

# **THEOLOGY OF THE BODY: A SALESIAN PERSPECTIVE**

## **1. Introduction**

The greatest gift God has gifted to humanity is the ability to love each other. The supreme manifestation of this self-giving love fulfils in the covenant of marriage. The first command God has given to humanity is to be fruitful and multiply. (Gen.1:28) Through our genuine love, we collaborate with God in his creative mission. However human beings failed to love each other and we have alienated ourselves from the original plan the love of God has desired for us. According to God's plan sex was understood as an expression of self-giving but it was coloured with selfish motives and its purpose was limited to bodily pleasures. All around the world, from time immemorial we see the repercussions of this perverted understanding of sex and its consequences.

Our bodies are created in the image and likeness of God as his dwelling place and temple of the Holy Spirit. Anyhow, we lost this divine dimension of the body. The deviation against the dignity of the body is increasing day by day such as pre-natural sex, same-sex marriages, pornography, etc. what could be the solution for this moral decline. I think the teachings of John Paul II could guide us to come out of these sexual aberrations by becoming aware of the original plan of love God established for us. The theology of the body is the collection of 129 talks delivered by John Paul II in the early years of his pontificate between September 1979 and November of 1984.<sup>1</sup> Let us analyze some of the key points of this theological view.

## **2. Incarnation: A Door Way to Theology of the Body**

The word became flesh and lived among us (Jn. 1:14). Incarnation is the most significant moment of salvation history. Jesus, the second person of the Holy Trinity incarnated in our midst to redeem us from the clutches of sin and restore our lost innocence that we may continue to enjoy our original solitude, unity, and nakedness. John Paul says: "The Son of God took on flesh died on a cross so that sinful humanity might be put to death. He rose from the dead to re-create our humanity. He ascended bodily into the life of the Trinity to 'in-spire' our bodies once again with God's life

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<sup>1</sup>Christopher West, *Theology of the Body for Beginners* (Pennsylvania: Ascension Press, 2004), 1.

and love. Through this gift of redemption, Christ breathes back into our flesh that same Spirit that expired from our bodies when we denied the gift.<sup>2</sup> The incarnation of Christ is a reminder for the entire humanity for the destiny to which each one of us is called for. When we analyze the public ministry of Jesus we could understand the fact that he always upheld the dignity of the human body. He provided the integral healing for both body and mind. He perfected the teaching that we are created in the image and likeness of God by stating that a lustful look on the other equal to committing adultery. It teaches us how much we need to respect our own bodies and equally the body of the other.

### **3. The Nuptial Meaning of The Body**

John Paul II sees the nuptial meaning of the body as the fundamental element of human existence in the world. The nuptial meaning of the body is also known as marital, spousal and conjugal love.<sup>3</sup> Vatican II sees it as an invitation to the universal call to holiness. There is a close relationship between the nuptial meaning of the body and holiness.<sup>4</sup> John Paul II opines: “The more we grow in authentic holiness, the more we discover and strengthen that bond that exists between the dignity of the human being and the nuptial meaning of his body.”<sup>5</sup> The basic purpose of the nuptial love that exists between man and woman is an invitation to become a gift to each other is through their sincere gift of the self.<sup>6</sup>

The donation of one’s self as a gift to their other is expressed in one’s own sexuality. Man’s body doesn’t make a sense by itself nor does a woman’s body. God’s eternal plan is that man and woman find a meaning for their existence by being a mutual gift to each other. This leads them to the knowledge of each other, makes them fruitful, lead to generation: Adam knew his wife and she conceived. (Gen. 14:1)<sup>7</sup> If man and woman find the meaning for their existence in their gift to each other then what about man and woman who give up the conjugate love and remain as celibates? It is not the rejection of sexuality. The ultimate purpose of our sexuality is in union

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<sup>2</sup>West, 42-43.

<sup>3</sup>West, 29.

<sup>4</sup>West, 30.

<sup>5</sup>John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 2006), 462.

<sup>6</sup>Paul II, 185-186.

<sup>7</sup>West, 29.

with Christ. They skip the earthly union and thrive towards the eternal union.<sup>8</sup> The first man and woman experienced this nuptial meaning of the body in its fullness. Let us discuss various dimensions of nuptial the body that the first man and woman experienced.

### **3.1. Original Solitude**

Then the Lord God said: “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for Him.” (Gen. 2:18) The creation account does not make a distinction between man and woman before the deep sleep of Adam.<sup>9</sup> The Hebrew word used for man is ‘Adam’ which means humanity or mankind it not only refers to man but both man and woman.<sup>10</sup> ‘Man is alone’ designates he is the only creature created in the image and likeness of God. He could not find another being with this characteristic feature. Adam was different from animals. The quality that distinguishes Adam from animals is freedom. Like animals, he was created out of dust. However, the life principle in Adam is not mere instincts but the breath of God. Therefore, he is not a mere body. This freedom provides him an inner life or inner world. It transforms him as a subject and not a mere object. In this experience of freedom and solitude man recognizes that love is his origin, vocation, and destiny.

He is invited to enter into a covenantal relationship with God; this relationship defines man’s solitude more than anything else. Tasting this relationship based on love, he longs to share the same love with a person just like him. This is the meaning of not good for man to be alone. In the original solitude, he recognizes his two-fold vocation love of God and love of neighbour. He also realizes his capacity to negate this love. He/she has the freedom to choose God or deny him. The original solitude and freedom are spiritual but experiential bodily. We are free means we have the freedom to do whatever we want with our bodies. Human freedom is not fully realized by inventing good and evil but by choosing properly between them.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>West, 30.

<sup>9</sup>West, 21-22.

<sup>10</sup>James Mctavish and Simone Lorenzo, “A Synthesis of Pope John Paul II’s Theology of the Body,” *Philippina Scara*, vol.XLIX, no.1479 May-August 2014) 150.

<sup>11</sup>West, 22-23.

### 3.2. Original Unity

After the creation of Eve, when Adam sees her, he cries: “this at last bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.” (Gen. 2:23) Now Adam encountered a body that expresses a person, all the animals that he named were bodies, not persons. Now he has found a companion who shares the same humanity with him. They are alone in the sense they are different from animals, and they are called to live in the covenant of love.<sup>12</sup>

“Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife and they become one flesh.” (Gen. 2:24) This unity helps them to overcome the original solitude that is being alone without the other. The human sexual union is not merely a biological union but also a spiritual union. Becoming one flesh is a sacramental expression that corresponds to the communion of persons.<sup>13</sup> “Man became the ‘image and likenesses of God not only through his own humanity, but also through the communion of persons.’”<sup>14</sup> Man becomes the image of God not only in his/her solitude; through his/her humanity man and woman enter into this spiritual communion through the gift of themselves to each other. Thus through this communion, man and woman enjoy a spiritual communion and also partake in the spiritual communion of the Holy Trinity.<sup>15</sup> Thus the expression *imago Dei* expresses the capacity to express the deepest kind of personal communion at the human level.<sup>16</sup>

### 3.3. Original Nakedness

“The man and his wife were both naked, and were not ashamed.” (Gen. 2:25) This is the third original experience of humankind. John Paul II considers it as a key to understanding God’s original plan for human life. We see once they fall from the grace by breaking the covenant of love with God they cover their nakedness with fig leaves. When a woman is alone she does not feel the need to cover her nakedness but in the presence of a man she feels shame, and as a form of self-defense, she covers her nakedness because she has the fear that she may be treated as an object for the

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<sup>12</sup>West, 24.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, forward by John S. Grabowski (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997), 46.

<sup>15</sup>West, 25.

<sup>16</sup>Mactavish, 151.

gratification of the other. She covers her body not because it is bad or shameful, rather she wants to protect herself from the lustful look of the other and protect her God-given dignity.<sup>17</sup>

This original nakedness also invites us to reflect on the original innocence man and woman had, before the original sin. They treated themselves as subjects.<sup>18</sup> This original sin did not allow them to reduce the other to the level of a mere object. They were united in the awareness that they are called to self-gift to each other.

In the gospels, we see Jesus says: “Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female.” (Mt.19:4) The words of Jesus ‘in the beginning’ are an invitation to understand the original plan of God for both man and woman. They are called to love without shame by being a gift to the other.<sup>19</sup> However, this is possible only when a person frees himself/herself from the clutches of the lust. Human beings couldn’t get back to their original innocence and love, to restore us to the purity of origins. Jesus lived among us as a perfection of the nuptial meaning of the body.<sup>20</sup>

#### **4. Communion of Persons through the Gift of Self**

In the original solitude, a man reaches his consciousness, by realizing that he is different from all the other living beings. This experience makes him/her open to his constitution and longing for a relationship leading to the communion of persons.<sup>21</sup> The Word communion expresses “the help that derives in some way from the very fact of existing as a person besides a person.”<sup>22</sup> The biblical account understands this communion as “the existence of the person ‘for’ the person.”<sup>23</sup> Therefore, human beings are called to live in mutual reciprocity. God promised a helper for man as his partner indicates the invitation to enter into this mutual relationship and help each

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<sup>17</sup>West,26-27.

<sup>18</sup>John Paul II, 72.

<sup>19</sup> Paul II, 73.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>West,27-28.

<sup>22</sup>Paul II, 162.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

other to build a meaningful existence, by recognizing the image of God, the intrinsic dignity that is endowed in everyone.<sup>24</sup>

“The man and woman did not feel shame.” (Gen. 2: 25) This characteristic feature reveals the original plan of God for human beings. Man and woman, both are called for self-donation and the acceptance of the other as a gift.<sup>25</sup> In this process that is, the gift of self, the very act of giving becomes acceptance and acceptance transforms itself into giving.<sup>26</sup> In the mystery of creation woman is given to man, is welcomed and accepted by him as a gift. In her self-donation to man, a woman finds herself, she becomes aware of her body sex and femininity. Similarly, not only accepting the woman but also through his self-donation, he becomes aware of his masculinity, sex, and the body. Thus through their sincere gift of self, man and woman find themselves and grow in their reciprocal relationship nourishing and cherishing each other.<sup>27</sup>

## **5. The Relevance of the Theology of the Body**

The greatest challenge that humanity encounters today is the ideology of disembodiment. There is an interior divorce between body and spirit. There is no doubt that modern science has contributed a lot to the welfare of humanity, however, it acts on the separation of a man into body and spirit. As a result, the modern man identified himself subjectively with his body and the elements of the spirit are completely denied. The mere focus on the human body caused the manipulation of the body as a mere object.

John Paul II presents his views on the theology of the body as a solution to the objectification of the human body that is manifested in all the spheres of human life. The theology of the body invites us to meditate on the spirituality of the body. Living spiritual does not mean deprivation of bodily feelings whereas it is an integrated and holistic vision of life, realizing the gift of one's own body in its masculinity and femininity. In the book of Genesis, we read that both man and woman, they were naked but they did not feel shame. This is the original vision of God for every human

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>John Paul II, 196.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>John Paul II, 197.

being. The theology of the body helps each of us to become aware of this original, far-reaching experience of holiness that God planned for us from eternity. Only a spiritually mature person can know the spousal meaning of the body, feel it and live it in his/her day to day life situations. Thus it enables us to take gospel message flesh in us and also put flesh on our spiritual lives too.

## **6. The Preventive System and the Theology of the Body**

Don Bosco's preventive system is based on three pillars namely reason, religion, and loving-kindness. It is a way of life, a manner rather than mere teaching. Salesian methods are mostly practical than theoretical.<sup>28</sup> The love for the educand is the basic feature of this system, without love there is no effective Salesian education.<sup>29</sup> The educator is called to be a friendly and nurturing presence in this system.<sup>30</sup> The dialogical relationship between the educator and educand has supreme importance in the preventive system.<sup>31</sup> Don Bosco formulated this educational system as a contrary method against the repressive system that is common in our educational ambiances. Here, the educator becomes a loving father who is always available for the educand, they can engage friendly chat with them and through their gentle corrections build confidence in the pupils and thrive towards an ambiance of the impossibility of committing faults.<sup>32</sup> The Salesian constitution speaks about personal development which aims at the following: "Always and in every case, we help them to be open to truth and to develop in themselves responsible freedom. To this end, we commit ourselves to inculcate in them a convinced appreciation of true values which will lead them to a life of dialogue and service."<sup>33</sup>

This pedagogy has two-fold dimensions to prepare an individual to take his/her integral development seriously and also help a person to grow in his/her religious convictions for example, in the case of a Christian youth to grow as an authentic Christian by creating an educational ambiance that is filled with religious

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<sup>28</sup>John Morrison, *The Educational Philosophy of St. John Bosco* (New York: Don Bosco Publications, 1979), 205.

<sup>29</sup>Morrison, 206.

<sup>30</sup>Morrison, 212.

<sup>31</sup>Morrison, 216.

<sup>32</sup>Morrison, 217.

<sup>33</sup>*Constitutions and Regulations of Society of St. Francis De Sales* (Bengaluru: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2015) 40-41.

spirit and assist the educand to recognize his/her inborn thirst for transcendence and continue to nurture it by provoking a constant and dynamic educative activities.<sup>34</sup> The Salesian Constitution summarizes this ideal as follows: “Imitating God’s patience, we encounter the young at their present stage of freedom. We then accompany them, so that they may develop solid convictions and gradually assume the responsibility for the delicate process of their growth as human beings and men of faith.”<sup>35</sup>

The connecting link between the preventive system and the theology of the body lies in the fact that “God created humankind in His image.” (Gen. 1:27) Therefore, we are called to live the original plan of God that is to cooperate with God in our integral human development. However, due to our fall and inclination towards sin, we forget to realize this original plan of God for each one of us. Theology of the body is a holistic attempt to regain the lost innocence of humanity. Similarly, the preventive system aims at the integral development of humanity. The Salesian constitution affirms this idea: “We are actively present among youth in brotherly friendship, helping them in their efforts to grow in what is good, and encourage them to cast off every form of slavery, so that their weakness may not be overcome by evil.”<sup>36</sup>

Thus, both these spiritualities help out each person to recognize his/her divine call and live according to that. Both these spiritualities give equal importance to the dialogical relationship between the human person and God, and also among the human persons. The dialogical relationship finds its consummation in the communion of human persons with God and one another.

## **7. Don Bosco - A Forerunner of the Theology of the Body**

“You shall be holy, for I am holy.” (Lev11:45) Salvation history is the story of a God who wanted to enter into a relationship with humanity. The story of Adam and Eve of Genesis to the book of Revelation contains the episodes of God’s unconditional love towards humanity. However, humanity failed oftentimes and broke this covenant with God. The incarnation of Jesus is to re-establish this covenant:

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<sup>34</sup>Morrison, 209.

<sup>35</sup>*Constitutions and Regulations of Society of St. Francis De Sales*, 44.

<sup>36</sup>*Constitutions and Regulations of Society of St. Francis De Sales*, 44-45.



“This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.” (Lk. 22: 20) By shedding his blood on the cross, he sealed this covenant forever and we could access the original plan of God for us that is ‘to be with him forever.’ However, the only criterion to remain in this covenant is our personal holiness. Jesus says: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” (Mt. 5:8) Our personal holiness completely depends upon God’s grace and our own personal effort to grow in holiness. Nevertheless, our holiness is not individualistic it is communitarian. As we are the members of Christ’s body each one of us is responsible for the holiness of the other. In the I Peter we read: “You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood a holy nation.” (1 Pet.1:9)

When we analyze the life of Don Bosco we realize that he has left any stones unturned concerning his sanctification and the sanctification of the people entrusted to his care. Don Bosco gave great importance to the virtue of purity. He considered purity as the angelic virtue and mother of all the virtues.<sup>37</sup> In the Salesian spirituality, he emphasized the importance of one’s own body and also respect for the body of the other. His decision to avoid all the corporal punishments and transform his students through his loving kindness emerged out of this conviction. He was always guided by the words of St. Paul: “Do you know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy that person. For God’s temple is holy and you are that temple.” (1 Cor. 3:16-17) Don Lemoyne speaks about the virtue of purity that Don Bosco manifested in the following words: “When he was among the boys, he very well resembled our Lord. The virtue of purity was outer garment covering him from head to foot; hence the boys approached him willingly and had unlimited confidence in him and both boys and priests would kiss his hand... with esteem and profound reverence just as if they were kissing a relic...”<sup>38</sup>

The Salesian spirituality places two devotions close to its heart. The first devotion is the devotion towards the Holy Eucharist. This devotion inspires us to live always in the presence of God, it would empower us to withstand ourselves from our

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<sup>37</sup>Edna Beyer Phelan, *Don Bosco: A Spiritual Portrait* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1963), 228.

<sup>38</sup>Phelan, 230.

thoughts and activities contrary to the virtue of purity.<sup>39</sup> The second devotion is the special veneration towards the Virgin Mary. He considered the virtue of purity as the virtue of Mary.<sup>40</sup> He developed active and lively traditions to spread the devotion towards Virgin Mary in the oratories. He proposed nine ways to preserve the virtue of purity in one's life they are 1. Shunning idleness 2. Avoidance of bad companies 3. keeping in the company of good companions 4. Frequent confession 5. Frequent communion 6. Frequent recourse to Mary 7. hearing Mass well 8. Review of the defects of passed confession 9. Small but frequent mortification in honour of Mary.<sup>41</sup> Thus, he developed an attitude among his pupils that the body is sacred because it is the temple of the Holy Spirit. The training that Don Bosco gave in the oratories was with this purpose to help them to regain their lost innocence and create in them a pure heart that they may grow in this virtue and prospect one's own body and the body of the other.

## **8. Salesian: A Call to Be a Gift to the Other**

Being a Salesian is being relational. A Meaningful Salesian existence demands an interpersonal relationship with God and others. A Salesian finds meaning for his life and mission is being with the young. It is an invitation to offer one's life for the salvation of young souls. Salesian spirituality is not based on ideal thoughts; it is very much practical and relational.<sup>42</sup> It is for sure that a Salesian vocation lived in its real spirit transforms the lives of the young and also the surrounding. Living this experience Don Bosco shares his wisdom: "By the preventive system, pupil acquires a better understanding, so that an educator can always speak to them in the language of the heart, not only during the time of their education but even afterwards. Having once succeeded in gaining the confidence of his pupils he can subsequently exercise a great influence over them and counsel them, advice and even correct them, whatever position they may occupy in the world later on."<sup>43</sup> Thus a Salesian is called to accompany his students not only when they are with him but even after they are far

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<sup>39</sup>Phelan, 231-232.

<sup>40</sup>Phelan, 228.

<sup>41</sup>Phelan, 232.

<sup>42</sup>Morrison, 205.

<sup>43</sup>*Constitutions and Regulations of Society of St. Francis De Sales*, 44.

from him. The presence of a Salesian is a nurturing presence and he/she is called to enter into a lifelong relationship with his/her students.

The Salesian vocation becomes fruitful only when one considers his/her life as a gift to the other. It is said about Don Bosco that he was always available for his students.<sup>44</sup> Once he was asked for the secrets of his success in education, he replied that it is love.<sup>45</sup> He always believed and taught that “the young must not only be loved, they must also be made to feel that they are loved.”<sup>46</sup> The success of Don Bosco was that he could convey to the young that there is a father who awaits them with a compassionate and loving heart. Like Don Bosco, when one imbibes the spirit of gospel charity he/she should be able to love his/her students selflessly and will be able to offer his/her life as a gift for the sanctification of the other.

## **9. Conclusion**

The preventive system of Don Bosco and the theology of the body of John Paul II are complementary to each other. These two spiritualities lead human beings to enter into communion with each other and finally communion with God himself. It upholds human dignity that all are created in the image and likeness of God; it gives intrinsic human dignity for all. The nuptial meaning of the body formulated by John Paul II reflects also in the preventive system of Don Bosco. When an educator dedicates his/her life wholly for the educand, he/she becomes a gift that perfects the bond of communion and the excellent manifestation of Christian charity. Both these spiritualities value the spirituality of bodily presence and stand against the objectification of the human body. The understanding of the theology of the body would enrich a Salesian to live his/her Salesian life as a God-given gift to the other to fulfil the greatest command of Christ that is ‘love one another as I have loved you’ in its fullness.

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<sup>44</sup>Phelan, 224.

<sup>45</sup>Morrison, 225.

<sup>46</sup>Eugene Ceria, *Memoria Biografiche Di Don Giovanni Bosco*, Vol. XVII (Turin: Societa Edutrice Internazionale, 1930-1937), 110 quoted in Morrison, 224.

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