

INTRODUCTION

Christianity is the religion of the “Word” of God, a word which is “not a written and mute word, but the Word is incarnate and living” (St. Bernard). If the Scriptures are not to remain a dead letter, Christ, the eternal Word of the living God, must, through the Holy Spirit, “open [our] minds to understand the Scriptures” (Lk 24:45).

—*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 108

The sacred words of scripture are, of course, critically important to our faith. “Still, the Christian faith is not a ‘religion of the book,’” as the *Catechism* insists (108). It is the religion of the Divine Word that “became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (Jn 1:14). Scripture, in fact, will remain a dead letter unless every word of it is read in view of the Word made flesh.

That is the purpose of the volume you now hold in your hands. Inspired by the scriptural vision St. John Paul II unfolded for us in his 129 Wednesday audiences from 1979 to 1984 that came to be known as the “Theology of the Body” (TOB), the brief, prayerful reflections on the Sunday readings in this book are intended to “open [our] minds to understand the Scriptures” by reading them in light of “the Word [which] is incarnate and living.”

ULTIMATE MEANING IS MADE FLESH

Have you ever paused to ponder what the Bible actually means by referring to the eternal Son of God as the Word? “Word” does not quite convey all the richness of the Greek *logos*. “Logos” refers to the rational principle governing the universe—the ultimate meaning, reason, logic, and beauty behind *everything*. And the astounding claim upon which all of Christianity rests is that the human body is God’s chosen vehicle for communicating his Word, for communicating ultimate meaning,

and for communicating who he is, who we are, and his final plan for the universe.

Just as in Jesus' day, when people hear how important the body is to Christian faith, they often respond as did some of the first disciples: "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" (Jn 6:60). This response is understandable. How could something as earthly as the human body convey something as heavenly as the mystery of God? And yet, if we believe in the meaning of Christmas, we should also believe this claim. For those with eyes to see, our bodies are not only biological; they're theological—they reveal the logic of God; they reveal the ultimate meaning behind everything.

This is why St. John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*, despite how it is typically framed, is not merely a papal teaching on marital love and human sexuality. It is that, to be sure, but it is also so much more. As John Paul II himself said, what we learn in his TOB "concerns the entire Bible" (TOB 69:8) and plunges us into "the perspective of the whole Gospel, of the whole teaching of the whole mission of Christ" (TOB 49:3). Through the lens of spousal love, St. John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* leads to "the rediscovery of the meaning of the whole of existence . . . the meaning of life" (TOB 46:6).

Having spoken since the 1990s to Catholic audiences around the world, it is clear to me that we are often unaware of what is really happening in the liturgy. We “look but do not see and hear but do not listen or understand,” as Jesus is quoted saying in Matthew 13:13. Reflecting on the Sunday Mass readings with the help of St. John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* is like putting on a pair of glasses that brings the entire biblical story (and the liturgy itself) into focus. Familiar passages and parables suddenly “pop open,” enabling us to enter their inner mystery and meaning as never before. We come to see that the whole of the Christian life is an invitation—as Jesus proposed in Matthew 22:1–14 and Luke 14:15–24—to a wedding feast!

GOD WANTS TO MARRY US

Scripture uses many images to help us understand God’s love for us. Each image has its own valuable place. But as John Paul II shared, the gift of Christ’s body on the Cross gives “definitive prominence to the spousal

meaning of God's love" (*Mulieris Dignitatem* 26). In fact, from the beginning to end, the Bible tells a nuptial or marital story. It begins in Genesis with the marriage of the first man and woman, and it ends in Revelation with the marriage of Christ and the Church. Right in the middle of the Bible, we find the erotic poetry of the Song of Songs. These bookends and this centerpiece provide the key for reading and understanding the whole biblical story. Indeed, we can summarize all of sacred scripture with five simple yet astounding words: *God wants to marry us*. Consider:

For as a young man marries a virgin,
your Builder shall marry you;
And as the bridegroom rejoices in his bride
so shall your God rejoice in you.
(Is 62:5)

I will betroth you to me forever:
I will betroth you to me with justice and
with judgment
with loyalty and with compassion;
I will betroth you to me with fidelity.
(Hos 2:19)

God is inviting each of us, in a unique and unrepeatable way, to an unimagined intimacy with him, akin to the intimacy of spouses in one flesh. In fact, as Pope Francis observed, “the very word [used in scripture to describe marital union] . . . ‘to cleave’ . . . is used to describe our union with God: ‘My soul clings to you’ (Ps 63:8).” Because of the supreme bliss of union with God, “a love lacking either pleasure or passion is insufficient to symbolize the union of the human heart with God: ‘All the mystics have affirmed that supernatural love and heavenly love find the symbols which they seek in marital love’” (*Amoris Laetitia* 13, 142).

While we may need to work through some discomfort or even fear to reclaim the true sacredness, the true holiness of the imagery, the “scandalous” truth is that scripture describes “God’s passion for his people using boldly erotic images” as Pope Benedict XVI explained in *Deus Caritas Est* (9). Elsewhere he declared, “Eros is part of God’s very Heart: the Almighty awaits the ‘yes’ of his creatures as a young bridegroom that of his bride” (Lenten Message 2007).

We are probably more familiar (and more comfortable) describing God’s love as “agape”—the Greek word for sacrificial, self-giving love. Yet God’s love “may

certainly be called eros,” asserted Pope Benedict XVI. In Christ, eros is “supremely ennobled . . . so purified as to become one with agape.” Thus, the Bible has no qualms employing the erotic poetry of the Song of Songs as a description of “God’s relation to man and man’s relation to God.” In this way, as Pope Benedict XVI concluded, the Song of Songs became not only an expression of the intimacies of marital love but also “an expression of the essence of biblical faith: that man can indeed enter into union with God—his primordial aspiration” (*Deus Caritas Est* 10).

THE ESSENCE OF BIBLICAL FAITH

Let’s try to let this essential message sink in: *the Song of Songs, this unabashed celebration of erotic love, expresses the essence of biblical faith.* How so? The essence of biblical faith is that God came among us in the flesh not only to forgive our sins (as astounding as that gift is); he became “one flesh” with us so we could share in his eternal exchange of love. In the first of his many

sermons on the Song of Songs, St. Bernard of Clairvaux aptly described marriage as “the sacrament of endless union with God.” The book of Revelation calls this endless union the “marriage of the Lamb” (Rv 19:7).

But there is more. Remember that pithy rhyme we learned as children: “First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes the baby in the baby carriage”? We probably didn’t realize as children that we were actually reciting some profound theology. Yes, our bodies tell a divine story; our bodies tell the story that God loves us, wants to marry us, and wants us to “conceive” eternal life within us. This is not merely a metaphor.

Representing all of us, a young Jewish woman named Mary once gave her yes to God’s marriage proposal with such totality and fidelity that she literally conceived eternal life in her womb. In a hymn addressed to her, St. Augustine exclaimed, “The Word becomes united with flesh, he makes his covenant with flesh, and your womb is the sacred bed on which this holy union of the Word with flesh is consummated” (Sermon 291). Mary’s virginity has always been understood by the Church as the sign of her betrothal to God. She is the “mystic bride of love eternal,” as a traditional hymn has it. As such, Mary perfectly fulfills the spousal character

of the human vocation in relation to God (see CCC 505).

PENETRATING THE ESSENCE OF THE MYSTERY

In the midst of unfolding the biblical analogy of spousal love, it is very important to understand the bounds within which we are using such language and imagery. “It is obvious,” wrote John Paul II, “that the analogy of . . . human spousal love, cannot offer an adequate and complete understanding of . . . the divine mystery.” God’s “*mystery remains transcendent with respect to this analogy as with respect to any other analogy.*” At the same time, however, St. John Paul II maintains that the spousal analogy allows a certain “penetration” into the very essence of the mystery (see TOB 95b:1). And no biblical author reaches more deeply into this essence than St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians.

Quoting directly from Genesis, St. Paul states:

For this reason a man shall leave [his]
father and [his] mother

and be joined to his wife,
and the two shall become one flesh.

Then, linking the original marriage with the ultimate marriage, he adds, “This is a great mystery, and I mean in reference to Christ and the Church” (Eph 5:31–32).

We can hardly overstate the importance of this passage for St. John Paul II and the whole theological tradition of the Church. He called it the “summa” (“sum total”) of Christian teaching about who God is and who we are (see *Letter to Families* 19). He said that this passage contains the “crowning” of all the themes in sacred scripture and expresses the “central reality” of the whole of divine revelation (see TOB 87:3). The mystery spoken of in this passage “is ‘great’ indeed,” he said. “It is what God . . . wishes above all to transmit to mankind in his Word.” Thus, “one can say that [this] passage . . . reveals—in a particular way—man to man, himself and makes his supreme vocation clear” (TOB 93:2; 87:6).

So what is this “supreme vocation” we have as human beings that Ephesians 5 makes clear? Stammering for words to describe the ineffable, the mystics call it “nuptial union” . . . with God. Christ is the New

Adam who left his Father in heaven. He also left the home of his mother on earth. Why? To mount “the marriage bed of the Cross,” as St. Augustine portrayed it, unifying himself with the Church and consummating the union forever.

COME TO THE WEDDING FEAST

The more we allow the brilliant rays of St. John Paul II’s Theology of the Body to illuminate our vision, the more we come to understand, as the *Catechism* observes, how the “entire Christian life bears the mark of the spousal love of Christ and the Church. Already Baptism, the entry into the People of God, is a nuptial mystery; it is so to speak the nuptial bath which precedes the wedding feast, the Eucharist” (CCC 1617).

I never met my father-in-law; he died when my wife was a young girl. But I admire him tremendously because of the intuition he had as a brand-new husband. At Mass the day after his wedding, having consummated his marriage the night before, he was in tears

as he came back to the pew after receiving the Eucharist. When his new bride inquired about his emotional state, he said, "For the first time in my life I understood the meaning of those words, "This is my body given for you."

This was a man for whom the Word of God was not a dead letter. God's Word had become flesh . . . *in his own flesh*. This was a man who had been given eyes to see and ears to hear what God's Word is in its very essence: an invitation to a Wedding Feast. My prayer is that this companion to the Sunday readings will help do the same for you.

My hope is that you will keep this little volume with you when you go to Sunday Mass. Use it to guide your prayer after Communion. Or better yet, get to Mass early enough to read the day's readings in advance and then use this companion to help you enter into the treasures of that day's liturgy. Like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Christ is walking with us to "open the scriptures" to us so as to reveal himself to us in the breaking of the bread. Lord, give us ears that hear and eyes that see. Amen.

THE ADVENT
AND CHRISTMAS
SEASONS

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

The days are coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and Judah. (Jeremiah 33:14)

Terror and Hope at the Coming of the Bridegroom

Advent is a time in which the Church prepares her heart for the coming of her Bridegroom, Jesus Christ—commemorating his first coming in Bethlehem and anticipating his second coming at the end of time when her every longing will be fulfilled in the “marriage of the Lamb.” An eternal marriage “is what awaits us,” explains Pope Francis: “And it is not just a manner of speaking: they will be real and true nuptials!” But before his return, as Christ warns in this Sunday’s gospel, nations will be in dismay because of the calamities befalling the earth. “But when these signs begin to happen”, Jesus tells us, we should stand tall because our “redemption is at hand.” Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that “the Last Judgment is not primarily an image of terror, but

an image of hope.” It’s an image of hope because it’s the revelation not only of God’s justice and judgment but also of his grace and mercy. “If it were merely justice, in the end it could bring only fear to us all,” observes Pope Benedict XVI. But it is Christ the Bridegroom who comes to us with his love. Christ has “linked the two together—judgment and grace.” Jesus, teach us how to await your judgment and grace with peace and hope.

Scripture: Jeremiah 33:14–16; Psalm 25:4–5, 8–9, 10, 14; 1 Thessalonians 3:12–4:2; Luke 21:25–28, 34–36

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

All flesh shall see the salvation of God. (Luke 3:6)

What Do We Worth-ship?

This Sunday’s gospel ends with the hopeful proclamation that “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” What is the salvation of God? From what do we need salvation? Sin is the textbook answer. But what is sin? We

haven't gotten to sin's essence if we think of it merely as a violation of a law. Sin is every attempt we make to satisfy the desires of our hearts with less than the satisfaction for which we are made. We are made for eternal ecstasy in union with God—what the saints called “nuptial union with the Lord.” The joys of this temporal world are meant to point us to that eternal joy, but when we love temporal pleasures more than infinite ones, our values are all mixed up. The salvation that “all flesh shall see” is precisely what St. Paul prays for in the second reading: “That your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, to discern what is of value.” For when we discern what is of true value—namely, Infinite Love—our desires become reoriented and we come to worship that which is of ultimate worth. “Worship” comes from worth-ship: that to which we assign ultimate worth. When we let go of lesser values and worth-ship ultimate Value (God), *that* is salvation. It's a painful reorientation, for we all have many God substitutes to which we cling. The hard work involved on this journey, however, ends in rejoicing, as we read in this Sunday's psalm. Those who embrace this journey of purification can truly say,

“The Lord has done great things for us; we are filled with joy!”

Scripture: Baruch 5:1–9; Psalm 126:1–2, 2–3, 4–5, 6; Philippians 1:4–6, 8–11; Luke 3:1–6

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

*Shout for joy, O daughter Zion! Sing joyfully, O Israel!
Be glad and exult with all your heart, O daughter
Jerusalem! (Zephaniah 3:14)*

**Shout for Joy:
You Are Pregnant with God!**

In this Sunday’s first reading, we have a powerful prophecy of the eternal nuptials to be consummated between God and humanity within Mary: “Shout for joy, O daughter Zion . . . the King of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst” (Zep 3:14, 15). As Pope Benedict XVI expounds, “Literally it says: ‘he is in your womb.’” And St. John Paul II tells us that “in the pages of the

Annunciation . . . the New Covenant is presented to us as the Nuptial Covenant of God with man, the divinity with humanity. . . . God's nuptial love, announced by the prophets, is concentrated on . . . the virgin-bride to whom it is granted conceiving and bearing the Son of God." *This* is the joy of all the earth, the source of all hope and gladness! St. Paul exclaims in the second reading, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I shall say it again: rejoice!" Why? "The Lord is near." How near? He is within us. With Mary as the model, we can say that in some way all members of the Church have become Christ-bearers, pregnant with God. "Let this be known throughout all the earth" (Is 12:5)—God wants to marry us and fill us with eternal life! If we say yes to his proposal, God will "renew [us] in his love" (Zep 3:17), and for all eternity we, with Mary, will "cry out with joy and gladness" (Is 12:6).

Scripture: Zephaniah 3:14–18a; Isaiah 12:2–3, 4, 5–6; Philippians 4:4–7; Luke 3:10–18