

Papal Address to Marriage and Family Institute

"In Love Man Is 'Re-created'"

Here is a translation of the address Benedict XVI gave Friday to mark the 30th anniversary of the foundation of the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family.

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Lord Cardinals,

venerable brothers in the Episcopate and Priesthood,

dear brothers and sisters,

With joy I receive you today, several days after the beatification of Pope John Paul II, who 30 years ago, as we heard, wanted to found both the Pontifical Council for the Family and your pontifical institute; two organisms that show how he was firmly convinced about the decisive importance of the family for the Church and for society. I greet the representatives of your great community, which has now spread to all the continents as has the worthy foundation for marriage and the family that I created to support your mission. I thank the president, Monsignor Melina, for the words that he has addressed to me in the name of everyone. The newly beatified John Paul II, who, as was recalled, exactly 30 years ago today was the victim of the terrible assassination attempt in St. Peter's Square, especially entrusted to you his "catecheses on human love," which contain a profound reflection on the human body for study, research and dissemination. Conjugating the theology of the body with the theology of love to find the unity of man's journey: this is the theme that I would like to indicate as the horizon of your work.

Shortly after the death of Michelangelo, Paolo Veronese was called before the Inquisition with the accusation of having painted inappropriate figures in a depiction of the Last Supper. The painter said that in the Sistine Chapel too the bodies were depicted nude with little reverence. It was precisely the inquisitor who defended Michelangelo with the response that has become famous: "Do you not know that in these figures there is nothing save what is of spirit?" We moderns have a hard time understanding these words, because the body appears to us as inert, heavy matter, opposed to the consciousness and the freedom of the spirit. But the bodies of Michelangelo are inhabited by light, life, splendor. He wanted to show in this way that our bodies hide a mystery. In them the spirit manifests itself and operates. They are called to be spiritual bodies as St. Paul says (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:44). We can thus ask ourselves: can this destiny of the body illuminate the stages of its journey? If our body is called to be spiritual, should its story not be that of the alliance between body and spirit? In fact, far from opposing itself to the spirit, the body is that place where the spirit can dwell. In light of this it is possible to understand that our bodies are not inert, heavy, but they speak -- if we know how to hear them -- the language of true love.

The first word of this language we find in the creation of man. The body speaks to us of an origin that we did not confer on ourselves. "You knit me together in my mother's womb," the Psalmist of the Lord says (Psalm 139:13). We can say that the body, in revealing the Origin to us, bears in itself a filial meaning, because it reminds us of our generation, that derives, through our parents who transmitted life to us, from God the Creator. Only when he recognizes the originary love that gave him life, can man accept himself, can he reconcile himself with nature and the world. Following that of Adam is the creation of Eve. The flesh, received from God, is called to render possible the union of love between man and woman and to transmit life. The bodies of Adam and Eve, before the Fall, appear in perfect harmony. There is a language in them that they did not create, an eros rooted in their nature, that invites them mutually to receive themselves from the Creator, to be able thus to give themselves.

So, we understand that in love man is "re-created." "Incipit vita nova," Dante said ("Vita Nuova I, 1) -- "the new life begins" -- the life of the new union of the two in one flesh. The true appeal of sexuality is born

from the greatness of this horizon that discloses integral beauty, the universe of the other person and the “we” that is born in the union, the promise of the communion that is hidden there, the new fruitfulness, the path that love opens to God, font of love. The union of one flesh is thus made a union for life so that man and woman also become one spirit. In this way a path is opened in which the body teaches us the value of time, of the slow maturation in love. In this light the virtue of chastity receives a new meaning. It is not a “no” to pleasures and to the joy of life, but the great “yes” to love as profound communication between persons, that requires time and respect, as a journey together toward fullness and as love that becomes able to generate life and generously welcome the new life that is born.

It is certain that the body also contains a negative language: it speaks to us of the oppression of the other, of the desire to possess and exploit. Nevertheless, we know that this language does not pertain to God’s original design, but is the fruit of sin. When it is detached from its filial meaning, from the connection with the Creator, the body rebels against man, it loses its capacity to make communion transpire and it becomes the terrain of the appropriation of the other. Is this not perhaps the drama of sexuality, which today remains shut up in the closed circle of one’s own body and in emotionalism, but that in reality can only fulfill itself in the call to something greater? In this regard John Paul II spoke of the body’s humility.

A character in Paul Claudel’s play “The Satin Slipper” says to his lover: “I am incapable of accomplishing the promise that my body makes to you,” and is answered thus: “The body is broken but not the promise...” (Day 3, Scence 13). The power of this promise explains how the Fall is not the last word on the body in salvation history. God also offers to man a journey of redemption of the body, whose language is preserved in the family. If after the Fall, Eve received the name Mother of the Living this testifies that the power of sin does not succeed in erasing the original language of the body, the blessing of life that God continues to offer when man and woman unite in one flesh. The family is the place where the theology of the body and the theology of love intersect. Here we learn the goodness of the body, its witness of a good origin, in the experience of love that we receive from our parents. Here is lived the gift of self in one flesh in conjugal charity that joins the spouses. Here the fecundity of love is experienced and our life is interwoven with that of other generations. It is in the family that man discovers his relationality, not as an autonomous individual who is self-actualized, but as a child, spouse, parent, whose identity is founded on being called to love, to receive himself from others and give himself to others.

This path from creation finds its fullness in the Incarnation, with the coming of Christ. God took on the body, he revealed himself in it. The upward movement of the body is here integrated into a more primordial movement, the humble movement of God who lowers himself toward the body to then raise it up to himself. As Son, he received the filial body in gratitude and obedience to the Father and gave his body for us, to thereby generate the new body of the Church. The liturgy of the Ascension sings this history of the flesh, sinful in Adam, assumed and redeemed in Christ. It is a body that becomes ever more full of light and of the Spirit, full of God. Here appears the profundity of the theology of the body. This, when it is read in the space of tradition, avoids the danger of superficiality and gathers the grandeur of the vocation to love, which is a call to the communion of persons in the double form of the life of virginity and of matrimony.

Dear friends, your institute is placed under the protection of the Madonna. Of Mary, Dante spoke illuminating words for a theology of the body: “In your womb love was rekindled” (Paradiso 23, 7). In her female body that Love that generates the Church took on a body. May the Mother of the Lord continue to protect your journey and to make fruitful your study and teaching, in service to the Church’s mission for the family and society. May the Apostolic Benediction, which I bestow on all of you from my heart, accompany you. Thank you.