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CONCEALING TO REVEAL:
MODESTY IN POPE JOHN PAUL II'S THEOLOGY OF THE BODY

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A Paper Submitted to the Faculty of the School of Theology of Saint John's University,
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in this paper.

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Responding to a need in the sphere of serious academic scholarship to address the topic of modesty, this paper delves into that theme. It examines the use and importance of the term 'modesty' in relation to comparable words, providing a definition of modesty that is useful for further theological discussion. It then incorporates Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body as a helpful tool in understanding the concept of modesty. Finally, this paper concludes with some implications this theological exercise entails, both for the particular sphere of sexual morality, and the broader spectrum of anthropological questions such as the ramifications this theology has when applied to the social/political arena.

This paper may be duplicated.

Signature of Student Writer

Date

Concealing to Reveal:

Modesty in Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body

“A time bomb, set to go off with dramatic consequences,”¹ is just now beginning to emerge in the consciousness of the popular sphere with the efforts of persons moderately knowledgeable in theological discourse, though not claiming to hold the status of serious scholarly theologians. Much of the fervor of this trend that appears to be a growing movement is in response to the present culture of their surroundings, a culture perceived as dangerously promiscuous in its general world-view, but particularly in regard to sexual morality.

Response to this permissive culture² of promiscuity is varied. Reactions that favor modesty and argue vehemently against this pervasive culture of immodesty appear to be growing. Articles decrying high hemlines, low bust lines, and exposed midriffs are easily found in Catholic newspapers, religious journals, and all sorts of internet sites. Books like Wendy Shalit's *A Return to Modesty*, and Joshua Harris' *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*³ are quite popular in certain arenas, with multiple other works being written within the same spectrum of thought.⁴ Personalities like Christopher West, George Weigel, Katrina J. Zeno, and Janet Smith write and speak in plentiful abundance on themes relating to modesty. The material is engaging and quite popular among certain

¹ George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 343.

² The term 'culture' when used in reference to immodesty is not meant to connote any particular country or countries, but rather a phenomenon that transcends national boundaries (though it seems more prevalent in certain countries and among certain peoples.)

³ Wendy Shalit, *A Return to Modesty: Discovering the Lost Virtue* (New York: Free Press, 1999) and Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2003).

⁴ These include but are not limited to publications such as Jeff Pollard, *Christian Modesty and the Public Undressing of America* (San Antonio, TX: The Vision Forum, Inc., 2004); Manis Friedman, *Doesn't Anyone Blush Anymore?: Reclaiming Intimacy, Modesty, and Sexuality* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990); and Dannah Gresh, *Secret Keeper: The Delicate Power of Modesty* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 2002).

segments of society. However, this intense interest on the topic of modesty and its accompanying themes is practically all on a popular level, as a grassroots movement of sorts. Academic scholarship—when researched—displays its poverty concerning work on these themes, particularly on modesty. Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body, as outlined in his papal Wednesday audiences, visible in his early work on sexual morality, and ever-present as a continuity of thought throughout his encyclicals and other papal writings, provides a system through which this theme may be engaged in a more scholarly manner. The Theology of the Body is not only about modesty. The recently deceased pontiff does not even explicitly utilize 'modesty' as a main theme. However, John Paul the Great's theological system lends itself well to exploring the concept of modesty in our present era, while modesty provides a particularly appropriate lens through which this entire Theology of the Body may be seen. Indeed, the concept of modesty is an imperative one in understanding the holistic theological anthropology outlined by Pope John Paul II, while this pope's theological approach provides a way for serious academic scholarship to contribute to the subject of modesty in a fruitful manner. To this end, this paper examines the use and importance of the term 'modesty' in relation to comparable words, provides a definition of modesty that is useful for further theological discussion, and incorporates the pope's Theology of the Body (in particular his analysis of the concept of shame) as a helpful tool in understanding the concept of modesty. Finally, this paper concludes with some implications this theological exercise entails, both for the particular sphere of sexual morality, and the broader spectrum of anthropological questions such as the ramifications this theology has when applied to the social/political arena.

I. The appropriateness of the term 'modesty'

The initial question which must immediately be dealt with is the question of why the specific term 'modesty' should be used in an endeavor to discover more about John Paul II's Theology of the Body and apply it to present cultural needs. 'Chastity,' 'temperance,' 'humility,' and 'purity,' are also excellent words used to describe practically the same reality. Why should modesty be singled out to express this certain concept? The answer lies in the use of the words and in their present and potential connotations. 'Chastity' is a beautiful word, applicable as a goal for not only singles and celibates, but also married persons. However, it names a slightly different aspect or reality, since modesty can be said to preserve and nurture chastity. 'Temperance' brings with it an archaic sense, and one focused mainly on alcohol as that which is in need of temperance when confronted by a human person. Saint Thomas Aquinas distinguishes temperance from modesty by associating the former with wine⁵ and strong passions, while "moderation is required in all things" and concerns "weaker passions."⁶ For persons in our era, the term 'temperance' cannot be applied to sexuality without carrying with it its own baggage of historically anti-alcoholic connotations which hamper the real message. 'Humility' appropriately names the non-physical aspects of this truth, while not lending itself well to material bodily connotations.⁷ 'Purity' is perhaps the best term

⁵ *Dicendum quod aliqua indigent temperantia propter suam vehementiam sicut forte vinum temperare.* Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (II-II.160.1). It is said that some things need tempering because of their own violence, just as strong wine is tempered. (my translation)

⁶ Translations are my own from *Sed moderatio requiritur in omnibus. Et ideo temperantia magis se habet ad passiones vehementes, modestia vero ad mediocres.* Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (II-II.160.1). But moderation is required in all things. And therefore, temperance is more about violent passions but modesty about ordinary ones.

⁷ Saint Thomas Aquinas actually categorizes humility as a "species" of modesty that is the opposite of pride. The other three species he names are studiousness (the opposite of curiosity), "modesty

besides ‘modesty,’ but even ‘purity’ has its limitations as it tends to imply a quality not peculiar to humans or a natural aspect granted solely by God with no human participation, rather than something that requires response and action on the part of human persons. John Paul II attempts to develop this understanding of the term to enable a broader, more inclusive concept of ‘purity’ to take root in the minds of his audience. For him, the virtue of purity is a capacity or aptitude, “which makes man capable of acting in a given way, and at the same time of not acting in the opposite way.”⁸ It is “a different form” of temperance, one with a more positive sense.⁹ Thus, purity is *both* a sort of abstention from unchastity and lust, *and* (even more so) applies to the positive dimension as “control of one’s own body in holiness and honor, and indirectly also that of others.”¹⁰ Purity is *both* a potentiality or capacity, *and* must be an actualized “concrete manifestation of life according to the Holy Spirit.”¹¹ However, lest he be accused of a type of Pelagianism, Pope John Paul II describes purity as *both* a virtue, *and* a gift.¹² This is the ‘double meaning’ of purity. The virtue aspect of purity lies in our preparation and reception of the gift, while the gift itself “strengthens the virtue and makes it possible to enjoy, in wisdom, the fruits of a behavior and life that are pure.”¹³

according to what is in words or acts,” and “modesty according to what concerns exterior dressing.” *Postea considerandum est de speciebus modestiae. Et primo, de humilitate, et superbia, quae ei opponitur; secundo, de studiositate, et curiositate sibi opposita; terio, de modestia secundum quod est in verbis vel in factis; quarto, de modestia secundum quod est circa exteriorem cultum.* Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (II-II.161).

⁸ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), General Audience of 28 January 1981, (p. 200).

⁹ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 28 January 1981, (200).

¹⁰ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 28 January 1981, (201).

¹¹ The pontiff also attributes this view of purity to Saint Paul, a view bound up with the concept of honor understood as an interior power and a spiritual order made fruitful by the Holy Spirit. Purity *is* life according to the Spirit. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 28 January 1981, (201).

¹² John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 18 March 1981, (209).

¹³ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 18 March 1981, (209).

Certainly ‘purity’ is an excellent word for describing an important and imperative concept in Pope John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body*. However, it remains a term with somewhat difficult connotations as a natural quality or something from the outside. It is also not particularly used in reference to human beings, but is so broad that its meaning goes beyond the human spectrum to be equally useful as a qualifier for other members of the animal kingdom, or even for inanimate objects. A flowing stream of water can be called ‘pure’. Modesty, on the other hand, is a particularly human trait with specifically embodied connotations (unlike terms such as ‘humility’ and ‘temperance’ which evoke a sense of primarily mental or spiritual attitudes, carrying with them an interiority divorced from any necessary connection with material reality). In its present use, the term ‘modesty’ immediately brings to mind clothing which in turn carries with it the theme of the body, particularly the human body. The term ‘modesty’ is a quickly grasped and commonly used one in our society today. Its meaning is most concerned with clothing. However, the term ‘modesty’ is much broader than simply a reference to clothing. Pope John Paul the Great explains that real purity or impurity “is in the heart and comes from the heart of man.”¹⁴ Likewise, modesty or immodesty may be understood as first and foremost an *attitude* of either recognizing or failing to recognize the human body as gift and either affirming or rejecting the value and dignity of the person,¹⁵ an attitude that is portrayed, made manifest, or revealed not just in dress, but also in action and speech.¹⁶

¹⁴ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 7 January 1981, (195).

¹⁵ As this paper later demonstrates, this attitude of recognition of the human body as gift and affirmation of the value and dignity of the person is one based on right relationships. The failure to recognize the human body as gift and the rejection and indeed violation of the value and dignity of the person is the result of sin. Something is immodest when it violates the principle of mutual self-donation that is manifested in our bodies.

¹⁶ This definition appropriately lays the emphasis on the attitude or heart of man rather than becoming caught up in culturally based particular manifestations of modesty. Modesty cannot simply be defined by how much of the body is covered by clothing since what is deemed appropriate or inappropriate

This definition also encourages the realization that the term “modesty” is not concerned only with sexual issues, but appropriately addresses a broader spectrum of concerns including even those of a social or political nature. Modesty is a particularly human and very embodied word without being exclusively physicalistic. It is particular enough to evoke important anthropological connotations, yet broad enough to be applicable beyond the confines of the limited sphere of sexual ethics.

II. Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body

One difficulty with ‘modesty’ particularly in the realm of sexual morality, however, is the way it is associated with prudishness and openly and vehemently disdained by our present sexually promiscuous culture. Pope John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* is a far cry from anything that might be considered prudish. In fact, the deceased pontiff decries the negation of the body that prudishness represents and fosters. “Sexual modesty,” the Holy Father declares, cannot be “a flight from love.” Chastity is an inner transparency, but misunderstanding and applying it as an “inhibition of sensuality,”¹⁷ leads to the danger of explosions.¹⁸ Repression of one's sexuality is not healthy, nor does it uphold the dignity of the human body and, as naturally follows, the dignity of the human person. To act, talk, or dress for prudish reasons grants no more

in this regard is dependent on societal norms and based a great deal on practical or functional needs in different situations. In a work he authored prior to his papacy, John Paul the Great said, “There are certain objective situations in which even total nudity of the body is not immodest, since the proper function of nakedness in this context is not to provoke a reaction to the person as an object for enjoyment, and in just the same way the functions of particular forms of attire may vary.” Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 191-192. “Speech is to be understood in this context as not limited to merely verbal communication, but as also applying to that which is signed, written, or even artistically rendered in some medium.

¹⁷ Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H. T. Willetts (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 179.

¹⁸ Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility*, 170.

dignity to the human body (and thus to the human person) than does promiscuous action, clothing, or speech. Both prudishness and promiscuity degrade the human body in their particular fashions.

True chastity and the modesty that protects and enables it, on the other hand, do not lead to disdain or disparagement. John Paul II talks of this in terms of a ‘humility of the body’. Unlike Victorian prudishness, this humility is dignifying toward the human body and uplifting of the human being. “Humility is the proper attitude toward all true greatness,” which includes one’s own greatness as a human person as well as the greatness of other human persons.¹⁹ Yet, it ultimately points toward the greatness beyond one's self, toward God.

Nevertheless, our present society's²⁰ negativity toward not merely the term ‘modesty’, but the concept or truth itself, requires a more detailed scrutiny of the idea. John Paul the Great provides this in his exegesis of Genesis and his in-depth analysis of the concept of shame. An important key in Pope John Paul II’s thought lies in Genesis 2:25 “The man and his wife were both naked, yet they felt no shame.”²¹ Delving into and attempting to comprehend this pre-lapsarian reality helps us to better understand ourselves in our post-lapsarian experience. This lack of shame enjoyed by Adam and Eve²² is not the same as shamelessness in our present day. The pre-lapsarian nakedness

¹⁹ “The human body must be humble in [the] face of the greatness represented by the person: for in the person resides the true and definitive greatness of man.” Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 172. For the human body to humble itself can mean to subordinate itself to the greatness of the other in love and appropriate reverence, awe, and honor.

²⁰ Like ‘culture’, ‘society’ is not meant to be understood in a technically correct manner, but in a broad, general way not limited to any one nation or segment of the human society, nor equally applicable to all.

²¹ NAB

²² This use of the terms ‘Adam’ and ‘Eve’ is not meant to imply the existence of an actual historical Adam and Eve. Nor is this footnote an opportunity to argue along historical critical lines of Biblical scholarship. Thus, for the sake of traditional expression, reference to Adam and Eve will continue in this same manner throughout the remainder of this paper.

spoken of in Genesis 2:25 is a kind of “spontaneous participation” in the world, objectively experienced before an actual awareness.²³ Before the Fall, Adam and Eve had the innocence and purity of heart that made modesty as we know it today completely irrelevant, and indeed impossible. This pair did not need modesty as we do in order to preserve their inherent dignity in light of one another and enable mutual self-giving. They could relate to one another in complete openness, mutually conscious of the nuptial meaning of their bodies, yet with no desire to use one another as an object for each one's own pleasure. The man was a gift to the woman, and the woman was a gift to the man, while the interior riches of each one were manifested in their bodies.²⁴ This relationship between pre-lapsarian persons is one of truth and openness without fear, but with true freedom. The man, in giving himself as total gift, finds the woman and accepts her “interiorly...as she is constituted in the mystery of the image of God through her femininity.”²⁵ She reciprocates, accepting him “as he is willed ‘for his own sake’ by the Creator and constituted by Him by means of his masculinity.”²⁶ Thus the human persons give of themselves as gift to the other, finding their true selves in the total giving of self to the other. Pope John Paul II talks of this acceptance of the gift of the other as an

²³ Mark S. Latkovic, “John Paul II On the Phenomenon of Sexual Shame,” *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* (Spring 2003), 46.

²⁴ “The body, and it alone, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and divine.” John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 20 February 1980, (76).

²⁵ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 16 January 1980, (64-65). It should be acknowledged that the terms “femininity” and “masculinity” might be aided in their resonance with the modern reader by being defined in more concrete terms, especially considering the confusion about their meaning that prevails in our society today. However, one must be extremely wary in any attempt to provide concrete examples to define or box in these terms, since any example, particularly one based merely on “gender roles” is vulnerable to being immediately declared a mere social construct for not fitting every situation in a universal and uniform manner. The fluidity of these gender terms makes defining them in a definitive, concrete, and systematic manner incompatible with their very essence. They are more properly and fruitfully left without being explicitly defined. However, one may hope that they are not simply left in a surrender to confusion, but left to work into the consciousness of the reader through means of example, narrative, symbolic metaphor, and other methods that transcend a simple cognitive grasp of information.

affirmation of the person “which, by means of reciprocity, creates the communion of persons.”²⁷

However, this beautiful and harmonious original innocence did not remain. The Fall forever altered the relationships between men and women, and indeed among all human persons. Original sin led to a distortion of relationships between persons and a destruction of the original innocence that had allowed freedom, harmony, and openness without cause for fear in the total giving of self to the other. The threat of lust was introduced. Instead of a total giving of the self to the other for the good of the other and complete acceptance of the other in God as gift, Adam now experienced Eve in a selfish manner.²⁸ For him, she was no longer ‘gift’ and ‘person’, to whom he gladly gave of himself, but rather, in his eyes, she now became ‘object’ for his use and gratification. Pope John Paul II explains that “the human body loses that deeply subjective meaning of the gift” when anyone looking at the body takes possession of that which “should exist essentially at the level of a gift, made by the person to the person.”²⁹ The woman senses this objectifying of herself in the mind and the heart of the man and naturally responds in a protective fashion to cover herself from this objectification also known as lust. This demonstrates part of the intrinsic connection between the inner and the outer man and provides an example for why John Paul II emphasizes the text of Matthew 5:27-28 “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you, everyone

²⁶ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 16 January 1980, (65).

²⁷ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 16 January 1980, (65). The applications and intrinsic connections to Trinitarian theology at this point are obvious.

²⁸ Of course, this does not simply go in one direction. Eve also experienced Adam in a selfish manner. However, for the sake of simplicity and clarity, this description will continue from this particular point of view with an awareness that the objectification of the person goes both ways: the female objectifying the male and the male objectifying the female.

²⁹ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 22 April 1981, (221).

who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”³⁰

The “interior reduction of the woman” to only a sexual object “can be construed as the sin of adultery” even without any accompanying explicit actions along those lines.³¹

Shame is a natural result of this need to protect oneself and one’s human dignity from the threat of this objectification and depersonalization. It may be seen as negative, suggesting the presence of a threat to the value of the person, or it may be viewed in a positive manner, something which “seeks to preserve the value of the person interiorly”³² and thus demonstrating that there is something of value to protect. Despite the separation and the profound gulf between our pre-lapsarian existence and our present post-lapsarian reality, our experience of shame provides a bridge between what Pope John Paul the Great dubs ‘original innocence’ and ‘man’s history’. Man is now separated from that original innocence, but “this does not mean, however, that he it is not able to approach that mystery by means of his theological knowledge.”³³ Our conscience manifesting itself in shame acts as a sort of pre-apprehension that allows us a connection with this original innocence.³⁴ Violation of this shame—particularly though not exclusively of bodily shame—is a violation of the dignity of the human person. The Polish pope talks of the methods used in concentration camps as examples of violation of bodily shame meant “deliberately to destroy personal sensitivity and the sense of human dignity.”³⁵

³⁰ NAB

³¹ Mary Shivanandan, “Natural Family Planning and the Theology of the Body: A New Discourse for Married Couples,” *The National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* (Spring 2003), 25.

³² Christopher West, *Theology of the Body Explained: A Commentary on John Paul II's Gospel of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media), 150.

³³ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 30 January 1980, (68).

³⁴ As John Paul II words it, “Through the veil of shame, man will continually rediscover himself as the guardian of the mystery of the subject, that is, of the freedom of the gift... to defend it from any reduction to the position of a mere object.” John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 20 February 1980, (75).

³⁵ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 22 April 1981, (222).

Offering hope in the midst of horror, John Paul II explains to his audience that despite the tremendous distortions and violations present in our fallen world, the dignity and nuptial meaning of the body “will always remain the deepest level.”³⁶

III. Implications

This leads to the tremendous importance of modesty. As an interior attitude of recognition and affirmation that is displayed, made manifest, or revealed in dress, action, and speech, true modesty upholds the dignity of the human person, and in a way reveals the nuptial meaning of the human person “in all its simplicity and purity” and “shown in its whole truth.”³⁷ Modesty is associated with the physical body and with outward actions and expressions. However, as Saint Thomas Aquinas and John Paul the Great both demonstrate in their theologizing, “modesty regards not only outward, but also inward actions.” This inward-originating modesty “may be shown by certain outward actions.”³⁸ The practice of modesty through appropriate behavior, speech, and clothing protects the person practicing it from being reduced to mere object in the thoughts of others in this present state of post-lapsarian distortion. As a secondary effect, it also helps protect those involved with or connected to them in some way from lapsing into this distorted and fallen manner of relating. The concealment of that which is too precious to be violated actually works as a way to reveal the truth and dignity of the human person, not “in some abstract way, as a theoretical magnitude which only the intellect can appreciate, but in a live and concrete fashion, bound up with the sexual

³⁶ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 16 January 1980, (66).

³⁷ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body*, General Audience of 16 January 1980, (66).

³⁸ *Interiorum moderatio manifestari potest per quaedam exteriora signa*. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (II-II.160.2).

values and yet superior to them.”³⁹ As that which reveals when it conceals, modesty is closely connected with self-mastery and good judgment, demonstrating “a serene ability to express and to ‘be’ oneself without self-advertisement.”⁴⁰ In this way, the “spontaneous need to conceal mere sexual values bound up with the person is the natural way to the discovery of the value of the person as such.”⁴¹ The connection between the inner person and the outer manifestation of that inner person in the body, which in turn informs the person as a whole, is beautifully portrayed through this deeper look at the concept of modesty. Modesty as an attitude or disposition of recognizing the human body as gift and affirming the value and dignity of the person manifests itself in modest behavior which, as a medium, becomes a message in itself that bears witness to the truth of the human body as “a worthy offering of love, a channel of grace, [and] a sacred sign.”⁴²

This is an excellent way to not only explore anthropology in a serious academic environment, but also hopefully lends itself to internalization and praxis in the realm of day-to-day relationships. However, to consider the examination of Pope John Paul II’s Theology of the Body through the lens of modesty as applying merely to theological anthropology, sexual ethics, and the male/female relationship is to drastically undervalue the significance and bearing this exploration has in a multitude of other important

³⁹ Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 179. This claim demonstrates the previous pope’s very concrete and experiential method based on a personalistic norm as opposed to other methods of doing theology, such as Saint Thomas Aquinas’ scholasticism. However, a drastic difference in method does not necessitate nor imply a difference in content or meaning.

⁴⁰ Peter A. Kwasniewski, “Rediscovering Modesty from Within,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (October 2003), 28.

⁴¹ Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 179

⁴² Peter A. Kwasniewski, “Rediscovering Modesty from Within,” 30. This language demonstrates the deep link of the concept of modesty not only with the mutual giving and receiving so often discussed in Pope John Paul II’s Theology of the Body, but also with the whole sacramental system of the Church.

applications. A liberationist theologian such as Gustavo Gutierrez might easily find ways to integrate it with his own thought and strengthen those aspects of faith to which he accredits great importance.⁴³

Surely Pope John Paul the Great's description of Adam and Eve's relationship after the fall would have strong resonance with Gutierrez and other liberationist theologians who would see a parallel between the objectification of Eve by Adam⁴⁴ and the oppression of the poor by the rich. Not only may a single person be seen by another person as an object for mere use and gratification, but entire groups of people may be oppressed in this way by other groups of people. This collective experience of "the poor" being dominated and taken advantage of by "the rich" for the purpose of gain demonstrates a communal sense of both sin and being sinned against. Gutierrez particularly faults the dynamics of a capitalist economy for exacerbating a rift between the few well-off countries in the center growing economically more and more powerful off the suffering of the many on the periphery.⁴⁵ However, as one may more clearly see when applying the Theology of the Body to sexual ethics, the problem does not stem from those things it is often blamed on such as scanty clothing, hormones, suggestive literature or pictures, or other such things. Rather, the root of the problem lies with sin, a denying of the gift by grasping for it rather than openly being receptive to it. Likewise, the problems felt so acutely by the poor and exploited stem not from particular social

⁴³ This should not be misunderstood as implying that liberation theologies are not in the realm of theological anthropology.

⁴⁴ Likewise of course, is the objectification of Adam by Eve.

⁴⁵ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1973), 84.

systems⁴⁶ per se, but from sin, the fallen state of mankind.⁴⁷ However, this does not make social systems completely irrelevant to the issue any more than suggestive clothing and suggestive material could be said to have nothing whatsoever to do with encouraging immodesty. In these sorts of situations, this understanding of modesty enlightened by the teaching of John Paul II in his *Theology of the Body* may provide a lens for seeing the particular situations with greater clarity and act as a sort of “rule of thumb” for determining the positive or negative value of anything that relates to human beings, whether in sexual ethics, in the social/political arena, or elsewhere. To the extent that a social or political structure is rooted in a concept of the person as mutual self-gift, and uplifts and recognizes the dignity of persons, it can be said to be exercising modesty. On the contrary, to the extent that a structure demonstrates a failure to recognize the human body as true gift and a rejection of the value and dignity of the person, that structure is falling as a whole, exhibiting social sin. Likewise, dress, action, and speech (whether verbal, signed, artistically rendered, or written) that honestly manifests an interior attitude of recognition of the human body as gift and affirmation of the value of and dignity of the human person should be sought. That clothing, action, and speech that manifests an immodest attitude may occasionally not be objectively wrong at all, but in certain situations it is a mediating sign of the problem of sin.

⁴⁶ Making this statement does not mean to imply that certain social or political structures may not be more or less vulnerable to providing ample ways for sin to wreak havoc on the marginalized and suffering.

⁴⁷ “Structures, whether they are good or bad, are the result of man’s actions and so are consequences more than causes. The root of evil, then, lies in free and responsible persons who have to be converted by the grace of Jesus Christ in order to live and act as new creatures in the love of neighbor and in the effective search for justice, self-control, and the exercise of virtue.” Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Instruction on Certain Aspects of the ‘Theology of Liberation’” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) 1984, 4.15.

This linking of the root problem and its effects in the relationships of both individual persons and entire communities only demonstrates the beginning of how modesty in Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* may be successfully integrated with social/political concerns. The ramifications extend far beyond a vision and labeling of "the problem." Modesty, as an interior attitude that is displayed, made manifest, or revealed in dress, action, and speech, a necessary response to the human sinfulness of treating the other as object, provides a guide for theologians immersed in liberation theologies, as well as for all people, in communal social responses to the human sinfulness of one group of people treating another group of persons as objects, as mere means for furthering their own gratification economically or politically. Just as "sexual modesty" cannot be "a flight from love,"⁴⁸ so too, social actions cannot ignore or run away from the painful reality of the great suffering of so many people. The answer is not to hide or run away from the challenge, but to face it.

Modesty, as understood in the light of the Holy Father's *Theology of the Body*, also provides guidance in how to face it. Rather than being seen as only a negative reaction to the sinful situation of objectifying persons, the concept of shame (and thus also the response of modesty both interiorly and exteriorly) points toward the positive dimension of the true dignity of the person. Likewise, liberation theologies should not (and generally do not) focus only on "liberation from," but instead talk of "liberation for" and the importance of the dignity of persons.

The theme of modesty is indeed an appropriate lens through which to view John Paul II's theological anthropology. The connotations it carries emphasize the importance

⁴⁸ Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, 170.

of the body while opening up to a properly broader concept that includes the internal and non-physical aspects without placing inanimate objects on the same level with human persons. Bound up closely with the concept of shame, modesty bridges the gap between our post-lapsarian experience and the original innocence of human relationships before the Fall. Modesty upholds the dignity of persons and preserves those who practice it in their dress, speech, and actions from falling into either the distortion of prudishness or the twisted permissiveness of promiscuity, both of which degrade and depersonalize the human being. Modesty is not only an imperative concept in understanding the holistic theological anthropology outlined by Pope John Paul II, but also a greatly needed virtue and gift in the midst of a perverted culture.

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