

THEOLOGICAL DIVERSITY—INTEREST GROUP

Topic: Theological Anthropology  
Convener: James F. Keating, Providence College  
Moderator: David Cloutier, Catholic University of America  
Presenters: Lisa Sowle Cahill, Boston College  
Nicolas J. Healy, Jr., Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on  
Marriage and Family

This year's session was the first of three for an interest group in theological diversity. The project stems from a 2010 report on the same topic and seeks to provide a forum for ideologically diverse viewpoints on major questions facing the Church today. The topic was theological anthropology and, in particular, the moral significance of embodiment. The fact that human beings are embodied is often treated differently in liberal versus conservative Catholic thought. Many conservative theologians seek to support the Church's teaching on sexuality with reference to natural law and its development in Saint John Paul II's "theology of the body." Liberal theologians, on the other hand, are often skeptical of such reasoning when it comes to strict sexual norms but are attracted to the importance embodiment for questions of social justice. In order to explore some of these differences, the team invited Lisa Sowle Cahill and Nicholas J. Healy.

Cahill's "The Body, Embodiment, and Nondualist Ethics" began with a frank admission of the complications that face anyone attempting to derive moral rules on the basis of the relationship of spirit and body within a Christian modality that insists on unity. The profoundly historical and inter-related character of human subjectivity means that it is best to speak of "embodied persons" who are defined, positively and negatively, by being related to other persons, objects, and their living environment. Understanding personhood requires, therefore, the assistance of science, natural and social, as well as the values of justice, universal human dignity, concern for the common good, and the Gospel imperative of special regard and love for the most vulnerable. Relying on the work of Shawn Copeland, Cahill argues that any moral consideration of what persons should and should not do must carefully attend to the social, racial, sexual, cultural, and gender dimensions of human embodiment and the struggle for justice in each area. To do moral theology in abstraction from these aspects is to sacrifice truth for clarity. In other words, because the moral significance of the body is inherently political, theology about the body must be informed by contextual theologies of liberation and ecology.

Cahill considers the timely case of transgenderism. The reality of intersex conditions and persons, for example, makes any simple connection between a person's body and his or her gender identity more nuanced and requires Catholic moralists to hold theoretical fire until attending to the complexities involved. We should listen first to the findings of science on the subject as well as the real-life experiences of these persons. All should be done in a spirit of openness to the new, accompaniment, and mutual recognition.

Nicolas Healy gave a paper entitled "The Indissoluble Nexus: Nature, Body, Person," which began by stating that his intention was not to build a bridge spanning liberal and conservative viewpoints but rather to fire up a lantern that would illumine one side of the gulf. His chosen instrument was a theological defense of Paul VI's

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encyclical, *Humane Vitae* on the eve of its fiftieth anniversary. After treating the backstory of the document in some detail, Healy sought to unfold the inner logic of the pope's teaching on the unbreakable unity of body and person in the conjugal act. If this unity is upheld, the use of artificial contraception inevitably denies an essential aspect of the personhood of the married partners by excluding an aspect of their embodiment. Only by keeping the unitive act open to procreation is the full meaning of each spouse's body accepted by the other. Healy was especially concerned to show that the encyclical's teaching on artificial contraception has been proven prophetic. Modern culture more and more tends to speak of sexuality activity apart from the truth of our bodies, championing a de-natured and disconnected freedom to pursue pleasure.

As might be expected the question period was a lively one. Each speaker kept to the time limit, and that provided the assembly of around seventy persons to pose questions and challenges to the speaker. The atmosphere was tense at times but always respectful. Just what we wanted.

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