*. Number one, which is *Gaudium et spes*, 22: "It is only in the mystery of the incarnate word that the mystery of man takes on light. Christ the final Adam, by revealing the mystery of the father and his love, fully reveals man to himself and makes the supreme calling clear." The Theology of the Body is the full flowering of that teaching of the council. And then *Gaudium et spes*, 24: "Christ has opened up vistas closed to human reason when he demonstrated there is a specific likeness between the union of the father, the son, and the holy spirit and the union of God's children in faith and love. And it follows from this," the council says, "that if man is the only creature that God willed for its own sake, man can only find himself through the sincere gift of himself."

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The Theology of the Body is the full flowering of that vision of the council. We're only 50 years out so what do we do? We continue planting seeds. The mustard seed is very tiny, but we know what happens. This is the parable that I think will help us through this difficult time. It's a small seed and it has yet to really spread. But the story is not over; it's only just begun.

I was giving a seminar on Theology of the Body the day John Paul II died, and I remember someone said to me, "Christopher, what are you going to do now?" as if my mission was over. I said, "No, no, no... it's only just begun! Now the seed, which is John Paul himself, has been put into the ground. And what will happen? Life is coming! We live in dark times, but the darker it gets, the brighter the light will shine. Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more. So do not lose hope! Do not fall into pessimism! God is working something mighty.

What did John Paul do for us? We live in dark times, and it's like he is Jesus walking with us on the road to Emmaus opening the Scriptures for us. Can we not say when John Paul II opens the Scriptures for us in this way that our hearts are *burning* inside? Let that fire spread!

*Transcribed by Thomas West*