

**PONTIFICAL FACULTY OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION  
AT DOMINICAN HOUSE OF STUDIES**

**TOWARDS A “CLIMATE OF CHASTITY”:  
BRINGING CATECHESIS ON THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY  
INTO THE HERMENEUTIC OF CONTINUITY**

**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE THEOLOGY FACULTY IN  
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS**

**BY**

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## Preface to the Third Edition

The following is a revision of my master's thesis, the original version of which was submitted to the Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception at Dominican House of Studies on March 26, 2010 (under my full legal name, Dawn Eden Goldstein), and was accepted by them after I defended it on May 19, 2010.

The major changes to the current version from that which was accepted are the incorporation of certain footnotes into the text and the addition of background on the Consilium's rejection of the phallic interpretation of the Easter Candle. I have also added some additional examples of Christopher West's presentation, to further support points made in the original version.

At the time I wrote my thesis, West and the Theology of the Body Institute, which was founded to promote his presentation of the theology of the body, were aggressively defending his presentation against the criticisms that had been leveled by David Schindler and others. The TOB Institute had publicized a letter in September 2009, announcing that it and West had received the blessing of Justin Cardinal Rigali (chairman of the institute's episcopal advisory board) and Bishop Kevin Rhoades (then West's ordinary in the Diocese of Harrisburg).<sup>i</sup> Following the letter's publication, West published an official response to critics.<sup>ii</sup> While claiming that many critics had "significantly misrepresented" his teachings, he refused to address specific criticisms. Instead, he focused upon one controversial aspect of his teaching (on "[w]hat ... the grace of redemption offer[s] us in this life with regard to our disordered sexual tendencies")—

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<sup>i</sup> "Support for Christopher West from Cardinal Justin Rigali and Bishop Kevin Rhoades." Letter dated August 10, 2009 (released to the press by the TOB Institute on September 17, 2009). TOB Institute Web site, <http://www.tobinstitute.org/images/TOBI%20Letter%20of%20Support.pdf> [accessed March 24, 2010].

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. Christopher West, "The Theology of the Body Debate: The Pivotal Question." LifeSiteNews, October 22, 2009, <http://www.lifesitenews.com/ldn/2009/oct/09102209.html> [accessed March 25, 2010]. Schindler's criticisms are reviewed in the body of my thesis.

repeating the same arguments he had propounded for years in his talks and books, and insisting that they accurately rendered the teachings of John Paul II.

Having followed West's work for some years, I had hoped he might take a more reflective and irenic approach, particularly given the ever-more urgent need to evangelize a culture in which the family and human life itself are under assault. That is why, for my master's thesis, I decided to assess his presentation and prominent critiques. My goal was to offer positive correctives that would help catechists give a fuller, deeper, and more accurate presentation of Church teachings on marriage and sex.

In an unexpected development, after I submitted my thesis, the TOB Institute announced that West, after consulting with its board, "agreed" to take a six-month sabbatical "to attend to family needs, and to reflect more deeply on fraternal and spiritual guidance he has received in order to continue developing his methodology and praxis as it relates to the promulgation of the Theology of the Body."<sup>iii</sup> It now appears that, at the least, he recognizes a need to consider changes to his presentation of the TOB—though whether he will in fact make such changes, and revise his published works accordingly, remains to be seen.

### *It's not just about West...*

My concern in writing my thesis was not merely to critique an individual author and speaker, but to critique a certain approach to interpreting a recent magisterial work. In the wake of Vatican II, there were many who asserted that the "open windows" of the council enabled a "radical break" that would bring "fresh air" inside a stale and fetid Magisterium. It is my contention that West and his disciples—while intending to be faithful to Holy Mother Church—

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<sup>iii</sup> "Christopher West Begins Sabbatical." Statement from Theology of the Body Institute, March 30, 2010, <http://www.tobinstitute.org/announcement.asp?AnnouncementsID=31> [accessed April 14, 2010].

often use language disconcertingly similar to that of those who propounded what our present pope calls a “hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture.”<sup>iv</sup>

I am also concerned that the interpretation of the TOB propounded by West and the TOB Institute in effect depicts John Paul’s work as a theology of sex. It is my hope that, by offering a critical analysis of the details of West’s presentation, my work may clear out the underbrush, so to speak—making room for others to expound upon the true meaning of the TOB.

For John Paul, as he says in his TOB catechesis, “*the mystery of the perfect communion of persons, of Man and Woman in the conjugal covenant*” finds its highest representation not in sexual ecstasy, but in the union of Mary and Joseph, whose “‘*continence for the kingdom of heaven*’ ... served the most perfect ‘*fruitfulness of the Holy Spirit*’ in the history of salvation.”<sup>v</sup> The centrality to this insight to his theology of marriage is made clear by the fact that he repeats it in his *Letter to Families*: “What Saint Paul will call the ‘great mystery’ found its most lofty expression in the Holy Family.”<sup>vi</sup>

Married couples do not need the Church to tell them to strive for pleasure in bed. What they do need is her guidance in learning how to live out the graces of the Sacrament of Matrimony—to “perfect [their] love and to strengthen their indissoluble unity,” and to “help one another to attain holiness in their married life and in welcoming and educating their children” (CCC 1641). It is to that end—and not the promotion of what one prominent West fan has dubbed “Holy Sex”<sup>vii</sup>—that John Paul’s TOB reflections on marriage are directed.<sup>viii</sup>

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<sup>iv</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia, December 22, 2005, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf\\_ben\\_xvi\\_spe\\_20051222\\_ro-man-curia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_ro-man-curia_en.html) [accessed August 2, 2010].

<sup>v</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, (Boston: Pauline Books & Media), 421 (General Audience of March 24, 1982, TOB 75:3).

<sup>vi</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Letter to Families* 20.

<sup>vii</sup> Cf. Gregory K. Popcak, *Holy Sex! A Catholic Guide to Toe-Curling, Mind-Blowing, Infallible Loving*, Crossroad Publishing Co, 2008. Christopher West published an enthusiastic review of the book upon its publication (“Dr Ruth Meets Thomas Aquinas,” October 24, 2008, <http://www.christopherwest.com/page.asp?ContentID=106>).

*... neither is it personal...*

My thesis began to attract attention in June 2010 after I posted my defense on my blog and began to e-mail copies of it upon request. While most of the responses have been positive, I have been struck by the eagerness of some of West's more fervent fans to presume that anyone who publicly criticizes his presentation must be acting out of personal animus. Such an uncharitable presumption insults not only me, but also the faculty of the Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception at Dominican House of Studies, for it implies they passed a thesis that was a personal vendetta.

In fact, proving perhaps that the student is not greater than his teacher [Matthew 10:24], all of West's critics, including David Schindler, Mary Shivanandan, and Alice von Hildebrand, have been accused by his supporters of uncharitable motives.<sup>ix</sup> Such accusations, when leveled for no real reason other than that the critic had the temerity to raise concerns about West's presentation, make it impossible to engage in charitable conversation.

Typical of these was an anonymous person who commented on a blog item that was critical of my thesis defense:

Thank you for going after Dawn Eden, as well as questioning the witch hunt against Christopher. A great disservice is being done in the Church when we tear each other down. We must do better, or we cannot bring the healing of Christ. Our actions will scream over the kindness that we're trying to speak.

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<sup>viii</sup> I am limiting my discussion in this thesis to John Paul's reflections on marriage in his Wednesday catecheses because those are the aspects of the TOB most pertinent to those charged with catechizing the faithful on family life. At the same time, it is important to note that, while the TOB is not a "theology of sex," neither is its significance for the Church limited to those aspects of it that directly concern matrimony. The catecheses provide profound and valuable insights into human personhood and the whole of Christian life.

<sup>ix</sup> See, for example, the defense of West written by Ascension Press owner Matthew Pinto, which begins, "Over the past few weeks, I have watched a friend and fellow soldier in the Church get assaulted by his own troops ..." "By His Fruits You Shall Know Him: A Defense of Christopher West." Catholic Exchange.com, June 11, 2009, <http://catholicexchange.com/2009/06/11/119383/> [accessed January 25, 2010]

I find it remarkable that people such as this commenter can delight in “going after” me, and, in the same breath, decry how “we tear each other down.”

My thesis is not about “going after” Christopher West, or anyone. It is about examining the work of an enormously popular author and speaker, who has been highly successful in reaching people with certain truths about the faith, and asking what boils down to a simple question: Is this presenter’s account of Catholic teachings *entirely* truthful, or does it contain, to paraphrase St. Thomas, the “admixture” of errors?<sup>x</sup> This is an important question to ask respectfully with regard to any teacher of the Faith who does not possess the charism of infallibility—especially one who is marketing his presentation with the claim that it faithfully represents a work of the Magisterium.

To their credit, West and the TOB Institute are in communication with their local ordinaries and (according to Cardinal Rigali and Bishop Rhoades’ August 2009 endorsement) work with their episcopal blessing.<sup>xi</sup> Their obedience to their ordinaries should be seen as a sign of their desire to serve the Church in truth.

At the same time, it is important to note what an episcopal blessing is not. Namely, it is not a canonization—the Church does not canonize living people—and neither is it an imprimatur upon everything that a teacher of the Faith articulates. It does not place a teacher above fraternal correction.

***... nor is it against popularizing Church teachings***

Along with other critics of West, I have also been accused of failing to recognize the need to have Church teachings transmitted in language that is understandable and relevant to the public

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<sup>x</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I.1.1, corpus.

<sup>xi</sup> “Support for Christopher West from Cardinal Justin Rigali and Bishop Kevin Rhoades.”

at large. It should be obvious that this argument is a straw man, since my book *The Thrill of the Chaste* transmits Church teachings in precisely such an accessible manner, even quoting West.

Not only do I recognize the need to reach those on the fringes of faith, I also recognize the importance of West's work in this regard. In fact, as I have repeatedly stated, when I was a new Christian struggling to be chaste, his work provided me with my first exposure to Catholic teachings on sex, and so was pivotal to my decision to enter into full communion with the Church:

At first I considered chastity something that I was doing just to “be good,” and my attitude was, “OK, God, I'm doing this for you and you better darn well appreciate it!” But as long as I had that attitude of blind submission to an arbitrary authority I couldn't really stay chaste. One thing that really helped me earlier on was reading Christopher West's book, *Good News About Sex and Marriage*, which is one of many works that interpret Pope John Paul II's theology of the body. It helped me to understand that God's design for us to be chaste actually has a purpose, which is to bring us to heaven, and which even in this life makes us happy. These are not just arbitrary rules meant to mortify us and make us miserable.<sup>xii</sup>

Christopher West's gifts as a popular presenter helped get me through the Church's doors—as they have for numerous other Catholics, and I will always be grateful for God's using his work in that way. However, as I got deeper into Catholic faith and practice, I began to discover discrepancies between his presentation and the teachings of the Magisterium—discrepancies that, however unintentional, appeared to be impacting the faithful in disturbing ways.

To name one example (others appear in Chapters Two and Three), West's interpretation of John Paul's writings about Adam and Eve's being “naked without shame, which I discuss in Chapter Two (see the sections labeled “Concupiscence and the ‘two bishops’” and “Pornography vs. ‘theo-graphy’”). He asserts that, because the human body is inherently holy and decent, the need for women to dress modestly exists only because many men are impure. Those who are

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<sup>xii</sup> Carolyn Moynihan, “Cut to the Chaste.” MercatorNet, June 29, 2007, [http://www.mercatornet.com/articles/view/cut\\_to\\_the\\_chaste/](http://www.mercatornet.com/articles/view/cut_to_the_chaste/) [accessed August 4, 2010].

tempted by the sight of immodestly dressed women have failed to make the effort to attain mature purity.

The dangers of this interpretation were revealed *in extremis* last year when Polish model Joanne Krupa cited John Paul II in defense of her posing nude: “I think worrying about going topless in a photo shoot or film is really ridiculous. And the fact is, Pope John Paul said, since we were born naked, it is art, and it's just showing a beautiful body that God created.”<sup>xiii</sup>

While West might be the first to say that the model’s photo shoots are not art, Krupa’s defense, based on subjectivity (in which her own intent determines whether the images of her are artistically valid), echoes arguments in *Theology of the Body Explained*.

As I write, the current edition of *Our Sunday Visitor* features an interview with Dr. Peter Kleponis, a psychiatrist who was called in by the New York Archdiocese to help find healing for men suffering from pornography addiction. “He told *Our Sunday Visitor* he talks to priests around the country, and ‘this is the No. 1 sin they are hearing from men in the confessional.’”<sup>xiv</sup> In addition to the concern expressed by the New York Archdiocese, two American prelates, Bishop Joseph Finn of Kansas City-St. Joseph and Bishop Paul Loverde of the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia, have written pastoral letters on the topic in the past three years.<sup>xv</sup>

I challenge anyone to find an episcopal letter or magisterial document that defines “mature purity” for a man as the ability to look at a naked or scantily clad woman who is not his wife, and

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<sup>xiii</sup> Catholic News Agency, “Catholic experts clarify the teachings of JP II following Playboy model’s comments.” December 3, 2009, [http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/catholic\\_experts\\_clarify\\_the\\_teachings\\_of\\_jpii\\_following\\_playboy\\_models\\_comments/](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/catholic_experts_clarify_the_teachings_of_jpii_following_playboy_models_comments/) [accessed August 4, 2010].

<sup>xiv</sup> Tom Hoopes, “Catholic psychologist trains confessors in growing problem.” *Our Sunday Visitor*, August 8, 2010, <http://www.osv.com/tabid/7621/itemid/6723/Catholic-psychologist-trains-confessors-in-growing.aspx> [accessed August 4, 2010].

<sup>xv</sup> Bishop Robert W. Finn, *Blessed Are The Pure In Heart: A Pastoral Letter on the Dignity of the Human Person and the Dangers of Pornography*, February 21, 2007, and Bishop Paul S. Loverde, *Bought With A Price: A Pastoral Letter on Pornography and the Attack on the Living Temple of God*, 2007.



not feel lust. Yet, this is exactly the high bar set by Christopher West in his talks and books. Moreover, West's approach in this area has been taken up by other speakers associated with the TOB Institute, such as Father Thomas Loya, a featured speaker at the TOB Congress, who recently wrote in an online column on the problem of pornography, "A true freedom in the Spirit, a true, lasting and integrated purity of heart comes not from 'looking away' from the human body. Rather it is in learning to look 'at' the human body with the eyes of God, with the deep soul of true Catholicism and the sacramental worldview."<sup>xvi</sup>

But was this really what John Paul intended—to make the Catholic man free to stare at the body of a woman who is not united with him in the sacrament of matrimony? My opinion on the matter may be found in Chapter Two of this thesis, but it may also be helpful to read the views of Father Matt McAuslin, a recently ordained diocesan priest in New Zealand, one of more than 300 teachers of the Faith who have written to me to request a copy of my thesis.

Father McAuslin forwarded me a copy of a letter he sent to Christopher West last year, before the "Nightline" controversy, in which he offered fraternal correction. Regarding West's suggestion that John Paul is urging men not to avoid "occasions of sin," but rather to learn to look at the naked body without lust, the priest writes:

I think the Pope's rejection of naturalism in art is important here. He speaks of an 'object of appropriation' and about 'limits which it is unlawful to exceed'.<sup>xvii</sup> But what the Pope doesn't say is that their art/activity can be viewed whilst respecting the nuptial meaning of the body. We have to be careful here remembering the Pope's words: "Anyone who lives in this way according to the flesh, that is submits – although in a way not quite conscious, but nevertheless actual ... ceases to be capable of the freedom for which Christ set us free."<sup>xviii</sup>

I realize there are photos of the Pope in the South Pacific where for example, where he greets women who are topless. But as he explains, this cultural aspect of

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<sup>xvi</sup> Father Thomas Loya, "More About Pornography and TOB." Catholic Exchange, March 31, 2010, <http://tob.catholicexchange.com/2010/03/31/1833/> [accessed August 4, 2010].

<sup>xvii</sup> Pope John Paul II, General Audience, April 29, 1981, <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/jp2tb61.htm> [accessed August 4, 2010].

<sup>xviii</sup> Pope John Paul II, General Audience, January 14, 1981, <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/jp2tb52.htm> [accessed August 4, 2010].

dress/undress is derived from norms associated with the temperature of the place. I am also yet to see a photo where he is actually looking at the woman's exposed breasts. He actually looks at her face and I think this is very important. Indeed, I believe to treat such a woman with dignity is to look at her face.<sup>xix</sup>

### *Criticizing the critic*

Although my thesis has been received positively by Dr. Alice von Hildebrand (who drew upon my research for her essay “Dietrich von Hildebrand, Catholic Philosopher, and Christopher West, Modern Enthusiast: Two Very Different Approaches to Love, Marriage and Sex”)<sup>xx</sup> and many others who have requested it, some criticisms have emerged. Here are the main ones, along with my response to each:

**Why am I being so harsh on West when he has expressed such willingness to correct his presentation?**<sup>xxi</sup> I admire and applaud West’s willingness to make corrections—but many more corrections needed if his presentation is to be faithful to both the letter and spirit of Church teachings. As I detail in Chapter Two of this thesis, even as he has modified his language over the years, he has maintained certain themes in the face of criticisms that date back to Dr. Mark Lowery’s review of his “Naked Without Shame” cassette series in 2001.

**Isn’t it unfair to criticize West when I have not met him personally?** People who make this claim are assuming that since I do not mention having had personal contact with West in my thesis, I have not made any attempt to reach him. In fact, I have corresponded privately with him on more than one occasion prior to writing my thesis, offering fraternal correction. I did not mention this correspondence in my thesis because it was private.

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<sup>xix</sup> Father Matt McAuslin, letter to Christopher West, February 10, 2009. “West wrote back to me and very politely told me that I was wrong,” says Father McAuslin (e-mail to author, July 10, 2010).

<sup>xx</sup> The essay is online at <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/document.php?n=999> [accessed August 5, 2010].

<sup>xxi</sup> “I want to thank those of you who offered thoughtful critiques of my work and helpful suggestions on how to improve it. I have taken them to heart. Indeed, I have always weighed my critics' observations carefully and prayerfully. They have helped me refine my approach a great deal over the years and I remain very grateful for that.” West, “The Theology of the Body Debate: The Pivotal Question.”

This is in fact often the case when academics criticize one another publicly, particularly in the relatively small community of Catholic scholars. They do not mention the personal communication in their critiques, because to do so would violate confidentiality, or it might seem petty (“I told X that he was wrong, but he refused to change his position”). It is wrong to assume that public criticism is for them anything but a last resort.

**Isn’t it uncharitable to criticize West when I have not taken one of his courses?** I have never said publicly whether I have taken any of West’s courses, so I don’t know where those who make this claim are getting their information. It is disturbing that people who accuse me of being uncharitable would publicize rumors and hearsay.

In any case, it is ridiculous to assert that an author may not be judged by his published work. The vast majority of those who encounter West’s presentation of the TOB do so through his books, DVDs, and CDs—not in person. A teacher of the Catholic faith is not to be judged in the same manner as an artist such as Bob Dylan, whose enigmatic pattern of self-contradiction demands that critics review his entire oeuvre. (Moreover, if West’s work did show such a pattern—which is not a claim of my thesis—the question would be why he should be teaching the faith at all, since Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever [Hebrews 13:8].)

### *Heeding the cardinal’s call*

While West is out of circulation, the TOB Institute continues to promote the TOB in the manner developed and popularized by its famous founder. Most recently, the institute organized the First National Congress on the Theology of the Body in Blue Bell, Pa., which garnered a reported 450 attendees from across the globe.<sup>xxii</sup> In a homily at the congress, Cardinal Rigali told

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<sup>xxii</sup> Genevieve Pollock, “Theology of the Body: Why All the Hype?” Zenit, July 30, 2010, <http://www.zenit.org/article-30044?l=english> [accessed August 2, 2010].

attendees that “the catechesis given thirty years ago is now the curriculum of the Culture of Life.”<sup>xxiii</sup> He urged them to turn the event into a “*campaign* of human and catechetical formation”<sup>xxiv</sup>:

The teaching of John Paul II on the theology of the body must be further introduced into Pre-Cana programs, RCIA instruction, Natural Family Planning training, parish adult education programs, campus ministry programs, youth groups, homilies and religious education among children and adolescents. Its rich content must be mined and proclaimed so that the next generation can continue to access and comprehend it.

In support of Cardinal Rigali’s desire to see the TOB “mined and proclaimed,” and especially to aid those in parishes and dioceses who are charged with disseminating it to the faithful, I have decided to make my master’s thesis available free of charge to all.

My prayers are with West and with all who work to bring the Mystical Body’s members to a greater understanding of the truth about man and woman “from the beginning” (Matthew 19:8). I hope to do so as a professor, after completing my doctoral studies. *Oremus pro invicem*.

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August 5, 2010

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<sup>xxiii</sup> “Homily of Cardinal Justin Rigali, First National Congress on the Theology of the Body,” July 30, 2010, <http://archphila.org/rigali/cardhom/theologyofbody.htm> [accessed August 2, 2010].

<sup>xxiv</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

The unqualified abbreviation “TOB,” as well as the terms “Wednesday catecheses” and “TOB catecheses,” all refer to Pope John Paul II’s 129 general audience addresses between 1979 and 1984 in which he taught his theology of the body, and to his undelivered addresses regarding the theology of the body that are published in *Man and Woman He Created Them*, translated by Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006). References to Christopher West’s interpretation of the TOB are qualified, e.g. “West’s TOB” or “West’s presentation.”

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply grateful to Father Angelo Mary Geiger F.I., Steve Kellmeyer, William Doyno, and Father Thomas Petri O.P. Each provided me with a sounding board, offered or recommended source material, and helped me refine my arguments. I would also like to thank the faculty at the Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception at Dominican House of Studies, particularly my thesis director, Father John Corbett O.P., and Dr. Gregory LaNave. Finally, I am thankful to Dr. Alice von Hildebrand for her encouragement, her witness to truth, and her showing me what charity, courage, and obedience to the Church look like in the life of a theologian.

## Introduction

G.K. Chesterton's vision of the Church as a "heavenly chariot [that] flies thundering through the ages,"<sup>1</sup> swerving "to left and right, so exactly as to avoid enormous obstacles,"<sup>2</sup> was never truer than in the Magisterium's responses to the moral upheavals of the 20th century. As successive popes articulated and defended its teachings on marriage and family (particularly Pius XI, with *Casti Connubii*, and Paul VI, with *Humanae Vitae*), the heavenly chariot resisted modern heresies at every turn. Recognizing the pitiful paradox in a culture that claimed the right to remove restrictions on individuals' sexual activity while leveling the heaviest restrictions ever enacted on their procreation, it blazed a wide trail defending true human dignity and freedom. Yet, to the outside world, its path appeared narrower than ever.

On September 5, 1979, Pope John Paul II embarked upon a sustained effort to help faithful Catholics remain on the upward path and to enlighten those living outside Church teachings, so that they might find their way back onto the chariot—or, to use a more traditional metaphor, back onto the Barque of Peter. Upon concluding the series of Wednesday catecheses on November 28, 1984, he called them "an *ample commentary* on the doctrine contained in the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*" (emphasis in original). They are better known, however, by the label he used to describe the "sphere of anthropology and theology" to which his reflections belonged: the theology of the body (TOB).

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<sup>1</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*. Reprinted in *Collected Works, Volume 1* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 306.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

John Paul's desire to deepen the faithful's understanding of *Humanae Vitae* was no doubt influenced by the crisis that had emerged as a result of the dissent that greeted the encyclical,<sup>3</sup> as well as the fallout experienced by society in general as a result of the widespread adoption of contraception. *Humanae Vitae* has been called a prophetic document;<sup>4</sup> certainly, many of Pope Paul VI's predictions have come true, particularly his warning that the use of artificial birth control served to "open wide the way for marital infidelity and a general lowering of moral standards."<sup>5</sup>

Society's shift away from traditional values was already well under way at the time when John Paul commenced his TOB catechesis. Today, it continues apace, as seen both in general cultural indicators such as the soaring rate of out-of-wedlock births (four out of every ten U.S. babies in 2007),<sup>6</sup> and in the Church's own statistics, which show a precipitous decline in the number of Catholic weddings (from 292,499 in 1995 to 191,265 in 2008).<sup>7</sup> During the past year, the Church in America has taken increasing notice of such alarming trends. New York

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<sup>3</sup> James Francis Cardinal Stafford has written that diocesan presbyterates have yet to recover from such dissent, which left "wounds [that] continue to affect the whole Church." Denver Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, in his pastoral letter on the 30th anniversary of the Paul VI encyclical, likewise pointed to the "broad dissent" that met *Humanae Vitae* (though in more general terms, without singling out the presbyterate), and added, "The irony is that the people who dismissed Church teaching in the 1960s soon discovered that they had subverted their own ability to pass anything along to their children." (James Francis Cardinal Stafford, "The Year of the Peirasmòs – 1968," July 25, 2008, <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/resource.php?n=675>; Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, "On Human Life," July 22, 1998, <http://guweb2.gonzaga.edu/~dewolf/chaput.htm> [both articles accessed February 7, 2010].

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Bishop Peter J. Elliott (Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Melbourne, Australia), "*Humanae Vitae*: Memories of an Encyclical," Human Life International e-Newsletter, August 7, 2008, reprinted on [lifeissues.net](http://www.lifeissues.net), [http://www.lifeissues.net/writers/hum/hum\\_20prophet.html](http://www.lifeissues.net/writers/hum/hum_20prophet.html); Bishop James D. Conley (Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Denver), "Bishop's Column, October 22, 2008, *Denver Catholic Register*, <http://www.archden.org/index.cfm/ID/800/Bishop>; Dr. Janet E. Smith, "*Humanae Vitae*: A Prophetic Document?" USCCB Secretariate for Pro-Life Activities, 1988, <http://www.usccb.org/prolife/programs/rlp/HVProphetic88.pdf>; Mary Eberstadt, "The Vindication of *Humanae Vitae*," *First Things*, August/September 2008, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2008/07/002-the-vindication-of-ihumanae-vitaei-28>. [All of the preceding pages were accessed February 7, 2010.]

<sup>5</sup> Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, Encyclical Letter, 1969.

<sup>6</sup> Gardiner Harris, "Out-of-Wedlock Birthrates Are Soaring, U.S. Reports." *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/13/health/13mothers.html>

<sup>7</sup> Jeff Ziegler, "The First Vocation Crisis." *Catholic World Report*, January 25, 2010, [http://www.catholicworldreport.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=151:the-first-vocation-crisis&catid=53:cwr2010&Itemid=70](http://www.catholicworldreport.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=151:the-first-vocation-crisis&catid=53:cwr2010&Itemid=70) [accessed February 7, 2010].



Archbishop Timothy Dolan named marriage and family “the real vocation crisis,”<sup>8</sup> and the USCCB capped off its five-year National Pastoral Initiative on Marriage with the November 2009 approval of its pastoral letter “Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan.”<sup>9</sup>

As the Church seeks to educate the faithful about the vocation of marriage—and, especially, as she seeks to instruct them in the areas where Catholic teachings run most counter to the prevailing culture—the most in-demand author and speaker on the topic is Christopher West. Through his books, pamphlets, DVDs, recorded talks, Web sites, public lectures, and numerous TV and radio appearances, West has become known to millions of Catholics. His books are reported to have sold more than one million copies.<sup>10</sup> He has also sold a reported 500,000 DVDs,<sup>11</sup> and more than three million copies of his lectures on CD are said to be in circulation.<sup>12</sup> According to his main publisher, Matthew Pinto of Ascension Press,<sup>13</sup> each year 55,000 people in 40 dioceses take West’s marriage-preparation program, and he has given his TOB training to 25 bishops and 3,600 priests in 31 dioceses. His three lectures at World Youth Day Sydney filled

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<sup>8</sup> Catholic News Agency, “N.Y. Archbishop Takes Stock of Challenges in the American Catholic Church.” August 13, 2009, [http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/n.y.\\_archbishop\\_takes\\_stock\\_of\\_challenges\\_in\\_the\\_american\\_catholic\\_church/](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/n.y._archbishop_takes_stock_of_challenges_in_the_american_catholic_church/) [accessed February 7, 2010].

<sup>9</sup> The letter is available online at [http://www.usccb.org/meetings/2009Fall/docs/Marriage\\_Love\\_Life\\_pastoral\\_letter.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/meetings/2009Fall/docs/Marriage_Love_Life_pastoral_letter.pdf) [accessed February 7, 2010].

<sup>10</sup> “ABC interview ‘sensationalized’ Theology of the Body, Christopher West says,” Catholic News Agency, May 9, 2009, [http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/abc\\_interview\\_sensationalized\\_theology\\_of\\_the\\_body\\_christopher\\_west\\_says/](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/abc_interview_sensationalized_theology_of_the_body_christopher_west_says/) [accessed January 25, 2010]. Michael Sean Winters, of Slate.com, gives a substantially lower estimate—“more than 300,000” books. Even that figure would place West among the most popular authors of Catholic apologetics since Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen. (See Michael Sean Winters, “What Do Pope John Paul II and Hugh Hefner Have in Common?” Slate.com, June 10, 2009, <http://www.slate.com/id/2220217/> [accessed January 25, 2010].)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* Although the article states that he has “sold more than 3 million CDs,” I write that more than three million of West’s CDs are “in circulation” because many of them are distributed free of charge by the Mary Foundation.

<sup>13</sup> Pinto, “By His Fruits You Shall Know Him: A Defense of Christopher West.”

9,000 seats.<sup>14</sup> Although his highest degree is an M.T.S., he is also an in-demand instructor at highly regarded seminaries, holding positions as instructor or visiting lecturer at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Marriage & Family in Melbourne; the St. John Vianney Theological Seminary in Denver, and the Institute for Priestly Formation at Creighton University in Omaha (where he is an adjunct faculty member).<sup>15</sup> More than 1,100 lay leaders have attended his five-day “Head & Heart Immersion” TOB course,<sup>16</sup> registration for which costs upwards of \$1,045.<sup>17</sup> In July 2010, the Theology of the Body Institute, which West founded and directs,<sup>18</sup> is set to host the first National Theology of the Body Congress, with a speaker’s roster headed by Justin Cardinal Rigali.<sup>19</sup>

Along with the widespread popularity of West’s presentation of the TOB have come occasional public criticisms from priests, theologians, and laity objecting to certain aspects of his presentation’s content and style. In May 2009, some of these concerns made headlines in the Catholic press, following an interview with him on ABC News “Nightline” in which he said, among other things, that he saw “very profound historical connections between Hugh Hefner and John Paul II,” and that the Song of Songs was “the centerfold of the Bible.”<sup>20</sup> Although West

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<sup>14</sup> Christopher West, “Youth of Today and My Experience Down Under,” <http://www.tobinstitute.org/newsitem.asp?NewsID=30> [accessed February 7, 2010].

<sup>15</sup> “Christopher West CV,” ChristopherWest.com (official Web site), [http://www.christopherwest.com/christopherwest\\_cv.pdf](http://www.christopherwest.com/christopherwest_cv.pdf) [accessed February 7, 2010].

<sup>16</sup> Pinto, “By His Fruits You Shall Know Him: A Defense of Christopher West.”

<sup>17</sup> Theology of the Body Institute, registration form, [http://tobinstitute.com/images/downloads/2010/tobi\\_summer\\_flyer\\_color.pdf](http://tobinstitute.com/images/downloads/2010/tobi_summer_flyer_color.pdf) [accessed February 7, 2010].

<sup>18</sup> West’s role as founder and director of the institute is highlighted in “Letter of Support for Christopher West.” Zenit, September 17, 2009, <http://www.zenit.org/article-26893?l=english>.

<sup>19</sup> “Speakers.” National Theology of the Body Congress, <http://tobcongress.com/program/speakers> [accessed March 24, 2010].

<sup>20</sup> See video and article, David Wright and Ely Brown, “Sex Sermonist’s Heroes: Pope John Paul II and Hugh Hefner,” ABCNews.com, May 7, 2009, <http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/Sex/story?id=7527380&page=1> [accessed February 9, 2010].

quickly issued a statement correcting “misleading” aspects of ABC’s presentation,<sup>21</sup> public criticisms emerged from theologians such as David Schindler, Alice von Hildebrand, and the Rev. José Granados, along with defenses by Janet Smith, Michael Waldstein, and others.<sup>22</sup> The debate went back and forth on editorial pages and Web sites, quieting only after the Theology of the Body Institute released a letter in September that was signed by Cardinal Rigali, chairman of the institute’s episcopal advisory board, and Bishop Kevin Rhoades, who was then West’s ordinary in the Diocese of Harrisburg, affirming their support for West.<sup>23</sup>

The popularity of West’s presentation, and the criticisms it engenders, offers a teaching moment for the Church. On the one hand, it shows both the great interest that the laity have in learning about the Church’s teachings on marriage and sex. On the other, it shows the great risks faced by catechists who wish to frame such teachings in a manner that will both engage their interest and help them think with the Church. In this thesis, I intend to show how catechetical methods might be improved so that they might better help the Church emerge from “the real vocation crisis” and provide a more effective counter to society’s attacks on marriage and family.

In the following chapter, I will give a comprehensive overview of West’s presentation of the TOB. In Chapter Two, I will summarize major public criticisms of his presentation and his responses to those criticisms, and then present my own critique. By “West’s presentation,” I mean not only his own lectures and writings, but also the presentation he promotes through his training programs at the Theology of the Body Institute, as well as the programs he has

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<sup>21</sup> Christopher West, “Christopher West on ABCNews.com,” posted to the “Christopher West (Official)” Facebook fan page, May 8, 2009, [http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note\\_id=90667348536](http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=90667348536) [accessed February 9, 2010].

<sup>22</sup> See “Following the Discussion on JP2’s Theology of the Body,” [http://headlinebistro.com/hb/en/news/jp2\\_theologyofbody.html](http://headlinebistro.com/hb/en/news/jp2_theologyofbody.html) [accessed February 9, 2010].

<sup>23</sup> “Support for Christopher West from Cardinal Justin Rigali and Bishop Kevin Rhoades.” Letter dated August 10, 2009 (released to the press by the TOB Institute on September 17, 2009). TOB Institute Web site, <http://www.tobinstitute.org/images/TOBI%20Letter%20of%20Support.pdf> [accessed March 24, 2010].

developed for parishes, marriage-prep programs, and study groups.<sup>24</sup> It is relevant to critique his presentation because what Catholics know as “John Paul II’s theology of the body” is, by and large, Christopher West’s presentation of John Paul II’s theology of the body. Finally, in Chapter Three, I will make recommendations for refining West’s presentation so that it may give a fuller and more accurate understanding of the richness and depth of the Church’s historical teachings on marital love and chastity.

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<sup>24</sup> The “brand name” versions of West’s presentation of the TOB are available through his main publisher, Ascension Press ([http://catholicintl.com/articles/Theology\\_of\\_the\\_Body.pdf](http://catholicintl.com/articles/Theology_of_the_Body.pdf)); the official Theology of the Body Web site (<http://www.theologyofthebody.com>), which is owned by Ascension Press), and the Theology of the Body Institute’s Web site (<http://www.tobinstitute.com>).

## Chapter One

### Christopher West's Presentation of the Theology of the Body: An Overview

#### Biographical Notes

A foundational point of Christopher West's presentation of the TOB is that John Paul II's teachings are "revolutionary"<sup>1</sup> because "previous generations of Christians" grew up under the burden of a "repressive approach" to sexual issues.<sup>2</sup> Because he uses his own experiences to support this point, it is relevant here to explore those aspects of his upbringing that informed his understanding of the attitudes he believes are ingrained in "most Christians."<sup>3</sup>

Born in 1969,<sup>4</sup> West was raised in a Catholic home and educated in Catholic schools from third grade through high school.<sup>5</sup> He has described the sex education he received in those schools as "woefully inadequate, an incomplete 'Don't-do-it' mantra."<sup>6</sup> In high school, he chafed at what he perceived as the Church's repressive stances on sexual issues, demonstrating his rebellion in a

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher West, "In-Vitro Fertilization and the Hermeneutic of the Gift." ChristopherWest.com (West's official Web site), <http://www.christopherwest.com/page.asp?ContentID=77> [retrieved February 5, 2010].

<sup>2</sup> Christopher West, "The New Language: A Crash Course in the Theology of the Body." *Crisis* 22, no. 11 (December 2004). Republished online by the Catholic Education Resource Center, <http://catholiceducation.org/articles/sexuality/se0108.html> [accessed January 26, 2010].

<sup>3</sup> Christopher West, "The Freedom of the Gift: Priestly Celibacy and Authentic Sexual Liberation," delivered at the Institute for Priestly Formation 6th Annual Symposium held at St. Vincent DePaul Seminary, Fla., March 16, 2007. <http://www.christopherwest.com/article11.asp> [accessed January 31, 2010].

<sup>4</sup> Christopher West, *Good News About Sex and Marriage*, revised edition (Cincinnati: Servant Books, 2004), copyright page.

<sup>5</sup> Candace O'Donnell, "Christopher West on the Theology of the Body." *St. Anthony Messenger*, February 2009. <http://www.americancatholic.org/Messenger/Feb2009/Feature2.asp> [accessed January 26, 2010].

<sup>6</sup> O'Donnell, "Christopher West on the Theology of the Body."

school paper in which he attempted to refute *Humanae Vitae*.<sup>7</sup> He lost his faith and initiated a sexual relationship with his high-school girlfriend.<sup>8</sup>

A traumatic experience during his freshman year at a Catholic college, in which he witnessed what he describes as a “date rape,”<sup>9</sup> prompted him to seek, through prayer and study, God’s plan for human sexuality. He later told an interviewer, “This was a pivotal moment for me. I remember crying out to God, ‘You gave us these hormones, and they seem to get us into so much trouble. What is your plan, God?’”<sup>10</sup>

Following that incident, West says, “I gave my life to Christ, convinced of his love. I heard a still voice telling me, ‘Trust me. Jump and I will catch you.’”<sup>11</sup> He began to study the Bible, seeking to know why God created humanity as male and female,<sup>12</sup> and was fascinated to discover the nuptial analogy within Scripture. “By discovering this spousal vision, Scripture and the sacraments which I had heard about all my life came alive for me.”<sup>13</sup>

He transferred to the University of Maryland, College Park, studying anthropology. By then, he, his parents, and other family members had entered the Mother of God Community, a charismatic Catholic group in Gaithersburg, Maryland, comprising some 1,200 members,<sup>14</sup> which they entered in 1987.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> O’Donnell, “Christopher West on the Theology of the Body.”

<sup>8</sup> Christopher West. *Theology of the Body Explained*, first edition (Boston: Pauline Books & Media), 215.

<sup>9</sup> O’Donnell, “Christopher West on the Theology of the Body.”

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Washington Post*, “Mother of God Timeline, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/local/longterm/library/mog/timeline.htm> [accessed January 26, 2010]. Since I made this thesis publicly available, some critics have asserted that it is unfair to include information about West’s experiences in the Mother of God Community. I am retaining it because my official readers did not once question the relevance of this information. It

The Mother of God Community was not a typical environment for a Catholic teenager in the late 1980s. Ten years later, West's mother, Bonnie, told a *Washington Post* reporter about the authority that community leaders claimed over teens' social lives and relationships with their parents:

“It was almost like, ‘Big Brother is watching,’” recalls ex-member Bonnie West. Parents learned from their heads that their teenaged children were forbidden to date until the community's leaders judged them ready. Even then the community would try to control every step. Many parents say they were taught to distrust everything their own children said and were encouraged to mount a steady surveillance of the community's youngsters.<sup>16</sup>

West received his bachelor's degree in 1992 and wished to enter graduate school for theology, but met with resistance from the Mother of God Community's leaders. Although a Catholic graduate school was willing to give him a partial scholarship, he opted to follow the community's wishes and reject the offer, instead taking a job with a long-distance telephone company.<sup>17</sup> Subordinating his own desires to those of the Mother of God Community leaders caused him great internal conflict, as the *Post* would later report: “He recalls sitting in his car one day, doubled over in emotional pain, crying out to God for help. ‘Who I was and what I was supposed to do in life — all of that was getting crushed,’ he says.”<sup>18</sup>

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is based upon comments that West himself gave to the *Washington Post*, and gives historical context to the information he has provided about his upbringing in numerous talks, as well as his articles and books.

<sup>15</sup> Justin Gillis, “The Church Takes a Closer Look.” *Washington Post*, April 13, 1997, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/local/longterm/library/mog/mgod6.htm> [accessed January 26, 2010].

<sup>16</sup> Justin Gillis, “Fitting Into the Hierarchy.” *Washington Post*, April 13, 1997, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/local/longterm/library/mog/mgod3.htm> [accessed January 26, 2010].

<sup>17</sup> Gillis, “Fitting Into the Hierarchy”; “Christopher West, Fellow, Founding Board Member.” Theology of the Body Institute, <http://www.theologyofthebody.org/page.asp?ContentID=23> [accessed February 2, 2010]. Gillis's article describes West as taking a “low-level job” rather than accepting the scholarship. The “Christopher West, Fellow” Web page states that West worked for a long-distance telephone company prior to beginning his studies at the John Paul II Institute.

<sup>18</sup> Gillis, “Fitting Into the Hierarchy.”

In 1994, James Cardinal Hickey, archbishop of the Archdiocese of Washington, began an in-depth review of the Mother of God Community.<sup>19</sup> West began to make clandestine visits to a Hickey adviser, telling his concerns.<sup>20</sup> As he reflected to the adviser, he voiced a realization: “It’s a cult. I’ve been living in a cult.” He later characterized his experience in the community to the *Post*’s Justin Gillis in dramatic terms: “The best way to describe it is that I feel like I have been raped.”<sup>21</sup>

The following year—at about the same time as Cardinal Hickey gave an address to the Mother of God Community in which he denounced its abuses of power, called for corrections in its theological teachings, and ordered changes to its leadership<sup>22</sup>—West removed himself from the community’s influence. He enrolled in studies for an M.T.S. at Washington’s John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family, and also entered a program for certification as a diocesan instructor in marriage preparation.<sup>23</sup> Upon receiving his degree in 1997, he accepted a position as director of the Archdiocese of Denver’s office of marriage and family life, and began his rapid ascent to prominence as a speaker and author.

### Ten Major Themes

Central to West’s appeal is the manner in which he distills John Paul II’s dense and lengthy oeuvre of Wednesday catecheses to a handful of major themes, which he further encapsulates into easy-to-remember catchphrases and analogies. These same major themes become starting

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<sup>19</sup> *Washington Post*, “Mother of God Timeline.”

<sup>20</sup> Gillis, “The Church Takes a Closer Look.”

<sup>21</sup> Justin Gillis, “Rise and Fall of a Religious Community.” *Washington Post*, April 13, 1997, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/local/longterm/library/mog/mgod1.htm> [accessed January 26, 2010].

<sup>22</sup> Hickey, “Address to Mother of God Community.”

<sup>23</sup> “Christopher West CV.”



points in his catechesis for those who wish to study the TOB beyond his introductory lectures or his beginning-level books.<sup>24</sup> I identify these themes as follows:

**1. The TOB is an all-encompassing theology that requires theologians and religious educators to recontextualize “everything” about Christian faith and life.**<sup>25</sup> It “isn’t just about sex and marriage;”<sup>26</sup> it is a “revolution”<sup>27</sup> that “will lead to a dramatic development of thinking about the Creed.”<sup>28</sup>

West often quotes George Weigel’s claims regarding the TOB to support his account of the teachings’ value and significance:

This is no footnote in the Christian life. As George Weigel observes in his biography of the Pope, the theology of the body “has ramifications for all of theology.” Yet it “has barely begun to shape the Church’s theology, preaching, and religious education. When it does it will compel a dramatic development of thinking about virtually every major theme in the Creed.”<sup>29</sup>

One major “dramatic development of Catholic thought”<sup>30</sup> present in the TOB, according to West, is John Paul II’s locating the *imago Dei* not only in the individual man or woman, but also (in the pope’s words) “through the communion ... which man and woman form right from the

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<sup>24</sup> West’s *Theology of the Body for Beginners*, *Good News About Sex and Marriage*, and *The Love That Satisfies* are all written on an introductory level; *Theology of the Body Explained*, while accessible to beginners, is for those wanting a more thorough understanding of the catecheses, while *Heaven’s Song*, although likewise accessible, is intended as an “advanced” instruction for those seeking insight into the TOB’s nuptial mysticism.

<sup>25</sup> I use the word “recontextualize” in reference to West’s favorably quoting George Weigel that the TOB “will compel a dramatic development of thinking about virtually every major theme in the Creed” (Christopher West, “The Theology of the Body & The New Evangelization,” <http://www.christopherwest.com/page.asp?ContentID=73> [accessed January 28, 2010].) The “everything” quote comes from West’s article “What Is the Theology of the Body and Why Is It Changing So Many Lives?” <http://www.christopherwest.com/article1.asp> [accessed January 28, 2010]. Fuller context for both quotes is given later in this section.

<sup>26</sup> West, “What Is the Theology of the Body and Why Is It Changing So Many Lives?”

<sup>27</sup> West, “The Theology of the Body & The New Evangelization.”

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* The Weigel quote is from *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Cliff Street Books, 1999), 343.

<sup>30</sup> West, “What Is the Theology of the Body and Why Is It Changing So Many Lives?”

beginning.”<sup>31</sup> In West’s view, this means that the male human body and the female human body, understood within the call to marital union, contain within themselves the entire content of the mysteries of Christian faith:

This is to say that everything God wants to tell us on earth about who he is, the meaning of life, the reason he created us, how we are to live, as well as our ultimate destiny, is contained somehow in the meaning of the human body and the call of male and female to become “one body” in marriage.<sup>32</sup>

One may, then, literally look to the human body to find the answers to questions “of the spirit” revealed.<sup>33</sup> “Indeed, a ‘holy fascination’ with our bodies as male and female is *precisely the key* that opens the holy door to the divine bridal chamber, allowing us to experience what the mystics call ‘nuptial union’ with God.”<sup>34</sup> “[C]uriosity about the meaning of the body and of sexuality—so often considered innately prurient—actually leads us into the heart of the mystery hidden in God from eternity.”<sup>35</sup> “Sex plunges us headfirst into the Christian mystery.”<sup>36</sup>

Why, then, if the TOB is so important, did nearly 2,000 years elapse before a pope articulated its message? Because the Church is in an ongoing process of maturation—and has only reached “puberty”:<sup>37</sup>

We must recognize that the Church matures through time in some ways similar to the maturing of a human person. The analogy is certainly imperfect, but we would not expect a

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> West, “The Pope’s Theology of the Body.” Catholic Education Resource Center, <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/sexuality/se0058.html> [accessed February 5, 2010].

<sup>33</sup> “What is marital spirituality? How does the family become authentically spiritual? For John Paul II, the answers to these questions ‘of the spirit’ are revealed in the body.” Christopher West, “John Paul II’s Theology of the Body: Key to an Authentic Marital & Family Spirituality.” ChristopherWest.com, <http://www.christopherwest.com/page.asp?ContentID=76> [accessed February 5, 2010].

<sup>34</sup> Christopher West, *Heaven’s Song: Sexual Love as It Was Meant to Be* (West Chester, Penn: Ascension Press, 2008), 43 (emphasis in original).

<sup>35</sup> Christopher West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised edition (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2007), 598.

<sup>36</sup> West, *Good News About Sex and Marriage*, 41.

<sup>37</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised edition, 599-600.

child to understand himself the same way as an adult does. We might even say that with John Paul II's TOB, the Church, as a corporate person, has reached puberty—a new “awakening” of sorts regarding the meaning of the body and the communion of the sexes. We might also observe that puberty is not full maturity, but only the beginning of the process that leads one into adulthood. Thus, if this comparison is at all accurate, the Church still has a good deal of maturing ahead of her, and a good deal of “growing pains.”<sup>38</sup>

**2. The “sexual revolution” was a “happy fault.”** More than merely a “revolution” in the Church's “thinking,”<sup>39</sup> the TOB is the catalyst for a “new sexual revolution”<sup>40</sup> or “sexual counter-revolution”:<sup>41</sup> a necessary corrective both to the errors of the sexual revolution and to the prudish, repressive attitudes of Christians which were a major causative factor in that revolution.

In West's words,

John Paul II warned that if chastity is lived in a repressive way, it's only a matter of time before sexual desires explode (see *Love and Responsibility*, pp. 170-171). I think we find here a key for understanding the sexual revolution of the twentieth century. It was a ticking time bomb waiting to detonate in response to the prudery and repressiveness of the previous era.<sup>42</sup>

He also says “the often repressive approach of previous generations of Christians (usually silence or, at most, ‘Don't do it’) is largely responsible for the cultural jettison of the Church's teaching on sex.”<sup>43</sup>

A corollary point in West's catechesis is that “most Christians” today continue to follow the unhealthy path of repression:

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<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> “About the Theology of the Body,” ChristopherWest.com (West's official Web site), <http://www.christopherwest.com/page.asp?ContentID=121> [accessed February 6, 2010]. West has also used the term “new sexual revolution” in his syndicated newspaper column—c.f. “The Redemption of Rock Music,” November 9, 2007, <http://christopherwest.com/page.asp?ContentID=66> [accessed February 6, 2010].

<sup>41</sup> Daughters of St. Mary, “Interview with Christopher West.” Republished by the Catholic Education Resource Network, <http://catholiceducation.org/articles/sexuality/se0115.html> [accessed January 28, 2010].

<sup>42</sup> Christopher West, “The Redemption of Rock Music.” Syndicated column posted to ChristopherWest.com, November 9, 2007, <http://www.christopherwest.com/page.asp?ContentID=66> [accessed February 1, 2010].

<sup>43</sup> West, “The New Language: A Crash Course in the Theology of the Body.”

When lust “flairs up” [*sic*] in the human heart, most people think they only have two choices: indulge or repress. If these are the only two options, most Christians will choose repression, mistakenly believing it the path to holiness.<sup>44</sup>

For those who were given the starvation diet of repression, “the [sexual] revolution got us talking about our hunger,” West says.<sup>45</sup> Public discussion of the “hunger” for sex is, in his view, a positive development of the sexual revolution that should be continued, albeit redirected.<sup>46</sup> “The Church looks at the sin of Adam and proclaims, ‘Oh happy fault that won for us so great a redeemer.’ We can look at the error of the sexual revolution and say ‘Oh happy fault that has won for us so great a theology of the body.’”<sup>47</sup> “Christians must complete what the sexual revolution began,” by redeeming the body and redeeming sexuality.<sup>48</sup>

**3. “Dumpster” vs. “banquet”—two contrasting means of satisfying “hunger.”** To the society that was starved from its diet of Puritan repression, the sexual revolution promised satisfaction.<sup>49</sup> Ultimately, however, it only exacerbated people’s “longing for union,”<sup>50</sup> to such a degree that many were led to fall for the “counterfeit”<sup>51</sup> of lust. West likens this hunger to that of the starving man who eats out of a waste bin to satisfy his needs. The Church bears some blame

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<sup>44</sup> West, “The Freedom of the Gift: Priestly Celibacy and Authentic Sexual Liberation.”

<sup>45</sup> Lisa Dahm, “Completing the Sexual Revolution: Theology of the Body.” *Hawaii Catholic Herald*, May 14, 2009, <http://www.hawaiicatholicherald.org/Home/tabid/256/newsid884/2319/Default.aspx> [accessed February 3, 2010].

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Dahm, “Completing the Sexual Revolution: Theology of the Body” and Catholic News Agency, “ABC News ‘Sensationalized’ Theology of the Body, Christopher West Says.”

<sup>47</sup> Daughters of St. Mary, “Interview with Christopher West.”

<sup>48</sup> “ABC News ‘Sensationalized’ Theology of the Body, Christopher West Says.”

<sup>49</sup> Cf. West, “The New Language: A Crash Course in the Theology of the Body.”

<sup>50</sup> Christopher West, “Theology of the Body: A Compelling, Bold, Biblical Response to the Sexual Revolution.” Reprinted on West’s official Web site, ChristopherWest.com, <http://www.christopherwest.com/article12.asp> [accessed February 2, 2010]. Originally published in *Breakpoint* magazine, January/February 2007.

<sup>51</sup> West, “What Is the Theology of the Body and Why Is It Changing So Many Lives?”

for individuals' desiring the counterfeit: "The world is starved for love, and when the Church fails to proclaim the glory of the banquet, we inevitably fall for the lies of the [D]umpster."<sup>52</sup>

In recent years, West has supplemented his analogy of the Dumpster with that of unhealthy "fast food."<sup>53</sup> As with the Dumpster analogy, the analogy implies that those who indulge in lust are satisfying a need that is more than a mere want. "Why was [*Playboy* magazine founder] Hugh Hefner a successful 'evangelist'?" West asks. "Because eating fast food is a lot better than starving to death."<sup>54</sup> Whereas Hefner was "just going to the wrong menu to feed the hungry," the TOB offers "the banquet of love that truly satisfies."<sup>55</sup>

**4. The nuptial analogy is the primary means by which the faithful should understand their relationship to God—and "nuptial" is to be envisioned in sexual terms.** The primary image that the believer should bear in mind for understanding his or her relationship with God is the spousal analogy, which John Paul II retrieved for the Church at large after it had been obscured for many years in the writings of mystics.<sup>56</sup>

With this image in mind, God's action upon the human person should be understood as "impregnation," with the Virgin Mary as model: "[T]he spousal imagery throughout all of Scripture [teaches us] that God wants to 'marry' us. Furthermore, through this mystical marriage, the divine Bridegroom wants to fill us, 'impregnate' us with divine life. In the Virgin Mary, this becomes a living reality."<sup>57</sup> This is true for men and women. "The key to authentic masculinity" is seeing oneself as a bride of Christ. "Don't worry, guys—it doesn't mean we have to wear a

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<sup>52</sup> West, "Theology of the Body: A Compelling, Bold, Biblical Response to the Sexual Revolution."

<sup>53</sup> Dahm, "Completing the Sexual Revolution: Theology of the Body."

<sup>54</sup> "ABC News 'Sensationalized' Theology of the Body, Christopher West Says."

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> West, "The Freedom of the Gift: Priestly Celibacy and Authentic Sexual Liberation."

<sup>57</sup> Christopher West, "The Spousal Mystery of Christmas." Syndicated column, December 12, 2008, <http://www.christopherwest.com/page.asp?ContentID=109> [accessed February 4, 2010].

wedding dress or anything. It means, essentially, that we, as creatures, have to learn how to open and ‘receive’ the love of the Creator.”<sup>58</sup>

**5. “[T]he whole reality of the Church’s prayer and sacramental-liturgical life is modeled on the union of spouses.”**<sup>59</sup> In participating in the liturgy, “we are called to deep, intimate, ecstatic joys with Christ the bridegroom.”<sup>60</sup> The faithful who “have eyes to see”<sup>61</sup> are called to be “inebriated,” getting “drunk in the Spirit” on the “new wine” of the “wedding feast of the Lamb.”<sup>62</sup> “In this ‘blessed death’<sup>63</sup> of holy intoxication, sexual desire passes-over [*sic*] from lust to an immeasurable love.”<sup>64</sup>

“[T]he real meaning of our liturgy and our rituals as Catholics,” such as the Eucharist and baptism, is, in its nuptial imagery and significance, “much [more] scandalous than some forums of piety might wish it to be.”<sup>65</sup> The Paschal candle is a particularly vivid example of such symbolism, and is “truly”<sup>66</sup> intended to be a phallic symbol, according to West:

The high point of the Church’s liturgical year is the Easter Vigil, and perhaps the high point of the Easter Vigil—next of course to the Eucharist itself—is the blessing of the baptismal font. And in this ritual the priest takes the Christ candle and plunges the Christ candle into

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<sup>58</sup> Christopher West, “Spousal Prayer Part I.” Syndicated column, August 29, 2009, <http://www.christopherwest.com/page.asp?ContentID=125> [accessed February 6, 2010].

<sup>59</sup> West, *Heaven’s Song: Sexual Love as It Was Meant to Be*, 11.

<sup>60</sup> “Transcript of CS #67: Christopher West Heaven’s Song,” August 10, 2008, <http://catholicspotlight.com/122/transcript-of-cs67-christopher-west-heavens-song/> [accessed January 29, 2010].

<sup>61</sup> “Transcript of CS #67: Christopher West Heaven’s Song.”

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> West puts quotes around “blessed death” to show he is quoting from St. Teresa of Avila’s commentary on Song of Songs.

<sup>64</sup> West, *Heaven’s Song: Sexual Love as It Was Meant to Be*, 42.

<sup>65</sup> “Transcript of CS #67: Christopher West Heaven’s Song.”

<sup>66</sup> “[T]ruly, the symbolism of the blessing of the baptismal waters at the Easter Vigil is that of Christ impregnating the womb of the Church from which many children will be ‘born again.’” Christopher West, “An Open Letter to a Concerned Listener.” This letter, dated September 2001, was included in copies of the original 1999 edition of West’s “Naked Without Shame” series, distributed by the Gift Foundation, until a newly recorded and revised edition of the talks was released in 2002.

the baptismal font. What is happening here? The baptismal font is the womb of the Church, from which many children will be born again. And the symbolism of that candle, that Christ candle being plunged into this baptismal font, is Christ the Bridegroom impregnating virginally, mystically of course, impregnating the Church, the Bride, from which these children will be born again.<sup>67</sup>

**6. “The joy of sex—in all its orgasmic grandeur—is meant to be a foretaste in some way of the joys of heaven.”**<sup>68</sup> West cites the Wednesday catecheses for this point: “John Paul describes the ‘beatifying experience’ of conjugal union as a foretaste of the joys of heaven (see T[O]B, Dec 16, 1981 and Jan 13, 1982).”<sup>69</sup>

The self-giving nature of the sexual act (West prefers this term to “marital act”) is exemplified in the orgasm. “That ecstatic moment reflects the unreserved surrender of our persons and the unreserved receptivity of the other.”<sup>70</sup> The Church’s sacraments and its liturgy (which, as we have seen, is “based and founded on the model of spousal love and union”<sup>71</sup>) are intended to reflect this:

The Eucharist, which is the climax of the church’s [*sic*] liturgy, the high point of the church’s liturgy—John Paul II says that the Eucharist is the sacrament of the bridegroom and the bride. When we have the eyes to see it, what is happening in the church’s liturgy is the union of a bridegroom and a bride and the filling of the bride with eternal life.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> “Transcript of CS #67: Christopher West Heaven’s Song.” In Chapter Two, I will show that the attribution of phallic symbolism to the Paschal Candle was condemned by the fathers of the Second Vatican Council.

<sup>68</sup> West, *Good News About Sex and Marriage*, revised edition, 41.

<sup>69</sup> Christopher West, “A Response to Luke Timothy Johnson’s Critique of John Paul II’s ‘Disembodied’ Theology of the Body.” <http://www.christopherwest.com/page.asp?ContentID=75> [accessed January 31, 2010]. West appears to be taking John Paul out of context; the catecheses he cites refer to the “conjugal union” of marriage as a “beatifying experience,” but do not seem to be referring specifically or exclusively to sex.

<sup>70</sup> West, *Good News About Sex and Marriage*, revised edition, 90.

<sup>71</sup> “Transcript of CS #67: Christopher West Heaven’s Song.”

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

In his original “Naked Without Shame” tape series (recorded in 1999 and later revised following criticism from theologian Mark Lowery and others),<sup>73</sup> West said, “Heaven is the ultimate climax.”<sup>74</sup>

**7. “God created sexual desire as the power to love as he loves.”**<sup>75</sup> Sexual desire is intended “to be the very power to love in the divine image. This is what enabled the first man and woman to be naked without shame.”<sup>76</sup> The New Adam, in His crucifixion, is likewise naked, and so redeems us from the effects of the first Adam’s sin: “From the pulpit of the cross, Christ’s naked body proclaims redemption to every man and woman who has ever lived under the inheritance of shame.”<sup>77</sup> “As we allow our lusts to be ‘crucified with Christ’ (see Gal 5:24)[,] we can progressively rediscover in what is erotic that original ‘nuptial meaning of the body’ and live it.”<sup>78</sup>

**8. “Mature purity” enables “liberation from concupiscence.”**<sup>79</sup> West asserts that “when it comes to questions of sexuality, it seems that many teachers and spiritual advisors” have erred in focusing “almost exclusively” on the “dangers” of sexuality.”<sup>80</sup> The proper focus is that of John Paul II’s TOB, which teaches “liberation from concupiscence—or, more precisely, from the

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<sup>73</sup> The Gift Foundation, “Naked Without Shame,” [http://www.giftfoundation.org/products\\_naked.cfm](http://www.giftfoundation.org/products_naked.cfm) [accessed February 3, 2010].

<sup>74</sup> Mark Lowery, “Christian Sex, or Sexy Christianity?” *National Catholic Register*, November 25, 2001, <http://www.ncregister.com/site/article/10910> [accessed February 3, 2010]. The date of the revision of “Naked Without Shame” is from the Gift Foundation’s Web site, [http://www.giftfoundation.org/products\\_naked.cfm](http://www.giftfoundation.org/products_naked.cfm) [accessed February 3, 2010].

<sup>75</sup> West, “What Is the Theology of the Body and Why Is It Changing So Many Lives?”

<sup>76</sup> Christopher West, “Why Do Men Look at Porn? Oprah Viewers Want to Know.” Syndicated column, November 18, 2005, <http://www.christopherwest.com/page.asp?ContentID=19> [accessed February 2, 2010].

<sup>77</sup> Christopher West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, first edition (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2003), 93; revised edition, 126.

<sup>78</sup> West, “What Is the Theology of the Body and Why Is It Changing So Many Lives?”

<sup>79</sup> Christopher West, “The Theology of the Body Debate: The Pivotal Question.” LifeSiteNews, October 22, 2009, <http://www.lifesitenews.com/ldn/2009/oct/09102209.html> [accessed March 25, 2010].

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*



*domination* of concupiscence” through the development of “mature purity” which, “through the grace of redemption,” enables one’s sexuality to “become in [one’s] practical, lived experience the realm of the sacramental and the holy.”<sup>81</sup> Christ restores to man the “pure way of seeing”<sup>82</sup> that Adam and Eve enjoyed “in the beginning”:<sup>83</sup>

[Adam and Eve] saw the mystery of God revealed through their bodies. But, tragically, what was the first result of the original sin? Shame. Shame that led them to cover their bodies. Not because the body’s bad. You don’t cover the body because it’s bad. We cover it because it’s so holy, and we know in a fallen world we no longer have the eyes to see the mystery of the body. We’ve been blinded by sin and by the deceiver to this true, beautiful, glorious vision that God has stamped in our bodies.

But here’s the good news of the Gospel. Christ came into the world preaching sight to the blind.<sup>84</sup>

The gift of vision that enables this revelation is received through the “wine” of the Holy Spirit, which, as has been noted, purifies our hearts through “holy drunkenness.”<sup>85</sup> Through this purification, we experience “a ‘real and deep victory’ over the distortions of lust (see TOB 45:4).”<sup>86</sup> That in turn leads to an ever-increasing sharing in the “sense of wonder and fascination of the human body that is present in the Song of Songs—an experience *very different* from the mere arousal of lust.”<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> West, *Heaven’s Song: Sexual Love as It Was Meant to Be*, 15.

<sup>83</sup> “Christopher West, Theology of the Body Pt 1 S2E9,” episode of TV show “Pure Passion” posted to Vimeo.com, <http://www.vimeo.com/2428915> [accessed February 6, 2010]. The quotation referenced begins at 23:42.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> “The more we allow God’s ‘wine’ (the Holy Spirit, see Eph. 5:19) to purify our hearts through holy drunkenness, the more we experience a ‘real and deep victory’ over the distortions of lust (see TOB 45:4).” West, *Heaven’s Song: Sexual Love as It Was Meant to Be*, 42.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

**9. “The Song of Songs is of great importance to a proper understanding of Christianity.”**<sup>88</sup> It shows “[h]ow we come to see the sexual embrace, the deep intimate erotic love of husband and wife, as a passageway into deep transforming intimate union with God.”<sup>89</sup>

A vital role that the Song of Songs can and should play in the Christian life is to enable Christians, through “prayerful reflection” on its “erotic themes,” to accomplish their essential task of “reclaim[ing] the holiness of the body and of spousal love” from the “tenacious grip of Manichaeian attitudes”:<sup>90</sup>

If we are to enter through this *gateway to holiness* opened to us by the Song of Songs, all suspicion towards the body must be abandoned at the threshold; all depreciations of sexuality—be they of the prudish or base kind—must be submitted to the glorious truth of this simultaneously sacred and unabashedly sexual song; and all fear of our own desires submitted to the purifying fire of the Mystery.<sup>91</sup>

**10. The meaning of marriage is encapsulated in “intercourse.”** “Through intercourse, the spouses *enact* their sacrament.”<sup>92</sup> When Pope John Paul II said that “[t]he sacrament [of marriage], as a visible sign, is constituted with man, inasmuch as he is a ‘body,’ through his ‘visible’ masculinity and femininity,” he was referring specifically to intercourse:<sup>93</sup>

The pope is saying here that God created our bodies as male and female to be a sign in the world that reveals his own eternal mystery, and that this happens most specifically when husband and wife unite their bodies in “one flesh.”<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> West, “Christopher West on ABCNews.com.”

<sup>89</sup> “Transcript of CS #67: Christopher West Heaven’s Song.”

<sup>90</sup> Christopher West, “Reflections on the Song of Songs, Part 1.” Syndicated column, June 8, 2007, <http://www.christopherwest.com/page.asp?ContentID=15> [accessed February 6, 2010].

<sup>91</sup> West, *Heaven’s Song: Sexual Love as It Was Meant to Be*, 74, emphasis in original.

<sup>92</sup> West, *Good News About Sex and Marriage*, revised edition, 49, emphasis in original.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

These ten themes comprise the theological foundation of Christopher West's presentation on the TOB. In the next chapter, I will examine the public criticisms that have been made of his presentation, as well as his response to those criticisms, and present my own critique.

## Chapter Two

### Criticisms of Christopher West's Presentation of the Theology of the Body

Exchange with Mark Lowery in *National Catholic Register* (2001)

In November 2001, the *National Catholic Register* invited Mark Lowery, then associate professor of theology (now full professor) at the University of Dallas, to review West's popular 1999 series of recorded talks "Naked Without Shame."<sup>1</sup> Lowery's review, published November 25, 2001, under the provocative headline "Christian Sex or Sexy Christianity?,"<sup>2</sup> begins with glowing praise for West, and ends with a "guarantee that many people will find that Christopher West's series provides just the jump-start needed to get their sexual lives in order."<sup>3</sup> In the body of the review, the professor recommends West fine-tune his presentation in certain areas. However, his overall intention is clearly correction, not condemnation.

Noting that the material content of West's presentation is virtually free from error, Lowery writes:

Rather, West's mistake occurs in the *formal* content he presents—that is, in the overarching lens or perspective through which he lets his audiences see the material content. ... [T]here is the lurking danger of conveying that Christianity really is all about sex. ...

For example, West shows how sexual pleasure is a foretaste of the eschaton<sup>4</sup>—an appropriate suggestion and a good example of Christianizing sexuality. But this is followed with the assertion that "Heaven is the ultimate climax"—an inappropriate suggestion and an unfortunate example of sexualizing Christianity.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Naked Without Shame" tape series (1999), distributed by the Gift Foundation.

<sup>2</sup> Lowery, "Christian Sex or Sexy Christianity?"

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Chapter One of this thesis, "Ten Major Themes," point No. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Lowery, "Christian Sex or Sexy Christianity?"

To avoid the “implication that sexuality is the very foundation of Christianity,” Lowery recommends that West give “a clear reminder that the truth about sex is not at the foundation of Christian truth. It is as true and as important as other Christian truths, but is not the foundation. ... At the foundation we find the Trinitarian life, dwelling in us as grace, through the Incarnation.”<sup>6</sup> He acknowledges that West’s presentation does make reference to grace, but asserts that West’s focus on “the truth about sex” effectively displaces grace from its primacy in the Christian life.<sup>7</sup> The primacy of grace is particularly necessary, he writes, in ministering to those whose sexuality is disordered:

Many of West’s listeners may very well be able to see and appreciate the sacramental meaning of the body, but, due to the damage wrought to the “raw material” of their sexuality, the capacity to fully experience that meaning may be beyond reach. ...

Take, for instance, the person abused as a child whose damaged psyche spreads to her sexuality. She may have come to terms with this privation, and would prefer to live with it. Likewise the person of homosexual orientation who lives chastely, and would prefer not to seek reparative therapy: He can appreciate the sacramental meaning of the body, and simultaneously put it on the back burner for himself, aware that it’s not the center of Christian life. ...

The foundation of the faith—the Trinitarian life, grace infused ever more into our being—is something they can have fully, and is in fact something that can grow ever more strong *right in the midst of* the struggle with our damaged raw materials.<sup>8</sup>

Two months later, the *Register* published a reply to Lowery’s piece, “Christopher West Responds: Christian Nuptiality and Nuptial Christianity.”<sup>9</sup>

West claims that Lowery’s dispute is not with him, but with John Paul II: “The Pope’s catechesis is not merely one aspect of truth in the overall hierarchy. It’s a new lens through

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Christopher West, “Christopher West Responds: Christian Nuptiality and Nuptial Christianity.” *National Catholic Register*, January 20, 2002, [http://www.ncregister.com/site/article/christopher\\_west\\_responds\\_christian\\_nuptiality\\_and\\_nuptial\\_christianity](http://www.ncregister.com/site/article/christopher_west_responds_christian_nuptiality_and_nuptial_christianity)

which to view the most essential theological *and* anthropological truths of the faith.”<sup>10</sup> As far as grace is concerned, he says, the pope cited intercourse as the means by which the sacramental grace of marriage is delivered: “John Paul stresses that in creation grace was communicated ‘through the union of the first man and woman in ... marriage.’ In redemption this same grace is communicated through ‘the indissoluble union of Christ with the Church, which ... Ephesians presents as the nuptial union of spouses’ (Oct. 13, 1982).”<sup>11</sup>

Although such an interpretation is not supported by John Paul’s unedited language, Lowery let West have the last word.<sup>12</sup>

#### The “Nightline” Segment and Ensuing Criticism (May 2009-October 2009)

For seven years following Lowery’s review, public criticisms of West were rare. The floodgates opened after May 7, 2009, when the TOB presenter received his widest-ever media exposure: a seven-minute segment on ABC News “Nightline.” An article on ABCNews.com, “Sex Sermonist’s Heroes: Pope John Paul II and Hugh Hefner,”<sup>13</sup> summarized the segment:

The seeming paradox of West’s position is captured in the unlikely pairing of his two big heroes—his muses, you might say. They are Pope John Paul II, and Hugh Hefner. ...

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<sup>10</sup> West, “Christopher West Responds: Christian Nuptiality and Nuptial Christianity.” Cf. Chapter One of this thesis, “Ten Major Themes,” point no. 1.

<sup>11</sup> West, “Christopher West Responds: Christian Nuptiality and Nuptial Christianity.”

<sup>12</sup> Father Angelo Mary Geiger has observed that West’s editing of the John Paul II quotation alters the Holy Father’s original meaning. The unedited quotation reads, “In this way the Mystery hidden from all eternity in God—a mystery that in the beginning in the sacrament of creation became *a visible reality through the union* of the first man and the first woman in the perspective of marriage—becomes in the sacrament of redemption *a visible reality in the indissoluble union of Christ with the Church*, which the author of Ephesians presents as the spousal union of the two, husband and wife” (Waldstein translation, emphasis in original).

Geiger writes, “Nowhere here does the Holy Father say what West claims he does, namely, that ‘in creation grace was communicated “through the union of the first man and woman in ... marriage.”’ ... [T]he point he is really making is that the real source of grace is the nuptial mystery of Christ’s union with the Church” (Father Angelo Mary Geiger, “Sexualizing Christianity” Mary Victrix, February 10, 2010, <http://maryvictrix.wordpress.com/2010/02/08/christopher-west-sexualizing-christianity>).

<sup>13</sup> Wright and Brown, “Sex Sermonist’s Heroes: Pope John Paul II and Hugh Hefner.”

“I actually see very profound historical connections between Hugh Hefner and John Paul II,” said West. ... Each man in his own way, West insisted, rescued sex from prudish Victorian morality. “I love Hugh Hefner,” said West. “I really do. Why? Because I think I understand his ache. I think I understand his longing because I feel it myself. There is this yearning, this ache, this longing we all have for love, for union, for intimacy.” ...

West goes so far as to call the Song of Songs “the centerfold of the Bible.”<sup>14</sup>

Within an hour of the “Nightline” airing, West’s official Facebook page published a statement intended “to correct any editorial comments [from the segment] which may appear misleading,”<sup>15</sup> including its account of his comments about the Song of Songs:<sup>16</sup>

The Song of Songs ... is in the very center of the Bible for a reason. Calling it the “centerfold” in Scripture, Christopher intends to redeem the common understanding of the word “centerfold,” which is usually associated in popular culture with pornography. In no way is it meant to compare the sacredness of the Song of Songs with the distortions of pornography.<sup>17</sup>

The segment sparked intense discussion among Catholics, particularly with regard to West’s statements about *Playboy* magazine founder Hugh Hefner.<sup>18</sup> In an interview that appeared two days after the segment’s airing, West stressed he “never said Hugh Hefner is a hero,” and claimed that the story “sensationalized some of the sexual aspects” of his presentation. Regarding his comments on Hefner, he added, “The point I was making with ABC was that we as Catholics agree with Hefner’s diagnosis of the disease of Puritanism, a fearful rejection of the body rooted in [the] heritage of Manicheanism.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> West, “Christopher West on ABCNews.com.”

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> See Matt Abbott, “Christopher West, Hugh Hefner, and the ‘Theology of the Body’ controversy.” *RenewAmerica.com*, May 9, 2009, <http://www.renewamerica.com/columns/abbott/090509> [accessed March 4, 2010].

<sup>19</sup> “ABC Interview ‘Sensationalized’ Theology of the Body, Christopher West Says.”

During the ensuing days and weeks, as has been noted, several Catholic thinkers publicly registered concerns about West.<sup>20</sup> The criticisms that received the widest attention, and engendered the widest response, were those expressed by Schindler, who published the first essay-length critique of West's presentation since Lowery's 2001 review.<sup>21</sup> Given his standing as provost/dean and Gagnon Professor of Fundamental Theology at the Pontifical John Paul II Institute—West's alma mater—as well as his having been one of West's early mentors, his critique carried significant moral weight. If anyone were qualified to offer a “course correction” to the popular TOB presenter, it was he.

The Schindler piece was quickly followed by several online commentaries defending West, most notably essays by Smith<sup>22</sup> and Waldstein.<sup>23</sup> Schindler then followed up with a second essay;<sup>24</sup> Smith<sup>25</sup> and Waldstein<sup>26</sup> each responded to that as well.

As followers of the debate awaited West's response, a response came instead from above, via the joint statement from Cardinal Rigali and Bishop Rhoades.<sup>27</sup> The bishops gave West and

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<sup>20</sup> “Following the Discussion on JP2's Theology of the Body,”

<sup>21</sup> David Schindler, “Christopher West's Theology of the Body.” *Headline Bistro*, May 22, 2009, [http://www.headlinebistro.com/hb/en/news/west\\_schindler2.html](http://www.headlinebistro.com/hb/en/news/west_schindler2.html) [accessed March 4, 2010].

<sup>22</sup> Janet Smith, “Moral Theologian Says Christopher West's Work is ‘Completely Sound’.” *Headline Bistro*, May 28, 2009, <http://www.headlinebistro.com/hb/en/news/janetsmithresponse.html> [accessed March 5, 2010].

<sup>23</sup> Michael Waldstein, “Translator of John Paul II's Original Work Defends Christopher West.” *InsideCatholic.com*, May 29, 2009, [http://insidecatholic.com/Joomla/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=6117&Itemid=48](http://insidecatholic.com/Joomla/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=6117&Itemid=48) [accessed March 5, 2010].

<sup>24</sup> David Schindler, “Response to Profs. Smith and Waldstein Regarding Christopher West.” *Headline Bistro*, June 5, 2009, [http://www.headlinebistro.com/hb/en/news/schindler\\_response.html](http://www.headlinebistro.com/hb/en/news/schindler_response.html) [accessed March 5, 2010].

<sup>25</sup> Janet Smith, “A Call for Fair Treatment of West.” *Headline Bistro*, [http://www.headlinebistro.com/en/news/smith\\_schindler.html](http://www.headlinebistro.com/en/news/smith_schindler.html) [accessed March 5, 2010]. The publication date is not listed on the Web page, but references to it on other Web sites show that it appeared online by June 18, 2009, if not before.

<sup>26</sup> Michael Waldstein, “The Pattern of Christopher West's Theology.” *Headline Bistro*, [http://www.headlinebistro.com/hb/en/news/waldstein\\_schindler.html](http://www.headlinebistro.com/hb/en/news/waldstein_schindler.html) [accessed March 5, 2010]. The article is undated; it is a response to David L. Schindler's “Response to Profs. Smith and Waldstein Regarding Christopher West,” which was published June 5, 2009.

<sup>27</sup> “Support for Christopher West from Cardinal Justin Rigali and Bishop Kevin Rhoades.”



the institute their highest praise, using language normally reserved for describing founders of ecclesial movements:

We are convinced that John Paul II's Theology of the Body is a treasure for the Church, indeed a gift of the Holy Spirit for our time. Yet, its scholarly language needs to be "translated" into more accessible categories if the average person is to benefit from it. To do this is the specific mission of the Theology of the Body Institute, and we believe that Christopher West, the Institute's popular lecturer and spokesman, has been given a particular charism to carry out this mission. With great skill as a presenter, with keen insight as a thinker, and with profound reverence for the mystery of human sexuality, he has been able to reach thousands in our sexually wounded culture with the Gospel of salvation in Christ.<sup>28</sup>

The bishops went on to say that West and the TOB Institute were in communication with them, worked with their episcopal blessing, and showed "strong fidelity" to Church teachings.<sup>29</sup>

Following this endorsement, West published an official response to criticisms.<sup>30</sup>

*In focus: the Schindler critique and major responses*

As Schindler's criticisms of West are the most significant and widely published ones to date, following are selected points from them, along with relevant responses from Smith, Waldstein, and the TOB presenter himself.

**West's overall "preoccupation" indicates "a disordered approach to human sexuality."<sup>31</sup>**

Schindler begins his first critique by emphasizing he is not questioning West's "intention of orthodoxy."<sup>32</sup> He then presents a lengthy list of examples of West's presentation that "have been

<sup>28</sup> "Support for Christopher West from Cardinal Justin Rigali and Bishop Kevin Rhoades."

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> West, "The Theology of the Body Debate: The Pivotal Question."

<sup>31</sup> Schindler, "Christopher West's Theology of the Body." Cf. Chapter One of this thesis, "Ten Major Themes," point no. 1.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

verified by persons directly involved or by things written by West himself.”<sup>33</sup> Among them are “advising young men in college and the seminary to look at their naked bodies in the mirror daily in order to overcome shame”; “using phallic symbolism to describe the Easter candle”; “and, on Nightline, praising Hugh Hefner for helping rescue sex from prudish Victorian attitudes, saying that there are ‘very profound historical connections between Hefner and John Paul II,’ while emphasizing that John Paul II took the sexual revolution further and in the right direction.”<sup>34</sup> His criticism “bears on the *substance* of [West’s] *preoccupation* as reflected in the examples.”<sup>35</sup>

In their responses, Smith and Waldstein emphatically disagree with Schindler’s assessment of West’s preoccupation, each questioning whether the examples he cites are authentic.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, Smith assumes the validity of some of them in order to defend their orthodoxy.

For example, in her second response, defending West against Schindler’s charge that he makes statements that are “vulgar and in bad taste,”<sup>37</sup> she chides the dean for criticizing West’s interpretation of the Paschal candle.<sup>38</sup> While admitting she initially thought the interpretation was “vulgar and irreverent,” Smith states that she later learned “that liturgists and theologians from the early days of the Church have understood the Easter Candle just as West does.”<sup>39</sup> She does not offer any source for this assertion.

[In fact, neither West nor his defenders have ever cited a historical source for the interpretation of the Paschal candle as a phallic symbol. In researching this interpretation, I

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis in original. This criticism recalls Lowery’s observation that West implies “sexuality is the very foundation of Christianity” (see Lowery, “Christian Sex or Sexy Christianity?”).

<sup>36</sup> See Smith, “Moral Theologian Says Christopher West’s Work is ‘Completely Sound’” and “A Call for Fair Treatment of West,” and Waldstein, “The Pattern of Christopher West’s Theology.”

<sup>37</sup> Schindler, “Christopher West’s Theology of the Body.”

<sup>38</sup> Smith, “A Call for Fair Treatment of West.”

<sup>39</sup> Smith, “A Call for Fair Treatment of West.”

discovered that Father Hugo Rahner S.J. had written against it in his 1957 work *Griechische Mythen in christlicher Deutung*, later published in English as *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*.<sup>40</sup> Rahner writes that the candle-as-phallus myth was first popularized by Hermann Usener (a professor whose best-known student was Nietzsche). It was passed down through Usener's disciple Albrecht Dieterich, who argued for a Mithraic interpretation of the liturgy, and was finally taken up, predictably, by Carl Jung.

The Consilium—that is, the body of theologians, historians, and bishops responsible for implementing the Vatican II reforms after the close of the Council—was aware of such modern-day interpretations when it undertook the revision of the blessing used during the candle immersion rite. As has been noted by Father Dominic Serra,<sup>41</sup> director of liturgical studies and sacramental theology at the Catholic University of America, the blessing was revised to emphasize “the paschal and Christic symbolism of the candle,”<sup>42</sup> rather than the original rebirth imagery, “in order to retain the candle immersion while avoiding the danger of seeing in it a phallic allusion.”<sup>43</sup> The Schema for the revision shows that the Consilium did so because neither the theology behind the liturgy, nor the liturgy itself, supported an intentionally phallic meaning.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Hugo Rahner, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery* (New York: Biblio & Tannen, 1971; original German edition published in 1957), 82-83. The relevant pages may be found on Google Books: <http://books.google.com/books?id=N8XAF-JE6PAC&lpg=PA127&ots=Ik4loyBHRH>.

<sup>41</sup> Dominic E. Serra. “The Blessing of Baptismal Water at the Paschal Vigil: Ancient Texts and Modern Revisions,” *Worship* 64:2 (1990), 142-156. Father Serra also wrote on this topic in “The Blessing of Baptismal Water at the Paschal Vigil in the Post Vatican II Rite,” *Ecclesia Orans* 7 (1990), 343-368. It should be noted that Father Serra's research, published several years before Christopher West began his public career, was not intended as a response to West or other TOB interpreters.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 156.

<sup>44</sup> “Et mutatur contextus: quae dicuntur de morte et resurrectione cum Christo, significantur per immersionem et elevationem cerei. Ita insuper melius evitatur interpretatio 'phallica' ritus, frequens apud historicos religionum, etiam catholicos, quae interpretatio, quamvis historice falsa (quia, ut dictum est, nulla est relatio originalis inter verba et ritum), speciem vari ex eo gignit, quia contextus actualis loquitur de effectu regenerandi (et praefatio forma

Hugo Rahner's words, although written several years before the revision of the liturgy, neatly summarize the theology behind the Consilium's revision: "What we witness here [in the candle immersion] is a symbol of Christ crucified giving to the water the illuminating power of the Spirit[,] and those who insist on seeing a phallic symbol in the candle appear to be completely oblivious to what not only the Roman, but all other liturgies have to declare on this particular point, of what, in point of fact, they declare with considerable emphasis. It is that the baptismal font is *immaculatus uterus*, and that, like Mary, the Church bears her children solely by the power of the Spirit."<sup>45</sup>]

West's official response does not address Schindler's criticisms with regard to his preoccupation.

**West ignores the "objective" presence of concupiscence in the body.**<sup>46</sup> Schindler writes that the author and speaker "misconstrues the meaning of concupiscence, stressing purity of intention one-sidedly when talking about problems of lust."<sup>47</sup>

When I first pointed this problem out to him several years ago, his response was that he refused to limit the power of Christ to transform us. My response is that concupiscence dwells "objectively" in the body, and continues its "objective" presence in the body throughout the course of our infralapsarian existence; and that we should expect holiness to "trump" temptations or disordered tendencies in the area of sexuality exactly as often as we should expect holiness to "trump" the reality of having to undergo death.<sup>48</sup>

While Smith's responses omit mention of Schindler's concerns on this issue, Waldstein attempts to address them in his first response, writing,

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antea de utero)." *Schema* 112, 19, quoted in Serra, "The Blessing of Baptismal Water at the Paschal Vigil: Ancient Texts and Modern Revisions," 155.

<sup>45</sup> Rahner, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*, 83.

<sup>46</sup> Schindler, "Christopher West's Theology of the Body." Cf. Chapter One of this thesis, "Ten Major Themes," point no. 8.

<sup>47</sup> Schindler, "Christopher West's Theology of the Body."

<sup>48</sup> Schindler, "Christopher West's Theology of the Body."

West does not contradict the Catholic teaching that concupiscence and the *fomes peccati* (the tendency to sin) are objective consequences of the Fall that remain in every human being until death. ... John Paul II considers true growth in virtue not only possible, but necessary for every man and woman. ... Also in the sexual sphere, true growth in virtue is possible; virtue can overcome the tendency to sin, though objective concupiscence and the consequent danger of sin remain real. The path to virtue leads through deep awareness of the spousal meaning of the body and through authentic growth in love. ... These are the truths West highlights in his writings and presentations. I doubt that Schindler denies these truths, but his critique of West sounds almost as if he does.<sup>49</sup>

Schindler writes in response, “What I reject ... is not the Catholic position regarding concupiscence as Waldstein states it, but only his claim that that position can be unambiguously claimed also as West’s.”<sup>50</sup>

West centers his official response to critics upon the “pivotal question”<sup>51</sup> of concupiscence, but frames the issue quite differently from Schindler, asking “What does the grace of redemption offer us in this life with regard to our disordered sexual tendencies?”<sup>52</sup>

While admitting that, in some of his earliest lectures and tapes, he did not emphasize clearly enough that “the battle with concupiscence is fierce,” his answer is ultimately the same as the one Schindler says he gave years ago: He refuses to limit the transforming power of Christ.<sup>53</sup> To give proper context to his perspective on this matter, it is necessary to quote him at length:

I humbly invite all those who question what I teach about liberation from concupiscence to take a closer look at the teaching of John Paul II on the matter. ... It is a point of utmost importance. Indeed, in a very real way, debates about what we are capable of in the battle with concupiscence take us to the crux of the Gospel itself.<sup>54</sup> “This is what is at stake,” John Paul II maintained, “the reality of Christ’s redemption. Christ has redeemed us! This means he has given us the possibility of realizing the entire truth of our being; he has set our freedom free from the domination of concupiscence” (*Veritatis Splendor* 103). ...

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<sup>49</sup> Waldstein, “Translator of John Paul II’s Original Work Defends Christopher West.”

<sup>50</sup> Schindler, “Response to Profs. Smith and Waldstein Regarding Christopher West.”

<sup>51</sup> West, “The Theology of the Body Debate: The Pivotal Question.”

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> For context on West’s views regarding this point and those that flow from it, see Chapter One of this thesis, “Ten Major Themes,” particularly point no. 8.

The teaching of John Paul II is clear: liberation from concupiscence—or, more precisely, from the domination of concupiscence (John Paul II used both expressions)—is not only a possibility, it is a necessity if we are to live our lives “in the truth” and experience the divine plan for human love (see TOB 43:6, 47:5). ...

It is precisely this liberation that allows us to discover what John Paul II called “mature purity.” In mature purity “man enjoys the fruits of victory over concupiscence” (TOB 58:7). This victory is gradual and certainly remains fragile here on earth, but it is nonetheless real. ... The distortions of sin are, of course, very real. But through the grace of redemption, can our sexuality not become in our practical, lived experience the realm of the sacramental and the holy? ... “To the pure all things are pure,” St. Paul said (Titus 1:15). But to those bound by lust, even the pure seems impure. Oh, how tragic when we label as ugly that which is beautiful!<sup>55</sup>

Schindler has not issued a public answer to West’s response.

### Assessing the Critiques

I will now present my own critique of West’s presentation of the TOB, considering the points made by the critics already cited, and outlining additional areas of concern.

#### *Nuptiality as key to sexual healing*

As has been noted, Christopher West says that his personal mission is to help the “wounded.”<sup>56</sup> To that end, his most recent book, *Heaven’s Song: Sexual Love as It Was Meant to Be*, is largely directed toward aiding the reader’s “sexual healing and integration.”<sup>57</sup>

Unquestionably, those wishing to be healed from a damaged or disordered understanding of sexuality need to consider the meaning of being created male or female. The healing process may

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<sup>55</sup> West, “The Theology of the Body Debate: The Pivotal Question.”

<sup>56</sup> For example, in a 2005 interview, West said, “I see great hunger for the Pope’s teaching everywhere I travel. The whole world is a mission field ready to soak up the Pope’s ToB [*sic*] because we have all been so wounded by the sexual revolution. People are beginning to wake up to this and they are yearning for answers to their questions and, even more, healing for their wounds. This is what the ToB affords” (Daughters of St. Mary, “Interview with Christopher West”).

<sup>57</sup> West, *Heaven’s Song: Sexual Love as It Was Meant to Be*, 74.

likewise include gaining understanding of the meaning and purpose of sexual desire, in order to rightly direct such desire. John Paul II's Wednesday catecheses, and particularly Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, with its exploration of the complementarity of *eros* and *agape*, offer ample support for the benefits such an understanding provides for the spiritual life.

However, exploring the objective meaning and purpose of sexual desire, with the aim of bringing one's own sexual desire into accord with the divine will, is not the same as immersing oneself deeply within one's sexual desire for the purpose of "holy fascination with the body and God's plan for sexual union."<sup>58</sup> Although West does indeed expound upon the objective meaning and purpose of such desire from the perspective of recent magisterial teachings, it is his call to "holy fascination" that provides the basis for his approach to sexual healing.

With the caveat that he is "writing this book for a mature readership and presupposing a high level of purity in the reader,"<sup>59</sup> West takes it as a given that those who seek Christ will necessarily find that sexual desire leads them to him. More than that, he insists "sexual love is the earthly key that enables us to enter into heaven's song":<sup>60</sup>

This doesn't mean we all need an earthly spouse in order to enter into mystical union with God. But it *does* mean that, for all of us, a pathway to a deep intimacy with God opens up as we come to understand "sexual love as it was meant to be." And *that's* the goal of this book: to use that "mystical key" of sexual love to open the holy door to union with God.<sup>61</sup>

Unlike the author's other works, which make at least passing mention of God's fatherhood and human parenthood, *Heaven's Song* is not in the least concerned with filiality. Children are

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<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis in original.

not even mentioned, except in the “real-life”<sup>62</sup> stories that open and close each chapter (e.g. “When it came out in the open that both of them were having affairs, they told their children that they were getting a divorce”<sup>63</sup>). The book likewise makes no mention of Church teachings on abortion and contraception, nor does it introduce the topic of periodic continence. Out of its 179 pages, only one paragraph mentions the word “chastity.” What there is in *Heaven’s Song* is exactly what West promises: a step-by-step guide to using “[f]ascination with the human body ... for training in *love*.”<sup>64</sup>

Just as “sexual love is the earthly key”<sup>65</sup> and the “mystical key,”<sup>66</sup> so too is such fascination key to encountering the divine:

Indeed, a holy fascination with the body is *precisely the key* that opens the holy door to the divine bridal chamber, allowing us to experience what the mystics call “nuptial union” with God. This deep, intimate, transforming union with God imbues us with authentic holiness.<sup>67</sup>

Taken as a whole, the work reads like a book-length denial of Lowery’s assertion, regarding those suffering from sexual wounds or disorders, that “[t]he foundation of the faith—the Trinitarian life, grace infused ever more into our being—is ... in fact something that can grow ever more strong *right in the midst of* the struggle with our damaged raw materials.”<sup>68</sup>

Throughout the book, West insists to the contrary. By his account, it is not enough simply to resolve to avoid sin, accept what one feels one cannot change, and seek to grow in faith. Genuine

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<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 43, emphasis in original.

<sup>68</sup> Lowery, “Christian Sex or Sexy Christianity?”



communion with the Church is simply impossible for the person who hesitates at undertaking a complete sexual healing.

[T]he road to holiness passes by way of sexual healing and integration. The way we understand our bodies and the union of man and woman has a direct bearing with the way we understand Christ's body and his union with the Church. Hence, if we are to *enter in* to proper union with Christ and his Church, the diseased images and ideas we have about our own bodies and sexual union *must* be healed. It can be a long and painful journey—and there is no detour.<sup>69</sup>

West repeatedly emphasizes that such an approach to healing requires envisioning one's relationship with God as nuptial. Although he does not go into detail about how this is accomplished for men,<sup>70</sup> he suggests that, for women, the key to sexual healing is to understand Jesus as Bridegroom. However, the real-life stories he offers bear the unintended message that, for women whose brokenness stems from fractured relationships with their parents, a single-minded focus on nuptiality brings doubtful results at best.

One such story begins chapter one of *Heaven's Song*. A woman identified as "Ellen" tells of parents who (in an echo of West's own upbringing) were "'good Catholics' from all external appearances, [who] told her next to nothing about her developing body or what to expect. ... Everything that had to do with *those* parts of the body was clouded in shame."<sup>71</sup> As a result of such enforced ignorance, she endured much trauma, including an abortion and "a string of broken relationships and one-night stands."

Ellen's eventual discovery of the TOB enabled her to begin to find healing, aided by a spiritual director, whom she has now been seeing for nearly four years. While she is learning how to forgive her parents, she is "still working through layers of bitterness towards them."<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> West, *Heaven's Song: Sexual Love as It Was Meant to Be*, 12, emphasis in original. He often emphasizes double entendres via italics or quotation marks.

<sup>70</sup> As noted in Chapter One, he applies the bridal analogy to men elsewhere, in his column "Spousal Prayer Part I."

<sup>71</sup> West, *Heaven's Song: Sexual Love as It Was Meant to Be*, 23.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

Her emotional recovery is built on a foundation of nuptiality. West indicates that such a foundation is the right one, but Ellen's account suggests it is fragile:

“The whole time [in all those relationships] I was looking for Jesus, I was looking for the Bridegroom, like the woman at the well [in John's gospel]. I know that now,” she says through her tears. “But it's still so painful. I want to do whatever I can to help spare other people this pain.”<sup>73</sup>

Ultimately, such a story raises questions as to whether a nuptial relationship with Christ be offered as the primary solution to a woman whose relationship with her parents is damaged by mistrust and a lack of affirmation of her femininity. Might not such a woman discover a more healing understanding of her identity in God by viewing him first as her Father? Indeed, might not the act of avoiding the idea of God as Father (unfashionable in the wake of feminism) in favor of the romantic ideal of Christ as Bridegroom, constitute precisely the kind of emotional “detour” that West claims to eschew?

These questions gain added relevance in light of the other real-life account in *Heaven's Song* in which parental issues play a major role. “Angela,” a thirty-year-old unmarried mother, tells of having a father who refused to touch her after she hit puberty. As a result, she says, she was “[s]tarved for masculine affirmation” and “sought it in all the wrong ways.”<sup>74</sup>

“Studying John Paul's teachings about lust” convinced Angela that her father resented her because her body “stirred his lusts.” “It all just makes me sick,” she says today.<sup>75</sup>

Healing began with the help of her fiancé, Gary, “who, in fact, was the one who introduced her to John Paul's TOB.”<sup>76</sup> She tells West,

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<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

I know Gary really wants to marry me, but he keeps telling me Jesus is my true Bridegroom. Coming to see that Jesus loves my body and created my body to reveal his own love—oh my gosh, that’s just amazing!<sup>77</sup>

Both she and Gary are “studying to be counselors with the goal of putting John Paul II’s teachings into practice.”<sup>78</sup> West seems to consider this a happy ending—it is the final sentence of the main body of *Heaven’s Song*, in fact. However, as with Ellen’s story, it is difficult to see how a simple recourse to nuptial spirituality offers sufficient healing from the protagonist’s psychological issues.

Angela does not seem to be starved for “masculine affirmation” so much as *paternal* affirmation (and perhaps maternal as well, as the story makes no mention of her mother). As with Ellen, she retains bitterness towards her father; in fact, he disgusts her even more now than before she discovered the TOB. As with Ellen, might not her quest for “masculine affirmation” through the “Bridegroom,” now mediated by her real-life bridegroom, be a spiritual “detour” to avoid seeing God as Father?

These are not merely hypothetical questions. The daughter of parents who have failed to provide a stable, loving home environment, and have failed to affirm her in her femininity, suffers from a serious psychological dysfunction that places her at an increased risk of negative outcomes in the realm of sexual relationships. Sociological data on daughters of broken families bear stark testimony to the extent to which girls are affected by lack of parental affirmation.

For example, daughters of divorced parents are more likely to find it difficult to value their femininity or to believe that they are genuinely lovable.<sup>79</sup> They tend to be more ambivalent about becoming involved in romantic relationships, experience more conflict and negativity in such

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<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> N. Kalter, “Long-Term Effects of Divorce on Children: A Developmental Vulnerability Model,” *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, vol. 57 [1987]: 587-600. This datum and the data that follows are taken from an unpublished manuscript written by Patrick F. Fagan with the present author (that is, Dawn Eden), *Longing to Belong* [2008].

relationships, and are less likely to trust their partner's benevolence.<sup>80</sup> At the same time, they are less likely to value consistency of commitment.<sup>81</sup>

One study found that almost all daughters of divorced parents anticipated cohabiting before marriage, regardless of the level of affection between them and their fathers.<sup>82</sup> It also found that daughters of intact marriages who did anticipate cohabiting were those who had poor relationships with their fathers.<sup>83</sup> In the words of Dr. Patrick F. Fagan of Family Research Council, who has devoted many years to analyzing sociological data on the effects of family instability upon children, "where there is a lack of male-female belonging in one generation (father-daughter), there is lessened belonging between female and male in the next (cohabiting daughter and male lover)."<sup>84</sup>

Given the evidence that daughters who suffer from the dysfunction of fatherlessness and other family brokenness carry that dysfunction into their sexual relationships, it would seem that attempting to fix such a dysfunction through sexual desire risks aggravating the problem.

### *Concupiscence and the "two bishops"*

West's contention that sexual desire necessarily mediates union with God is key to his understanding of concupiscence. Because there is "no detour"<sup>85</sup> to such union outside of a

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<sup>80</sup> S.E. Jacquet and C.A. Surra, "Parental Divorce and Premarital Couples: Commitment and Other Relationship Characteristics," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, vol. 63 [2001]: 627-638.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> S. Southworth and J.C. Schwarz, "Post-Divorce Contact, Relationship with Father, and Heterosexual Trust in Female College Students," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, vol. 57 [1987]: 379-381.

<sup>83</sup> Southworth and Schwarz, "Post-Divorce Contact, Relationship with Father, and Heterosexual Trust in Female College Students."

<sup>84</sup> Fagan, *Longing to Belong*, Chapter 1.

<sup>85</sup> West, *Heaven's Song: Sexual Love as It Was Meant to Be*, 12.

sublimation of sexual desire, it follows for him that every opportunity to sublimate sexual desire is an opportunity for holiness.

The substance of “mature purity,” he insists, is not found in avoiding “occasions of sin.”<sup>86</sup> Such avoidance is mere continence, and “we must not call that virtue.”<sup>87</sup> Rather, mature purity is found only in those who are willing to “risk”<sup>88</sup> concupiscence so that they might reap the benefits of “union with Christ and his Church.”<sup>89</sup> He underscores this point in *Theology of the Body Explained*, in an excursus dedicated to attacking the notion that an engaged couple wishing to stay chaste should “never spend any extended time alone together.”<sup>90</sup>

The concern that engaged couples may be *too* chaste seems an anachronistic one for a Catholic catechist to raise in the wake of the sexual revolution. However, West’s understanding of what constitutes a normative Catholic upbringing may be shaped from the fact that, as mentioned in Chapter 1, he spent his late teens and early 20s living with his family in the Mother of God Community, in Gaithersburg, Maryland, where those who wished to date were subject to strict rules.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised edition, 215.

<sup>87</sup> Christopher West, “A Response to Von Hildebrand on Sexuality.” Audio recording of public lecture sponsored by the Personalist Project on June 3, 2009, in West Chester, Pennsylvania, downloaded from The Personalist Project’s Web site, <http://www.thepersonalistproject.org/index.php/TPP/downloads/>. (As of March 11, 2010, the recording of the lecture is no longer online.)

<sup>88</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised edition, 275.

<sup>89</sup> West, *Heaven’s Song: Sexual Love as It Was Meant to Be*, 12.

<sup>90</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised edition, 274.

<sup>91</sup> As the *Washington Post* reported in its Mother of God exposé (sources for which included both West and his mother, Bonnie): “Some former members say their marriages were arranged by Mother of God superiors and that they were manipulated into marrying partners they did not love.” (Gillis, “Rise and Fall of a Religious Community”).

“The control began with dating. ‘It was almost, like, “Big Brother is watching,”’ recalls ex-member Bonnie West. Parents learned from their heads that their teenaged children were forbidden to date until the community’s leaders judged them ready. Even then the community would try to control every step. Many parents say they were taught to distrust everything their own children said and were encouraged to mount a steady surveillance of the community’s youngsters” (Gillis, “Fitting Into the Hierarchy”).

While he allows that “[a] couple who choose not to be alone together in order to avoid sexual temptation should be commended,” West stresses that “[t]hey should also be aware that they are called by Christ to a much deeper freedom”:<sup>92</sup>

Think about it: if the only thing that keeps a couple from having sex before marriage is the lack of opportunity, what does that say about the desire of their hearts?<sup>93</sup> Are they free to choose the good? Are they free to love? ... As stated previously, if we chain our freedom to sin, with the same stroke we chain the freedom necessary to love.

The logic behind West’s insistence that such a couple is chaining its freedom to love is difficult to comprehend. After all, the restriction he describes was not imposed from outside; the hypothetical pair freely chose to avoid what they believed might be occasions of sin. Moreover, if freedom to love is dependent upon one’s refusing to chain one’s freedom to sin, what then of religious who choose the cloister, practicing the evangelical counsels behind monastery walls? Is their practice of charity impeded by such self-imposed “chains”? Last, what of the saints in heaven, who are, by their free choice, no longer capable of sin? Are they not free to love?<sup>94</sup> He continues,

... Trusting our own freedom to control concupiscence and to choose the good can be very threatening. It is much easier to distrust ourselves and hold our hearts in continual suspicion. But this is the antithesis of the meaning of life. We are called to set our eyes on Christ, get out of the boat, and walk on water. Many Christians, it seems, stay in the boat for fear of sinking if they were to get out. This may seem like a “safer” approach. ... The truth

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The *Post* articles included a firsthand account from Jim and Valerie Kiernan, who claimed their marriage had been arranged by Mother of God leaders. The control the leaders exercised over couple’s dating included limiting the amount of time they might be alone together, as witnessed by this anecdote: “Jim says a Mother of God member pulled him aside and asked if he’d consider dating Valerie. ... Their respective heads set up the first date: Jim would give Valerie a ride home from a prayer meeting. They were told what route to follow, straight down Interstate 270. ‘You can’t go the long way on the Beltway,’ they recall being told” (Gillis, “Fitting Into the Hierarchy”).

<sup>92</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised edition, 274.

<sup>93</sup> West adds a footnote here: “See CCC, nos. 1768, 1770, 1775, 1968, 1972.” The sections of the Catechism that he cites concern the need to order the movements of the senses towards virtue, and the grace given by the New Law to enable the faithful to act virtuously. They do not, however, condemn those who seek to avoid occasions of sin, nor do they suggest that the proper way of enacting one’s freedom in Christ is to risk occasions of sin.

<sup>94</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas writes on the question of whether one may make a vow, given that it would seem to impede one’s liberty: “Even as one’s liberty is not lessened by one being unable to sin, so, too, the necessity resulting from a will firmly fixed to good does not lessen the liberty, as instanced in God and the blessed” (*Summa Theologiae*, II-II.88.4, ad 1).

of human life ... can only be found on the water amidst the wind and the waves—in the drama of putting faith to the test and learning to walk with our eyes set on the Lord.<sup>95</sup>

These words may sound inspirational—until one realizes that, by “putting faith to the test,” West means embracing potential occasions of sin as opportunities to grow in grace. He goes on, “Learning to love always involves risk. There is nothing ‘safe’ about it. But it is better to get out of the boat and accept the risk of sinking than to lock up our freedom and throw away the key.”<sup>96</sup>

To illustrate his point about the necessity of taking the “risk” of “trusting our own freedom to control concupiscence and to choose the good,” he frequently tells a story of “two bishops”:<sup>97</sup>

The following story illustrates what mature Christian purity looks like. Two bishops walked out of a cathedral just as a scantily clad prostitute passed by. One bishop immediately turned away. The other bishop looked at her intently. The bishop who turned away exclaimed, “Brother bishop, what are you doing? Turn your eyes!” When the bishop turned around, he lamented with tears streaming down his face, “How tragic that such beauty is being sold to the lusts of men.” Which one of those bishops was *vivified* with the ethos of redemption? Which one had passed over from merely meeting the demands of the law to a superabounding fulfillment of the law?

In West’s presentation of the TOB, the “two bishops” story functions as a therapeutic exercise in character education. The reader or listener is supposed to ask himself which of the bishops he would have been. (I write “he,” for the story is clearly intended for men.) The author reinforces this therapeutic intent in *Theology of the Body Explained* when he notes, “[a]s an important clarification, the bishop who turned his eyes did the right thing, because he knew that if he had not done so, he would have lusted. We classically call this ‘avoiding the occasion of sin’ by ‘gaining custody of the eyes.’”<sup>98</sup> While calling such avoidance a “necessary first step,” West emphasizes it does not constitute “mature purity.” Later on, he states more clearly that the

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised edition, 215.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

purpose of the story is to show the insufficiency of continence: “The bishop who looked away was *continent*, but the bishop who saw rightly was *virtuous*.”<sup>99</sup>

He claims the story is “adapted from the story of Bishop St. Nonnus of Edessa and the harlot Pelagia”:

[I]t is generally reported that upon seeing the half-naked Pelagia parading through the streets of Antioch while his brother bishops turned away, Bishop Nonnus looked upon her with love and great delight. She noticed his look of love and was eventually converted through his counsel and preaching. She is known as St. Pelagia of Antioch.

In a footnote, West cites Helen Waddell’s account of Nonnus and Pelagia in *The Desert Fathers*.<sup>100</sup> However, the story she relates, translated from Eustochius’s Latin version of James the Deacon’s Greek account, differs from his own on many key points. Nonnus’s tears are not because “such beauty is being sold to the lusts of men.” Rather, the bishop feels ashamed upon witnessing the effort that the harlot puts into preparing her appearance for men, for he believes he has not put nearly so much effort into his appearance before God. Returning to his chamber, he flings himself upon the floor and repents to Christ: “for a single day’s adorning of a harlot is far beyond the adorning of my soul.”<sup>101</sup>

The original story also counters West’s implication that casting a look of “mature purity” upon a “scantly clad prostitute” may cause her to notice the loving gaze and so discover God’s love. Pelagia, in Waddell’s account, does not notice that Nonnus looks at her on the street; her conversion comes about afterwards, when she hears him preach. Most significantly, when Pelagia then writes to the bishop and asks to see him, he agrees only on the condition that there be other bishops present. “[S]eek not to tempt my weakness,” he writes.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised edition, 566. As will be shown, this sets up a dichotomy between continence and virtue that will lead to problems in West’s interpretation of John Paul’s TOB catechesis.

<sup>100</sup> West’s citation reads “Helen Waddell, *The Desert Fathers* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1957), 181-96.”

<sup>101</sup> Helen Waddell, *The Desert Fathers*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998 [original paperback edition published 1957]), 179.



It is not surprising that West omits that last detail, as, by his own definition, it would mean Bishop St. Nonnus was insufficiently virtuous. In a 2009 public lecture, speaking of the hypothetical engaged couple who avoid being alone together, he said, “[W]e must not call that virtue. Such a couple is continent, but they are not virtuous, in the true sense of the word, in the true Thomistic sense of the word.”<sup>103</sup>

As noted earlier, West’s understanding of the “Thomistic sense” of the word is that “[c]ontinence falls short of virtue since virtue presupposes a right desire, and this is lacking in the continent person (see *Summa, Prima Secundae*, q. 58, a. 3, ad 2).”<sup>104</sup> In conjunction with that assertion, as noted, West says that the engaged couple who are continent out of fear of temptation lack the right desire.<sup>105</sup>

At the 2009 lecture, continuing his example of the hypothetical engaged couple, West went on to explain that the continent pair could not be called virtuous because “[t]here is no magic trick on the wedding day that suddenly makes what you do that night an act of love. If you could not be alone together the day before you got married and not sin, there is no magic trick, there is no waving at the wand at the altar, that suddenly makes your sexual behavior beautiful, true, good, lovely, and pure.”<sup>106</sup>

At a time when Catholic young adults overwhelmingly ignore Church teachings on premarital chastity (if they are aware of them at all), West’s urging engaged couples to “accept the risk” rather than “lock up [their] freedom”<sup>107</sup> lends credence to Schindler’s concern that his

<sup>102</sup> Waddell, *The Desert Fathers*, 182.

<sup>103</sup> West, “A Response to Von Hildebrand on Sexuality.”

<sup>104</sup> West, “The Theology of the Body Debate: The Pivotal Question.”

<sup>105</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised edition, 274.

<sup>106</sup> West, “A Response to Von Hildebrand on Sexuality.”

<sup>107</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised edition, 275.

“ambiguity” could lead to “dangerous imprudence in matters of sexuality.”<sup>108</sup> As with his “two bishops” story that effectively damns the real-life St. Nonnus, he takes a grain of truth and places it within a line of thinking that leads to the very opposite of John Paul II’s teachings.

The reading of Aquinas that begins West’s train of thought is reasonably accurate; the Angelic Doctor does indeed indicate that continence alone, in isolation from right desire, is an incomplete virtue.<sup>109</sup> The Holy Father says likewise in his Wednesday catecheses, noting of continence, “this virtue does not appear and does not act abstractly and thus in isolation, but always appears and acts in connection with the other virtues (*nexus virtutum*), and thus in connection with prudence, justice, fortitude and above all with love.”<sup>110</sup> There, however, the accord ends—for, while West emphasizes that a couple must advance beyond mere continence prior to marriage, John Paul’s language makes it clear that such advancement naturally takes place within marriage.

[An objection that West might raise to the interpretation I am about to give to John Paul II’s account of continence, is that John Paul, in describing continence as “a virtue,” is necessarily defining it as something other than the definition given by Aquinas, who said that it is “something less than a virtue.”<sup>111</sup> That is essentially the argument he makes in *Theology of the Body Explained*.<sup>112</sup> Using this line of thinking, West “chastitizes” John Paul’s instruction on growth in continence. The pope, by this account, is no longer speaking to beginners in virtue; rather, he is addressing those who are already pure, advising them how to become *more* pure. Since John Paul’s instruction in this area is addressed to married couples, such an interpretation

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<sup>108</sup> Schindler, “Response to Profs. Smith and Waldstein Regarding Christopher West.”

<sup>109</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I-II.58.3, ad 2.

<sup>110</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, (Boston: Pauline Books and Media), 645 (TOB 128:2, October 24, 1984).

<sup>111</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, I-II.58.3, ad 2.

<sup>112</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised ed., 564-565.

enables West to claim that engaged couples must progress through “unvirtuous” continence to “virtue”—that is, chastity—*before* marriage.

Such an interpretation cannot be sustained, because John Paul makes it clear that, in calling continence a virtue, he *is* using St. Thomas’s definition. As noted, we see this in his stating that “this virtue ... always appears and acts in connection with the other virtues (*nexus virtutum*).”<sup>113</sup> Moreover, continuing his analysis in an audience given two weeks later, he specifically states that he is drawing upon Aristotle and St. Thomas’s understanding of “the virtue of continence.”<sup>114</sup>

If there appears to be ambiguity, it is because John Paul is speaking of it in both the “now” and the “not yet.” As noted above, he stresses that continence is a gradual process, beginning with the “imperative of self-control,” which leads to “the necessity of immediate continence and of habitual temperance.” Being that the continence he describes is necessarily immediate, arising first in response to an imperative, its practice begins when the subject is in the “not yet”—desiring temperance, but not yet having it. Continence becomes virtuous when, through its practice over time, the subject arrives in the “now” of habitual temperance. There is, then, no ground for claiming John Paul is departing from continuity and inventing a vocabulary on this topic, nor is there ground for West’s inference that the pope expects couples to possess habitual temperance prior to receiving the graces of the sacrament of matrimony.]

To recognize the distinction between the late Holy Father’s understanding on this issue and that of West, it must be observed that John Paul takes great care to stress the gradualness of the development of virtue. Speaking of the sensual excitement expressed in concupiscence, he says

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<sup>113</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 645 (TOB 128:2, October 24, 1984).

<sup>114</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 651 (TOB 130:1, November 7, 1984).

that “[t]he personal subject, in order to succeed in mastering this impulse and excitement, must be committed to a progressive education in self-control of the will, feelings and emotions”:<sup>115</sup>

This education must develop beginning with the most simple acts in which it is relatively easy to put the interior decision into practice. As is obvious, this presupposes the clear perception of the values expressed in the law and the consequent formation of firm convictions. If accompanied by the *respective disposition* of the will, these convictions give rise to the corresponding virtue. This is precisely the virtue of continence (self-mastery).<sup>116</sup>

Passages such as this are the source of West’s acknowledgement that continence is a “first step” towards mature purity.<sup>117</sup> However, John Paul’s next words make it clear that, following *Humanae Vitae*, he is speaking of this continence as developing into virtue *within* a sacramental marriage—and not, as West implies, as a virtue that must necessarily be possessed before marriage in order for the marriage to be holy. The pope makes this clear with his reference to Ephesians 5, his touchstone Scripture for describing sacramental marriage in light of the resurrected Christ:

This virtue [continence] is seen to be the fundamental condition for the reciprocal language of the body to remain in the truth and for the couple to “defer to one another out of reverence for Christ,” according to the words of Scripture (Eph 5:21). This “deferring to one another” *means the common concern for the truth of the language of the body*; rather, deferring “out of reverence for Christ” indicates the gift of the fear of God (a gift of the Holy Spirit) which accompanies the virtue of continence.<sup>118</sup>

The “gift of the Holy Spirit” of which the pope speaks is specifically that which made available through the sacrament of marriage, which actuates the graces each spouse received in

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<sup>115</sup> John Paul II, General Audience, October 24, 1984. Official Vatican translation from Eternal Word Television Network, <http://www.ewtn.org/library/PAPALDOC/JP841024.htm> [accessed March 25, 2010].

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised edition, 215.

<sup>118</sup> John Paul II, General Audience, October 24, 1984. Official Vatican translation from Eternal Word Television Network, <http://www.ewtn.org/library/PAPALDOC/JP841024.htm> [accessed March 25, 2010].

baptism.<sup>119</sup> It is abundantly clear that he is not discussing the gift with regard to engaged couples, as he goes on to stress that “this conjugal chastity is manifested in its organic link with the power of love, which is poured out into the hearts of the married couple along with the consecration of the sacrament of marriage.”<sup>120</sup> As if to underscore that mere continence is an appropriate starting point to attain virtue *within marriage*, he added,

Conjugal chastity (and chastity in general) is manifested at first as the capacity to resist the concupiscence of the flesh. It later gradually reveals itself as a *singular capacity* to perceive, love and practice those meanings of the language of the body which remain altogether unknown to concupiscence itself. Those meanings progressively enrich the marital dialogue of the couple, purifying it, deepening it, and at the same time simplifying it.<sup>121</sup>

[West, while accurately characterizing the theology of the body as an effort to give depth and context to *Humanae Vitae*, fails to acknowledge the extent to which John Paul II follows the theological categories and terminology of the Paul VI encyclical. As a result, the true depth of John Paul’s catechesis becomes obscured; he becomes a “revolutionary” who thinks *as* the Church, but not *with* the Church. This *lacuna* in West’s presentation is clear, as we have seen, in his assumption that John Paul is using a different definition of continence than that of St. Thomas. We see it also in his failure to recognize that John Paul’s catecheses on continence are meant to add depth and context specifically to *Humanae Vitae*’s description of “self-mastery.”

He is clearly aware that continence and *Humanae Vitae*’s “self-mastery” are linked; the index to the revised edition of *Theology of the Body Explained* refers the reader looking for “continence” to the topic of “self-mastery.” The point he seems to miss is that *Humanae Vitae* stresses that the *virtuous fruits* of self-mastery—that is, the virtue that results from habitual

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<sup>119</sup> Cf. John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* 13: “As actuation, [marriage] gives [the spouses] the grace and duty of putting into practice in the present, towards each other and their children, the demands of a love which forgives and redeems.”

<sup>120</sup> John Paul II, General Audience, October 24, 1984. Official Vatican translation from Eternal Word Television Network, <http://www.ewtn.org/library/PAPALDOC/JP841024.htm> [accessed March 25, 2010].

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

temperance—are acquired *within marriage*. That chastity—and the continence it entails—is required for all is a given, but it is the particular self-mastery of spouses that “[enables] husband and wife to develop to their personalities and to be enriched with spiritual blessings.”<sup>122</sup>

Were he to present a correct understanding of *Humanae Vitae*’s categories and terminology, he would have to acknowledge that engaged couples, while required to practice continence—which will lead to growth in chastity<sup>123</sup>—are necessarily unable to experience the “spiritual blessings” of mutual perfection unique to those in the married state.<sup>124]</sup>

Bearing John Paul’s intentions in mind, and their larger context of the Church’s historical teachings on the sacrament of matrimony, we may now return to the assertion West made that “[t]here is no magic trick on the wedding day that suddenly makes what you do that night an act of love. If you could not be alone together the day before you got married and not sin, there is no magic trick, there is no waving at the wand at the altar, that suddenly makes your sexual behavior beautiful, true, good, lovely, and pure.”<sup>125</sup>

But can it be true that *nothing* happens at the altar to transform sexual behavior? Is it impossible for an engaged couple’s mere continence—self-control that has not reached the level of perfect chastity—to become graced through the sacrament of matrimony, so that it might henceforth be turned towards the couple’s mutual perfection? West writes elsewhere about the graces of the sacrament of marriage. On this issue, however, in his haste to counter the kind of puritanism under which he suffered in the Mother of God Community, he seems to forget it

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<sup>122</sup> *Humanae Vitae* 21.

<sup>123</sup> CCC 2350.

<sup>124</sup> See CCC 1641: “This grace proper to the sacrament of Matrimony is intended to perfect the couple’s love,” etc. (For an example of how West characterizes the TOB in relation to *Humanae Vitae*, see Christopher West, “The Pope’s Theology of the Body,” Catholic Education Resource Center, <http://www.catholiceducation.org/articles/sexuality/se0058.html> [accessed March 13, 2010].)

<sup>125</sup> West, “A Response to Von Hildebrand on Sexuality.”

entirely, taking up—unwittingly, perhaps—a semi-Pelagian ideal of human-powered self-control.

By contrast, John Paul—following *Humanae Vitae* and, through that encyclical, the historical teachings of the Church—affirms that it is *precisely* the graces received at the altar that render the couple capable of the “spiritual blessings” of marriage (*Humanae Vitae* 21), through which is “gradually [revealed in them] the *singular capacity* to perceive, love and practice those meanings of the language of the body which remain altogether unknown to concupiscence itself.”<sup>126</sup>

### *Occasions of sin*

In one of his earliest papal writings, the 1979 Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*, which encapsulated the results of the 1977 Synod of Bishops on catechesis, John Paul II observed that “[c]atechesis is intrinsically linked with the whole of liturgical and sacramental activity, for it is in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist, that Christ Jesus works in fullness for the transformation of human beings.”<sup>127</sup> One of his concerns in this area to which he devoted considerable attention was for catechesis that would lead the faithful to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the sacrament of penance. To that end, over the years, he repeatedly reminded the faithful of the necessity of a “sense of sin.”<sup>128</sup>

The role of catechesis in enabling such moral consciousness was an overriding theme of “Reconciliation and Penance,” John Paul’s 1984 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation. To that end, one of the catechetical points that he singled out as particularly important was the need to

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<sup>126</sup> John Paul II, General Audience, October 24, 1984. Official Vatican translation from Eternal Word Television Network, <http://www.ewtn.org/library/PAPALDOC/JP841024.htm> [accessed March 25, 2010].

<sup>127</sup> John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae, On Catechesis in Our Time* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1979).

<sup>128</sup> Cf. John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Penitentia* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1984).

avoid exposure to occasions of sin. He mentioned this within the context of explaining that the mere experience of temptation is not in itself sinful, when one makes every prayerful effort to avoid and resist it:

For those who beseech the Father not to be tempted beyond their own strength and not to succumb to temptation, and for those who do not expose themselves to occasions of sin, being subjected to temptation does not mean that they have sinned; rather it is an opportunity for growing in fidelity and consistency through humility and watchfulness.<sup>129</sup>

Given that helping the faithful develop a sense of sin entails, in part, teaching them to avoid occasions of sin, it would seem that a catechist on marriage and sex would devote at least some part of his catechesis to helping the faithful gain discernment in this area. West, however, makes mention of “occasions of sin” only to distinguish between those who have “mature purity” and those who lack it. His point is that, for those who possess such purity, occasions of sin are no longer a concern.

One such example, already mentioned, is his explanation regarding the bishop who turned away his eyes: “We classically call this ‘avoiding the occasion of sin’ by ‘gaining custody of the eyes.’”<sup>130</sup> Recall that he goes on to say that the bishop who avoided the occasion of sin was not virtuous.<sup>131</sup>

Indeed, a running theme in West’s work is the association of “mature purity” with a man’s ability to actively seek out what would be, for other men, occasions of sin, and—instead of being defiled by them—find in them a source of further purification. He illustrates this point with stories such as one he tells in both *Theology of the Body Explained* and “Naked Without Shame,” describing how a rush of sexual attraction, which he felt towards a “very beautiful” red-haired

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<sup>129</sup> *Reconciliatio et Penitentia* 26.

<sup>130</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised edition, 215.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 566.



woman<sup>132</sup> as she stood up for the Eucharistic Prayer,<sup>133</sup> during Mass, enabled him to “enter into the very heart of the mystery of prayer.” (He adds that he did not see the woman’s face, so the appellation “very beautiful” apparently applies only to her posterior.)<sup>134</sup>

Upon feeling the rush of attraction to the woman, West—who notes that this incident occurred after his marriage—asked God why he had such an unexpectedly strong reaction to this “feminine symbol.”<sup>135</sup> An answer came: It was because the church in which he was praying was a symbol of the womb of a woman—Mary—and he was about to witness, in the Eucharist, the Word made flesh.<sup>136</sup>

In “Naked Without Shame,”<sup>137</sup> he exhorts the men in the audience to take up his example of purity, so that they might see that, in having “intercourse,” they “have the privilege of entering the Holy of Holies.” “The veil has been removed,” he adds. Therefore, since “to the pure, all things are pure” (Titus 1:15), they should “beg God for the eyes and heart to see other people purely” so that they might have a revelation where others would see only a “distraction to prayer.”

When giving an exhortation to “mature purity,” West typically adds a caveat that his advice is only for those who are not impure or lustful. For example, in telling of the desire he felt for the strange woman during Mass, he says, “Granted, if you are impure and you’re desiring to lust, yeah, that’s definitely going to be a distraction to prayer. And if you’re impure, then, OK, don’t ponder these things during Mass.”

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<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 398.

<sup>133</sup> West, “Naked Without Shame” (2002 edition), sixth talk (“The Sacramentality of Marriage”), 39:20 ff.

<sup>134</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised edition, 398.

<sup>135</sup> West, “Naked Without Shame” (2002 edition), sixth talk (“The Sacramentality of Marriage”), 39:20 ff.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

In *Theology of the Body Explained*, immediately after telling of the red-haired woman, he relates an event that took place several months later, which he says is “closely related.”<sup>138</sup> As with the previous anecdote, he shares it to “illustrate how grace can enable men to appreciate women’s true beauty.” He describes how, several months after the church incident, he was at the beach when, in his words, “Seeing many shapely, bikini-clad women, I found myself engaged in a lively battle to reclaim this heavenly vision of woman’s body.”

In a footnote to that sentence, he adds his familiar caveat that this story is directed only to the pure: “By telling this story, I do not mean to give license to those who might be so bound by lust that going to the beach would be an ‘occasion of sin.’ For the man bound by lust, the admonition ‘Turn away your eyes from a shapely woman’ (Sirach 9:5) retains all its wisdom.”

Continuing the story, West tells of how the sight of a “very overweight woman” added a new dimension to his exercise.

As I had been praying to see the true personal beauty in all the ‘shapely’ women at the beach, so too did I begin to pray to see the true personal beauty in all the ‘unshapely’ women at the beach. ... By God’s grace I experienced a new level of integration that day, a new level of purity in heart.<sup>139</sup>

We are to believe that West’s “mature purity,” attained because he was no longer “bound by lust,” enables him to transform an “occasion of sin” into an occasion of “grace.”<sup>140</sup> To the best of my knowledge and research, this idea that one should actively seek out opportunities to engage in a “lively battle”<sup>141</sup> against lust is completely novel in the Church’s history. Certainly, there is no mention of it in the Wednesday catecheses; indeed, it is in direct contradiction to John Paul’s admonitions to avoid such occasions entirely. (Not only does the pope give such instruction in

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<sup>138</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised edition, 398.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*; as noted, West seeks through this anecdote to “illustrate how grace can enable men to appreciate women’s true beauty.”

<sup>141</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised edition, 398.

*Reconciliatio et Penitentia*,<sup>142</sup> but the same point is repeatedly emphasized in the most comprehensive magisterial document on sexual education issued during his pontificate: the 1995 Pontifical Council for the Family directive “The Truth and Meaning of Sexuality: Guidelines for Education Within the Family.”<sup>143</sup>)

The implicit message carried by such tales in West’s TOB is that this “new level of purity” would not have been possible had he simply followed the advice of Sirach and turned his eyes away. Only because he emulated the “bishop who saw rightly”<sup>144</sup> was he able to attain a closer union with God, because such a union is *necessarily* mediated by sexual desire. There is, again, no detour.<sup>145</sup>

But is that what the pope had in mind when he urged the faithful to seek “liberation from concupiscence”? Did he intend that they seek occasions to grow in union with God through the specific medium of sexual desire, and *only* through such desire? Was he really saying that, to attain the beatitude of the pure in heart, men have to take every opportunity to admire the beauty of women not their wives?

In “Naked Without Shame,” discussing his reaction to the woman who sparked his arousal at Mass, West effectively answers these questions in the affirmative. He first cites the following quotation from John Paul II:

The point of departure as well as the point of arrival for this fascination—mutual wonder and admiration—are in fact the bride’s femininity and the groom’s masculinity, in the direct experience of their visibility. The words of love uttered by both of them are therefore concentrated on the body ... because on the body there lingers directly and immediately that *attraction toward the other person*, toward the other “I”—female or male—which in the interior impulse of the heart generates love.

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<sup>142</sup> *Reconciliatio et Penitentia* 26.

<sup>143</sup> See “The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality,” sections 18 and 71, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/family/documents/rc\\_pc\\_family\\_doc\\_08121995\\_human-sexuality\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_08121995_human-sexuality_en.html) [accessed August 2, 2010].

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 566.

<sup>145</sup> West, *Heaven’s Song*, 12.

In addition, *love unleashes a special experience of the beautiful*, which focuses on what is visible, but at the same time involves the entire person. The experience of beauty gives rise to satisfaction, which is mutual.<sup>146</sup>

West interprets those passages in this manner:

Heck, I have attraction to all kinds of women, many of whom are not my wife. It doesn't mean I go home—"Honey, I'm in love with another woman, because I felt this attraction." No! It means I'm recognizing the goodness and the beauty of another person—which I'm supposed to do! That's who [*sic*] was going on in that story I told you about—the red hair. [*He whistles. Audience giggles.*] I saw something genuinely beautiful about this person, and through the eyes of purity this becomes something that lifts our sights to the heavens.<sup>147</sup>

For the sake of argument, let us assume that the look West gave the “very beautiful woman” at Mass was indeed a look of love. John Paul goes on to say that “[t]he experience of beauty gives rise to satisfaction, which is mutual.” Did West’s experience of “visibility” (to use the pope’s terminology) meet John Paul’s criteria an “experience of the beautiful” by giving rise to *mutual* satisfaction?

The answer has to be no, since the Holy Father is decidedly not giving instruction on how to redirect the arc of arousal one feels towards an anonymous, depersonalized (and, seen only from the back, literally faceless) stranger. The very passage West cites, in fact, explicitly states the contrary; John Paul says he is speaking of the “bride” and “groom” of Song of Songs. A more general interpretation is fully ruled out; earlier in that same audience, the pope specifies that he is addressing “[t]he theme of marital love.”<sup>148</sup>

Moreover, John Paul’s understanding of purity does not eliminate the need for the faithful to heed the advice of Sirach. Rather, in his TOB catecheses, the pope incorporates the Sirach passage into an understanding of spousal purity that runs directly counter to West’s illustrations

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<sup>146</sup> John Paul II, General Audience, May 23, 1984, emphasis in original. Official Vatican translation, available on the EWTN Web site, <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/JP2TB108.HTM> [accessed March 15, 2010]. West used this translation in his “Naked Without Shame” talks.

<sup>147</sup> West, “Naked Without Shame” series of recorded talks (2002 edition), seventh talk (“Love and Fruitfulness”), 9:10 ff.

<sup>148</sup> John Paul II, General Audience, May 23, 1984, emphasis in original.

of extramarital attraction. He cites the admonition, “Turn away your eyes from a shapely woman,” because it and the Wisdom tradition it represents are the scriptural foundation for Christ’s warning in the Sermon on the Mount that “everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:28 NAB).<sup>149</sup> The central point of his catechesis on that Gospel verse—for which he was roundly mocked by media commentators at the time<sup>150</sup>—was that “[a]dultery ‘in the heart’ is not committed only because the man ‘looks’ in this way at a woman who is not his wife, but *precisely because he looks in this way at a woman. Even if he were to look in this way at the woman who is his wife, he would commit the same adultery ‘in the heart.’*”<sup>151</sup>

John Paul, therefore, was not attempting to lower the bar from Sirach’s admonition; rather, he was raising it. His use of the word “only”—“[a]dultery ‘in the heart’ is not committed only because the man ‘looks’”—emphasizes that Christ’s words do not obviate those of Sirach; they *encompass* them.<sup>152</sup>

### *Pornography vs. “theo-graphy”*

Among the misinterpretations of the TOB that flow from West’s insistence that “mature purity” requires seizing opportunities to be like the “bishop who saw rightly,”<sup>153</sup> none is more serious than that which he presents with regard to the catecheses in which John Paul II

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<sup>149</sup> Cf. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 281ff.

<sup>150</sup> *Time*, “Tempest in a Cappucino Cup?” October 27, 1980, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,951608,00.html> [accessed March 15, 2010].

<sup>151</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 298 (General Audience, October 8, 1980; TOB 43:2), emphasis in original.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised edition, 566.

distinguishes between pornography and legitimate artistic representations of the naked human body.

Because, for West, sexual desire necessarily mediates desire for God, it is logically impossible for John Paul to state that there may be anything objectively wrong with the circumstances under which one desires to reveal the naked body to others, or the circumstances under which one desires to look at a naked body. The body is objectively good; therefore, for West, its representations are objectively good. Only *personal intentions* can make such a representation bad—the artist’s intention to arouse, and the viewer’s intention to be aroused. Therefore, pornography is wrong, because “[p]ornographers portray the body with the explicit intention of arousing lust—or, as theologians would say, ‘concupiscence’—in the viewer.”<sup>154</sup> Likewise, it is wrong to give a lustful “look.”<sup>155</sup> But the proper answer to the question, “Are you decent?”—when it means “Are you clothed”—is always “yes,” because the “[t]he body is *always* decent. Only the manner of another’s ‘look’ may lack decency.”<sup>156</sup>

For West, moral progress entails that Catholic artists “rightly” portray the naked human body. In fact, he sees the creation of such art as a moral imperative. “Catholic artists should respond to our pornographic culture not by refusing to portray the human body in its nakedness, but, by portraying it rightly so that we can reclaim the glorious theological truth of our creation as male and female.”<sup>157</sup>

Moral progress for John Paul II, however, is not marked by the uncovering of the human body. Rather, the Holy Father says that such progress is measured by an increase in modesty:

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<sup>154</sup> Christopher West, “Authentic Art vs. Pornography.” Syndicated column, January 12, 2007, <http://www.christopherwest.com/page.asp?ContentID=46> [accessed March 16, 2010].

<sup>155</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained* (revised edition), 233.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid*, emphasis in original.

<sup>157</sup> West, “Authentic Art vs. Pornography.”

If culture shows an explicit tendency to cover the nakedness of the human body, it certainly does so not only for climatic reasons, but also in relation to the process of growth of man's personal sensitivity. The anonymous nakedness of the man-object contrasts with the progress of the truly human culture of morals. It is probably possible to confirm this also in the life of so-called primitive populations. The process of refining personal human sensitivity is certainly a factor and fruit of culture.<sup>158</sup>

Such an understanding of modesty—seeing it not merely as a reaction to the potential lustful “look,” but as a requirement for a “truly human culture of morals”—is absent from West's TOB. Absent, too, is any acknowledgement that, since the Fall, the naked human body, while retaining its fundamental goodness, can no longer have its original “decency” (a word that in Latin is related to fittingness, honor, and worthiness). Cardinal Ratzinger alludes to this in *The Spirit of the Liturgy* when discussing the meaning of priestly vestments in light of the hope that St. Paul describes in Second Corinthians 5:

[St. Paul's] hope is to be not “unclothed,” but “further clothed,” to receive the “heavenly house”—the definitive body—as a new garment. ... Thus the theology of clothing becomes a theology of the body. ... The liturgical vestment carries this message in itself. It is a “further clothing,” not an “unclothing,” and the liturgy guides us on the way to this “further clothing,” on the way to the body's salvation in the risen body of Jesus Christ, which is the new “house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Cor 5:1). The Body of Christ, which we receive in the Eucharist, to which we are united in the Eucharist (“one Body with him,” cf. 1 Cor. 6:12-20), saves us from “nakedness,” from the bareness in which we cannot stand before him.<sup>159</sup>

Our true goal, then, is not to be “naked without shame,” but, rather, to be clothed in grace.

### *A penchant for promoting problematic pop culture*

There is a strange compatibility between West's perspective on pornography—claiming that its wrongness resides solely in the intentionality of the producer and consumer—and that of

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<sup>158</sup> John Paul II, General Audience, April 22, 1981. Official Vatican translation from the Eternal Word Television Network, <http://www.ewtn.com/library/PAPALDOC/jp2tb60.htm> [accessed March 25, 2010].

<sup>159</sup> Ratzinger, Joseph Cardinal, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 218.

Third Wave feminists such as playwright Eve Ensler who argue that a man should never be aroused by a woman's manner of dress unless the woman specifically states that her intention is to arouse. In Ensler's *Vagina Monologues*, a young woman in a miniskirt declaims, "My short skirt, believe it or not/has nothing to do with you."<sup>160</sup> Neither she nor West are willing to acknowledge that exposing naked flesh outside a nuptial context is objectively wrong regardless of whether the artist or the short-skirt wearer "intends" to arouse.

West has, in fact, given Ensler an affirmation of sorts in his newspaper column, stating that the *Vagina Monologues* speaks to "some ache in the human heart" suffered by "[w]omen have been deeply wounded by both a puritanical fear of their bodies on the one hand, and by a pornographic exploitation of their bodies on the other."<sup>161</sup> Writing after Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend Bishop John D'Arcy condemned the University of Notre Dame's decision permitting the play to be staged on campus, West argued that the play "in its own vulgar way has given women a forum in which to explore their 'issues': "I would surmise that students at Notre Dame continue to demand this play because they have not heard anything better coming from their parents, their pastors, their friends, and their teachers in response to the many pressing questions and 'thirsts' of their hearts."<sup>162</sup>

West's sympathy for the "wounded" who suffer from "longings of the heart that 'nobody talks about'" is understandable in light of the pain he himself admits to having experienced from the atmosphere of silence with which sexual issues were treated in his home.<sup>163</sup> In his most popular book, *Good News About Sex and Marriage*, which is required reading for couples

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<sup>160</sup> Eve Ensler, *I Am an Emotional Creature: The Secret Life of Girls Around the World* (New York: Villard Books, 2010), 123.

<sup>161</sup> Christopher West, "How Should Catholics Respond to the 'Vagina Monologues'?" Syndicated column, April 14, 2006, <http://www.christopherwest.com/page.asp?ContentID=28> [accessed March 16, 2010].

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>163</sup> O'Donnell, "Christopher West on the Theology of the Body."



undergoing marriage preparation in 40 U.S. dioceses,<sup>164</sup> he admits that he carries lingering resentment over the failure of those charged with his education to instill in him a proper understanding of Church teachings on sex. In some sense, he even holds them responsible for his failure to live up to those teachings:

I myself am frustrated by the fact that I didn't learn about the richness and sensibleness of the Church's teaching when I was growing up, despite twelve years of Catholic education. For the most part, the message was simply, 'Don't do it.' So what did I do? The exact opposite, of course.

Had I been taught how wonderful and beautiful the Catholic vision of sex and marriage actually is, perhaps I would have thought it something worth holding out for. Perhaps I would have been spared the pain I inflicted on myself and others.<sup>165</sup>

His misgivings over his upbringing are echoed in his defenses of sexually explicit films, plays, and popular songs that express what he calls an “understandable and deserved”<sup>166</sup> reaction against “puritanical” elders.<sup>167</sup>

In July 2008, West posted a ten-minute video commentary on YouTube and his own Web site [theologyofthebody.com](http://theologyofthebody.com), about female pop singer Katy Perry, then topping the charts worldwide with “I Kissed a Girl.”<sup>168</sup> While admitting that he has never met the singer and is hypothesizing based on information he has read online, he asserts that Perry—whose parents were Protestant pastors—creates songs and videos celebrating bisexuality and sexual brokenness as a reaction against her “puritanical” upbringing.

West exclaims in the video, “I am sick and tired of this Puritanical BS that passes for Christianity. ... This woman is so deeply, deeply wounded.” He expresses concern that “[s]he’s a

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<sup>164</sup> Pinto, “By His Fruits You Shall Know Him.” The marriage-preparation program to which Pinto refers in his article is “God’s Plan for a Joy-Filled Marriage,” the textbook for which is *Good News About Sex and Marriage*; see <http://www.joyfilledmarriage.com/course/> [accessed March 16, 2010].

<sup>165</sup> West, *Good News About Sex and Marriage*, revised edition, 69.

<sup>166</sup> Christopher West, “Spring Awakening: A Cry from the Depths for Sexual Redemption.” Syndicated column, October 26, 2007, <http://www.christopherwest.com/page.asp?ContentID=65> [accessed March 16, 2010].

<sup>167</sup> West, “How Should Catholics Respond to the ‘Vagina Monologues’?”

<sup>168</sup> Christopher West, “Body Language Podcast: Katy Perry.” YouTube.com, July 31, 2008, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1n4iStqs56A> [accessed March 16, 2010].

very beautiful, very attractive young woman, and she's out in Hollywood, and I'm sure men are all over her, all the time, trying to get a piece of her."

As evidence of Perry's woundedness, he gives a graphic description of one of her music videos:

It's about—a song where she's in bed with one guy, and she's thinking about this other guy who she had been with who was perfection, and she dumped him—dumped her. So she's in bed with this other guy, now, thinking of this guy, and at the end of this video, oh my gosh, on YouTube, if you watch this video, she is cutting herself with a knife, and she's got blood all over her cleavage, blood all over her hands, she's in bed with this guy, cutting herself. ...

Note that not only is West describing the sex and violence depicted in Perry's music video, he is actually telling viewers where to find it—"on YouTube." It is difficult to reconcile his video commentary—which carries no content warning for unsuspecting parents of young children—with the exhortation of Pope Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*, so often repeated by John Paul II in his TOB catechesis, that educators "create an atmosphere favorable to the growth of chastity."<sup>169</sup>

Along similar lines, in October 2007, West devoted an installment of his syndicated column to praising "Spring Awakening,"<sup>170</sup> a Broadway musical about sexually repressed teenagers in 19th-century Germany. The show, featuring actors between the ages of 15 and 22,<sup>171</sup> was then causing a stir for its explicit sexual content, including a man masturbating, a naked couple simulating intercourse, and, according to one critic, "what might be the most passionate gay kiss seen on Broadway."<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> *Humanae Vitae* 22.

<sup>170</sup> West, "Spring Awakening: A Cry from the Depths for Sexual Redemption."

<sup>171</sup> Gwynne Watkins, "Virgin Territory: A Q&A with the Writer Behind Broadway's 'Spring Awakening.'" Nerve.com, June 7, 2007, <http://www.nerve.com/dispatches/watkins/springawakening/index.asp?page=1> [accessed March 16, 2010].

<sup>172</sup> "'Spring Awakening' Proves Why it's Broadway's Best Musical." Qnotes.com, January 22, 2010, <http://go.qnotes.com/5095/spring-awakening-proves-why-its-broadways-best-musical>.

In his column on the show, West says he is well aware that “[s]ome religious folk” deemed “Spring Awakening” “an ‘abomination’ with no goal other than to encourage sin.’ But, while “not recommend[ing] everyone see this play,” he refuses to “join the angry bandwagon”—because, he believes, it reinforces the teachings of John Paul II.

In his *Letter to Artists*, John Paul II wrote that “even in situations where culture and the Church are far apart, art remains a kind of bridge to religious experience. ...Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption” (n. 10).

This explains precisely what I think *Spring Awakening* offers as a piece of art. It does, indeed, explore some of the “most unsettling aspects of evil.” ... But the over-riding theme of this musical, as I saw it, was *a cry from the depths of the spirit for redemption*, more specifically, for the “redemption of the body” (Rom 8) so often spoken of by John Paul II.<sup>173</sup>

West’s use of John Paul’s letter to defend a play containing grave matter reflects his tendency to view the late pope’s writings as though they existed apart from the hermeneutic of continuity. Certainly, in writing “Letter to Artists,” which references *Gaudium et Spes*, John Paul intended it to be taken in continuity with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, whose decree *Inter Mirifica* (“On the Media of Social Communication”) states, regarding “the narration, description, or portrayal of moral evil,” that “such presentations ought always to be subject to moral restraint, lest they work to the harm rather than the benefit of souls.”<sup>174</sup>

John Paul also would have had in mind the words of Paul VI in *Humanae Vitae*, who drew upon *Inter Mirifica* as he expounded upon his call for an “atmosphere of chastity”:

Everything therefore in the modern means of social communication which arouses men’s baser passions and encourages low moral standards, as well as every obscenity in the written word and every form of indecency on the stage and screen, should be condemned publicly and unanimously by all those who have at heart the advance of civilization and the safeguarding of the outstanding values of the human spirit. It is quite absurd to defend this kind of depravity in the name of art or culture or by pleading the liberty which may be allowed in this field by the public authorities.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> West, “Spring Awakening: A Cry from the Depths for Sexual Redemption.”

<sup>174</sup> Second Vatican Council, Decree *Inter Mirifica* 7, 1963.

<sup>175</sup> Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* 22.

As John Paul frequently observed in his TOB catecheses, *Humanae Vitae* is not merely intended to convey Church teachings on regulation of birth; it directs the faithful toward “an integral vision of man.”<sup>176</sup> To do justice to the encyclical, and particularly to its prophetic character, a presentation of the TOB would necessarily have to take into account its entire message—including its admonitions against “obscenity,” “indecent,” and “depravity in the name of art or culture.” That West chooses to overlook such admonitions suggest that his reaction against “puritanism” carries with it the price of refusing to accept the objective dangers of such perversions. Such a refusal is, ultimately, a refusal to embrace the integral vision of man that Christ revealed through His Cross.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> John Paul II, *Male and Female He Created Them*, 220 (TOB 25:3, General Audience of April 2, 1980). When making this statement, the pope adds that his words refer to *Humanae Vitae* 7.

<sup>177</sup> Cf. Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes* 22.

## Chapter Three

### Enabling an “Integral Vision of Man”

As has been shown, Christopher West’s presentation of the theology of the body is compromised by errors and lacunae. Since it is currently the most widely promoted account of Church teachings on marriage and sex, the question now turns to what modifications would be necessary in order to present the fullness of Catholic doctrine.

It is now possible, drawing upon the preceding chapters, to outline two theological aspects of West’s presentation in most serious need of modification.<sup>1</sup> In doing so, I will recommend how each aspect might be addressed in a manner consistent with the 1985 Extraordinary Synod’s instruction that the Second Vatican Council be interpreted within the hermeneutic of continuity.<sup>2</sup>

**1. The appropriate starting point for catechesis on marriage and sex is the expression of frustration<sup>3</sup> at “previous generations”<sup>4</sup> of “repressive” Christians, coupled with exhilaration over the “new sexual revolution”<sup>5</sup> sparked by Pope John Paul II.** West’s account of earlier attitudes of Christian parents no doubt resonates with certain members of his

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The expression “an integral vision of man” is from John Paul II, *Male and Female He Created Them*, 220 (TOB 25:3, General Audience of April 2, 1980).

<sup>1</sup> I qualify these aspects as “theological” because they do not make direct reference to the overriding concern of West’s overall style. While I am in complete agreement with the published statements of Alice von Hildebrand, David L. Schindler, and Mark Lowery regarding the need for him to refrain from vulgarity and refrain from sexualizing the divine mysteries, I am choosing to focus on the main substance of his theology. If he and others who use his presentation of the TOB were to implement the correctives outlined in this chapter, the problems of style would significantly diminish.

<sup>2</sup> “[T]he Council must be understood in continuity with the great tradition of the church, and at the same time we must receive light from the Council’s own doctrine for today’s Church and the men of our time. The Church is one and the same throughout all the councils” (Final Report of the 1985 Extraordinary Synod).

<sup>3</sup> “I myself am frustrated ...” quoted in Chapter 2 of this thesis. West, *Good News About Sex and Marriage*, revised edition, 69.

<sup>4</sup> “[T]he often repressive approach of previous generations of Christians ...” quoted in Chapter 1 of this thesis. West, “The New Language: A Crash Course in the Theology of the Body.”

<sup>5</sup> “About the Theology of the Body.”

audience. The problem with using frustration at such “repression” as a starting point for catechesis is that it sets up a hermeneutic of discontinuity, suggesting that to love today’s Church is to resent yesterday’s Church. An authentically Catholic catechesis would acknowledge the pain felt by those taught to fear sexuality, without encouraging them in any way to dwell upon the unreality of how different their past might have been, had they been instructed rightly.<sup>6</sup>

God is, in the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, “uttermost being.”<sup>7</sup> To focus on what might have been is to remove one’s focus from God. In that light, telling those who are already hurting that proper instruction might have spared them pain, places them at risk of acedia (which is characterized by turning one’s focus away from spiritual goods) and its related sins, particularly spite.<sup>8</sup> When such an emphasis is used within the context of resentment at representatives of the Church, even with the caveat that such representatives were not presenting the fullness of Catholic teaching, the presentation runs the risk of “mix[ing] catechetical teaching unduly with overt or masked ideological views”—an approach proscribed by John Paul II.<sup>9</sup>

Beyond the need to show appropriate consideration to those who received a fear-based sexual education lies a larger issue that was of great concern to John Paul II: the need for catechesis to be culturally relevant.<sup>10</sup> In the wake of the sexual revolution, and particularly the widespread dissent from *Humanae Vitae*, it is no longer even nearly accurate to characterize the sex education received by American Catholics as founded upon prudery and fear.

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<sup>6</sup> West, *Good News About Sex and Marriage*, revised edition, 69.

<sup>7</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I.1.3, corpus.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, II-II.35.1 *ad* 4 (re acedia’s entailing turning the mind from spiritual goods); II-II.35.4 *ad* 2 (re spite).

<sup>9</sup> John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae*, 52.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. John Paul II, *Catechesi Tradendae* 51 and *Novo Millennio Inuente* 29.

In the wake of West's "Nightline" appearance, Jimmy Akin, director of apologetics and evangelization for Catholic Answers, observed (in a blog entry largely favorable to West) that the author and speaker is "overselling the potential for Puritanism."<sup>11</sup>

He makes it sound as if our natural inclination as Christians is to see sex as bad and shameful and our bodies as evil, and that's not the case. That's the *stereotype* of what Christians think, but that's not what they *really* think.

I don't know *any* adult Christians who think that way.

And I think it sells Christian culture short to make it sound as if this is the big danger for Christians.<sup>12</sup>

Instead, Akin suggests,

It would be *more* effective to give Christian culture its due and challenge the stereotype by saying something like, "C'mon . . . when has anybody *ever* told you that your body is shameful or that sex is dirty. Have you *ever* heard a priest say that from the pulpit? How about a bishop? How about a pope? If anybody *has* told you this, they *weren't* speaking for the Church. This is a false stereotype of Christians that the media tries to sell you to justify a loose-sex lifestyle."<sup>13</sup>

Akin's last point brings out a deeper problem with West's approach: His focus upon prudery as the issue *par excellence* unwittingly serves to affirm outdated cultural stereotypes of the Church. Recall his readiness to assume that Notre Dame students seek to have the "Vagina Monologues" staged on campus because "they have not heard anything better coming from their parents, their pastors, their friends, and their teachers in response to the many pressing questions and 'thirsts' of their hearts."<sup>14</sup> His implication that Catholic women who support the "Monologues" do so because they have been "deeply wounded" by a "puritanical fear of their bodies," taken on its face, bears an unfortunate resemblance to the sort of anti-Catholic

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<sup>11</sup> Jimmy Akin, "Christopher West." JimmyAkin.org, May 14, 2009, <http://www.jimmyakin.org/2009/05/christopher-west.html> [accessed March 25, 2010].

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> West, "How Should Catholics Respond to the 'Vagina Monologues'?"

caricatures propagated by the likes of Planned Parenthood, which claims Church teachings “deny the pleasurable and positive aspects of sex.”<sup>15</sup>

In like manner, West’s characterizations of preconconciliar Catholics as “often repressive”<sup>16</sup> are not unlike the claims of those who assert that the open windows of Vatican II enabled a stodgy Church to make a “radical” break with tradition.<sup>17</sup> Then there is his assertion that “the Church matures through time in some ways similar to the maturing of a human person”; that, “with John Paul II’s TOB,” it “has reached puberty,” and that it “still has a good deal of maturing ahead ... and a good deal of ‘growing pains.’”<sup>18</sup> Such an account of doctrinal development is difficult to distinguish from critics of Catholicism who argue that “[t]he church’s sexual doctrine is archaic and immature.”<sup>19</sup>

It would be grossly inaccurate to suggest that West intends to spread or to encourage unorthodox teachings—his entire career bespeaks the contrary. Rather, the fact that some of his characterizations of the Church resemble those of the Church’s critics reveals unwitting flaws in his catechesis, which detract from his intended message. I see this perhaps most of all in his characterization of the TOB as a “new sexual revolution,” as the term “revolution,” however well intended, by its nature implies discontinuity. In perpetuating the use of this term to describe the exposition of Church doctrine, what is to prevent Catholics from imagining that another, more

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*; “Planned Parenthood Criticizes Catholic Church,” Catholic News Agency, February 12, 2010, <http://www.calatholic.com/news/newsArticle.aspx?id=21a95819-bfbc-4a89-ac20-8937fb0ecdeb> [accessed March 21, 2010].

<sup>16</sup> West, “The New Language: A Crash Course in the Theology of the Body.”

<sup>17</sup> John W. O’Malley S.J., “The Style of Vatican II.” *America*, February 24, 2003, [http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article\\_id=2812](http://www.americamagazine.org/content/article.cfm?article_id=2812) [accessed March 20, 2010].

<sup>18</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised edition, 599-600.

<sup>19</sup> Paul McHugh, “Maybe Common Sense Would Work / Church Needs to Grow Up When It Comes to Sexual Doctrine.” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 5, 2002, [http://articles.sfgate.com/2002-05-05/opinion/17544418\\_1\\_pope-s-insistence-church-sexual](http://articles.sfgate.com/2002-05-05/opinion/17544418_1_pope-s-insistence-church-sexual) [accessed March 20, 2010].



permissive “sexual revolution” is in the Church’s future—and that, by using contraception, they are ahead of the curve?

*Positive correctives*

Following the Magisterium’s direction to present culturally relevant catechesis may well entail acknowledging negative stereotypes of Church teaching. To avoid lending credence to such stereotypes, a prudent approach would be like that suggested by Akin: acknowledging such stereotypes with the sole purpose of showing that they are invalid. Because audiences are extremely sensitive to intimations of frustration and resentment at Church teachings, such an acknowledgement, to be effective, would have to emanate from a perspective of unadulterated love for the Mystical Body of Christ and its members.

This was precisely the approach taken by the great Catholic apologist Father Daniel A. Lord S.J., who, between 1925 and 1955, wrote about three hundred pamphlets, which together racked up sales in the millions. These pamphlets, many of which addressed issues regarding chastity, marriage, and family life, often bore deliberately provocative titles, such as “The Church Is Out of Date,” “What of Lawful Birth Control?,” “Don’t Marry a Catholic,” “These Terrible Jesuits,” “Is Religion Bad for Your Mind?,” “Catholic Education Is a Waste?,” and “The Church Can’t Order Me.”<sup>20</sup>

Lord’s typical style is, in some sense, a modern spin on that of St. Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*. With the attitude of a patient, fatherly priest passionately in love with Christ and His Church, he presents critical views of the Church, accurately depicting the thought processes behind them, and proceeds to show why such views are ill-founded.

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<sup>20</sup> See “Partial List of Father Lord’s Publications,” in Thomas Gavin, *Champion of Youth: A Dynamic Story of a Dynamic Man: Daniel A. Lord S.J.* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1977), 203ff.

A particularly relevant example of this approach may be found in “Why Be Decent?”, a 1938 pamphlet that Lord originally wished to title “The Church Is Too Strict About Sex.”<sup>21</sup> The author acknowledges early on that that most of the Catholic teenagers he meets at youth conventions are “trying in fairly heroic fashion” to remain pure in a hostile culture.<sup>22</sup>

They always resented the charge that in her stand for personal purity the Catholic Church was being puritanical and was declaring herself opposed to human joy. They objected when a cynical world calmly prophesied that the Church would soon tone down her principles and would accept modern standards of sexual conduct.<sup>23</sup>

With this brief acknowledgement of the attitudes of the Church’s enemies, Lord deftly emasculates such criticisms by placing them alongside the witness of young people—the reader’s peers—who refute them with their very lives.

Another aspect of Lord’s approach that would fill a lacunae in West’s TOB is his acknowledgement that the Church *is* strict about sex—and for good reason: “The whole of the Catholic stand for purity is a splendid one, a stand for the defense of human life.”<sup>24</sup>

John Paul II’s magisterium likewise did not shy from emphasizing that chastity is a challenge, and the stakes are high. “The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality,” urging parents to teach children self-mastery, approvingly recalls Pauline admonitions against concupiscence, observing “[s]uch self-mastery involves both avoiding occasions which might provoke or encourage sin as well as knowing how to overcome one’s own natural instinctive impulses.”

Although West’s presentation of the TOB speaks of self-mastery, it cannot be said to place the same level of emphasis upon it as do magisterial documents. This is particularly true given West’s refusal to acknowledge that growth in chastity necessarily entails avoiding occasions of

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<sup>21</sup> Daniel A. Lord S.J., “Why Be Decent?” (St. Louis: The Queen’s Work, 1938). Cf. Daniel A. Lord S.J., “The Church Is Too Strict About Sex” (*Daniel A. Lord S. J. Collection*, Box 4 Folder 20, Georgetown University Library, Special Collections Division).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 1. The conventions to which Lord refers are those of the Sodality of Our Lady, which he directed.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Lord, “Why Be Decent?”, 4.

sin—not just for those who are “bound by lust,” but for everyone. Moreover, his presentation is, as we have seen, compromised in its failure to understand continence as it is defined by the traditional teachings of the Church, as expressed by St. Thomas Aquinas and Pope John Paul II. Correcting it would therefore necessitate restoring the traditional emphasis on self-mastery, within a positive context akin to that presented by Lord, encouraging the faithful to recognize their divinely charged responsibility to be a “sign of contradiction.”<sup>25</sup> Recent research suggests that such a restoration would add cultural relevance to catechesis, as people are increasingly attracted to religions whose high standards place them in tension with the surrounding culture.<sup>26</sup>

**2. Because sexual desire necessarily mediates desire for God, the extent to which a married couple’s love images divine love is defined by the couple’s experience of *eros*.**<sup>27</sup>

West’s writings show a desire to teach in continuity with the Church’s longstanding battle against Manichaeism and every other form of dualism. As has been noted, because he wishes to correct such attitudes—which he calls the “spirit good—body bad”<sup>28</sup> mentality—he goes to great lengths to demonstrate that the Church teaches that marital sexual union is good.

However, as has been noted, in his zeal, he ventures further. While the larger message of his presentation is that sex, in all its goodness, was created by God to take place within the union of spouses, he repeatedly uses language that isolates “sexual desire” from the context of marriage. For example, he says that “God created sexual desire to be the very power to love in the divine image”<sup>29</sup>—that is, not just an expression of such power, but the very nature of it. “[S]exual

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<sup>25</sup> *Humanae Vitae* 18.

<sup>26</sup> John Lamont, “The Prophet Motive.” *First Things*, April 2010, <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2010/03/the-prophet-motive> [retrieved March 21, 2010].

<sup>27</sup> See all “Ten Major Themes” listed in Chapter One, especially Nos. 1, 4, 5, 7, 8, and 9.

<sup>28</sup> *Theology of the Body Explained*, first edition, 11.

<sup>29</sup> West, “Why Do Men Look at Porn? Oprah Viewers Want to Know.”

love,” he says, “is the earthly key that enables us to enter into heaven’s song.”<sup>30</sup> “Through sex, mankind may attain the great spiritual illumination which will transform the world, which will light up the only path to an earthly paradise.”<sup>31</sup>

That last quotation is not from Christopher West. It is from Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger, whose guiding philosophy, it should go without saying, was diametrically opposed to everything Christopher West stands for. Yet, the superficial resemblance between her message and West’s should give one pause. If the Church is indeed to be a “sign of contradiction,”<sup>32</sup> might it not be prudent for catechists to take great care that they do not appear to validate the culture’s preoccupation with sex?

A running theme of West’s catechesis is that the culture does not sufficiently value sex. “The problem with our sex-saturated culture,” he says, “is not that it overvalues the body and sex. The problem is that it has failed to see just how valuable the body and sex really are.”<sup>33</sup> Although his intended meaning is in keeping with Church teachings, his choice of emphasis contrasts with that of the first commentary John Paul II (as Karol Cardinal Wojtyla) wrote on *Humanae Vitae*, in which he singled out for criticism the culture’s “overevaluation of sex.”<sup>34</sup>

Modern man must decide correctly, too, the value of conjugal union and the true meaning of love in the mutual relationship of persons of the opposite sex. ... Here too, the encyclical shows an awareness of the complexity of the situation. It does not put all the blame for aberration on the evils of “sexualism,” but it does seek to make evident the true value of sex in human life and above all in marriage. *The overevaluation of sex results in its devaluation.* This is the fundamental error of “sexualism” in its various forms. On this basis, contraceptive attitudes arise as well as the demand for the legalization of contraceptives. The author of the encyclical declares himself in favor of the true value of sex, and defends it

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<sup>30</sup> West, *Heaven’s Song*, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Margaret Sanger, *The Pivot of Civilization* (New York: Brentano’s, 1922), 271.

<sup>32</sup> *Humanae Vitae* 18.

<sup>33</sup> Christopher West, “The Meeting of Eros and Agape in Benedict XVI’s First Encyclical.” Syndicated column, January 27, 2006, <http://www.christopherwest.com/page.asp?ContentID=23>.

<sup>34</sup> Karol Cardinal Wojtyla, “Crisis in Morality.” From *Crisis in Morality: The Vatican Speaks Out* (Washington: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1969), 5.

against the abasement which lies hidden in its overevaluation in daily life, particularly in conjugal life.<sup>35</sup>

Superficially, these words could be said to affirm West's claim that the true value of sex is indeed more glorious than the value presented by society. Unlike West, however, Wojtyla's criticisms are pointed not at a danger outside married life—what West calls our “sex-saturated culture”—but, rather, at one that threatens “conjugal life” from within. That is why he refers to “the fundamental error of ‘sexualism’ *in its various forms*” (emphasis added)—e.g., not only those forms whose promoters are opposed to the goods of marriage, but even those whose promoters uphold such goods. Any attempt to overevaluate the role of sex, “particularly in conjugal life,” leads “modern man” to devalue “conjugal union and the true meaning of love in the mutual relationship of persons of the opposite sex.”

Wojtyla's point is one that has been consistently emphasized by the Magisterium: The foundation of marital happiness does not subsist in mutually satisfying sex. Pius XII said, in his “Allocution to Midwives,”

There are some who would allege that happiness in marriage is in direct proportion to the reciprocal enjoyment in conjugal relations. It is not so: Indeed, happiness in marriage is in direct proportion to the mutual respect of the partners, even in their intimate relations; not that they regard as immoral and refuse what nature offers and what the Creator has given, but because this respect, and the mutual esteem which it produces, is one of the strongest elements of a pure love, and for this reason all the more tender.<sup>36</sup>

In his TOB catecheses, John Paul II likewise made every effort to convey the point that, contrary to the mythology of a culture fascinated with sexual “power,” the dynamic force that impels marital unity draws its strength from chastity.

If the key element of the spirituality of the spouses and parents—the essential “power” that the spouses must continually draw from their sacramental “consecration”—is *love*, this love, as the text of the encyclical makes clear (*Humanae Vitae*, 20), is by its nature *linked with chastity, which, in turn, manifests itself as self-mastery or continence.*<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5, emphasis in original.

<sup>36</sup> Pius XII, “Allocution to Midwives,” October 29, 1951.

<sup>37</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 644 (TOB 127:5, October 10, 1984).

His placing chastity at the heart of spousal love, and linking that chastity with continence, reflects the fact that the late Holy Father intended his TOB catechesis to be in continuity with *Humanae Vitae*. That encyclical links continence with repeated, compassionate acknowledgements of the “difficulties”<sup>38</sup> of married life and the “great endurance”<sup>39</sup> required of couples to live according to the moral law (issues that are also present in the TOB, but are largely overshadowed by John Paul’s emphasis on the joys of married love). Those expressions, in turn, link *Humanae Vitae* back to Pius XI’s 1930 encyclical *Casti Connubii*, which, in upholding conjugal chastity, noted the sufferings that are a natural part of married life.

It will also help [the spouses], if they behave towards their cherished offspring as God wills: that is, that the father be truly a father, and the mother truly a mother; through their devout love and unwearying care, the home, though it suffer the want and hardship of this valley of tears, may become for the children in its own way a foretaste of that paradise of delight in which the Creator placed the first men of the human race.<sup>40</sup>

The topic of suffering is nearly absent from the TOB catecheses. John Paul II himself was the first to recognize this lacuna, stating in his final TOB audience, “These reflections do not include many problems belonging, with regard to their object, to the theology of the body (e.g. the problem of suffering and death, so important to the biblical message).”<sup>41</sup>

John Paul’s later writings suggest that his failure to connect his TOB catechesis with suffering weighed upon him. In *Evangelium Vitae*, written more than a decade after his final TOB audience, he gave catechists an imperative to teach the faithful the meaning of pain in light of Christian faith, hope, and charity.

<sup>38</sup> *Humanae Vitae* 25.

<sup>39</sup> *Humanae Vitae* 20.

<sup>40</sup> Pius XI, *Casti Connubii* 113.

<sup>41</sup> John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them*, 660 (TOB 133:1, November 28, 1984).

*The work of education cannot avoid a consideration of suffering and death.* These are a part of human existence, and it is futile, not to say misleading, to try to hide them or ignore them. On the contrary, people must be helped to understand their profound mystery in all its harsh reality. Even pain and suffering have meaning and value when they are experienced in close connection with love received and given.<sup>42</sup>

The absence of suffering from both the original TOB and West's presentation has not gone unnoticed by theologians. In a forthcoming essay, David Cloutier and William C. Mattison argue that "TOB actually shortchanges the work of God's grace by obscuring what St. Paul calls its greatest glory, its ability to show itself precisely in and through our weakness and brokenness." Although I strongly disagree with the contention that John Paul's Wednesday catecheses themselves (even given their lacunae) "shortchange" grace, the criticism holds with regard to West's presentation, because of his repeated implication that the quality of a married couple's sex life is the determinate factor of their holiness.<sup>43</sup>

### *Positive correctives*

Giving an adequate interpretation of Magisterial teaching on the way in which sexual relations are integrated within a fully rounded married life requires careful attention to emphasis. Catechists should make every effort to examine magisterial writings—including and especially the voluminous writings of John Paul II on the subject—from the widest possible perspective, rather than focusing upon passages that omit the ways in which spouses' love bears the Cross.

West, knowing the influence St. John of the Cross had upon John Paul II, occasionally makes passing reference to *The Dark Night of the Soul*. Given his affinity for discussing the flesh, he would do well to complement such teachings with the perspective on marital sacrifice that Fulton

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<sup>42</sup> John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* 97 (1995).

<sup>43</sup> David Cloutier and William C. Mattison, "Bodies Poured Out in Christ: Marriage Beyond the Theology of the Body," in *Leaving and Coming Home: New Wineskins for Catholic Sexual Ethics*, ed. David Cloutier (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books/Wipf & Stock, 2010, forthcoming).

J. Sheen offers in the chapter of *Three to Get Married* devoted to “The Dark Night of the Body.” The chapter is addressed to spouses for whom “[t]he intimacy which at first was so desirable, now becomes at times a burden”:<sup>44</sup>

What the Dark Night of the Soul is to the spiritual life, the Dark Night of the Body is to marriage. Neither are permanent; both are occasions of purification for fresher insights into Love. If the fig tree of love is to bear fruit, it must be purged and dunged. Dryness in the spiritual life and in marriage are really actual graces. God’s finger is stirring the waters of the soul, creating discontent, that new efforts may be put forth. . . . There are two kinds of dryness: there is one which rots, which is the dryness of love without God; and there is also a dryness which ripens, and that is won when one grows through the fires and heat of sacrifice.<sup>45</sup>

Cloutier and Mattison make a similar point in one of their recommendations for correcting West’s presentation of the TOB.

[R]edemption . . . can (and should) be seen as the in-corporating of brokenness into Christ’s healing body, the Church, through the shared life and mission of a marriage. This is the fully-developed, Christ-like understanding of total self-gift in a life that is not pre-Fall and yet not yet fully glorified. Such love may have moments of intense and private intimacy. But just as the Christ depicted in the gospels is no isolated mystic, but instead the wandering, suffering servant, so too his model of service ought to be the tie that binds together couples in Christ.<sup>46</sup>

The suggestion to present the TOB within the context of Mystical Body theology (the “in-corporating of brokenness”) is particularly profound, because such a perspective would enable another important correction to West’s approach: It would provide a powerful means to guide the faithful towards healing from the separation from God that arises as a result of concupiscence.

Concupiscence leads one to give oneself priority over others, and so places one in opposition to them and God.<sup>47</sup> Two of the most powerful interior acts that an individual can do are to love

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<sup>44</sup> Sheen, Fulton J., *Three to Get Married* (New York: Scepter Publishing, 2005), 183. Originally published 1951. Here, as elsewhere, Sheen’s attitude of reverence carries a lesson for modern catechists. He discusses sexual matters with notable frankness, without ever resorting to graphic or colloquial language.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Cloutier and Mattison, “Bodies Poured Out in Christ: Marriage Beyond the Theology of the Body.”

<sup>47</sup> Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I-II.77.4, ad 2.



and to suffer (suffering here described as an activity rather than a passion, because it becomes an activity through the sufferer's loving choice to unite his suffering to Christ).<sup>48</sup>

Despite the universality of love itself, every person's love is unique. Only I can love as *I* love, the love coming from my very own self—and likewise with suffering.<sup>49</sup> This individual nature of both love and suffering comes from possessing one's own act of existence (*actus essendi*), which is an unearned gift of God.<sup>50</sup> Because this act of being subsists in my very substance, my love and suffering are both my own in that they are embodied; only I can give my own love from my own soul and body; likewise, only I can suffer in my own soul and body.

Suffering, united to Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, purifies love (cf. Romans 5:3-5).<sup>51</sup> Although charity must precede that suffering in order for one to desire to unite it to Christ's Passion, such suffering, by purifying love, enables the sufferer to attain the degree of charity that will determine his level of beatitude. In this way, it is precisely because one's suffering is one's own, that it can enable the healing of the love of concupiscence that separates one from God and neighbor. Through suffering with Christ, I become united with Him and all his Mystical Body in love. Suffering, then, leads to the completion of the *reditus*; the Cross is the medium through which the many are returned to the One.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> To express this in Thomistic terms: Love is the first movement of the will (I.20.1, corpus). It is experienced interiorly (*Summa Theologiae*, I-II.26.2, corpus); as is suffering (I-II.35.7, corpus). Because they are interior, love and suffering are both in some way infinite (I-II.2.6, corpus) and thereby each is powerful, at least in its effect on the one who loves or suffers.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. John Paul II, *Salvifici Doloris* 24, on the "creative character of suffering."

<sup>50</sup> In his commentary on Boethius's *De Hebdomadibus* (Chapter 4, line 152), Aquinas details the twofold goodness (*duplex bonitas*) of created goods: In addition to being good through their relation to the First Good, created goods are good in themselves, through their own act of existence. While such goodness is not their own in the sense of their having created it, their existence as individuals enables them to possess it.

<sup>51</sup> "It is not by sidestepping or fleeing from suffering that we are healed, but rather by our capacity for accepting it, maturing through it and finding meaning through union with Christ, who suffered with infinite love." Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe Salvi* 37.

<sup>52</sup> "[I]n so far as outward pain is not repugnant to the interior appetite, it becomes in a manner pleasant and agreeable by way of inward joy." *Summa Theologiae*, I-II.35.7, corpus (Benziger translation).

## Conclusion

In a 2000 address to catechists and religion teachers, Cardinal Ratzinger warned of “the temptation of impatience, the temptation of immediately finding the great success, in finding large numbers.” This, he said, “is not God’s way. For the Kingdom of God as well as for evangelization, the instrument and vehicle of the Kingdom of God, the parable of the grain of mustard seed is always valid (see Mark 4:31-32).”<sup>1</sup>

He goes on to say,

New evangelization cannot mean: immediately attracting the large masses that have distanced themselves from the Church by using new and more refined methods. No—this is not what new evangelization promises. ...<sup>2</sup>

West’s presentation has become, as Schindler says, “a problem for the Church,”<sup>3</sup> as a result, I believe, of the “temptation to impatience”<sup>4</sup> of which the Holy Father speaks. The hope of “attracting the large masses”<sup>5</sup> led parishes and dioceses to seek his “new and more refined methods”<sup>6</sup> of evangelization, without submitting his writings and talks to sufficient theological scrutiny. As a result, the primary instruction that millions of teenage and adult Catholics are receiving on Church teachings on sexuality is theologically compromised. In this light, it would be wise for those charged with overseeing the instruction of the faithful to reflect upon an old proverb, quoted by the Holy Father in that same address to catechists: “Success is not one of the names of God.”

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Address to Catechists and Religion Teachers, Jubilee of Catechists, 12 December 2000.” Eternal Word Television Network, [http://www.ewtn.com/new\\_evangelization/Ratzinger.htm](http://www.ewtn.com/new_evangelization/Ratzinger.htm) [accessed March 23, 2010].

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Schindler, “Christopher West’s Theology of the Body.”

<sup>4</sup> Ratzinger, “Address to Catechists and Religion Teachers, Jubilee of Catechists, 12 December 2000.”

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

In the long run, perhaps the most damaging aspect of West's presentation may be his assertion that John Paul II's teachings are "revolutionary," thereby teaching that the Church's sacred deposit of faith is not fully contained in Scripture and Tradition, but, rather, progresses with the passage of time—like a pubescent child that "still has a good deal of maturing ahead ... and a good deal of 'growing pains.'" <sup>7</sup> The memory of the dissent from *Humanae Vitae*, which was prompted largely by contraception advocates' dashed expectations that the encyclical would alter official teachings, should serve as a warning against suggesting to the faithful that the Church's doctrine keeps pace with changing times. <sup>8</sup>

Truth be told, there is something "new" about John Paul II's teachings on marriage and sexuality, but it is not the newness of radicalism, revolution, drama, or daring. To borrow the language of G.K. Chesterton, the theology of the body is new because it is part of a Catholic faith whose "very antiquity preserves an attitude of novelty." <sup>9</sup> Its newness is that of ancient truths shining ever bright in the face of a world that is "passing away" (1 John 2:17). In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, "What earlier generations held as sacred, remains sacred and great for us too, and it cannot be all of a sudden entirely forbidden or even considered harmful. It behooves all of us to preserve the riches which have developed in the Church's faith and prayer, and to give them their proper place." <sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> West, *Theology of the Body Explained*, revised edition, 599-600.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Francis Cardinal George, "Remarks on the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of *Humanae Vitae*." Archdiocese of Chicago Respect Life office, <http://www.respectlifechicago.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=M-tpg5ZzzXk%3D&tabid=6148&mid=11290&language=en-US> [accessed March 23, 2010].

<sup>9</sup> G.K. Chesterton, *The Catholic Church and Conversion*, Chapter 2 (1926). Reprinted in *Collected Works*, Vol. 3 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 70.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Summorum Pontificum*.

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