

INVITED SESSIONS

JOHN PAUL'S II THEOLOGY OF THE BODY AND ITS RECEPTION AMONG UNDERGRADUATES

Topic: Sex Appeal? A Critical Examination of the Theology
of the Body and Its Popular Attraction
Convener: William C. Mattison III, Mount St. Mary University
Presenter: David Cloutier, College of Saint Benedict/Saint John University
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Respondent: Lisa Sowle Cahill, Boston College

In his paper, entitled "Heaven Is a Place on Earth? Understanding the Popularity of Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body," David Cloutier argued, based in part on interviews with students who had engaged theology of the body outside the classroom, that the success of the theology has a great deal to do with the way it responds to the same plausibility structure the same naming of experience which makes TV series such as *Sex and the City* successful. He contrasted this structure with some other theological attempts to generate a positive sexual ethic, such as the work of Joan Timmerman. The theology of the body recognizes and effectively narrates the central problem in the "relationship marketplace" of today: the way in which we instrumentalize others, rather than loving them. Whereas other sexual ethics appeal to justice and reciprocity in relationships as the key for sexual behavior, John Paul II appeals to authenticity. Expanding on an idea developed by Charles Taylor, Cloutier further suggested that authenticity is a hallmark of contemporary culture ethical discernment about sex, and that the theology of the body offers a re-narration of what authentic relationships mean. On the other hand, its extraordinarily romanticized view of self-giving, a central part of its appeal, also raises certain questions which it will have to confront. He argued that these questions may prove fruitful ground for continued theological development of a Catholic sexual ethic.

In his paper entitled " 'When they rise from the dead, they neither marry nor are given to marriage': Marriage, Resurrection, and the Nuptial Meaning of the Body in John Paul II's Theology of the Body," William Mattison offered a friendly criticism of certain aspects of John Paul II's theology of the body, and its popular presentation by proponents such as Christopher West. While sympathetic with the overall project for reasons identified in Cloutier piece, Mattison took the occasion of the conference theme "Resurrection of the Body" to identify three ways in which the vision of marriage and sexuality presented in the theology of the body is inadequate from an eschatological perspective. First, despite John Paul nuanced delineation of a "nuptial meaning" of the human person that need not be fulfilled in earthly marriage, Mattison argues that certain thrusts in the former pope thought prompt popularizers like West to grant marriage and sexuality an ultimacy in the Christian life that is unwarranted from an eschatological perspective. Second, theo-

logians of the body focus too narrowly on certain liminal acts (mainly wedding vows and sexual intercourse), cleaving these extraordinary moments apart from more ordinary marital acts, implicitly limiting God's efficacious grace solely among the former. Finally, theologians of the body portray a vision of graced marriage and sexuality that applies more to the pure state of original innocence than the state of redemption by neglecting to depict how God's grace in this life heals human sinfulness, especially in the arenas of marriage and sexuality. Reminiscent of Cloutier paper, Mattison concludes that this romanticized and idealized vision of marriage and sexuality constitutes part of its "sex appeal" to Western culture, but also renders the theology of the body deficient from the perspective of Christian eschatology.

Lisa Sowle Cahill affirmed the general conclusions of both Cloutier and Mattison papers, and offered four further observations on the theology of the body. First, concerning the broad appeal of the theology of the body, Cahill suspected that the young adult population interested in this approach is selective in appropriating some of its claims (e.g., the theological significance of sexuality) and not others (e.g., gender complementarity and homosexuality). Second, she opined that its exaggerated focus on marriage and sexuality is likely an attempt to shore up traditional Church teachings on sexuality. Third, Cahill claimed that the theology of the body offers less a "theology" of sexuality than an older natural law approach spruced up with further Scriptural references. Finally, she offered advice to both theology of the body critics ("its vulnerability is its overemphasis on sexuality") and its supporters ("continue to respond to young people hunger for high ideals and discipline in matters of sexuality").

Both Cloutier and Mattison papers will appear in a volume on marriage and sexuality edited by Cahill, forthcoming from Sheed and Ward.

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