

Catholic

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God's Gift to Us: *Amoris Laetitia* and *Theology of the Body*

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LOVING THE GIFT OF OUR BODIES

At every Mass, we hear the priest say the following about the holy Eucharist: “this is my Body, which will be given up for you.” At Christmas, we give thanks to God for the gift of his Son—presented to us in the form of a tiny baby boy. At Easter time, we see how Jesus sacrificed his body by dying on the cross for us. We can become so familiar with these physical, bodily expressions of Jesus’ love for us that we forget what a great mystery it is.

The Incarnation of Jesus, God made flesh, is truly fascinating. In the Joy of Love (*Amoris Laetitia*), Pope Francis' moving catechesis on love, marriage, and family, Francis states: "The incarnation of the Word in a human family, in Nazareth, by its very newness, changed the history of the world" (AL 65). By living and walking among us in human form, Jesus revealed that our bodies are precious and remarkable signs of God's love for us. We may ask: *Why did God create people with bodies and angels as pure spirits?* The answer is that God gave us our bodies as gifts for us, others, and ultimately for him.

Theology of Our Bodies

In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis frequently quotes his predecessor Pope St. John Paul II, who gave a series of papal addresses that came to be known as *Theology of the Body* (TOB, 1979–1984). The book speaks to our inherent worth as individuals and of our bodies. Our bodies are not bad, dirty, or shameful. Nor are they secondary to our souls. Rather, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, our souls and bodies are profoundly united (CCC 365). Furthermore, each of us has a "sacred and inviolable dignity" (AL 151). Quoting John Paul II, Pope Francis urges all of us to "learn, with perseverance and consistency, the meaning of his or her body" (AL 151, quoting TOB 4). *Theology of the Body* can teach us how to love our bodies, how to treat others with respect, and how to love. Love that remains unspoken, unshared, or bottled up in our hearts fails to reach its full potential. Love becomes palpable when we open our lips to speak words of encouragement or when we open our arms to offer a friendly embrace. Loving

acts of service toward others, particularly the underprivileged, spreads the message of Christ and the witness of his gospel.

At its quintessence, *Theology of the Body* is the theology of love. It teaches us how to make our love real, rather than abstract, and how to translate it from vague feelings into concrete deeds that shape the world.

Our Bodies as Gifts to Ourselves

How often do we recognize our bodies as the great gifts they are and thank God for them? It's easy to see how babies delight in their bodies. They have perpetual looks of wonder on their little faces because they constantly see, hear, or feel something new. Something as simple as discovering their toes can catapult them into fits of joy. As we age, these sensory experiences are gifts that we tend to stop noticing, but we can and should revive our delight in them. The colors painted across the sky at sunrise and sunset reveal to our eyes a glorious and artistic creation of God. The reverberation of music, the voice of loved ones, and even the roar of a crowd can exhilarate us. The physical contact of a warm hug, a gentle kiss, or a firm handshake allows us to experience real love from another human being—a reflection of God's love toward us.

While some of us might have a love-hate relationship with our bodies, loving them when they look or feel good and hating them when they don't measure up to our hopes or expectations, God's gift is fundamentally good. God gave bodies to people in all shapes and sizes, and they are all beautiful to him. The natural world brims with an abundance of diversity. It is home to more than 300,000 species of flowering plants alone. Nature is an obvious example of God's delight in dissimilarity. We can't judge the physical beauty of our faces and bodies by a single, limiting standard. Because our bodies are a gift from God, we should foster a positive image, not a negative one.

Cultivating a positive relationship with our body begins in childhood and continues as we age. Parents rejoice in their children's physical milestones. They pay tribute to their child's first steps and their verbalization with squeals of encouragement. We don't have to lose that joy or sense of appreciation for what the body is capable of when physical changes transpire because of puberty or aging.

It's an inescapable reality that our bodies will change over time. As Pope Francis wrote, "Although the body ages, it still expresses that personal identity that first won our heart" (AL 164). From birth to death, our bodies remain great gifts to us, allowing us to be and express who we truly are.

DIG DEEPER

In what ways can we help the youth we encounter to better understand TOB?

How can we foster expressions of love and service that help build up the kingdom?

What are the lifelong spiritual benefits of cultivating a positive relationship with our bodies?

