

"The Body As Icon: Making Visible What Is Invisible"

Joseph C. Atkinson*

"The world is like a word, a 'logos' which sends you further, calls you unto another, beyond itself, further up. ...the structure of the 'impact' of the human being with reality awakens within the individual a voice which draws him towards a meaning which is further on and further up." *L. Giussani*

INTRODUCTION

The underlying presupposition of this paper is that the human body was created with the purpose, and therefore the nature, to image forth, in the created world, the inalienable¹ meaning of the body which God has inscribed in it and which originates and participates in the mystery of the inner life of God. Or, put more simply, the human body is an icon which makes visible the invisible.

1. Creation as Hermeneutic of Reality

The phrase, "to image forth" is used to point to the sacramental value of the physical human body and its intrinsic capacity to reveal to human consciousness the theological meaning of gendered existence. This telos determines and teleologically informs the essence or the quiddity (the what-ness) of the body. The clue to the meaning of the body is that man is made "in" (**אִן**) in Hebrew the image of God (*imago Dei*) and thus is intrinsically related to it. The actual image is Christ the Lord (Col 1:15), the Logos of creation (Jn 1:1-3). As such, the human body is designed to reveal in creation this Logos and thus the inner life of God, i.e., of the divine essence. The body is not that essence, but it is created with the capacity for, and is given the predestined vocation to image forth the divine image because it ultimately is meant to participate in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4).

¹ The Oxford English Dictionary defines *inalienable* as "that [which] cannot be alienated or transferred from its present ownership or relation." [Click https://www-oed-com.proxycu.wrlc.org/view/Entry/93064?redirectedFrom=inalienable+#eid](https://www-oed-com.proxycu.wrlc.org/view/Entry/93064?redirectedFrom=inalienable+#eid)

Of course, all this needs unpacking if we are to construct a theology of the body. This will require us to develop several key underpinnings or “foundational stones” for our exegetical work.²

Created Reality Possesses Depth

The first foundation stone has to do with how we understand the world. Through various historical developments, the way in which man has understood and conceived of the universe has undergone radical changes. For millennia, the classical viewpoint saw creation as a theocentric, *organic* body. Then, in a paradigm shift during the Enlightenment, the world was envisioned as being anthropocentric and mechanistic. The created world was now thought of as a machine. But unlike organic bodies, machines do not have teleological ends.³ One of the key consequences of this development was that it paved the way for nominalism which deprives “things” of depth and of teleology. Ultimately, in our modern culture, this mechanistic view has been applied to the human person and has become the *informing principle* of modern anthropologies. Having no end (telos) towards which “a thing” is oriented, things cannot possess the nature to become icons. As the Wizard of Oz was wont to assert: ‘there is nothing behind the curtain.’ Nominalism is, in essence, dualistic, separating the physical from the spiritual, it is anti-sacramental and anti-iconographic. Consequently, the possibility of a sacramental economy evaporates in a nominalistic system, and the body becomes inert matter. If matter does not have a meaning *per se*, then a body is only matter and any meaning imposed on it is derived from the human mind and, therefore, is of one’s own deliberate construction. We see the full fruit of this in to-

² This importance of adequate foundational structures is well illustrated by an example from the business world: “There are seven foundation stones that need to be laid before we can successfully develop and utilize key performance indicators (KPIs) in the workplace. When building a house, you need to ensure that all the building is undertaken on solid foundation stones. Success or failure of the ...project is determined by the presence or absence of these seven foundation stones.” <https://www.oreilly.com/library/view/key-performance-indicators/978119019831/c07.xhtml> Click Accessed July 2, 2022.

³ The consequence of this conceptual shift was what W. T. Stace called, “though silent and almost unnoticed...the greatest revolution in human history.” W. T. Stace, *Atlantic Monthly*, Sept. 1948, cited by Dillistone, *Christianity and Symbolism*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955) 59. As Dillistone wrote: “A second consequence of the adoption of the new model was the rapid deterioration of the idea of “telos” which had from the time of Aristotle been dominant in the Western world. What need was there for the scientist to concern himself with the question of ultimate ends? ...there was no necessity to postulate purposes or meanings of a transcendent character” (*Ibid.*, 59).

day's profound destructive and nihilistic attitude towards sexuality, marriage, and family whose roots are to be found in this nominalistic turn.

But the entirety of Christian belief moves against this. Christianity is grounded in the event of the Incarnation in which God became man; divinity unites with human nature and becomes the human/divine person, that is, God assumes a human body. In fact, it is from this divine act that the very concept of "person" is derived.⁴ *The Incarnation proves that matter and God are not antithetical.* The Incarnation proves that material things do have the capacity "to image forth" and participate in spiritual realities, and it is this that grounds the Christian sacramental system.⁵ This metaphysical principle is shown to be at the heart of creation. In Romans 1:20, Paul writes:

For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made.⁶

Here, things are indeed "things", but they are ontologically rooted in the God who desires that His creation be reflective of His being. Consequently, all things have an iconic quality in that they become a portal through which we see into the divine mind. Creation is filled with *vestigia* [traces/evidence], or as Hopkins put it, "the world is charged with the grandeur of God...like shining from shook foil."

Theologically, this is expressed concisely in the Johannine prologue which explains the nature of Jesus' mission in iconographic terms:⁷ "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known (ἐξηγήσατο). The Greek translated as "to make known" is ἐξηγήσατο which literally translates as "to guide or lead out of" and gives us the English word *exegesis*. In Johannine theology, it is precisely because He has taken on matter (i.e

⁴ It is because of this matter-spirit union that icons even became possible.

⁵ Karl Rahner's explanation of creation as being the expression of the divine nature and yet distinct from it is helpful here. See Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, trans. Kevin Smith, vol. 4 [New York: Crossroad, 1982], 237-238.

⁶ All Scripture quotes will be taken from the *New American Standard Bible* 1977 except where the author will make his own translations.

⁷ Mysteries (musth,ria) are not things a.) that remain hidden and cannot be known or b.) when they are revealed no longer remain as mysteries but are reduced to a datum of commonplace knowledge. Rather the mysteries for St Paul (here, see especially Ephesians) are the truths that are essential to man, and which are hidden within the heart of God, but whose purposes are to be revealed when the time is fulfilled for each mystery, so that man can enter into the mystery *as mystery* and allow it to inform his own being.

a fleshly body) that Jesus exegetes or reveals the Father to us. Christ's body and His person are an intrinsic part of His revelatory mission. The uniqueness of this mission is captured by Matthew, who writes:

No one knows the Son, except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father, except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. [11:27]

We come to know who God the Father is through God the Son. But Christ also takes on the title of Son of Man, and consequently is, as St. Paul says, the final Adam (1 Cor 15:45). While all things *qua* created entities have being through (διὰ) the Logos and carry the divine *vestigia*, it is only with the human person that the image of God is “imaged forth” as a created psycho-somatic reality. It is not that God is like man but rather that man is like God. As the *teleological* man, Jesus appropriately takes up the title of Son of Man for the purpose of revealing man to man in all his fullness.⁸ As the Vatican II document, *Gaudium et spes*, puts it, “Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.”

The converse of that is also true: the more we distance ourselves from Christ, the more we are alienated from the truth of the human person and inevitably will create a distorted and disintegrated vision of man until, finally, the “very good” creation becomes a nihilistic dystopia.

The Dramatic Nature of History

Another key part to our exegetical foundation is to understand that there is a *dramatic dimension* to history. This is not some form of cosmic poetry. Rather it means that man finds himself in the midst of a drama that he, personally, did not begin, which is moving inexorably to an end, and with each person of each generation playing a unique and irrepeatable role. Christians sketch out this drama in terms of four acts: Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Judgment. Theology sees each person, precisely because they are created, as being caught up in the cosmic

⁸ In *The Religious Sense* Luigi Giussani writes (in a manner reminiscent of C. S. Lewis): “[W]e could say that the world, this reality into which we collide unleashes a word, an invitation, a meaning as if upon impact. The world is like a word, a ‘logos’ which sends you further, calls you unto another, beyond itself, further up. ...the structure of the ‘impact’ of the human being with reality awakens within the individual a voice which draws him towards a meaning which is further on and further up.” [Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, trans. John Zucchi (Montreal/Buffalo: McGill-Queens University Press, 1997) 109]. This well expresses the idea that the world is not merely a nominalistic reality, but that “things” do have meaning and do point beyond themselves to some greater reality. Here, Giussani compares the things of the world to a *word*, to a *logos*, which links his understanding of the world with the Prologue of John. Through the *logos* all things are created; through the *logos* all things are revealed.

drama with each of the four “acts” of the drama informing the person in his quest for identity and meaning. This divine dramatic narrative provides us with the lens, as it were, by which we can negotiate reality. We live by our narratives, whether they be true or false, but each has inexorable consequences.

The modern era has become entranced, almost to the point of obsession, with the concept of human freedom.⁹ The foundation for this is to be discovered in the Enlightenment which, effecting an anthropological turn, put man at the centre of reality, ousting God to an unknown and uncertain future. This effected a seismic shift in the theological and philosophical understanding of the person. Descartes’ dictum, “I think, therefore I am” is paradigmatic of this epistemological change and which now informs the West’s understanding of anthropology. This has morphed into the predominance of self-conscious determination at the expense of biological reality to such a degree that the law of non-contradiction is challenged continually within the highest institutions of societies. Once the link between a created reality with a telos, objective reality and truth is relinquished, then we begin to live in an Alice-in-Wonderland nightmarish world where one can “believe six impossible things before breakfast.” At this point, it is looking as if at some future Olympiad, all the participants in the female divisions will only be biological males. One is no longer bound to believe that sexual differentiation has anything to do with the teleology of procreation or of marriage; or that the gender specific chromosomal marks that distinguish every cell in the human body (and that result in specific genitalia, differentiated body mass and strength) have any bearing on the being or identity of the person; or that the zygote, emerging from the union of the male and female gametes is a human reality, but instead is only a mass of cells that only the mother may bestow the dignity of life upon... or not. While for some, all these beliefs may be the beginning of a brave new world, it must be remembered that epistemological commitments (i.e., what we commit to) have inevitable consequences.

Always, each person, in the exercise of his will, has the choice to either become his own god by rejecting truth and living in alienation from objective reality or he can

⁹ Every age has its questions, which, once answered properly, help humanity in its further growth. Theologically, this can be seen in the conflicts throughout Church history (e.g., the Christological debates), by which a greater grasp of the truth is achieved. Similarly, to-day our concern is the question of human freedom. How can man have genuine freedom in the face of an almighty Creator? While the destructive responses of modern society have caused so much harm, nonetheless, the right question is being asked. As in the Christological debates, Christians need to provide the world with the liberating word of truth and not be seduced by the zeitgeist of the culture.

choose to live in the truthfulness of creative reality and in the life-giving divine-human communion. The tension between these existential choices is at the heart of the salvific drama and the decisions each person makes possess eternal consequences. In this drama, all are primary actors.

Each "act" has its specificity. Creation is the act of God alone; the Fall is the act of man alone; the Redemption is the act of the God-Man making an expiation for man's rejection of the truth through His own corpus as expiation; and the final Judgement is the revelation of the choices we have all made. In this final act, the question Paul raises in Romans 1:25 is of critical importance: have we held fast to the truth or have we "exchanged the truth of God for "the lie" (tw/| yeu,dei).

The Ecclesial Dimension to Truth

At the heart of salvation is truth and our relationship to it. Paul writes to the Thessalonians, that there are "those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth so as to be saved [2 Thess 2:10]. Part of the drama of history is the continual revelation of truth. We easily see this in terms of salvation history in which God causes specific historical events to occur which bring about His plan of salvation. Through these millennia, God has been leading His, people, step-by-step, more deeply into the mystery of what His covenantal love contains. Finally, He speaks to us in the Son. But that is not the end of salvation history. At His Eucharistic table in Jn 16:12-13, Jesus reveals to His disciples the continuing drama of truth:

I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth (evn th/| avlhqei,a| pa,sh|).

This can be called the "ecclesiological" dimension of truth. The Spirit, guiding the Body of Christ, will reveal, confirm, and secure the truth until the faith is complete.¹⁰ This is clearly illustrated in the NT when we look over the Church's first controversy which was over what constitutes salvation: does one keep the Mosaic Law and then add on the saving work of Jesus, or, is the work of the Lord on the Cross determinative of salvation without the works of the Law? This was an

¹⁰ In Ephesians 4:11-13, Paul shows how all the gifts and offices of the Holy Spirit exist to enable the Church to grow, as a body, to achieve the unity of faith, to the knowledge of the Son of God and into a perfect man (eivj a;ndra te,leion) to the measure of the maturity of the fullness of Christ. Growth in the Church is meant for us to become truly the full Body of Christ- the teleological man (a;ndra te,leion).

issue of utmost importance as it concerned the way of salvation. After a number of years of in-fighting, the leadership of the Church came together, arguing and praying concerning the issue. After this proto-typical council in Jerusalem, the Church believed it *could* come to know the mind of the Spirit, and concluded that the Mosaic Law did not save, but only Christ's work on the Cross gave us salvation. The concluding decree of this prototypical council stated: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ..." (Acts 15:28). The nascent Church was claiming that it could know the mind of God. Through this conciliar way, the truth of salvation was discerned and secured. But even here, the drama continues for one now must decide either to live in communion with the Church and her teaching or live outside of it.

Later, during the fourth and fifth centuries, the Church was faced with a number of Christological heresies which distorted the nature of Christ. Again, the foundation of the Christian salvation was at stake and had to be resolved. But it is within this drama, precisely because of these controversies, that the Church is forced to examine more deeply its beliefs. In so doing, the great truths of Christ's nature were more deeply secured. In each of these controversies, a tension emerged between the truth and the anti-truth which affected the eternal destiny of man. On the level of historical faith, this was an existential crisis but in each case, it led the Church, as C. S. Lewis' Narnian unicorn cried out, "further up and further in".¹¹

To-day, we are no longer dealing with the Christological heresies. These have been definitively resolved and the truth secured, forming a key part of the foundation of the Christian faith.

The Anthropological Heresies

Instead, to-day we are facing the anthropological heresies. These have emerged from the modern assault on the nature of man. Just as in the Christological controversies, reductive principles (sometimes to the point of *ad absurdum*) are the driving forces behind the various ideologies that emerge. The first assault came from the dominant forms of feminism which posited that there was no differentiation between man and woman, other than accidental differences. In order to eviscerate the gender differences, the valuing of the feminine, the honouring of

¹¹ "The difference between the old Narnia and the new Narnia was like that. The new one was a deeper country: every rock and flower and blade of grass looked as if it meant more. I can't describe it any better than that: if ever you get there you will know what I mean." C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle* (Glasgow: William Collins & Sons – Fontana -Lions, 1980) 162.

motherhood, and the acknowledgement of the purpose of the womb were all rejected. Contraception and abortion became the sacramentals of this new world order. They could seemingly strip out the specificities of woman (her complementarity to man, the fecundity of her maternal womb, and her nature as feminine and mother) and banish them. With the elimination of motherhood, the next logical step was the rejection of fatherhood and, ultimately, of maleness itself. This move has been so successful that parts of modern society believe genuine masculinity is toxic and must be rejected if a gender-neutral society is to be created. This has inevitably led to the rejection of the male-female nexus, oriented as it is naturally towards procreation and has replaced it with an understanding that refuses to account for the telos of the differentiated instantiations of the human body.

In essence, nature (i.e., created reality) has been emptied of any meaning and has been reduced to raw material which the human will can manipulate at its pleasure.

But with any drama, there is the beginning, climax and dénouement. But where are we in this narrative arc? Of course, no one knows when decisive climatic the hour will come. However, it has been particularly interesting to note seemingly prophetic sense of the two following events.

In 1976, when visiting the US, the archbishop of Cracow, Karol Wojtyla,

“We are now standing in the face of the greatest historical confrontation humanity has gone through. I do not think that wide circles of the American society or wide circles of the Christian community realize this fully. We are now facing the final confrontation between the Church and the anti-Church, of the Gospel versus the anti-Gospel. This confrontation lies within the plans of divine Providence; it is [a] trial which the whole Church... must take up.”¹²

What lends more credence to this statement is that Wojtyla would become John Paul II, a man who, while living under the brutal regime of the communists, fought for the Church’s freedom. He has first-hand experience of the first century church and its persecutions.

¹² The National Catholic Register stated that this quote was reported in the Wall Street Journal and then reprinted in Nov. 9, 1978. <https://www.ncregister.com/commentaries/john-paul-ii-s-warning-on-final-confrontation-with-the-anti-church> [Accessed July 2, 2022.]

The second concerns the founding of the JPPI Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family which was created by JPPI in 1981. There was much opposition to this Institution from both outside and within the Church. JPPI had appointed Archbishop Carol Caffarra as the first president of the Institute. During this discouraging time, Caffarra decided to write a letter to Sr. Lucia who was the last of the child-visionaries of Fatima. He simply wanted to ask her for her prayers. He wrote that he did not expect a reply back. But within a few weeks, Sr. Lucia wrote him and in that letter she wrote:

“Father, a time will come when the decisive battle between the kingdom of Christ and Satan will be over marriage and the family. And those who will work for the good of the family will experience persecution and tribulation.”¹³ But her letter ended on a note of hope stating that Satan has been conquered.

What we are to make of these two events is a personal matter. But, if nothing else, they show that there has been a growing sense of conflict in the times in which we live. In Caffarra’s analysis, the Evil One has attempted to effect an anti-creation by first destroying the two pillars of creation.

As Caffarra wrote:

*There are two pillars of creation: the human person in its irreducibility to the material universe, and the conjugal union between a man and woman, the place in which God creates new human persons “in His image and likeness”. The axiological elevation of abortion to a subjective right is the demolition of the first pillar. The ennoblement of a homosexual relationship, when equated to marriage, is the destruction of the second pillar. At the root of this is the work of Satan, who wants to build an actual anti-creation.*¹⁴

2. Human Body As Icon

If the body is *iconographic* and if it does make visible the invisible, then what precisely are the invisible realities that the body is ordained to image forth?

¹³ <https://aleteia.org/2017/05/19/exclusive-cardinal-caffarra-what-sr-lucia-wrote-to-me-is-being-fulfilled-today/>
Accessed July 2, 2022.

¹⁴ <https://www.lumenfidei.ie/the-final-battle-catholic-marriage/> accessed June 27, 2022.

To answer this, we must go back to the first two chapters of Genesis which forms an integrated, single *narrative of creation*. For our purposes, there are six things to observe.¹⁵

1. In Hebrew, the verb “to create” (בָּרָא / *barah*) can only have God as its subject. The human person cannot create; man can make and do. Only God creates.
2. בָּרָא / *barah* – to create used without the accusative of matter, meaning that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is suggested here. This is important as it shows that there is not ‘God’ and then some ‘non-God’ reality existing prior to creation as some form of prime matter. There is only God and all that is created is determined by God alone.¹⁶
3. The original creation is called a תְּהוֹמֵי רֵבֵבוֹת / *tōhû vābōhû* (Gen 1:2) which, in essence, means an inchoate reality. Like the zygote in the womb, the *tōhû vābōhû* awaits a further differentiation to enter into its fullness of being.¹⁷
4. It is the Word of God that is spoken by the Creator that brings about this differentiation. The *unity* emerges into a *multiplicity* which can always trace its roots back to the original unity of the *tōhû vābōhû*.¹⁸

¹⁵ For a fuller explanation of the process of creation and the principles informing it, see “The Principles Of Creation And Covenantal Reality” in *Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Family* [J. Atkinson (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2014) 33-77.

¹⁶ McComiskey, ar“āB’ in *TWOT*, 127: “The word is used in the Qal of God’s activity and is thus a purely theological term...appropriate to the concept of creation by divine fiat.”

¹⁷ The meaning of this phrase accepted by most commentators is “unformed void,” i.e., matter in an undifferentiated state of chaos. Speiser translates it as “a formless waste” [Speiser, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible, vol. 1. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) 3]. From other uses in the OT the sense of WhTo+ / *tōhû* is negative. In Isa 45:18 a reference is made to God as the creator of the earth. It states, “He established it and did not create it a waste place (WhTo+ / *tōhû*) but formed to be inhabited.” Here WhTo+ has the sense of an empty, uninhabited space. This is confirmed in Job 26:7: “He stretches out the north over empty space (WhTo+) and hangs the earth on nothing.” If this follows the common structures in Hebrew poetry, the inherent parallelism would confirm the sense of emptiness. In Is 34:11, God is angry against the nations and plans to visit His vengeance upon them: “And He shall stretch over it the line of desolation (WhTo+) and the plumb line of emptiness (Whbo)” (see R. F. Youngblood, “תְּהוֹמֵי רֵבֵבוֹת.” *TWOT*, 964-965). Wenham, examining Deut 32:10 and Job 6:18, sees תְּהוֹמֵי רֵבֵבוֹת / *tōhû vābōhû* (the primordial waters in Gen 2) as having a primary meaning of chaos or disorder like “the untraced desert where a man can lose his way and die” [Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1. (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987) 15]. When תְּהוֹמֵי רֵבֵבוֹת is compared with its possible Arabic cognate *bahiya* (“was empty”), it appears to have the meaning of emptiness. See Youngblood, “תְּהוֹמֵי רֵבֵבוֹת.”, *TWOT*, *ibid.*, 965.

¹⁸ As a consequence of the preceding footnote, I would argue against the phrase תְּהוֹמֵי רֵבֵבוֹת / *tōhû vābōhû* having any sense of chaos or confusion. This would be to fall back into the pagan myths and their horrific concepts of creation which included battle and bloodshed. See A. Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis* (Chicago: The University of

5. In the parallel of this text, John in his Prologue shows that this Word is the Logos, the intelligibility of creation. Through (διὰ) him all things are made. Further, this Word becomes incarnate in Christ. Thus, to understand the nature of any created reality, one has to ground that understanding in the Logos because creation is Christocentric.
6. Finally, we need to note that at the heart of creation there is active the principle of הַבְּדִיל *havdil*: the separation/differentiation of things from a preceding unity. In fact, this is the active principle in the creative process.

Principle of *Havil* (Separation) / “The *One-to-the-Many* Relationship”

The sixth principle of separation is particularly critical to the understanding of the human person because the creation of mankind follows the same process evident in the creating of the rest of earthly creation. The Hebrew verb *havdil* is used three times in Gen 1 where God separates the light from darkness (1:4); the waters from the waters (1:6); and the waters above from the waters below (1:7).

Then the earthly waters are separated out and the dry land appears (Gen 1:11-12). Interestingly, vegetation and plant life are not produced and *then* introduced to the soil; rather the earth brings forth (תּוֹצֵא) the realities within it, *i.e.*, another form of differentiation. It is important to see that creation is not a collection of disparate and random parts that are put together like a giant Meccano in which some form of *arbitrary* relationality is imposed upon the various elements. Rather, creation is a wholly organic reality. This is emphasized in the term used to describe the creative process in Gen 2:4. The word used is תּוֹלְדוֹת / *tōl^odōth*, which is normally used to describe the generating of a family birth line (2:4) which has a paternal origin which then leads to the future generations. In the process of creation, there is the original unity, the *tōhû vābōhû*, from which the multiplicity emerges. It is this one-to-many reality that establishes the relationship between things.

Chicago Press, 1963) 224-269. In complete contrast to this, Gen 1 is totally irenic. As Youngblood states: “Since the word has no certain cognates in other languages, its meaning must be determined solely from its OT contexts” (*ibid.*, 964). As he says, further in his article, “The *tōhû* word in Gen 1:2, likewise, refers not to the result of a supposed catastrophe (for which there is no biblical evidence) but to the formlessness of the earth before God’s creative hand began the majestic acts described in the following verses.” (*Ibid.*, 965.) The original unity (the **תּוֹהוּ וּבְהוּ**) is not in any sense in opposition to God (as chaos would be) but presents an undifferentiated unity and it is this unity that provides the ground for the relational dynamics of all that is differentiated from it.

This same principle of *havdil* is also active in the creation of man, male and female. The Hebrew text of Gen 1:27 keeps the tension between the one (original unity) and the many.

וַיִּבְרָא אֱלֹהִים | אֶת־הָאָדָם בְּצַלְמוֹ בְּצֶלֶם אֱלֹהִים בָּרָא אֹתוֹ זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה
בָּרָא אֹתָם:

So God created man in His image; in the image of God He created him [אָתוֹ]; male and female He created them [אֹתָם].

Here, we have both the *singular* (him) and the *plural* (them) juxtaposed beside each other. This tension is only resolved when we come to Gen 2:21-22 where the actual process is described.

So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then He took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh at that place. And the LORD God fashioned [וַיִּבְרָא] into a woman the rib which He had taken from the man, and brought her to the man.

Again, we have demonstrated the same principle of *havdil* operative in Gen 1. From the single man אָדָם [ādām / man] comes the woman [אִשָּׁה] / *ishshāh*. God did not create multiple men and multiple women at the same time and bring them together. To do so would create only a moral bond between them and not an ontological one. Here man and woman are neither neutral nor antithetical to each other. Rather, their very differentiated genders capacitate them to become one flesh [בְּשָׂר אֶחָד]. This one-flesh reality, where man and woman become a psycho-somatic unity, is the key to the understanding of gender. It is here that we need to look to unravel the teleology of the body.

Eden as the Prototypical Temple

It is important to realize that the בָּשָׂר אֶחָד / *basar echad* is uniquely embodied in the marital embrace. But care must be taken here. The ‘one-flesh’ reality cannot be simply identified with sexual union. Such union is the *privileged expression* of the *basar echad*, but it is not reducible to that. In fact, the union of man and woman is one of the densest symbols in the created order.

To unpack this symbol, we need to compare the two movements of the single creation narrative. Genesis 1 answers the general question, “How did all things come to be?” The answer is simply ‘by God’ whose *general* name אֱלֹהִים / ‘*elohim*’ is used in this context. Gen 2, on the other hand, is answering the question, “What is the precise relationship between man and woman?” Here, the answer given uses covenantal language and imagery throughout.¹⁹ The *covenant* name of God יהוה / Yahweh is used.²⁰ As well, the whole of Gen 2 has a demonstrable sub-text which shows that the Edenic garden is, in fact, the prototype of the Temple. The eastward position parallels the Jerusalem Temple; the mentioning of gold brings to mind the gold which embellish so much of the structure and instruments of the Sanctuary; bdellium was associated with the manna which was kept in the ark of the covenant in the Holy of Holies; the onyx stones are reflective of the High Priest breastplate that contained these stones with the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. Perhaps key to this interpretation is the fact that the work given to man in 2:15 was “to guard [לְעֹבְדָהּ] and to keep [לְשָׁמְרָהּ] it. “These two verbs can be used as technical terms in reference to the covenant. One *guards* and *keeps* the law/covenant. As well, the object of these verbs in Hebrew is the feminine objective pronoun הָ (āh). which cannot refer to the garden (as is usually supposed) because garden [גַּן / gan] in Hebrew is masculine. Instead, Cassuto, Wenham and others have proposed that “it” refers to the Torah which is a feminine noun.²¹ In that case, the God-given work of man in the garden was of a covenantal nature. This interpretation is certainly in line with the covenantal sub-text that saturates the text.

From all this work, it is clear that when the narrative of creation (which is certainly a privileged text) turns to the question of the precise nature of the male-female relationship and its proper resolution, the answer is embedded in a text which is

¹⁹ One of the best commentaries on this is Gordon J. Wenham. See his “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story” in *I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1-11*, edited by R. S. Hess and D. T. Tsumura (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994) 399-404. Also, see U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: From Adam to Noah: Genesis 1-6:8*, translated by I. Abrahams. Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press-The Hebrew University) 1978; J. Atkinson, *Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Family* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 2014) 128-160.

²⁰ This is related to the revelation of the covenantal name of God to Moses in the burning bush. “God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM” (אֲנִי הוּא אֱלֹהִים); and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM (אֱלֹהִים) has sent me to you.” Ex 3:14

²¹ See Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story,” 401; Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: From Adam To Noah*. trans. by Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1961) 122; Atkinson, *Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Family*, 128-160.

redolent with covenant and Temple imagery. It is this narrative approach which indicates that human marriage has a greater depth than a mere societal construct. It, in fact, is intrinsically linked to God salvific covenant. The dimensions of this relationship are as yet unrevealed, but the starting point for the theological trajectory which will image forth the salvific depth of gendered existence has been given. This theological dimension of the marital union will accompany the whole of Israelite history until its final revelation in Eph 5:32 and with its iconic/sacramental revelation in the Wedding Banquet of the Lamb (Rev 19:7-9).²²

The Mystery of the One-Flesh Union

The importance of the one-flesh union can be seen via narrative criticism. Immediately after the seven-days work, the creation narrative then returns to explore the man-woman relationship. Impressive as this is on the surface, the narrative takes on unimagined depths by developing a matrix of covenantal languages and images in which to carry out this investigation. concept

A second help in re-discovery the depth of this text is through the recovery of the philosophical meaning of *echad*/one which is the high point in the text. In several key places in Scripture, the word ‘*echad*’ is used to express a diversity possessed of a unity. In these instances, ‘*echad*’ does not have a monadic sense of an undifferentiated unity. Genesis 1:5 reads, “There was evening and there was morning, one day.” It consists of two parts (evening and morning) that make up the one (‘*echād*’) day. Genesis 2:24 reports that the man and the woman become “one flesh”. Again, the two genders, coming together, form one unity. In all these references, “one” has the sense of differences held together in a unity, or conversely, it is a unity of differences.

When ‘*echad*’ is also applied to God in the *shema* (Deut 6:4), this understanding of “one” provides the opening for the possibility of a communion of persons that

²² At various points there are points that are development points of this nuptial-covenantal theme, some obscure and others more direct. In Ex 4:24-26, when Moses is going back to Egypt to confront Pharaoh, the LORD mysteriously seeks to kill Moses. His wife, Zipporah, saves Moses by circumcising their (uncircumcised) son with a flint knife and throws the foreskin at Moses’ feet. Moses is called a bridegroom of blood because of the circumcision (וַיִּקַּח מֹשֶׁה אֶת־בְּרִית־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לְפָנָיו). This enigmatic passage is perhaps the first reference to the concept of nuptiality (via the notion of *bridegroom*) connected to circumcision which is the sign of the Abrahamic covenant. Once the era of the prophets begins, the understanding of God’s covenant as a nuptial reality is clearly presented, particularly in Hosea 1-3. See especially Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., *Whoredom: God's Unfaithful Wife in Biblical Theology* in *New Studies in Biblical Theology*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 47-75.

exists within God. If God is characterized by the reality of communion, then man, made in his image, is also so ordered.²³

This one-flesh union is one of the earliest mysteries of revelation. It becomes the a.) key to the mystery of man himself, b.) is the central concept upon which Jesus gives his teaching on the indissolubility of marriage (Matt 19: 4-5) and c.) is the crucial concept that links the marital union of human love with the union of the Bridegroom, Christ, and His body, the Church.

The foundation for this *one-flesh* unity can be found in Genesis 1:27: *God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.* This text functions in two ways. First, it mentions masculinity and femininity in the context of the image of God. This would seem to indicate that human-gendered existence and the finality of gender (fecundity/communion) are somehow reflective [but obviously not in a one-to-one correspondence] of the inner reality of God. Note that this is not suggesting that one imports gender into God (which would, after all, be a return to paganism); but, rather, provides an initial entry into the reality of the *communio*-existence in the divine essence. In the human economy, communion takes the form of the one-flesh unity of man and woman. This is intrinsically reflective of the inner communion *within* God which ultimately is revealed as being in the form of trinitarian life (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

Corporate Personality

This is an example of the Semitic principle of *corporate personality*²⁴. This means that the personal, specific dimensions of our being (i.e., our individual, personal existence) are always grounded in a larger organic whole, such as the family or the covenantal community. This idea is succinctly expressed in this African proverb: “I am because we are.” Thus, the human person always exists as a particularity (the individual person) within, and expressive of a whole (the family, the tribe, etc.), which, in turn, is concretized in this particular individual. It is this dual *corporate-personal* understanding of human nature which becomes the antidote to the

²³ For a fuller explanation see J. Atkinson, “The One-Flesh Union and the Holiness of God” in *Why Humanae Vitae Is Still Right*, ed. Janet Smith (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018) 16-145.

²⁴ For an excellent presentation of the Hebraic concept of *corporate personality* see Johannes Pedersen, *Israel, Its Life And Culture I-II* (London: Oxford University Press, 1926; reprint, 1954) 99-181. Also, cf. Atkinson, Chapter 6: “Hebraic Anthropological Principles: Corporate Personality” in *Biblical and Theological Foundations of the Family* (Washington, DC, 2014) 161-192.

prevailing anthropology of modern culture which sees the person as an isolated, self-determining consciousness. This recovery of the corporate dimension is at the heart of the healing of modern man who has privileged the individual and subjectivity.

As a reflective image, man, in the psychosomatic unity of his gendered being, has the vocation to be a concrete expression of the intra-communion of God. In this way, gender in the human person has a dimension that transcends animal sexuality. As such, the meaning and form of the sexual embrace are grounded in the oneness (the inner communion) of God. These conclusions are further supported when we realize that, while all the animals are created before man and will reproduce sexually, gender is only mentioned in the context of the *imago Dei* [Gen 1: 22]. Sexuality has a radically different meaning for the human person than for the *animalia*.²⁵

Original Nakedness and Original Solitude

In the explanatory account in chapter 2, Genesis reveals that man is a self-conscious individual who becomes aware of his being through the encounter with the other. JPII has perceptively written about this in his *Theology of the Body*. In examining the text where *Yahweh-‘elohim* brings the animals to the first *‘adam* as a companion, JPII calls this original state the *original solitude* and reveals its meaning.

Thus, the first meaning of man's original solitude is defined based of a specific "test" or on an examination that man undergoes before God (and in some way also before himself). Through this "test" [being presented with the animals), man gains the consciousness of his own superiority, that is, that he cannot be put on a par with any other species of living beings on the earth...

The observation that man "is alone" in the midst of the visible world and, in particular, among living beings, has a negative meaning in this search, inasmuch as it expresses what man "is not" ...

²⁵ What is often overlooked is the fact that the first experience of gender is in Gen 1:21-22 with the creation of the animals and *before* the creation of man. These animals are told to be fruitful and multiple (just as man is). But to do so, there has to be differentiated genders to accomplish this. But this reality is not highlighted. But with the human person, it is within the context of the image of God that human gender is introduced. Thus, gender for the human person has a deeper ontological significance than for the *animalia*. Through the sexually differentiated embrace, another image of God is brought forth. See Atkinson, "The One- Flesh Union and the Holiness of God," 121-122.

He is not only essentially and subjectively alone. In fact, solitude also signifies man's subjectivity, which constitutes itself through self-knowledge. Man is alone because he is "different" from the visible world, from the world of living beings.²⁶

To realize one cannot be identified with the world around you, to acknowledge the longing for transcendence which the *imago dei* plants in man, is to rightly discern the meaning of man.

But this longing is not only spiritual. As JP II writes:

The body, by which man shares in the visible created world, makes him [man] at the same time aware of being "alone." ... To link man's original solitude with the awareness of the body, through which man distinguishes himself from all the animalia and "separates himself" from them, and through which he is a person. One can affirm with certainty that man thus formed has at the same time the awareness and consciousness of the meaning of his own body. Moreover, [he has] this based on the experience of original solitude.²⁷

If this is true, then to reduce man to mere consciousness or will is to fatally block the human subject from genuine development and freedom, using his being at the service of an ideology.

It is interesting how JP II links the state of original solitude to the final overcoming of the male-female difference. He calls this resolution of the gendered differential "an overcoming of the frontier of solitude." To become fully human, a person must come to a personal, corporate and subjective realization that is rooted in the body. The body, *qua* body, is essential to the being and meaning of personhood. As JP II explains:

Indispensable for this solitude was everything that was constitutive in providing the foundation for the solitude of each, and thus also self-knowledge and self-determination, that is, subjectivity and the awareness of the meaning of one's own body...

²⁶ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006) 148-150 [Audience: October 10, 1979].

²⁷ *Ibid*, 150-152 [Audience: October 24, 1979]. [*emphasis added*]

*We can then deduce that man became the image of God not only through his own humanity, but also through the communion of persons *which man and woman form from the beginning.*²⁸*

If this is true, then one can readily see how the belief (that the body is only malleable material, possessing neither purpose nor meaning other than what the human agent construes it to be), is anti-human and, in reference to God, is anti-creational. But note also that the differentiation into masculine and feminine is always ordered towards the openness to the formation of another image of God. The oneness of the two becomes manifest in the third. The covenantal God of Israel reveals His nature through His name: אֶהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר אֶהְיֶה / I Am who I AM.²⁹ In His essence, the Lord is life itself. Consequently, those made in His image are ordered towards life, and in particular the procreation of life. This is the meaning of sexuality: the communion and procreativity which are expressive of the inner divine being. To reject one or the other is to reject the image we carry.

This not mere theological speculation. If our bodies have meaning, then what we do with our bodies has meaning. If the unity of the sexual act (which uniquely images forth the divine inner communion and it's orientation toward life) is intentionally attacked, then the ability to image forth and participate in the inner communion of God is damaged and put at great risk. The truth is that there are inevitable consequences to the anthropological commitments we make. If this is true, then what we do with our bodies is never only a personal choice. Our acts of the will always affect our relationship to the divine. Our freedom, which our modern world is so rightly concerned with, can only be secured if, unlike our primordial parents, we stop wanting to be gods, and instead, become faithful to the truth God has inscribed in our bodies and conscience.

Hermeneutics of the Gift

An adequate theology of the body has to also deal with the *hermeneutics of the gift* which is present in the creation narrative. As we examine the first encounter of the

²⁸ Ibid., 163 [Audience: November 14, 1979]. [*emphasis added*]

²⁹ Ex 3:14

man with the woman, we see the instance of what JP II calls *original nakedness*. As the text specifically notes, this condition is without shame. This happens precisely because each person looks at the other with the fullness of vision not eclipsed by sin.

In his Wednesday catechesis, JP II taught:

The original meaning of nakedness corresponds to the simplicity and fullness of vision in which their understanding of the meaning of the body is born from the very heart, as it were, of their community-communion. We will call this meaning "spousal." ...

they see each other in this way, before knowing "that they were naked". This reciprocal vision of each other is not only a share in "exterior" perception of the world, but also has an inner dimension of a share in the vision of the Creator himself...

The situation that is indicated... does not an inner break and antithesis between what is spiritual and what is sensible.³⁰

This primordial encounter in original nakedness is the archetype of all human relations, which again, is uniquely represented in the marital union. Precisely because we are not controlled by concupiscence, the inner movement of our being toward communion (whose genesis is in the inner life of God) can be properly fulfilled. *The concrete body can image forth and make visible in this world the invisible communion of God, Himself.* But the hermeneutical principle which helps us to understand this archetypal encounter is the concept of *the gift of self*. This means the coming to *the full consciousness of who one is*. This includes our masculinity or femininity and the conscious awareness of the need for communion which, ontologically, is a longing for the original unity of man. The concrete fulfillment of this longing can only be realized when, in the consciousness of an integrated personhood, one trembling makes a complete and irrevocable gift to the other. The concrete *gift of self* to the other is making visible the invisible and indissoluble communion of God, Himself.³¹

³⁰ Ibid., 177 [Audience: January 2, 1980]. The first part of this quote comes at the end of the audience and all that is cited after this comes from the earlier part of JP II's teaching.

³¹ As man is made in God's image, the human person reflects God's nature. Within the divine essence, this takes the form of trinitarian communion, whereas in the created order this takes the form of nuptial love, specifically

This primordial nuptial reality is the beginning point of a typological trajectory which concludes in Paul's Christological understanding of marriage. In Ephesians 5:32, Paul reveals the breath-taking iconic value of the body and its teleological orientation to the one-flesh union. In his letter, he refers to the one-flesh union as a mystery which is great (*τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο μέγα ἐστίν*) because the human body images forth and participates in the salvific actions of Christ, thus making visible the invisible salvific love of God in its final incarnational form.

In the first five chapters, Paul is at pains to explain to the Ephesians the nature of redemption. Then at verse 5:22, he begins to transition to the theme of human marriage. This transition from theology to concrete action reveal that, for Paul, faith in Christi was not a Gnostic form of intellectual assent, but faith had to inform and be manifested in the life of the Christian. Here, Paul combines both in developing a "theological norm" for marriage in which the sacrificial work of Christ is to be the underlying principle.³² He concludes by referring to Gen 2:24:

For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh.

Here mystery means something that is a part of the Father's plan and held within the divine heart until the determined time for its revelation. In Eph 5:32, Paul makes an astonishing correlation which is simply not self-evident. Speaking of the *basar echad*, the one flesh union of man and woman initiated at the foundation of creation, he writes:

*τὸ μυστήριον τοῦτο μέγα ἐστίν ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω εἰς Χριστὸν καὶ εἰς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν.
This mystery is great; but I am speaking with reference to Christ and the church.*

Here the correlation is made between α) what Christ did on the Cross and the immeasurable depth of his love for His own Body, the Church and β) the human love between man and woman in a one-flesh union with its privileged expression in bodily terms.

I would propose that what Paul understands is that marriage, in all its human frailty, participates in and *therefore is able to make visible*, this salvific love of

expressed as the one-flesh union.; See Atkinson, "Nuptiality as a Paradigmatic Structure of Biblical Revelation," in *Dialoghi Sul Mistero Nuziale (Festschrift for Archbishop Angelo Scola)*, Lateran University Press (2003)

³² See Hans Urs Von Balthasar, "Ephesians 5:21-33 and *Humanae Vitae*: A Meditation," in *Christian Married Love*, ed. Raymond Dennehy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 55-73.

God in creation. As such, the one-flesh union of the body reaches its teleological end in the final Christological act of salvation. The love of Christ for the Church, expressed in His death and resurrection, is the ground for all marriages. As such, with the accomplishment of Christ's sacrificial mission, the one-flesh union becomes a unique expression of His sacrificial love and the grace of the cross now becomes the informing agent of that union for those in Christ. This had always been the end towards which marriage was created and why the first revelation of marriage is within the covenantal-Temple context underlying Gen 2.

If one accepts Paul's ontological correlation and if the marital union of one-flesh is divinely proposed as a fundamental way of making present in creation the love of the divine act of redemption, then it would seem that to attack the body, to deny its meaning, to see matter and the human body as eternally malleable, to deny the given nature of creation, to proffer a deformed sexuality by eradicating its complimentary nature and procreative end, to deny the objective reality of the masculinity and femininity and to attack the indissolubility of the one-flesh union is objectively to participate and co-operate in the attack on the divine nature, the divine inner communion, and the salvific act of Christ. It is to inevitably deform the human person, condemning him to an existence which takes on the form of an anti-creation.

I will conclude with the prophetic words of Cardinal Carol Caffarra:

*Testimony means to say, to speak, to announce openly and publicly. Someone who does not testify in this way is like a soldier who flees at the decisive moment in a battle. We are no longer witnesses, but deserters, if we do not speak openly and publicly.*³³

³³ This quote is taken from the address which Cardinal Caffarra gave on May 19, 2017 at the Fourth Annual Roman Life Form conference. <https://voiceofthefamily.com/cardinal-caffarra-we-are-no-longer-witnesses-but-deserters-if-we-do-not-speak-openly-and-publicly/> [Click](#) [Accessed: July 4, 2022.]