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TOWARD A DOMESTIC ECCLESIOLOGY: THE “DOMESTIC CHURCH” FINDS
ARTICULATION IN POPE JOHN PAUL II’S “THEOLOGY OF THE BODY.”

by

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December 15, 2007

When the Second Vatican Council used the term “domestic church” in *Lumen Gentium* to describe the ecclesial reality of marriage and family life, it set the theology of marriage and family on a trajectory few would have guessed at the time. Who would have thought that what started with a mere reference to parents as preachers of the faith to their children would develop into a radical reinterpretation of marriage at the heart of God’s plan for salvation? While this dramatic theological reflection has taken place, few acknowledge--let alone engage-- this startling new reality. Yet the elements of a new theology of marriage and family are precisely what we find with the pontificate of John Paul II (JPII).¹ The documents from the Council and the writings of Paul VI provide us with a blueprint for this new concept of domestic church.² Beginning with the 1980 Synod of Bishops and continuing in various letters and encyclicals we find that this blueprint broadens and deepens. Finally, JPII, in his series of Wednesday audience addresses popularly known today as the theology of the body, takes this blueprint and posits marriage and family life at the center of the drama of salvation. While JPII is not known as an ecclesiologist, what we find in his writings on marriage and family is a radical, domestic ecclesiology rooted in his deeply biblical and anthropological reflections on the human person. I will first analyze references to domestic church in official church teaching and then turn to JPII’s theology of the body, where this trajectory of domestic ecclesiology is reinterpreted and presented anew.

One of the most surprising aspects of this concept of domestic church is how it is largely ignored in contemporary theological literature. Joann Heaney-Hunter’s treatment

¹ JPII and “the Pope” are used interchangeably for John Paul II throughout the paper, unless another pope is clearly being discussed.

² I have deliberately chosen to not capitalize “church” in my use of “domestic church.” Some authors and church documents do capitalize, but given the ambiguous nature of the term, to make it analogous with the commonly capitalized “universal Church” seemed presumptuous.

of domestic church exemplifies the tendency to overlook fundamental contemporary developments in official Church teaching. She does acknowledge that "...there appears to be a sharp discontinuity between the guiding beliefs about domestic church articulated in documents and theological writings, and the daily practice or understanding of it in the Church community."³ While acknowledging the existence of domestic church in official teaching, her observation concerning everyday experience seems to lead her to gloss over important developments, particularly by JPII. Much of the theological literature, though rarely acknowledging the domestic church as thoroughly, makes the same mistake. On the other hand, the more recent work of theologians like Florence Cafrey Bourg⁴ have paid attention to domestic church in great detail. Bourg takes it upon herself to explore domestic church as an ecclesial category, echoing the same concern that few discuss domestic church as a serious theological category.

Vatican II & Paul VI: The Blueprint Established

The concept of domestic church was resurrected in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.⁵ *Lumen Gentium* (LG), in its discussion of the sacraments, refers to

³ Joann Heaney-Hunter, "Domestic Church: Guiding Beliefs and Daily Practices," eds. Michael G. Lawler and William P. Roberts, *Christian Marriage and Family: Contemporary Theological and Pastoral Perspectives* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier/The Liturgical Press, 1996) 62.

⁴ Florence Cafrey Bourg, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Christian Families As Domestic Churches* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

One of the only other serious treatments of domestic church that I am aware of is by Joseph C. Atkinson, yet he focuses on the process by which the term domestic church came to make its way into final draft of *Lumen Gentium*. "Family as Domestic Church: Developmental Trajectory, Legitimacy, and Problems of Appropriation." *Theological Studies*. 66 (September 2005): 592-604.

⁵ Michael A. Fahey, "The Christian Family as Domestic Church at Vatican II," eds. Lisa Sowle Cahill and Dietmar Mieth, *The Family* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), 89 textual citation (cf. PG 62, 143; PG 62, 549). The article deals with the conciliar process of how the term domestic church made its way into the final documents of the Second Vatican Council.

the family rooted in the sacrament of marriage as the "domestic church."⁶ The Christian parents are deemed, "...the first preachers of faith for their children by word and example...." and "...must foster the vocation which is proper to each child, taking special care if it be a sacred vocation." It is significant to note that parents are charged with what is also the principal task of the bishop: preach the faith. This would seem to associate the sacrament of marriage and the sacrament of orders in an unprecedented way. This kind of association also prefigures the kind of reinterpretation we will find in our discussion of the theology of the body. In *Apostolicam Actuositatem* (AA) the concept of domestic church is further elaborated upon.

The mission of being the primary vital cell of society has been given to the family by God. This mission will be accomplished if the family, by the mutual affection of its members and by family prayer, presents itself as a domestic sanctuary of the church; if the whole family takes its part in the church's liturgical worship; if, finally it offers active hospitality, and practices justice and other good works for the benefit of all its sisters and brothers who suffer from want.⁷

This is a substantive elaboration upon LG 11. Along with being preachers of the faith and fosterers of vocation, the family has a divine mandate to be the pivotal institution of society, to offer one another "mutual affection," to pray together, to participate in liturgy together, to offer hospitality, practice justice and other good works toward those who suffer. These seven attributes are the defining characteristics of the domestic church as presented by the Second Vatican Council, and form the basis for all of the theological and pastoral reflection up to the present regarding the domestic church. It is also

⁶ Austin Flanery, O.P., ed., *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, (Costello Publishing Company, Inc., 1996), LG 11.

⁷ Ibid, AA 11

significant to note that none of the theologians⁸ that spend any time discussing the usage of domestic church at Vatican II acknowledge or discuss this passage. While *AA* is not the most authoritative of conciliar documents, it still holds more weight than any other church document outside of *LG*, thus warranting more sustained attention.

Paul VI, though not treating the domestic church directly, emphasizes several important points regarding the concept of domestic church in his treatment of other themes. In his encyclical *Marialis Cultus* concerning Mary, in a section dealing with praying the Rosary in the family context, he reiterates the teaching from *AA* 11, but qualifies it in an important way, stating if the "...element of common prayer were missing, the family would lack its very character as a domestic Church." He further calls for a "...a concrete effort to reinstate communal prayer in family life if there is to be a restoration of the theological concept of the family as domestic church."⁹ It is here that we realize that there can be a difference between families in general and a family as a domestic church, a point not acknowledged in contemporary theological writings. Not all families are domestic churches—only families that pray together have the right to be considered domestic Churches. While this could be inferred from the text of the Council itself, Paul VI here is forceful in requiring prayer to be a defining element of the domestic Church.

In discussing evangelization in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, Paul VI offers a similar qualification concerning the concept of the domestic Church. In *EN* 71 (referring to both

⁸ Specifically Bourq and Atkinson, but it also applies to every other writer that has addressed the use of domestic church at Vatican II.

⁹ Paul VI, *Marialis Cultus* 52 [online document] http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19740202_marialis-cultus_en.html; Internet; accessed Nov. 23 2007. All of the papal documents cited were accessed at the Vatican's web site.

LG 11 and AA 11, as well as St. John Chrysostom) he states "...that there should be found in every Christian family the various aspects of the entire Church."¹⁰ This is a startling, potentially radical, assertion, charging the family with a great responsibility. Paul VI is requiring the domestic church to mirror the *entire* universal Church. This is a significant step forward in thinking about the domestic church. While his remarks specifically concern evangelization, it still begs the question of how far we are to take this teaching of the domestic church possessing aspects of the *entire* Church.

John Paul II: The Blueprint Expanded in Letters & Encyclicals

We will now turn to JP II's letters for an answer to that question. He takes significant steps in expanding the already-established blueprint of the domestic Church into the mission of the universal Church, particularly with communion categories and the ecclesial motif of priest, prophet and king. In 1980 at the Synod of Bishops, the topic of family was chosen as its focus. Following the Synod, the Pope issued his apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (FC). Weighing in at over 35,000 words, it is the most thorough treatment of Christian family life in the modern world by any pope and contains a significant contribution toward a more comprehensive conceptualization of domestic church.

The first reference to domestic church occurs in an articulation of the relationship between marriage and family and the universal Church. The category of communion, an increasingly popular category at the time (and *the* category used to describe ecclesial relations today) is used to describe this relation. JP II begins with conjugal communion, describing it as "...the foundation on which is built the broader communion

¹⁰ Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 71, *Ibid.*

of the family of parents and children, of brothers and sisters with each other, of relatives and other members of the household."¹¹ He continues:

The Christian family is also called to experience a new and original communion which confirms and perfects natural and human communion. In fact the grace of Jesus Christ, "the first-born among many brethren" is by its nature and interior dynamism "a grace of brotherhood," as St. Thomas Aquinas calls it. The Holy Spirit, who is poured forth in the celebration of the sacraments, is the living source and inexhaustible sustenance of the supernatural communion that gathers believers and links them with Christ and with each other in the unity of the Church of God. The Christian family constitutes a specific revelation and realization of ecclesial communion, and for this reason too it can and should be called "the domestic Church."¹²

Given Vatican II's introduction of personalist philosophical categories in speaking about marriage and family life, the use of the scholastic, natural law paradigm of "grace building upon nature" is curious, given the sacramental concept he is trying to posit. It would seem that a sacramentally based communion would be more appropriate, given the simple fact that the persons involved have already been graced by the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, and Marriage. Thus, in a very real way, grace comes before nature. Whatever the conceptualization may lack, it does posit a very real link in communion categories between the domestic and universal Church. We will see a much more personalistic reflection on marriage when we take up the theology of the body.

The principal contribution toward the concept of domestic church in *FC* is the integration of marriage and family life into the Church's self-understanding of its priestly, prophetic, and kingly mission.¹³ The thirteen sections of catechesis and pastoral advice

¹¹ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* 21, Ibid.

¹² *FC* 21, Ibid

¹³ *FC* 49-62, Ibid.

provide the most detailed articulation of how the family as domestic church is to contribute to and be informed by the universal Church. JP II begins this section with the following declaration: “[a]mong the fundamental tasks of the Christian family is its ecclesial task: the family is placed at the service of the building up of the Kingdom of God in history by participating in the life and mission of the Church.”¹⁴ This gesture furthers the intimate association between the domestic and universal Churches.

Another somewhat peculiar model for the domestic Church is set forth in the letter *Redemptoris Custos*, in its section concerning fatherhood. The introduction of this model is not really in line with developmental trajectory of the concept of domestic Church, but it is worth noting for the very fact that it is held up as a model. The Holy Family of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus is referred to as "...the original 'Church in miniature (Ecclesia domestica)....'"¹⁵ This model carries challenging implications for Christian married life. First, the procreation that took place was effected by the Holy Spirit in a supernatural way, rather than naturally via Joseph. Second, Joseph and Mary, according to tradition, did not engage in conjugal relations throughout the course of their married life, making their example somewhat difficult to relate to. Third, the Holy Family is a single child family, running contrary to the traditional admonition to "be fruitful and multiply." JP II here is stepping outside of the trajectory he has already established with the priest, prophet, and king theme from Vatican II and reaches further back in Tradition in referencing the Holy Family. None the less, the Holy Family offers a radical challenge to the way in which we theologize about (as well as live out the experience of)

¹⁴ FC 49, Ibid.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Redemptoris Custos* 7, Ibid.

the domestic Church, and deserves our attention with regard to theological reflection. One possibility could be positing Mary and Joseph as a model for those times of periodic abstinence that occur within the rhythms of Natural Family Planning.

John Paul II declared 1994 to be the “year of the family” and he issued his *Letter to Families (LF)*. Here again we find significant development with regard to family as domestic church. First, the theme of family as fundamental to both society and church, which was discussed first in *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, is picked up here and made central to the entire document. Second, in what seems like a development from the communion ecclesiology discussed in *Familiaris Consortio*, we now see the phrase *communio personarum* used when referring to the particular kind of communion of marriage and family life. LF begins by proscribing the family as “the way of the Church.”¹⁶ Shortly after this, we are told that “Throughout this Year it is important to discover anew the many *signs of the Church’s love and concern for the family*, a love and concern expressed from the very beginning of Christianity when the meaningful term ‘*domestic church*’ was applied to the family.”¹⁷ Here again we have domestic church established as the principal ecclesial category for marriage and family. LF will resurface in our discussion later on the theology of the body, as many of these same themes were proposed and developed first in JP II’s catechetical homilies.

In *Familiaris Consortio*, *Redemptoris Custos*, and JP II’s *Letter to Families* we see a further development of the blueprint for a domestic ecclesiology. The following

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Letter to Families 2*, Ibid. Mention of the domestic church as a church “in miniature” basically references the fact that the “domestic church” ought to possess the essential elements of the universal church.

¹⁷ LF, 3, Ibid.

references to domestic church in official teaching continue to include it in further teaching, while not specifically developing the concept per se. The 1994 letter from the Pontifical Council on the Family *Gratissimam Sane* (GS) and the 1995 encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (EV) contextualize the domestic church within the "culture of life" motif developed by the Holy Father. GS 13 posits a vision of "two civilizations," placing the family as domestic church—in light of the teaching of AA 11—in a pivotal role, bringing into being a "civilization of love" to counter what is referred to as "anti-civilization." The passage elaborates upon a rather technical exposition of the ills of modern culture, consisting essentially of a "crisis of truth" leading to a denigration of the person. It is principally through the family, specifically as domestic church, that this is counteracted. This is a small, yet strong, statement of the desire of the Pope to conceptually integrate the family into the ecclesial life of the universal Church. The reference to domestic church in EV 92 is a reformulation of earlier themes pertaining to evangelization and reiterating the family's essential role therein, through the raising of children.

The Blueprint Reinterpreted: Domestic Church in the Theology of the Body

While we have seen that domestic Church has flowed into official papal teaching over the last several decades and a substantive blueprint is articulated, we find the most thorough theological treatment of marriage and family as domestic church in a curious place—in the series of 129 Wednesday audience homilies from 1979 to 1984 that has since been dubbed the "theology of the body." A significant portion of this theology of the body has been devoted to reflection upon the sacramentality of marriage and the morality of conjugal relations therein. While this reflection upon the marriage is only a

part of a broader reflection upon biblical anthropology in the mode of JP II's personalist, phenomenological philosophy, the following discussion will focus on his reflections on marriage, and only bring in his more anthropological reflections where appropriate. What we find in JP II's catechesis on the sacramentality of marriage is a reinterpretation of the blueprint outlined thus far of a domestic ecclesiology, yet it is fully in line with the trajectory of marriage being more fully conceptually integrated into the life and mission of the universal Church.

This reinterpretation unfolds gradually over the course of his addresses on the sacramentality of marriage, and takes place in two parts. First, we find a presentation of marriage as central in the economy of salvation throughout his reflections on Ephesians 5. Second, in his discussion of the sign of the sacrament of marriage we find elements of this domestic ecclesiology in his articulation of the communion of persons (*communio personarum*) through the language of the body, which, in turn, becomes liturgical language. JP II is not intending to set out an ecclesiology and we do not find any of the usual elements of traditional ecclesiology, but I hope the following will allow the reader to see a bit of what George Weigel, referencing an interview he had done with Bishop Angelo Schola, was speaking of when he spoke of the theology of the body as having a potentially radical impact on every aspect of theology.¹⁸

Engaging in theological reflection upon the theology of the body raises several difficulties. First, there are very few others in the academic community with whom to dialogue about the theology of the body. Much of what we find written is by lay catechists with the aim of propagation and evangelization of the content, and not critical

¹⁸ George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of John Paul II* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999) 343.

reflection. While several of these works are very detailed, thorough explanations, they are just that: explanations and descriptions, containing little to no analysis. I was able to find only two scholarly responses to the theology of the body: one by Susan A. Ross; the other by Luke Timothy Johnson, each of whom take a critical stance. Johnson's reflection on the theology of the body is more of an extended editorial, with only his observations on JP II's biblical exegesis seeming to carry much weight given this is his field of expertise.¹⁹ Ross's treatment is more balanced and systematic, but is still only six pages.²⁰ One is left, through necessity, to these sources and to more general treatments of marriage and family, and the writings of JP II.

Second, the forum of Wednesday audience homilies, while a form of papal teaching, is not regarded as the most authoritative mode of address from the Vatican or a pope. However, the sustained, systematic nature of the addresses, as well as their conceptual relationship with the more authoritative teaching in *Familiaris Consortio* and the *Letter to Families*, in addition to *Lumen Gentium* and *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, should lead us to see these addresses as an organic extension of the conciliar documents and encyclicals. Third, and closely related to the second, is the actual method JP II employs throughout the addresses. There is a cyclic character to the interplay of biblical reflection and theological analysis, where key themes are revisited and expanded upon in subsequent homilies. For example, beginning with the words of Christ and His reference back to the book of Genesis, JP II lays a foundation of intensive

¹⁹ Luke Timothy Johnson. "A Disembodied 'Theology of the Body: John Paul II on love, sex and pleasure." *Commonweal* 128.2 (26 Jan. 2001): 11-17. Christopher West responds to this article, revealing a vast difference in perception over the nature and significance of the theology of the body material.

²⁰ Susan A. Ross, "The Bride of Christ and the Body Politic: Body and Gender in Pre-Vatican II Marriage Theology," *The Journal of Religion*. 71 (July 1991): 345-361.

anthropological analysis of the Genesis text; Later, in his reflection upon Ephesians 5 and the sacramentality of marriage, he uses the anthropological themes already developed and reads St. Paul's text with those lenses, showing us how these themes play out in the context of marriage. His goal throughout is to illustrate how all of the seemingly disparate themes and concepts are intimately and organically related. The homiletic nature of the addresses also requires the Pope to constantly be summarizing for his new audiences in the successive addresses. While we do have an element of repetition, on the positive side we are given regular summaries and concise statements of key themes that are very helpful in wading through what is very dense and sometimes technical material.

Marriage on the Move: Marriage as Central to Salvation

The first aspect of this domestic ecclesiology involves a reinterpretation of marriage in the life of the Church. Rather than just being one of the seven sacraments,²¹ the reality of marriage is seen to permeate the entire economy of salvation. JPII's addresses on Ephesians 5 and the sacramentality of marriage principally revolve around a series of biblical passages. It is the exegesis and analysis of these scripture passages that reveal how marriage is central and essential for salvation. While the focus of his addresses on the sacramentality of marriage center on Ephesians 5, we will need to consider JPII's starting place with the dialogue of Christ with the Pharisees concerning Moses's allowance of divorce, and the reference therein back to "the beginning," to Genesis 2:24. This reflection and analysis form the

²¹ Marriage also labors with the historical and theological disadvantage of being the last of the seven sacraments to be officially recognized by the Church and an all-too juridical conceptualization in the life of the Church.

foundation for the exegesis on Ephesians 5. From this foundation, JP II reflects on a series of prophetic texts from the Old Testament, illustrating their connection with Genesis 2:24, and how they pertain to Ephesians 5 and the sacramentality of marriage. The final round of biblical texts from the Song of Songs and the Book of Tobit are yet another stream illustrating the nuptial meaning of the body, and are used to shed light on the meaning of Ephesians 5.

John Paul II begins his entire series of addresses with the words of Christ. Prior to beginning his exegesis, he gives us a hint about why there is a need for such an extended catechesis:

For some time now preparations have been going on for the next ordinary assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which will take place in Rome in the autumn of next year. The theme of the Synod, “The role of the Christian family,” concentrates our attention on the community of human and Christian life, which has been fundamental from the beginning.²²

It is essential for our discussion, as well as to apprehend the nature of the 129 addresses that comprise the theology of the body, that JP II begins with a consideration on the nature of marriage. Given that the 1980 Synod of Bishops, the first of JP II’s pontificate, had the task of discussing marriage and family life tells us that marriage was at the forefront of the mind of the Church, or at least at the forefront of the Pope’s mind. The above paragraph finishes with a framing of the general scriptural focus of the first half of the addresses:

The Lord Jesus used precisely this expression “from the beginning” in the talk about marriage, reported in the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. Mark. We wish to raise the question what this word “beginning” means. We also wish to clarify why Christ referred to the “beginning” on that occasion and, therefore, we propose a more precise analysis of the relative text of Holy Scripture.

²² *TB*, 25.

He begins with the words of Christ which quickly refer us back to Genesis 1:27, which tells us that the Creator made humanity male and female. In the dialogue with the Pharisees Christ also refers to Genesis 2:24, which tells us that “Therefore, a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh.”²³

John Paul II proceeds to engage in an extensive exegesis and analysis of the creation stories of Genesis. A brief summary will have to suffice for the purposes of our discussion. JPII articulates what Christopher West, in his *Theology of the Body Explained: A Commentary on John Paul II's 'Gospel of the Body,'* has summarized as our origin, our history, and our destiny. Our origin refers to humanity's experience prior to original sin and the fall and is dubbed “Original Man.” Our history deals with humanity's experience of sin and human existence after the fall and is called “Historical Man.” Lastly, our destiny is explained under the heading of “Eschatological Man,” and primarily deals with the resurrection. This basic outline forms the first half of the theology of the body and the foundation, or the first level, of the entire catechesis. There are many concepts that are introduced and developed in the first part that are essential to our discussion on marriage, such as the communion of persons (*communio personarum*) and the nuptial meaning of the body,²⁴ which will be elaborated upon as they become relevant to our discussion.

²³ *TB*, 26.

²⁴ Michael Waldstein, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books, 2007). A new translation of the theology of the body was published in January 2007 by Pauline Books and translated by Michael Waldstein that addresses the problematic translation of this concept. The preferred translation is now deemed to be the *spousal* meaning of the body. The nuptial meaning of the body was a central concept throughout the theology of the body. In this paper, nuptial and spousal should be taken to be synonymous.

The second part of the theology of the body begins with the application of the anthropological principles and concepts that are developed in part one. A discussion on the celibate vocation precedes the discussion on marriage with the second part concluding with a discussion of conjugal morality. It is to our discussion of the sacramentality of marriage that we now turn.

Up to this point the discussion of marriage itself has been limited to JP II's introductory remarks about the purpose of the 1980 Synod and a more indirect consideration of Genesis 2:24. The chapter entitled the Sacramentality of Marriage²⁵ begins a more direct and sustained discussion on the nature and meaning of marriage. Again, this portion of our discussion will focus on how marriage is brought to a central place in the economy of salvation. The Pope begins this new round of addresses with a direct quotation of the text he will be considering, Ephesians 5:21-33. In one of his characteristic summaries he reveals how central this text is to marriage and to his entire catechesis:

This passage of Ephesians constitutes almost a crowning of those other concise key words [Christ's reference to "the beginning," the human heart, the Sermon on the Mount, and the future resurrection]. The theology of the body has emerged from them along its evangelical lines, simple and at the same time fundamental. In a certain sense it is necessary to presuppose that theology in interpreting the above mentioned passage of Ephesians. Therefore if we want to interpret that passage, we must do so in the light of what Christ told us about the human body. He spoke not only to remind historical man, and therefore man himself, who is always contemporary, about concupiscence (in his heart). But he also spoke to reveal, on the one hand, the prospectives of the beginning or original innocence or justice, and on the other hand, the eschatological prospectives of the resurrection of the body, when "They will neither marry nor be given in marriage" (cf. Lk 20:35). All of this is part of the theological viewpoint of the "redemption of our body" (Rom 8:23).

Even the words of the author of Ephesians are centered on the body, both its metaphorical meaning, namely the Body of Christ which is the Church, and its

²⁵ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books, 1997) 304. Subsequent citations of this text will denoted as *TB*.

concrete meaning, namely the human body in its perennial masculinity and femininity, in its perennial destiny for union in marriage....²⁶

In essence what the Pope is telling us is that this text of Ephesians 5 ties together all that has come before in almost three years of weekly addresses. The key sentence above begins the citation where the passage from Ephesians is called a “crowning”²⁷ of all that has come before in his reflections, which constitutes an essential aspect of the reorientation of marriage and will be discussed shortly. The use of this classic text from Ephesians also serves an essential function for outlining a domestic ecclesiology, for marriage is given an intimate relationship to the Church and vice versa. Thus, from the point of view of revelation and from all of the preceding addresses of the theology of the body we are poised to see this domestic ecclesiology.

The next key biblical text that is presented for consideration is Isaiah 54:4-10, which serves not only as a text for reflection, but also brings the entire prophetic tradition of the Old Testament to bear upon Ephesians 5. The Pope summarizes the text as follows:

The love of God-Yahweh for the chosen people-Israel is expressed as the love of the man-spouse for the woman chosen to be his wife by means of the marriage alliance. In this way Isaiah explains the events which make up the course of Israel’s history, going back to the mystery hidden in the heart of God. In a certain sense, he leads us in the same direction in which, after many centuries, the author of Ephesians will lead us.²⁸

Having already linked Ephesians 5 with the entirety of his catechesis beginning with the words of Christ and harkening back to Genesis, the Pope links the Old Testament prophetic tradition with Ephesians 5 and all of his previous reflections. Here we also

²⁶ *TB*, 304-305.

²⁷ *TB*, 304.

²⁸ *TB*, 327.

see the spousal analogy that is so often used to depict the relationship between God and his people Israel. The spousal analogy also serves to illustrate the spousal meaning of the body that JP II sees present throughout the theology of the body. Thus far in our reorientation of marriage in the economy of salvation we have gone from Christ's discussion of marriage and divorce with the Pharisees, back to Genesis for extensive anthropological reflection, leading next to Ephesians 5 to consider the sacramentality of marriage, and now we bring forth the Old Testament prophetic tradition to further illustrate the spousal character of God with Israel, and, in turn, Christ with the Church.

The next move in the reinterpretation of marriage involving the sign value of marriage as a sacrament is probably the most dramatic of all, but is really the logical result of all of the JP II reflection thus far. It also involves a methodological shift where he brings his reflection on Ephesians back to bear upon the Genesis text, in light of "Original Man", "Historical Man," and "Eschatological Man" mentioned above. He does not merely use his considerations on Ephesians 5 as a lens; he rereads marriage back into our origin, history, and destiny.

In returning to our origin in Genesis, the Pope tells us that marriage is the central point of what he calls the "sacrament of creation."²⁹ He begins the discussion by recalling a quotation of his own from an earlier address:

"Man appears in the visible world as the highest expression of the divine gift, because he bears within himself the interior dimension of the gift. With this he brings into the world his particular likeness to God, whereby he transcends and dominates also his 'visibility' in the world, his corporality, his masculinity or femininity, his nakedness. Resulting from this likeness there is also the

²⁹ *TB*, 333.

primordial awareness of the conjugal significance of the body, pervaded by the mystery of original innocence.”³⁰

Here we see JP II’s deep awareness of the basic sacramentality of the human person.

The Pope sees this as illustrative of the “problem of the primordial sacrament,” and continues his above reflection as follows:

“Thus, in this dimension, there is constituted a primordial sacrament, understood as a sign which effectively transmits in the visible world the invisible mystery hidden from eternity in God. This is the mystery of truth and love, the mystery of the divine life in which man really shares....”³¹

This sacrament of creation can be summed up as the totality of the experience of humanity prior to the Fall. It is human experience in its fullness, as God intended it to be, in perfect harmony and in perfect relationship with God. The Pope concludes this particular address with the following Trinitarian summation of the sacrament of creation: it is “the supernatural fruits of man’s eternal election on the part of the Father in the eternal Son—those fruits which man was endowed with by God in the very act of creation.”³²

While the sacrament of creation loses its sacramental power after the fall and fails to “effectively transmit in the visible world the invisible mystery hidden from eternity in God,” the sacrament of creation is redeemed by Christ, becoming central to the entire economy of salvation. The Pope sums up his reflections on the sacrament of creation in the following way:

The sacramentality of marriage is not merely a model and figure of the sacrament of the Church (of Christ and of the Church). It also constitutes an

³⁰ *TB*, 333.

³¹ *TB*, 333.

³² *TB*, 336.

essential part of the new heritage, that of the sacrament of redemption with which the Church is endowed in Christ.³³

Here we see that marriage is not a mere example or model of the Church, but is “essential” to what the Pope calls the “sacrament of redemption;” put in another way, it is the totality of redemption in Christ. JP II is now poised to conclude this reorientation of the sacrament of marriage with the following:

Marriage as a primordial sacrament constitutes, on the one hand, the figure (the likeness, the analogy), according to which there is constructed the basic main structure of the new economy of salvation and of the sacramental order. ... In this way marriage, as a primordial sacrament, is assumed and inserted into the integral structure of the new sacramental economy, arising from redemption in the form, I would say, of a prototype. ... Reflecting deeply on this dimension, one would have to conclude that in a certain sense all of the sacraments of the new covenant find their prototype in marriage as the primordial sacrament.³⁴

This is one of the most radical statements thus far in nearly three years of Wednesday homilies. JP II clearly sees, as I have proposed, that marriage is central to the entire economy of salvation. He has laid an intricate and solid foundation from the deepest streams of Divine Revelation beginning with the words of Christ about marriage in dialogue with the Pharisees, to the creation accounts of Genesis, to Ephesians 5, and back to Isaiah and the prophetic tradition of the Old Testament. The Pope has gone to great lengths to illustrate how central marriage, with its spousal meaning has been to the entire biblical tradition. This is the kind of material about which George Weigel was speaking when he noted that the theology of the body is “one of the boldest reconfigurations of Catholic theology in centuries.”³⁵

The Sign Value of Marriage: The Reinterpretation Continues

³³ TB, 339.

³⁴ TB, 339.

³⁵ Weigel, 336.

This reinterpretation is only half of what JP II accomplishes toward the culmination of this domestic ecclesiology. The remainder of the addresses on the sacramentality of marriage deals with the sign value of marriage, and how it is to be an efficacious sign of God. There are many ways in which sacramental efficacy is, and has been, expressed. However, the Pope uses ecclesial language to depict the efficacy of the sacrament of marriage. First, his concept of the communion of persons reveals a particular kind of communion ecclesiology in what is also an anthropological concept. Next, he deals with what is called “the language of the body,” which reveals more deeply how the body is sacramental. Finally, in another bold stroke, the Pope concludes that the language of the body expressed by the communion of persons is essentially a liturgical language. This final element of liturgical language brings us more fully into the realm of ecclesiology, with liturgy being one of the essential aspects in the life of the Church.

The communion of persons needs to be understood within the broader context of the communion ecclesiology that has become dominant since the Second Vatican Council. Avery Dulles, in an essay describing JP II’s ecclesiology, affirms that his dominant ecclesial category is that of communion.³⁶ Dulles goes on to further clarify the ecclesiology of JP II in the following way: “The supreme model for the Church [according to JP II] is the divine Trinity as a *communio personarum*.”³⁷ Thus, Avery Dulles also observes, based upon JP II’s own words, that not only is his ecclesiology a communion ecclesiology, but it is a particular, more specific kind of communion ecclesiology—it is

³⁶ Avery Dulles, “The Ecclesiology of John Paul II, *Gift of the Church: A Textbook On Ecclesiology in Honor of Patrick Granfield, O.S.B.*, edited by Peter Pham (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000) 94.

³⁷ Dulles, 95.

communion of persons with the Trinity as its base. We see here the intersection of the anthropological with the ecclesiological and how the two are almost inseparable in the thought of JP II. Dulles goes on to argue that JP II is not primarily concerned with questions of ecclesiology and has only a series of Wednesday addresses between 1991 and 1996 (not to be confused with the theology of the body addresses) that constitute any discernable, sustained reflection on issues of ecclesiology.³⁸ A cursory glance at these addresses reveals that JP II is not engaging in original theological reflection on the level that he does in the theology of the body, but is offering a catechetical treatment of ecclesiological questions in light of the teaching of Vatican II and the release of the, then, new Catechism of the Catholic Church. Thus, we are left with other works of JP II like the theology of the body to discern his ecclesiological thought, though it is clear that a particular kind of communion ecclesiology in the form of the communion of persons is at work in the thought of JP II.

The concept of the communion of persons in the theology of the body essentially has two aspects: what I will call vertical and horizontal; vertical on the plane of human-divine relationships, and horizontal on the plane of human relationships. It is primarily the horizontal plane that is considered in the theology of the body, but the vertical aspect is alluded to throughout the addresses. The vertical aspect of the communion of persons is essentially Trinitarian and refers to the personal relationship with the three persons of the Trinity. It is this divine communion of persons that makes possible the horizontal communion of persons the Pope spends most of the first part of the theology

³⁸ Dulles, 94.

of the body articulating. The Pope broadly summarizes this vertical element in the following:

It [the sacrament of creation and the sacrament of marriage] is the sacrament in which man and woman, called to be “one flesh,” participate in God’s own creative love. They participate in it both by the fact that, created in the image of God, they are called by reason of the image to a particular union (*communio personarum*) and because this same union has from the beginning been blessed with the blessing of fruitfulness.³⁹

It is the image of God, with its Trinitarian interplay implied, that forms the basis for the horizontal communion of persons. In addition, Dulles, in the essay discussed above, citing John Paul II’s own *Sources of Renewal*, observes that “The supreme model for the Church...is the divine Trinity as a *communio personarum*.”⁴⁰ This reinforces my contention that the communion of persons forms the basis a domestic ecclesiology.

The concepts of “original solitude” and “original unity” developed in the early round of addresses entitled “The Original Unity of Man and Woman,” form the basis of the horizontal communion of persons. “Original solitude” refers to the experience of Adam in the Garden prior to the creation of Eve. The Pope sees this as an essential *human* experience, and one that makes all human communion possible. JP II tells us that:

...the communion of persons could be formed only on the basis of a ‘double solitude’ of man and of woman, that is, as their meeting in their distinction from the world of living beings (*animalia*), which gave them both the possibility of being and existing in a special reciprocity.⁴¹

The Pope gives us the essence of “original unity” in an elaboration upon this “special reciprocity” two paragraphs beyond the above quotation:

³⁹ *TB*, 352.

⁴⁰ Dulles, 95.

⁴¹ *TB*, 46.

“...we can deduce that man became the “image and likeness” of God not only through his own humanity, but also through the communion of persons which man and woman form right from the beginning. The function of the image is to reflect the one who is the model, to reproduce its own prototype. Man becomes the image of God not so much in the moment of solitude as in the moment of communion. Right “from the beginning,” he is not only an image in which the solitude of a person who rules the world is reflected, but also, and essentially, an image of an inscrutable divine communion of persons.”⁴²

Thus, the communion of persons encompasses not only man and women from the beginning in prelapsarian harmony, but in this communion of persons they most fully image the Triune God! Christopher West observes that this statement is yet again another element in the Pope’s theological reconfiguration that Weigel alludes to above.⁴³ The radicalism here stems from locating the image of God in the relationship between man and woman, rather than in each of them as separate individuals.

Having established an understanding of JP II’s concept of the communion of persons, we are ready to resume the remainder of his discussion of the sacramental efficacy of marriage with his concept of “the language of the body.”⁴⁴ He begins this discussion with a reflection on the wedding vows the couple make:

The words “I take as my wife/as my husband imply precisely that perennial, unique, and unrepeatable language of the body. At the same time they situate it in the context of the communion of the person: “I promise to be always faithful to you, in joy and in sadness, in sickness and in health, and to love you and honor you all the days of my life.” In this way the enduring and ever new language of the body is not only the “substratum,” but in a certain sense it is the constitutive element of the communion of the persons.”⁴⁵

⁴² TB, 46.

⁴³ Christopher West, *The Theology of the Body Explained: A Commentary on John Paul II’s “Gospel of the Body”* (Boston: Pauline Books, 2003) 78.

⁴⁴ TB, 356.

⁴⁵ TB, 356.

This “language of the body,” however is not limited to the words expressed on a couple’s wedding day. The Pope concludes the homily from which the above quotation is taken by stating that the language of the body is the “essential element” of the sacrament of marriage.⁴⁶

JPII resumes his reflections after postponing his addresses for the 1983 Holy Year by picking up with two new scriptural texts to further articulate the tradition of spousal love present in the Old Testament and also to further integrate the Old Testament into his reflections upon the theology of the body. He focuses this round of reflection on an analysis on the *Song of Songs* and the *Book of Tobit*. I bring up this section of JPII’s reflections on marriage not so much to discuss or analyze them, but to show how systematically he is working through the scriptural texts pertaining to marriage and his desire to bring all of the relevant biblical traditions, particularly in the Old Testament, to bear upon the central text of the chapters on marriage, that of Ephesians 5. That JPII chooses to reflect for three weeks on the *Song of Songs* in his reflections on the theology of the body should surprise no one at this point in our discussion. As the Pope has done with all of his previous biblical texts, he brings to bear all of the concepts he has developed in previous reflections and uses them to interpret the *Song of Songs*. The text is ripe with themes not only of erotic love, but with the spousal meaning of the body and the communion of persons that have been the subject of much of his reflection on the sacrament of marriage.

⁴⁶ *TB*, 360.

The second text JP II proposes for reflection comes from the *Book of Tobit*.⁴⁷ He only spends one homily on this text, but highlights the important example Tobiah provides for proper understanding of spousal love. It is Tobiah's acknowledgement of Sarah as a sister as well as a spouse which reveals the quality and level of love he possesses, marking a stark contrast to the other seven men who have attempted to wed Sarah and have all died. JP II's interpretation implies that it was the lack of proper love for Sarah that led to their deaths and Tobiah's right relationship with God and his proper love for Sarah that allowed him to live. He concludes his address by highlighting the prayer Tobiah offers to God on their wedding night as evidence of how "the 'language of the body,' reread in the subjective dimension of the truth of human hearts and in the 'objective' dimension of the truth of living in union, becomes the language of the liturgy."⁴⁸

This statement about liturgical language is literally dropped in at the end of his address with no explanation, seemingly leaving such elaboration for subsequent addresses. JP II spends only one homily elaborating upon this pivotal move, and raises more questions than he answers. The Pope does not specify precisely what liturgy he is speaking of, but it seems to be liturgy in its most essential meaning. Christopher West echoes this puzzlement when he is forced to extrapolate from definitions of liturgy from the Catechism of the Catholic Church to piece together what the Pope might mean.⁴⁹ I would posit that it is in the Church's liturgy, regardless of what liturgy, that we

⁴⁷ *TB*, 375.

⁴⁸ *TB*, 377.

⁴⁹ West, *TOB Explained*, 411.

speak with our bodies what we profess to believe. It is this “speaking” of the language of the body to God and to one another that makes this spousal relationship liturgical. Whatever the Pope may have precisely meant, what we have with this conclusion is the completion of the logic and flow of the efficacy of the sacrament of marriage: on the basis of the communion of persons the language of the body, rightly read and lived rightly, becomes “an uninterrupted continuity of liturgical language....”⁵⁰

It is the whole dynamic of this articulation of sacramental efficacy that leads us to consider it as a domestic ecclesiology, but the concluding portion of the language of the body being a liturgical language seals the Pope’s reflections on marriage as a domestic ecclesiology. We have an ecclesial vision of marriage that is rooted in *Genesis* and its creation accounts of man and woman; the prophetic tradition is then viewed as a call back to this “beginning” with its spousal imagery. The books of *Tobit and Song of Songs*, also bear witness to this spousal and corporate reality. All of these flow into the central text on the sacrament of marriage in St. Paul’s reflections on marriage and the Church in *Ephesians 5*.

Conclusion

This discussion ends in a very different place from where it started. From an almost throw-away reference to domestic church in *Lumen Gentium* to the very nature of conjugal relations among married couples considered as liturgical, this paper has attempted to offer a snapshot of the dramatic theological developments that have taken place concerning the ecclesial reality of marriage and family life. This domestic ecclesiology articulated by the Church poses a radical challenge to the entire Church if

⁵⁰ *TB*, 379.

my assessment of JP II's reflections is correct. Their profoundly biblical nature coupled with their deep association with the tradition of the Church ought to at least grab our attention, whether we agree with their line of thinking or not. His reflections strike the reader—this reader anyway—as being simultaneously radical and new yet also deeply familiar. The blueprint I have laid out of the trajectory of the development of this domestic ecclesiology provides a much needed antidote to the cultural onslaught of sin that the family endures on a daily basis. The challenge now that we have recognized this domestic ecclesiology is to live it.

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