

“THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY AND
THE DIGNITY OF WOMEN”

BISHOP ROBERT J. BAKER
CATHOLIC MEDICAL ASSOCIATION
ATLANTA, GEORGIA
OCTOBER 4, 2007

I AM HONORED TO BE WITH YOU TODAY AND, I MIGHT ADD, EXTREMELY FORTUNATE, AS I ALMOST HAD A CONFLICT, WITH AN EVENT OF OCTOBER 2 THAT OCCURRED IN BIRMINGHAM, MY INSTALLATION AS BISHOP THERE.

BUT I REALLY WANTED TO BE HERE, AND ALL WORKED OUT FOR ME TO MAKE THIS CONFERENCE WITH YOU VERY DEDICATED MEMBERS OF THE CATHOLIC MEDICAL ASSOCIATION.

LIKE OTHER BISHOPS, I AM VERY GRATEFUL FOR YOUR COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH THAT HELPS US IN OUR WORK, SUCH AS YOUR STUDY OF THE ORIGIN AND TREATMENT OF PERSONS STRUGGLING WITH SAME-SEX ATTRACTIONS AND YOUR DOCUMENT “HOMOSEXUALITY AND HOPE,” WHICH I CITE IN MY PASTORAL LETTER, “THE REDEMPTION OF OUR BODIES.”

AMONG THE MANY GREAT CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE PAPACY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II WAS HIS SERIES OF 129 PAPAL AUDIENCE ADDRESSES FROM SEPTEMBER OF 1979 TO NOVEMBER OF 1984. HE USES THE PHRASE “THEOLOGY OF THE BODY” AS A WORKING TERM FOR THEM. MORE CORRECTLY THEY CENTER AROUND THE THEME “THE REDEPMTION OF THE BODY AND THE SACRAMENTALITY OF MARRIAGE.”

YOU ARE NO DOUBT FAMILIAR WITH THE CATHOLIC THEOLOGIAN AND PAPAL BIOGRAPHER GEORGE WEIGEL’S DESCRIPTION OF THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY OF JOHN PAUL II AS “ONE OF THE BOLDEST RECONFIGURATIONS OF CATHOLIC THEOLOGY IN CENTURIES” --“A KIND OF THEOLOGICAL TIME-BOMB SET TO GO OFF WITH DRAMATIC CONSEQUENCES -- PERHAPS IN THE 21ST CENTURY.” WEIGEL PREDICTS THAT HIS TEACHING “WILL COMPEL A DRAMATIC DEVELOPMENT OF THINKING ABOUT VIRTUALLY EVERY MAJOR THEME IN THE CREED” (WITNESS TO HOPE, PP. 336, 853).

THIS TEACHING OF POPE JOHN PAUL II WAS GIVEN IN A TIME OF NEED BOTH WITHIN THE CHURCH AND THE LARGER SOCIETY FOR AN UPDATED UNDERSTANDING OF THE HUMAN PERSON. ST. THOMAS AQUINAS SUMMARIZED AND INTEGRATED THE TRADITION OF HIS DAY, HAVING HEAVY RECOURSE TO THE PHILOSOPHY OF ARISTOTLE, A TRADITION WHICH IS STILL RELEVANT FOR OUR TIME. POPE JOHN PAUL II WAS A STUDENT OF THE THOMIST TRADITION, IN WHICH HE COMPLETED A DOCTORAL DISSERTATION UNDER THE DIRECTION OF ONE OF THE GREATEST THOMISTS OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, FATHER REGINALD GARRIGOU-LAGRANGE, O.P. HE WAS ALSO A STUDENT OF THE THOUGHT OF ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS. THE SCHOLASTIC TRADITION GAVE THE POPE A THOROUGH FRAMEWORK IN THE OBJECTIVE ORDER, WHILE HIS CARMELITE STUDIES MADE HIM A MASTER IN THE MAPPING OF THE INTERIOR LIFE.

AS A SERIOUS PHILOSOPHER OF THE SCHOOL OF PHENOMENOLOGY, JOHN PAUL WAS ABLE TO INTEGRATE THE SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE WORLDS AND BE PART OF THE PHILOSOPHICAL RECOVERY FROM THE SCHISM BETWEEN THE TWO, WHICH RENE' DESCARTES AND IMMANUEL KANT HAD IMPOSED UPON TWO CENTURIES OF PHILOSOPHICAL THOUGHT. IT IS A HALLMARK OF THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY, AS WELL AS OF ITS AUTHOR THAT IT IS WELL-INTEGRATED, EMBRACING HUMAN EXPERIENCE AS WELL AS THE MOST SUBLIME OF THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS. THE THOMIST INTEGRATION, WHILE SIGNIFICANT FOR ALL TIME, DID NOT FULLY DESCRIBE THE EXPERIENCE OF THE PASSION FOR LOVE, NOT THE MEANING OF THE DYNAMICS OF THAT HUMAN EXCHANGE. POPE JOHN PAUL II ACCOMPLISHES THAT IN HIS THEOLOGY OF THE BODY.

THE YOUNG FATHER KAROL WOJTYLA WROTE A SECOND DOCTORAL DISSERTATION ON MAX SCHELER, WHO HAD BEEN A STUDENT OF THE FATHER OF PHENOMENOLOGY, EDMUND HUSSERL. WHILE WOJTYLA WAS CRITICAL OF SCHELER'S WORK, HE DID FIND VALUE IN SCHELER'S USE OF PHENOMENOLOGY IN ITS BEING A TOOL FOR THE STUDY OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS. PHENOMENOLOGY, WHILE SUBJECTIVE, IF USED PROPERLY, COULD LEAD TO OBJECTIVE TRUTH ABOUT MAN AS REVEALED BY GOD, TO AN APPRECIATION OF THE MYSTERY OF HUMAN PERSONHOOD. THAT IS PRECISELY HOW POPE JOHN PAUL WAS TO USE THIS METHOD IN HIS "THEOLOGY OF THE BODY" DISCOURSES.

THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY ARRIVED ON THE SCENE JUST IN TIME TO RESCUE THE HUMAN PERSON AND PROVIDE CLARITY ABOUT THE NATURE OF THE PERSON GOD HAS CREATED AND AS THE WAY TO WHOLENESS AND HOLINESS. IN MY PASTORAL LETTER, "THE REDEMPTION OF OUR BODIES," I SUGGEST THAT THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY HELPS US TO UNDERSTAND THE THEOLOGICAL AND ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF THE CHURCH'S TEACHINGS, NOT ONLY ABOUT

CONTRACEPTION AND HOMOSEXUALITY, BUT ALSO ABOUT THE SACRAMENTS OF HOLY ORDERS AND HOLY MATRIMONY, MARRIAGE GENERALLY STATED, AND THE WITNESS OF CELIBACY. I WILL ALSO MAKE THE CONNECTION IN MY FEW REFLECTIONS TODAY BETWEEN THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY AND THE DIGNITY OF WOMEN. A LITTLE MORE FIRST ON WHAT CONSTITUTES POPE JOHN PAUL'S THEOLOGY OF THE BODY.

A CENTRAL TENET OF THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY IS THAT FAITHFUL SELF-DONATIVE LOVE, AND THE COMMUNICATION WHICH RESULT FROM THE GIVING AND RECEIVING OF THAT GIFT, IS THE CREATIVE DYNAMIC WHICH REFLECTS THE INNER LIFE OF THE HOLY TRINITY. SELF-DONATIVE LOVE IS THE GIFT OF SELF ON BEHALF OF ANOTHER PERSON. IT IS THE LIFE-GIVING LOVE OF THE TRINITY AT CREATION. IT IS THE LOVE OF JESUS CHRIST, ESPECIALLY AT CALVARY. IT IS THE LOVE WHICH INSPIRED THE MARTYRS OF THE CHURCH AND THE GREAT SAINTS OF OUR OWN TIME. IT IS THE LOVE WHICH IS THE HEART OF THE MARRIAGE COVENANT.

THE POPE DEVELOPED THE PHRASE "THEOLOGY OF THE BODY" TO INDICATE THAT THERE IS A CONNECTION BETWEEN THE HUMAN BODY AND THE CREATOR IN WHOSE IMAGE IT IS MADE. HE SAYS THAT "THE TRUTH ABOUT LOVE CANNOT BE SEPARATED FROM THE LANGUAGE OF THE BODY. THE TRUTH ABOUT LOVE ENABLES THE SAME LANGUAGE OF THE BODY TO BE REREAD IN TRUTH," (GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JUNE 6, 1984).

THE COMPLEMENTARITY OF WOMEN AND MEN, PHYSICALLY AND SPIRITUALLY, IS AN IMPORTANT ELEMENT OF A PERSON'S BEING TRULY HUMAN. THE GIFT OF SELF IN NUPTIAL LOVE, WHETHER THAT BE THROUGH THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY MATRIMONY OR THROUGH THE COMMITMENT OF CONSECRATED CELIBACY, EXPRESSES THE DIVINE IMAGE IN THE HUMAN PERSON. ALL HUMAN BEINGS ARE MEANT TO BE SPOUSES --TO LIVE IN RELATIONSHIP WITH OTHERS, COMMITTED TO THEIR GOOD, WHETHER THIS IS IN MARRIAGE, OR BEING MARRIED TO CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH; ALL ARE MEANT TO BE PARENTS, WHETHER PHYSICAL OR SPIRITUAL. PARENTING, THE LIVING OF MATERNITY AND PATERNITY, IS A PART OF EACH ADULT HUMAN LIFE.

THE POPE TOOK A UNIQUE AND INSPIRED LOOK AT THE CREATION STORIES AND THE WRITINGS OF ST. PAUL THAT LET HIM TO THE CONCLUSIONS HE DREW. HE SEES HUMAN LIFE AS CREATED IN THE IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF DIVINE LIFE, AND HE NOTED THAT NUPTIAL LOVE WAS AT THE HEART OF THE LIFE OF THE HOLY TRINITY. THREE PERSONS, EACH GIVING COMPLETELY IN LOVE TO THE OTHER, YET REMAINING DISTINCT PERSONS, IS THE KEY TO UNDERSTANDING THE TRIUNE GOD. THEN, BY THE NUPTIAL ANALOGY DRAWN FROM EPHESIANS 5, WHICH BECOMES THE PRIVILEGED ANALOGY FOR UNDERSTANDING HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE, ONE CAN UNDERSTAND

DIVINE LOVE LIVED IN HUMAN LIVES. HUSBAND AND WIFE ARE IN FACT SUBJECT TO ONE ANOTHER AND ARE MUTUALLY SUBORDINATED TO ONE ANOTHER. THE SOURCE OF THIS MUTUAL SUBJECTION IS TO BE FOUND IN CHRIST PIETAS, AND ITS EXPRESSION IS LOVE, SAYS THE POPE IN HIS AUGUST 11, 1982 AUDIENCE ADDRESS.

JOHN PAUL PRESENTS MAN AND WOMAN IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS PRIOR TO THE FALL AS BEING IN NUPTIAL BLISS. HE SITES THE SONG OF SONGS, WITH ITS EXULTATION OF THE BRIDE FOR THE BRIDEGROOM IN AN EXPRESSION OF NUPTIAL UNION AS INDICATIVE OF SCRIPTURE REFERENCES TO MARRIED LOVE AND A KEY TO UNDERSTANDING CHRIST'S MESSAGE ON LIFE AND LOVE.

THE TWO GENDERS ARE THEREFORE COMPLIMENTARY, EACH HAVING MEANING IN REFERENCE TO THE OTHER. THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY POINTS TO THE OBVIOUS MEANING OF THE NAKED HUMAN MALE AND FEMALE: THEY ARE MADE FOR THE OTHER. IN BEING FOR AND WITH THE OTHER, A COMMUNION OF PERSONS IS CREATED IN WHICH THERE IS A UNITY WHICH CANNOT BE BROKEN. IN HIS CAREFULL AND THOROUGH ANALYSIS OF THE CREATION ACCOUNTS OF THE BOOK OF GENESIS, POPE JOHN PAUL TEACHES THAT IT IS PRECISELY AS MALE AND FEMALE, AND IN THE ONE-FLESH UNITY WHICH THEY FORM TOGETHER, THAT HUMANITY IS DECLARED TO BE THE IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD. A PART OF OUR BEING CREATED IN THE IMAGE AND LIKENESS OF GOD IS THE ATTRACTION AND TENDENCY WHICH WE HAVE TO THE OTHER GENDER, TOWARDS FORMING A COMMUNION OF PERSONS.

“(THE HUMAN PERSON) BECOMES THE IMAGE OF GOD NOT SO MUCH IN THE MOMENT OF SOLITUDE AS IN THE MOMENT OF COMMUNION. RIGHT FROM THE BEGINNING, HE IS NOT ONLY AN IMAGE IN WHICH THE SOLITUDE OF THE PERSON WHO RULES THE WORLD IS REFLECTED, BUT ALSO AND ESSENTIALLY, AN IMAGE OF AN INSCRUTABLE DIVINE COMMUNION OF PERSONS” (AUDIENCE OF NOVEMBER 14, 1979).

POPE JOHN PAUL II INSISTS ON THE EQUAL DIGNITY OF MAN AND WOMAN THROUGH THEIR SEPARATE MODES OF LOVING.

AFTER THE FALL, THE NUPTIAL RELATIONSHIP AND SEXUAL UNION BECAME DISORDERED. ADAM AND EVE IMMEDIATELY FELT SHAME, WHEREAS BEFORE THEY WERE AT EASE WITH EACH OTHER. ALL HUMAN BEINGS SUFFER IN THEIR RELATIONSHIPS BECAUSE OF THE DISORDER BROUGHT ABOUT BY ORIGINAL SIN. “FROM THE BEGINNING” IN ITS MASCULINITY AND FEMINITY, THE BODY WAS CALLED TO BECOME THE “MANIFESTATION OF THE SPIRIT, DOING SO ALSO BY MEANS OF THE CONJUGAL UNION OF MAN AND WOMAN, WHEN THEY UNITE IN SUCH A WAY AS TO FORM ONE FLESH.”

LUST, ADULTERY OF THE HEART, ENTERS IN AND OBSCURES THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BODY AND THE PERSON. FEMINITY WILL CEASE TO BE FOR THE MAN A LANGUAGE OF THE SPIRIT AND A SIGN OF THE WONDERFUL MATRIMONIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BODY. LUST WILL RUIN THIS SIGNIFICANCE AND WILL LEAD TO SATISFY ONLY THE BODY'S SEXUAL NEEDS AS ITS PRECISE OBJECT. WHEN A MAN LOOKS WITH LUST, THE WOMAN CEASES TO BE THE OBJECT OF ETERNAL ATTRACTION AND BECOMES THE OBJECT OF CARNAL CONCUPISCENCE. "TO THAT IS CONNECTED THE PROFOUND, INNER SEPARATION OF THE MATRIMONIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE BODY."

IN A 2004 DOCUMENT ENTITLED "LETTER TO BISHOPS OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH ON THE COLLABORATION OF MEN AND WOMEN IN THE CHURCH AND IN THE WORLD," THE CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH UNDER THEN CARDINAL JOSPEH RATZINGER, INDICATED THAT THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES AND IN PARTICULAR THE SUBJUGATION OF WOMEN IS THE RESULT OF ORIGINAL SIN AND NOT OF GOD'S ORIGINAL DESIGN FOR CREATION. THIS PERSPECTIVE WOULD BE IN LINE WITH POPE JOHN PAUL'S THEOLOGY OF THE BODY TEACHINGS.

THE DOCUMENT ALSO INDICATED THAT "ATTEMPTS TO ADVANCE THE CAUSE OF WOMEN BY SEEING MEN AS ENEMIES TO BE DEFEATED OR BY CLAIMING THAT NO REAL DIFFERENCE EXISTS BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE HAVE HAD 'LETHAL EFFECTS,' PARTICULARLY ON THE FAMILY" (CNS REPORT).

THE SECRETARY OF THE CONGREGATION, THEN ARCHBISHOP, NOW CARDINAL AMATO "TOLD VATICAN RADIO THAT THE LETTER WAS MEANT TO OFFER A CHRISTIAN CRITICISM OF TWO CURRENT TRENDS: THAT OF EMPHASIZING 'A RADICAL RIVALRY BETWEEN THE SEXES' AND THAT OF TRYING 'TO CANCEL THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE SEXES' " (CNS REPORT).

THE SECRETARY SAID THAT "FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE...MEN AND WOMEN WERE CREATED WITH DIFFERENCES PRECISELY IN ORDER TO ENTER INTO A PARTNERSHIP AND A RELATIONSHIP OF SELF GIVING THAT WOULD BRING NEW LIFE INTO THE WORLD."

"THE CONSEQUENCE IS THAT THE MAN AND THE WOMAN NO LONGER SEE THEIR DIFFERENCES IN TERMS OF RIVALRY AND OPPOSITION, BUT IN TERMS OF HARMONY AND COLLABORATION, THE DOCUMENT SAID" (CNS REPORT).

ALL OF THIS AGAIN IS FULLY IN LINE WITH THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II. THE POPE ALLUDES TO THE THREE FORMS OF LUST: THE PRIDE OF LIFE, THE LUST OF THE EYES, AND THE LUST OF THE FLESH, AND HE SHOWS HOW THE FIRST FINDS A FALSE RESOLUTION IN THE NIETSCHEAN

INTERPRETATION, A JUDGEMENT AND ACCUSATION OF THE HUMAN HEART; THE SECOND IN THE MARXIST INTERPRETATION FOR A SOLUTION; THE THIRD, "THE LUST OF THE FLESH" IN THE FREUDIAN INTERPRETATION FOR A SOLUTION.

ALL THREE OF THESE INTERPRETATIONS RUN COUNTER TO THE RESOLUTION PROVIDED BY JESUS IN THE GOSPELS, ACCORDING TO POPE JOHN PAUL.

THIS IS WHERE JOHN PAUL APPLIES THE PAULINE TERM "THE REDEMPTION OF THE BODY" FROM ROMANS 8:23. "REDEMPTION," HE SAYS IS A TRUTH, A REALITY, IN THE NAME OF WHICH MAN MUST FEEL CALLED, AND "CALLED WITH EFFICACY."

"MAN MUST FEEL CALLED TO REDISCOVER ... TO REALIZE THE NUPTIAL MEANING OF THE BODY. HE MUST FEEL CALLED TO EXPRESS IN THIS WAY THE INTERIOR FREEDOM OF THE GIFT, THAT IS OF THAT SPIRITUAL STATE AND THAT SPIRITUAL POWER WHICH ARE DERIVED FROM MASTERY OF THE LUST OF THE FLESH." IN CHRIST AND THROUGH HIS CHURCH AND ITS SACRAMENTS, ESPECIALLY BAPTISM AND THE HOLY EUCHARIST, THE ORIGINAL POWER THEREFORE ALSO THE GRACE OF THE MYSTERY OF CREATION BECOMES FOR ... EACH /PERSON/ POWER (THAT IS, GRACE) OF THE MYSTERY OF REDEMPTION...

"HE IS CALLED AS A PERSON IN THE TRUTH OF HIS HUMANITY, THEREFORE ALSO IN THE TRUTH OF HIS MASCULINITY OR FEMINITY, IN THE TRUTH OF HIS BODY. HE IS CALLED IN THAT TRUTH WHICH HAS BEEN HIS HERITAGE FROM THE BEGINNING, THE HERITAGE OF HIS HEART, WHICH IS DEEPER THAN THE SINFULNESS INHERITED, DEEPER THAN LUST IN ITS THREE FORMS. THE WORDS OF CHRIST, SET IN THE WHOLE REALITY OF CREATION AND REDEMPTION, REACTIVATE THAT DEEPER HERITAGE AND GIVE IT REAL POWER IN HUMAN LIFE" (AUDIENCE OF OCTOBER 29, 1980).

IN MY PASTORAL LETTER, (AS A FORMER PROFESSOR OF SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY), I EXPAND ON THE POPE'S TREATMENT OF CHURCH AS THE BODY OF CHRIST AND THE SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH AS THE FORUM, THE LOCUS, THE SETTING FOR THE REDEMPTION OF OUR BODIES.

AND YOU SEE, THERE ARE A LOT OF JUMPING OFF POINTS FOR EXPANDED REFLECTIONS ON JOHN PAUL'S THEOLOGY OF THE BODY.

HE HIMSELF USES THIS FRAMEWORK AS THE BASIS OF HIS ENCYCLICAL OF AUGUST 15, 1988 "ON THE DIGNITY AND VOCATION OF WOMEN ON THE OCCASION OF THE MARIAN YEAR" -- "MULIERIS DIGNITATEM," AND HIS LATER DOCUMENT OF JUNE 29, 1995, HIS "LETTER OF WOMEN."

AN ORGANIZATION CALLED “ENDOW,” WHICH STANDS FOR “EDUCATIONS ON THE NATURE AND DIGNITY OF WOMEN,” HAS EXCELLENT STUDY GUIDES ON THESE TWO DOCUMENTS.

JUST READ THROUGH BOTH OF THEM. THERE YOU FIND THE BASIS FOR ALL THE MAJOR CONCLUSIONS OF JOHN PAUL’S THEOLOGY OF THE BODY.

LET ME READ BRIEFLY FROM HIS “LETTER TO WOMEN.”

“I AM CONVINCED THAT THE SECRET OF MAKING SPEEDY PROGRESS IN ACHIEVING FULL RESPECT FOR WOMEN AND THEIR IDENTITY INVOLVES MORE THAN SIMPLY THE CONDEMNATION OF DISCRIMINATION AND INJUSTICES, NECESSARY THOUGH THIS MAY BE. SUCH RESPECT MUST FIRST AND FOREMOST BE WON THROUGH AN EFFECTIVE AND INTELLIGENT “CAMPAIGN FOR THE PROMOTION OF WOMEN,” CONCENTRATING ON ALL AREAS OF WOMEN’S LIFE AND BEGINNING WITH A “UNIVERSAL RECOGNITION OF THE DIGNITY OF WOMEN.” OUR ABILITY TO RECOGNIZE THIS DIGNITY, IN SPITE OF HISTORICAL CONDITIONING, COMES FROM THE USE OF REASON ITSELF, WHICH IS ABLE TO UNDERSTAND THE LAW OF GOD WRITTEN IN THE HEART OF EVERY HUMAN BEING. MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, THE WORD OF GOD ENABLES US TO GRASP CLEARLY THE ULTIMATE “ANTHROPOLOGICAL BASIS” OF THE DIGNITY OF WOMEN, MAKING IT EVIDENT AS A PART OF GOD’S PLAN FOR HUMANITY.”

THE POPE PROCEEDS TO DESCRIBE WHAT WE KNOW TO BE THE ORIGIN OF HIS THEOLOGY OF THE BODY PRESPECTIVE, REFLECTING ON GENESIS 1:27 “GOD CREATED MAN IN HIS OWN IMAGE, IN THE IMAGE OF GOD HE CREATED HIM; “MALE AND FEMALE HE CREATED THEM.” “THEIR MOST NATURAL RELATIONSHIP, WHICH CORRESPONDS TO THE PLAN OF GOD, IS THE ‘UNITY OF THE TWO,’ A RELATIONAL ‘UNI-DUALITY,’ WHICH ENABLES EACH TO EXPERIENCE THEIR INTERPERSONAL AND RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP AS A GIFT WHICH ENRICHES AND WHICH CONFERS RESPONSIBILITY.” “TO THIS ‘UNITY OF THE TWO’ GOD HAS ENTRUSTED NOT ONLY THE WORK OF PROCREATION AND FAMILY LIFE, BUT THE CREATION OF HISTORY ITSELF.”

THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF WOMEN ARE PRIMARILY SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL IN NATURE, BUT ALSO, HE SAYS SOCIO-POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC AS WELL. “THE VARIOUS SECTORS OF SOCIETY, NATIONS AND STATES, AND THE PROGRESS OF ALL HUMANITY, ARE CERTAINLY DEEPLY INDEBTED TO THE CONTRIBUTION OF WOMEN.”

WOMEN’S INFLUENCE IS FELT IN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY, IN THE SOCIAL AND ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF SOCIETY, ‘WHICH DEALS WITH HUMAN RELATIONS AND SPIRITUAL VALUES...ESPECIALLY WITHIN THE FAMILY...’

WOMEN ARE INVOLVED IN VARIOUS AREAS OF EDUCATION, EXTENDING BEYOND THE FAMILY TO NURSERIES, SCHOOLS, UNIVERSITIES, SOCIAL SERVICE AGENCIES, PARISHES, ASSOCIATIONS AND MOVEMENTS. "WHEREVER THE WORK OF EDUCATION IS CALLED FOR, WE CAN NOTE THAT WOMEN ARE EVER READY AND WILLING TO GIVE THEMSELVES GENEROUSLY TO OTHERS, ESPECIALLY IN SERVING THE WEAKEST AND MOST DEFENSELESS IN THIS WORK," THE POPE SAYS, THEY EXHIBIT A KIND OF "AFFECTIVE, CULTURAL AND SPIRITUAL MOTHERHOOD WHICH HAS INESTIMABLE VALUE FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDIVIDUALS AND THE FUTURE OF SOCIETY." AT THIS POINT, THE POPE GOES ON TO SAYS, "HOW CAN I FAIL TO MENTION THE WITNESS OF SO MANY CATHOLIC WOMEN AND RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS OF WOMEN FROM EVERY CONTINENT WHO HAVE MADE EDUCATION, PARTICULARLY THE EDUCATION OF BOYS AND GIRLS, THEIR PRINCIPAL APOSTOLATE?" YOU WILL HEAR AFTER MY TALK, OF THE GREAT WORK OF MOTHER ELVIRA PETROZZI WITH THE SPIRITUAL REHABILITATION OF PEOPLE FACING ADDITIONS. MY FRIENDS ALBINO AND JOYCE ARAGNO HAVE THAT WONDERFUL STORY FOR YOU.

THE POPE GOES ON TO EXPRESS GRATITUDE FOR ALL THE WOMEN WHO LIKE YOURSELVES, HAVE WORKED IN HEALTH CARE, "NOT ONLY IN HIGHLY ORGANIZED INSTITUTIONS, BUT ALSO IN VERY PRECARIOUS CIRCUMSTANCES, IN THE POOREST COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD, THUS DEMONSTRATING A SPIRIT OF SERVICE WHICH NOT INFREQUENTLY BORDERS ON MARTYRDOM..." AN AUNT OF MINE EXEMPLIFIED THIS DEVOTION AS A SUPERINTENDENT OF A HOSPITAL IN OHIO. MY 91 YEAR OLD MOTHER WAS A NURSE, MY SISTER, AS WELL.

THE POPE INDICATES THAT ONE CAN ALSO APPRECIATE THAT THE PRESENCE OF "A CERTAIN DIVERSITY OF ROLES IS IN NO WAY PREJUDICIAL TO WOMEN, PROVIDED THAT THIS DIVERSITY OF ROLES IS NOT THE RESULT OF ARBITRARY IMPOSITION, BUT IS RATHER AN EXPRESSION OF WHAT IS SPECIFIC TO BEING MALE AND FEMALE ." THIS ISSUE, HE POINTS OUT, "ALSO HAS A PARTICULAR APPLICATION WITHIN THE CHURCH. IF CHRIST -- BY HIS FREE AND SOVEREIGN CHOICE, CLEARLY ATTESTED TO BY THE GOSPEL AND BY THE CHURCH'S CONSTANT TRADITION -- ENTRUSTED ONLY TO MEN THE TASK OF BEING AN 'ICON' OF HIS CONTENTANCE AS 'SHEPHERD' AND 'BRIDEGROOM' OF THE CHURCH THROUGH THE EXERCISE OF THE MINISTERIAL PRIESTHOOD, THIS IN NO WAY DETRACTS FROM THE ROLE OF WOMEN, OR FOR THAT MATTER FROM THE ROLE OF THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE CHURCH WHO ARE NOT ORDAINED TO THE SACRED MINISTRY, SINCE 'ALL' SHARE EQUALLY IN THE DIGNITY PROPER TO THE 'COMMON PRIESTHOOD' BASED ON BAPTISM. THESE ROLE DISTINCTIONS SHOULD NOT BE VIEWED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE CRITERIA OF FUNCTIONALITY TYPICAL IN HUMAN SOCIETIES; RATHER THEY MUST BE UNDERSTOOD ACCORDING TO THE PARTICULAR CRITERIA OF THE "SACRAMENTAL ECONOMY," I.E., THE ECONOMY OF 'SIGNS' WHICH GOD FREELY CHOOSES IN ORDER TO BECOME PRESENT IN THE MIDST OF HUMANITY."

THE POPE HIGHLIGHTS THE PROPHETIC CHARACTER OF THE “CONSECRATED” WOMAN, CONSECRATED WITH THE INTEGRITY OF A “VIRGIN” HEART TO BECOME THE “BRIDE” OF CHRIST AND “MOTHER” OF BELIEVERS LIKE MARY, REFLECTING THE VERY ESSENCE OF THE CHURCH.

THE POPE NOTES IN HIS “LETTER TO WOMEN” THAT “THE CHURCH SEES IN MARY THE HIGHEST EXPRESSION OF THE ‘FEMININE GENIUS’ AND SHE FINDS IN HER A SOURCE OF CONSTANT INSPIRATION...THROUGH OBEDIENCE TO THE WORD OF GOD SHE ACCEPTED HER LOFTY YET NOT EASY VOCATION AS WIFE AND MOTHER IN THE FAMILY OF NAZARETH. PUTTING HERSELF AT GOD’S SERVICE, SHE ALSO PUT HERSELF AT THE SERVICE OF OTHERS, A “SERVICE OF LOVE.” THE POPE PICKS UP FROM HIS THEOLOGY OF THE BODY PERSPECTIVE TO SAY OF MARY THAT SHE WAS “IN ALL HER BEING A GIFT FOR HER SON” AND “A GIFT FOR THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF THE WHOLE HUMAN RACE, AWAKENING PROFOUND TRUST IN THOSE WHO SEEK HER GUIDANCE ALONG THE TRANSCENDENT DESTINY.”

“IN THIS VAST DOMAIN OF SERVICE,” SAYS THE POPE, “THE CHURCH’S TWO THOUSAND YEAR HISTORY, FOR ALL ITS HISTORICAL CONDITIONING, HAS TRULY EXPERIENCED THE ‘GENIUS OF WOMAN’; FROM THE HEART OF THE CHURCH THERE HAVE EMERGED WOMEN OF THE HIGHEST CALIBER WHO HAVE LEFT AN IMPRESSIVE AND BENEFICIAL MARK IN HISTORY...WOMEN MARTYRS, SAINTS AND FAMOUS MYSTICS,” HE CITES TWO WOMEN DOCTORS OF THE CHURCH, SAINT CATHERINE OF SIENA AND SAINT TERESA OF AVILA, NAMED BY POPE PAUL VI. HE COULD HAVE ADDED SAINT THERESA OF THE CHILD JESUS AND SAINT BENEDICTA OF THE CROSS, EDITH STEIN, NAMED DOCTORS OF THE CHURCH BY HIMSELF. AND OF COURSE THERE IS ST. FAUSTINA OF HIS NATIVE POLAND.

AND THE POPE CONCLUDES THIS PART OF HIS COMMENTARY BY SAYING THAT “THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM WILL CERTAINLY NOT BE LACKING IN NEW AND SURPRISING MANIFESTATIONS OF ‘THE FEMININE GENIUS.’”

WORKING OFF HIS MAGNUM OPUS, “THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY,” POPE JOHN PAUL II IS ABLE TO BUILD A WEB OF INTRICATE CONNECTIONS THAT HELP US UNDERSTAND BETTER THE ROLE OF WOMEN AND MEN IN THE CHRISTIAN DISPENSATION, WOUNDED, YET REDEEMED IN SOUL AND BODY, AND CALLED TO HOLINESS OF LIFE.

THIS IS A MESSAGE OF HOPE FROM A MAN WHO WAS A MESSENGER OF HOPE IN HIS PAPACY, IN DEPTH OF INSIGHT, IN HIS HOLINESS OF LIFE.

POPE JOHN PAUL II NOT ONLY LIVED A LIFE WHICH WITNESSED TO THE WELL-INTEGRATED HOLINESS WHICH MODERN SCHOLAR, ACTOR, POET, PHILOSOPHER, THEOLOGIAN, PROFESSOR, PRIEST, BISHOP, CARDINAL AND POPE

MIGHT CHEERFULLY ACHIEVE BY THE GRACE OF JESUS CHRIST, BUT HE ALSO SPOKE ABOUT THE REDEMPTION OF THE BODY WHEN OTHERS SPOKE OF ITS DEGRADATION. AND IN HIS FINAL DAYS WITH US HE EVEN WENT FURTHER THAN THAT. HE WITNESSED IN A VERY PUBLIC MANNER GREAT SUFFERING AND BROUGHT IT TO A DRAMATIC CONCLUSION IN AN EXEMPLARY DEATH WHICH WAS GRACED BY GOD TO ENCOURAGE ALL OF US TO MEET OUR FINAL DAY WITH COURAGE AND WITH HOPE. THIS MAN'S LIFE AND WRITINGS COMBINE TO LEAVE US A LEGACY WHICH ENABLES US, WOMEN AND MEN, TO MEET THE WORLD OF OUR DAY, SO ORIENTED TO MATERIALISM, WITH A HOPE THAT THESE BODIES OF OURS, IN ALL OF THEIR PHYSICALITY AND FRAILTY, HAVE A REAL HOPE OF REDEMPTION.

I INVITE YOU GREAT MEMBERS OF THE CATHOLIC MEDICAL ASSOCIATION TO CONTINUE YOUR STUDY OF POPE JOHN PAUL'S THEOLOGY OF THE BODY AND EXPAND ON THE WEALTH OF INSIGHTS YOU FIND THERE, ADDING YOUR GREAT WISDOM TO HIS. WHEN ONE PLUMBS THE DEPTH OF THE MYSTERIES OF GOD, ONE NEVER EXHAUSTS THE TREASURE FOUND THERE. MAY POPE JOHN PAUL II INSPIRE YOU TO FURTHER RESEARCH INTO THE THEOLOGY OF THE BODY. GOD BLESS YOU. AND PLEASE PRAY FOR THE NEW BISHOP OF BIRMINGHAM!