

# Behold the Man

The Philosophy of Pope John Paul II



## Embodiment

by John F. Crosby



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

I began my last installment by saying that personalist philosophy can go astray in different ways, and I proceeded to show how in the contemporary world it commonly goes astray by becoming too individualistic. Now I want to begin the present installment by mentioning a deviant form of personalism that will come as a surprise to most of my readers: Personalism commonly goes astray by becoming too "spiritualistic." What could I possibly mean by this?

Here is an example. A notorious "Catholic" feminist was recently calling into question all of the moral teachings of the Church in the area of sexuality, and she said, "God does not care what we do with each other's bodies; He only cares whether we treat each other as persons." In other words, men and women could do anything they like with each other's bodies—short of using coercion, of course—as long as they show respect for each other as persons. This in turn implies that there are no definite bodily ways of showing respect or disrespect for persons; showing respect to another is mainly an interior and disembodied act, since *any* use of another's body can in principle express respect. By detaching personal respect from its bodily expression, this feminist fails to understand how we exist as embodied persons. She thus provides an example of what I call *spiritualism*. Since she lays great stress on showing respect to persons, her statement typifies spiritualistic personalism.

Now Pope John Paul II's personalism is very different; he takes very seriously the embodiment of human persons. He thinks that God cares very much what we do with each other's bodies. His personalism is not spiritualistic, it is incarnational.

The Holy Father's deepest thoughts on the embodiment of human persons are found in his discussion of man and woman, just as his deepest thoughts on the interpersonal vocation of human persons are found in his discussion of man and woman, as we saw in the last installment.

According to the unisex view, the difference between man and woman is merely biological and not really personal. The main thing about man and woman is that they are both persons, their gender remaining outside of and below their personhood. They are genderless persons. Thus, from a personalist point of view, it does not much matter what a person's gender is; his or her capacity for interpersonal communion is unaffected by gender and other such bodily details. This unisex position tends to separate persons from their embodiment as man and woman.

You begin to get a sense for Pope John Paul II's incarnational personalism when you see how strongly he opposes the unisex position. He thinks that the personhood of a man is deeply formed by his being a man, no less than the personhood of a woman is deeply formed by her being a woman. In other words, human persons, being embodied,

exist as masculine and feminine persons. Their embodiment as man and woman reaches into their personal existence, “ordaining” them to interpersonal communion.

Pope John Paul II even has a name for this capacity of the human body to serve love: He speaks of the “nuptial meaning” of the human body. He also speaks of a “sacramental” capacity of the human body, which is capable of visibly expressing the invisible person, and of doing so in such a way as to invite persons to love each other. The point is that the Pope takes our embodiment as man and woman far more seriously than does the unisex position, which is tainted by spiritualistic personalism. A body endowed with a nuptial meaning and a sacramental power of rendering the invisible visible, is something far more and far richer than a merely biological body. It is a body endowed with rich personalist meaning, a body that mysteriously embodies the person.

In fact, Pope John Paul II here makes a bold theological point that strongly expresses his incarnational understanding of human persons. He says (and is the first pope to say) that the image of God can be detected in the man-woman difference. Since the Trinitarian God is a being of interpersonal communion, His creatures reflect Him insofar as they are beings of interpersonal communion; it follows that His human creatures reflect Him insofar as they exist as man and woman. Thus Pope John Paul II teaches that the image of God in human beings reaches into their bodily being. They do not just reflect God in being genderless spiritual persons, as the spiritualistic personalists think, but also in being embodied as man and woman.

Pope John Paul II also knows why the nuptial meaning of the human body is often ignored, so that the body is thought of in merely biological terms and the person is thought of in excessively spiritual terms.

First, the nuptial meaning of the body has been obscured by the fall and as a result we often have great difficulty experiencing it. With extraordinary depth and originality Pope John Paul II analyzes the way in

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which a man looks lustfully at the body of a woman. The body of the woman ceases to be expressive of her as person and to invite the man to spousal love. In this lustful looking, men see women—and in an analogous way women see men—as objects of consumption rather than as persons to be loved in a spousal way; their look violates the personhood of the other and ignores the fact that each person is “an enclosed garden,” “a fountain sealed”—expressions taken by Pope John Paul II from Song of Songs 4:12 and applied to men and women as persons.

It is on the basis of this analysis of concupiscence that Pope John Paul II made his famous statement back in 1980 that the “adultery in the heart” condemned by Jesus can be committed even by spouses within marriage. Though many were astonished by this claim, and others ridiculed it, it logically follows from his personalistic theology of the body. Depersonalizing lust may dominate the intimate relations of married spouses. When it does, they desire each other in such a way as to show disrespect for each other, and the fact that they are married does nothing to prevent such disrespect. Pope John Paul II teaches that marriage is not supposed to be a state of “legalized lust,” but rather a state in which lust is overcome by love, and in which the selfish “sex appeal” of the body gives way to the deeper appeal of the nuptial meaning of the body.

There is something else which interferes with our experience of the capacity of the body to serve self-donation. Besides the selfish concupiscence of fallen men and women, there is also the modern passion to dominate the world and everything bodily by the means of technology. One looks upon the material world, and even one’s own human body, as nothing but raw material for human

making and manufacturing, as if everything in nature receives its meaning from what man chooses to do with it. As a result, we become estranged from our bodies, looking at them as objects over against us. We become unable to experience our bodies as sharing in our personal subjectivity, as the Pope puts it, and we no longer recognize ourselves as embodied persons. We thus lose touch with the deep personal meanings—including the nuptial meaning—which are inscribed in our bodies.

The “redemption of the body,” about which Pope John Paul II has much to say in his theology of the body, refers to the reintegration of bodily sexuality and personhood—the radical “personalization” of masculinity and femininity. The redemption of the body, though it will be consummated in eternity, begins already now in time. As this redemption is worked out, the body is drawn more and more into the lives of persons, and made to serve more and more the love between persons.

Many people think that the Church holds in contempt the human body (especially its sexuality). But in fact it is the non-Christian pagans who hold the body in contempt by taking the body as merely biological and by refusing to let it really embody persons. The spiritualistic feminist holds it in contempt when she says that God doesn’t care what we do with each other’s bodies. Pope John Paul II esteems the body far more than they do when he speaks of personalizing the body, of letting it reveal the person and serve as a sacrament of the person. You may be used to thinking that the problem with the secular world is that it makes too much of the body, but it is also true that it makes too little of the body. John Paul is *the* defender of the human body against its pagan detractors. ■