

Behold the Man

The Philosophy of Pope John Paul II



Embodiment and Morality

by John F. Crosby



Images© copyright 2000 PhotoDisc, Inc.

John F. Crosby is the chairman of the Philosophy Department at Franciscan University of Steubenville. Dr. Crosby is also a member of CUF's board of directors.

"Behold the Man" is a ten-part series on the personalist philosophy of Pope John Paul II. This is the ninth installment.

In our last installment we got acquainted with Pope John Paul II's teaching on the embodiment of human persons. We saw how strongly he affirms the destiny of the human body to embody persons, to be personalized by them, and to be drawn up into the lives of persons. He does not speak of the body as something "merely biological," but speaks instead of its capacity to serve as a "sacrament" of the human person. As a result, he appreciates the human body far more deeply than do those who only know how to use and manipulate it.

In the present installment, I propose to show how Pope John Paul II employs his personalist philosophy of embodiment to explain Christian morality. It is not difficult to see that if you have a deficient understanding of embodiment you will not be able to make sense of many norms and principles of morality. Recall the example given last month of a dangerously disembodied understanding of persons: "God doesn't care what we do with each other's bodies; He only cares whether we treat each other as persons." Little wonder that the feminist making this statement was in the process of throwing out almost all of the norms of Christian sexual morality. On the other hand, Pope John Paul II, by doing justice to the embodiment of persons, is able to throw fresh new light on these norms, presenting them in a particularly convincing way.

In Vitro Fertilization

Let us consider the procedure where sperm and egg are extracted from the man and woman and then brought together for fertilization in a laboratory dish, after which the fertilized egg is inserted into the uterus of the woman, who thereby achieves pregnancy. This sounds like the perfect medical procedure for infertile couples, and it seems to be not an anti-life but a pro-life procedure, helping to bring about conception where it would otherwise not occur. And yet Pope John Paul II condemned it in 1986 as morally unacceptable. Why? Because he takes seriously the embodiment of human persons.

In this procedure the bodies of the man and woman are simply used as a source of biological materials, which are assembled by a lab technician. A new human person is, in a way, manufactured in the laboratory. The nuptial meaning of the body is bypassed. The man and woman do not enact their love in and through their bodies; they simply present their bodies in the lab to have some gamete cells extracted and then manipulated. The child does not emerge from the enactment of their love, but is manufactured by a stranger. The child is made, not begotten. The bodies of the parents, and of the child, are too much the objects of manipulation; only people already deeply estranged from their bodies could consider seriously such a procedure.

People who live their embodiment understand that the one-flesh union of man and wife is simply irreplaceable as the way of bringing a new human person into being. They understand that the body of a new person should not be assembled by a lab technician, who thereby comes to occupy a morally intolerable position of superiority over the child. (He understandably feels that if he is entitled to make a person, he is also entitled to “unmake” one, if say he has fertilized too many eggs.) Of course, it is not that these people idolize the “natural” way of achieving conception and have some irrational aversion to the artificiality of the in vitro method of achieving it, as if they were hankering after the simplicity of the pre-technological world. No, if the artificial method did not interfere with some great value of their embodiment, neither they nor Pope John Paul II would have any moral qualms about it.

Contraception

In the contraceptive mentality Pope John Paul II sees the same manipulative approach to the human body. Contracepting spouses think that they can sterilize the procreative potential of their marital intimacy while preserving the unitive power of it. They think they can take the mystery of marital intimacy apart, keeping what they want and excluding what they do not want. They are out of touch with their embodiment.

Those Catholic spouses who really live their embodiment understand that fertility is not an accident of marital intimacy; they experience in their bodies how the procreative meaning of their intimacy grows out of the unitive meaning of it. Pope John Paul II interprets for them the truth about their embodiment when he says that marital intimacy inevitably becomes poisoned with selfish using when its procreative potential is sterilized, and that the self-donation of the spouses is disrupted when they act to block the possibility of conception.

Sometimes people say the fertility of a man or woman is just a neutral biological fact, like the length of

one’s hair. Just as you are at liberty to cut your hair as short as you like it, you are at liberty to inhibit your fertility. The idea that it is wrong to manipulate your fertility seems to them as bizarre as the idea that it is unnatural to cut your hair. Sometimes people accuse Pope John Paul II of “physicalism,” that is, of slavishly following natural physical tendencies of the body instead of feeling at liberty to improve them for the good of persons.

Here is the response of Pope John Paul II. He agrees that there are plenty of neutral biological facts about the human body, and that we are indeed at liberty to change them. For instance, the fact that a cancer is naturally growing is no reason why we should not try to stop it. But he says that the very idea of considering the procreative power of human sexuality as just another biological fact shows that people are seriously estranged from their bodies. To do justice to fertility is not enough to look at the body as an object; you have to live in your body with all its fertility and listen to what your body tells you about the intrinsic connection of spousal love and procreation. If only men and women could learn once again to dwell in their bodies and not always see their bodies as objects in a laboratory, they would readily understand what the Church teaches about the inseparability of the unitive and procreative meanings of the marital act.

Fundamental Option

It is not only in particular moral issues like contraception that we can see people being estranged from their bodies; we can also see this estrangement in the way they think about the first principles of the moral life. Pope John Paul II gives us an example of this in his great encyclical on the moral life, *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 65.

Many moral theologians separate the innermost moral freedom of persons from the concrete bodily actions that we perform. They say that we become morally good or bad according to the fundamental option that we make for or against God in

the deepest depths of our freedom. The concrete actions that we perform do not make us good or bad; they are seen instead in terms of their impact on the world around us and not in terms of their impact on the moral character of the one who performs them. This means that you might, say, commit adultery without revoking your fundamental option for God and so without really impairing the moral goodness of your character.

Pope John Paul II responds by acknowledging that there is indeed such a thing as a fundamental choice for or against God. But he insists that we human persons who exercise this choice are embodied persons. We do not exercise it by withdrawing into a disembodied interiority. It is rather the case that we exercise it in and through our concrete bodily actions. Thus we unavoidably weaken or even revoke our decision for God by committing adultery or performing other seriously wrong actions. Pope John Paul II puts his finger on the deficient understanding of embodiment that he sees in these moral theologians: “To separate the fundamental option from concrete kinds of behavior means to contradict the substantial integrity or personal unity of the moral agent in his body and in his soul.” And again: “It is in the unity of body and soul that the person is the subject of his own moral acts.”

It was just one year after his election as pope that Pope John Paul II began his five-year cycle of addresses in which he presented to the Church his “theology of the body.” He seems to have sensed right from the beginning that the full truth about the embodiment of human persons would be of particular importance for his teaching as pope. He seems to have sensed, prophetically, that the moral confusion of our time derives in good part from the estrangement of persons from their bodies. He has been able to witness so powerfully to the truth about good and evil all these years just because he began his ministry as pope by deeply rethinking and re-affirming the embodiment of persons. ■