

Revising Catholic Sexual Ethics:  
Nuptial Mysticism and John Paul II's Theology of the Body

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### Abstract

The thought and writings of Catholic ethicist John Paul II (1920-2005) concerning sexual ethics, the value and dignity of life, and the bond of a man and woman in marriage highlights the theological value of the body in Catholic thought. While John Paul II belongs to a religious tradition that holds conservative and counter-cultural ideas concerning sexuality, his work marks a fundamental shift in the tradition of Catholic nuptial mysticism. Catholic teaching has always prioritized the critical significance of mystical or spiritual marriage of the soul/Church and God over the importance of marriage between a man and woman. This hierarchical ordering of the spiritual nuptial union over the human does not continue with the work of John Paul II. The latter argues for the value of the body in the immanent world as a good in itself as well as offering a deeper theological valorization of the experience of nuptial sexuality than his predecessor and mystic, John of the Cross (1542-1592). John Paul's understanding of conjugal union is based on the latter's egalitarian rendering of the spousal relation between God and humanity: when man and woman unite intimately, they are two equals. Human dignity and equality is fully realized in the intimate act of love. Through an analysis of two of John Paul II's major studies, *Theology of the Body* and *Love and Responsibility*, one comes to the conclusion that the latter valorizes the human body and sexuality by arguing for the incarnation of mystical nuptiality in conjugal union. In so doing, John Paul II adopts a new and positive theological affirmation of the meaning of the human body and conjugal union. Finally, John Paul's view of the female body in particular sheds even greater light on his innovative approach to the (female) body: John Paul II's theology of the body is focused on male/female embodiment, equality, identity and dignity. His nuptial mysticism offers an interesting trajectory for Catholic feminist theory, that is more tangible than the contributions of classic female mystics and visionaries such as Julian of Norwich (1342-1416) or modern Catholic mystics such as Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955).

### *Abstrait*

Jean Paul II (1920-2005), un homme aux pensées Catholique et avec un grand intérêt pour l'éthique sexuelle, a de nombreuses écritures concernant la valeur de la vie, la dignité humaine ainsi que l'union matrimoniale de l'homme et la femme. Les pensées de cet homme ont augmentées la valeur du corps humain dans la pensée Catholique. Malgré le fait que Jean Paul II a des pensées conservatrices concernant la sexualité, ces écritures marquent un changement important dans la tradition du mariage mystique. La pensée Catholique a toujours enseignée la valeur supérieure du mariage mystique en comparaison à la valeur du mariage entre une femme and un homme. Cette hiérarchie ne continue pas avec la pensée de Jean Paul II. Ce dernier juge la valeur du corps humain à être aussi importante dans la relation intime entre un homme et une femme qu'entre Dieu et l'être humain. Ceci est encore plus évident quand on compare la pensée de ce dernier aux écritures Jean de la Croix, un mystique Espagnol du seizième siècle. La pensée de Jean Paul II est basée sur l'égalité de l'homme et la femme, surtout dans une relation intime qui est à l'image de Dieu et de l'esprit humain, qui sont aussi de valeur égale. Après avoir analysé deux des travaux importants de Jean Paul (*Théologie du Corps* et *Amour et Responsabilité*), nous pouvons conclure que ce dernier valorise le corps humain et la sexualité en défendant l'incarnation du mariage mystique sous la forme de la matrimoine humaine. Ainsi, Jean Paul II adopte une nouvelle philosophie, c'est-à-dire, une pensée positive concernant la sexualité humaine. Finalement, sa pensée sur le corps féminin renforce le fait qu'il a une pensée positive concernant la valeur du corps humain, l'égalité de l'homme et de la femme ainsi que la valeur de a sexualité humaine. Ses pensées offrent un trajet philosophique pour la pensée féministe encore plus intéressante et tangible que les contributions de Dame Julian of Norwich (1342-1416), mystique et contemplative, ou Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), théologien et homme de science.

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I take this small window of opportunity to express my personal spiritual gratitude to my Father in heaven for making his love tangible and real in the presence of such an important group of people. Thank you.

## Abbreviations

### Author's Names:

JC	John of the Cross
JP	John Paul II

### Works:

<i>DN</i>	<i>Dark Night of the Soul</i> , by John of the Cross
<i>FaSJC</i> or <i>Faith</i>	<i>Faith According to Saint John of the Cross</i> , by John Paul II
<i>HV</i>	<i>The Gospel of Life [Humane Vitae]</i> , by John Paul II
<i>L&amp;R</i>	<i>Love and Responsibility</i> , by John Paul II
<i>SS</i>	<i>Song of Songs</i> (Bible)
<i>The Ascent</i>	<i>The Ascent of Mount Carmel</i> , by John of the Cross
<i>TheLFL</i> or <i>LFL</i>	<i>Living Flame of Love</i> , by John of the Cross
<i>TOB</i>	<i>Theology of the Body</i> , by John Paul II

## INTRODUCTION

According to John Paul II, sexual ethics and sex-talk have been an integral part of Catholic theology from its biblical beginnings. Genesis tells of the story of a man and woman created by God and given the task to give birth to future generations. A theology of sexuality is developed in the opening biblical narratives and remains an evolving theme throughout the canon right to its eschatological conclusion in the book of Revelations. In John Paul II's survey of the biblical heritage, he zeros in on specific texts such as the Song of Songs, Genesis 1:27, Genesis 2:5-25, Ephesians 5:22-33, Matthew 19:3, and Mark 10:2 (among others) since they explore the intimate union of a bride and groom. Just as in the biblical tradition there are certain narratives that contribute more to discourse on sexuality, in the post-biblical tradition, there are pivotal contributions to the Catholic discourse on sex. The Church Fathers, for instance, struggled with the place of sexuality and sexual desire in Christian life.<sup>1</sup> During the middle ages, a form of nuptial mystical eroticism flowered in the genre of commentaries on the Song of Songs.<sup>2</sup>

While this long-standing tradition of spirituality argued for the critical importance of celibacy as the essential pathway for bridal mysticism, more recently there are those who argue for the relationship of bridal mysticism to conjugal intimacy. It is here that the relevance of John Paul II's work emerges. At the basis of the historic tradition of Catholic teaching on sexuality is the understanding that the spiritual mystical experience of marriage, love and erotic desire takes priority over the experience of human intimacy. Marriage to God

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<sup>1</sup> Martha A. Brozyna, *Gender and Sexuality in the Middle Ages: a Medieval Source Documents Reader*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland &, 2005, 31.

Another book of interest in Peter Brown's *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Tremper Longman, *Song of Songs*, Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001, 21. There is another book that discusses the long tradition of commentary written by Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990.

This tradition revives in the tradition of Carmelite mysticism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Carmelite mysticism is a spirituality of abandonment where in solitude and contemplation, one may reach a disembodied union with God.



takes precedence over human conjugal unions.<sup>3</sup> However, this prioritization of spiritual marriage does not continue with the work of John Paul II. John Paul II works out of the tradition of bridal mysticism, but explores the positive value of the body, the value of sexuality and conjugal intimacy. For this reason, this thesis is interested in John Paul's understanding of the conjugal body that is the earthly body that is gendered and sexual by nature. How can one situate John Paul II's innovative approach to conjugal intimacy in light of modern writings on sexuality? In order to situate his work in contemporary content, I will offer a brief overview of the most important intellectual influences on his work, followed by an analysis of his work in relation to more recent writings on the conjugal body, the erotic and mysticism.

### Important Influences

There is a complex web of intellectual influences on John Paul II. Some highlights of his personal and intellectual journey leading up to his papacy include among others: his underground theatrical work, his interaction with Polish philosophy and literature," his work at the Catholic University of Lublin, and his episcopal career in Cracow and his contributions to the Second Vatican Council.<sup>4</sup> Wojtyla's personal experiences led him to an intellectual and existential commitment to basic human liberties. He was greatly influenced by a rich tradition of Polish liberalism that receives scant attention in the standard studies of Western political thought. He became a forceful advocate for an egalitarian vision of society based on the dignity of each individual person, the body.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> As Lisa Sole Cahill notes on the history of Catholic sexual ethics, "celibacy has been advocated as the ideal even though sex in marriage has been justified for the purpose of procreation, a purpose determined primarily with reference to biological function and hemmed in with numerous specific rules. 'Overall, the Christian tradition in the first half of its history developed a consistently negative view of sex'" (Maura A. Ryan and Brian F. Linnane, eds, *A Just & True Love: Feminism at the Frontiers of Theological Ethic: Essays in Honor of Margaret A. Farley*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2007, 32).

<sup>4</sup> George H. Williams, *The Mind of John Paul II: Origins of his Thought and Action*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1981, xii.

<sup>5</sup> See Williams' discussion of the influence of Pawel Wlodkowic of Brudzen (1370-1435) on John Paul II (31).

There are two important influences in his life that have shaped his approach to the body. Jan Tyranowski (1900-1947), a Catholic layman and student of the Discalced Carmelites, is a central figure in Wojtyla's intellectual and spiritual development. Tyranowski later became a role model in the lives of hundreds of youths, especially for Wojtyla.<sup>6</sup> His influence is best seen in Wojtyla's growing interest and study of the important Carmelite mystic, John of the Cross (1542-1591).<sup>7</sup> Tyranowski was also a spiritual mentor for Wojtyla.<sup>8</sup>

Another major influence is his doctoral supervisor Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange (1877-1964), master of spiritual theology and author of numerous studies of mystical theology and John of the Cross including *L'amour et la Croix de Jesus*.<sup>9</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange was a very important and influential scholastic figure in the history of modern Catholic thought.<sup>10</sup> Under Garrigou-Lagrange, Wojtyla received vigorous training in Thomism.<sup>11</sup> However, in contrast to the standard neo-Thomistic approach, Wojtyla refused to abandon his way of conceiving and referring to God as "subject".<sup>12</sup> This is an important component of his theology that makes its way into his theology of the body where he discusses the human body as a subject and person.

Both of these influences directed Wojtyla's thought towards Carmelite mysticism and especially the spirituality of John of the Cross. However, Wojtyla's evolving approach to the conjugal body, the mystical and the erotic would valorize earthly conjugal intimacy in a way that marked the beginning of a new development in the tradition of bridal mysticism while remaining loyal to some of the underlying principles of that tradition.

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<sup>6</sup> Williams, *The Mind of John Paul II*, 78.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>8</sup> Tyranowski would engage in about four hours of meditation daily which was emulated by Wojtyla.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 93, 103.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>11</sup> Fergus Kerr, "Karol Wojtyla," *Twentieth-century Catholic Theologians: from Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mysticism*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2007, 165.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

### Major Works

In 1960, John Paul published *Love and Responsibility*, his first major study of conjugal love and intimacy. According to him, this book grew out of his involvement with youth and students through his pastoral work and his role in confessional, as well as his analysis of Max Scheler's philosophical ethics and phenomenology.<sup>13</sup> While John Paul's thought on marriage tends to be viewed as conservative, and remains quite traditional in many respects, nevertheless Williams is correct in stating that his discussion does open new ground. As he notes, *Love and Responsibility* acknowledges the body and sexuality as fundamental goods which are critical to human flourishing. However, according to Williams, *Love and Responsibility* does have limits. First, its audience is quite limited and specific. It does not target young juveniles, the physically handicapped, the criminally incarcerated or militarily segregated, for whom sexuality remains a daily issue with which they must deal both physically and emotionally. Homosexuality, pre-marital sexuality, young love, abortion and medically-induced childbearing are not mentioned either. The target audience of the book are mature autonomous individuals who are about to enter marriage.<sup>14</sup> However, the book sheds light from a traditional Catholic point of view on the importance of intra-marital intimacy and sexuality.

*The Acting Person* (1969) is a more general treatment of his philosophical anthropology.<sup>15</sup> According to Fergus Kerr, this book features John Paul II's greatest philosophical contribution, namely his discussion of "human moral agency."<sup>16</sup> He is one of the many authors in the twentieth century struggling to deal with the individual person as a self-determining agent as well as an acting agent in relation to others.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Williams, 151.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 151-153.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 186-187.

<sup>16</sup> Kerr, 169.

<sup>17</sup> Other twentieth century authors interested in the agency of the person include John MacMurray (author of *The Self as Agent*), Stuart Hampshire (*Thought and Action*), Gilbert Ryle (*The Concept of Mind*), Maurice Merleau-Ponty (*Phenomenology of Perception*), Heidegger (*Being and Time*), and Wittgenstein (author of *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*) (Kerr, 169).

The focus of this thesis is on John Paul II's most important study written during the period of his papacy, *Theology of the Body*. Prior to and throughout the redaction of this work, there was a sense that Catholic teaching was at the center of an important controversy regarding sexuality. To engage this, he developed a theological approach to sexuality and the body focused on biblical sources so as to return to the so-called "original" meaning of unity of man and woman, the body, eroticism and conjugality. John Paul II's approach to biblical teaching on the conjugal body engages modern biblical scholarship as well as important modern theorists of biblical myth and symbol such as Mircea Eliade, Carl Jung, Rudolf Otto and Paul Ricoeur.<sup>18</sup>

Briefly stated, *Theology of the Body* is an attempt to enrich Catholic teaching on the body, sexuality and marriage through a meditation on the biblical conceptions of the genesis of the human person as male and female and the significance of interpersonal sexual communion. John Paul's papal writings on sexual ethics, the value and dignity of life, and the bond of a man and woman in marriage develop important themes (e.g. spousal union) in a way that elevates the theological status of the body in Catholic thought. His theological exploration of the conjugal body is part of his project to offer a fresh engagement of contemporary cultural and philosophical debates on critical issues in sexual ethics while being grounded on foundational theological anthropology.<sup>19</sup>

#### *Theology of the Body* and Controversy

This papal engagement with sexuality and the body has not been without controversy. Christopher West, a research fellow and faculty member of the Theology of the Body Institute, is one of the leading Catholic expositors of John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*. West is the author of *Good News About Sex & Marriage*, *Theology of the Body Explained*, and *Theology of the Body for*

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<sup>18</sup> Williams, 272.

See John Paul II's notes to the third address "The Second Account of Creation: The Subjective Definition of Man" in *TOB* where he discusses Rudolph Otto, Carl Gustav Jung, Mircea Eliade, Paul Tillich, Heinrich Schlier and Paul Ricoeur's understanding of "myth" in Genesis.

<sup>19</sup> The conjugal body refers to the earthly body instead of the mystical body. The mystical body refers to the human soul that acts as a person, i.e. the bride, longing for union with God, who is the other person, that is the bridegroom, which the tradition of bridal mystical theologians refer to.

*Beginners*, all of which have become Catholic best-sellers.<sup>20</sup> He has become the most important public commentator as well as a promoter of John Paul II's *Theology of the Body* to the wide Catholic audience and beyond. He has made appearances on television shows, conferences, public lectures, and retreats and presents John Paul II's thought on the body in a language that is accessible to most Catholics, especially those of the younger generation. However, according to some Catholic critics, his approach to *Theology of the Body* is not true to John Paul II's thought at times and offers a problematic conception of human sexuality. A public controversy was sparked when West compared Hugh Hefner, founder of Playboy Enterprises, with John Paul II on ABC<sup>21</sup> and hailed these two figures as founding fathers of the modern sexual revolution.

It is interesting that it is David Schindler, Christopher West's dissertation supervisor, who makes the most serious critiques of West's approach in this public controversy.<sup>22</sup> Schindler is dean and professor of Fundamental Theology at the John Paul II Pontifical Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family.<sup>23</sup> He was appointed by John Paul II as consulter for the Pontifical Council for the Laity in 2002.<sup>24</sup> In an article on West's theology of the body, Schindler argues that while he acknowledges West's fidelity to the Church and in his desire for orthodoxy, he warns "that good will is not synonymous with sound thought."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "Christopher West About the Theology of the Body," *Christopher West Home*. Web. 12 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.christopherwest.com/page.asp?ContentID=121>>.

According to his own website, he has "delivered more than 1000 public lectures on 4 continents, in more than a dozen countries, and in over 200 American cities."

<sup>21</sup> David Wright and Ely Brown, "Sex Sermonist's Heroes: Pope John Paul II and Hugh Hefner - ABC News," *ABCNews.com: Breaking News, Politics, World News, Good Morning America, Exclusive Interviews - ABC News*. Web. 13 Apr. 2011. <<http://abcnews.go.com/Nightline/Sex/story?id=7527380>>.

<sup>22</sup> While Schindler is an important member of West's major critiques, Luke Timothy Johnson is the one who sparked this wave of criticism in his work "A Disembodied 'Theology of the Body': John Paul II on Love, Sex and Pleasure," *Find Articles at BNET | News Articles, Magazine Back Issues & Reference Articles on All Topics*. Web. 13 Apr. 2011. <[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1252/is\\_2\\_128/ai\\_71578789/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1252/is_2_128/ai_71578789/)>.

<sup>23</sup> David L. Schindler, "Christopher West's Theology of the Body | Theology of the Body," *Headline Bistro*. Web. 11 Mar. 2011. <[http://www.headlinebistro.com/hb/en/news/west\\_schindler2.html](http://www.headlinebistro.com/hb/en/news/west_schindler2.html)>.

<sup>24</sup> "David L. Schindler, Faculty of John Paul II Institute," *John Paul II Institute*. Web. 11 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.johnpaulii.edu/faculty/detail/provostdean>>.

<sup>25</sup> Schindler, "Christopher West's Theology of the Body."

This then leads to a detailed criticism of West's sex-positive approach to John Paul II's theology of the body:

West's work has involved suggesting that a man and woman bless their genitals before making love; blessing the ovaries of women in his classes; advising young men in college and the seminary to look at their naked bodies in the mirror daily in order to overcome shame; using phallic symbolism to describe the Easter candle; criticizing "flat-chested" images of Mary in art while encouraging Catholics to "rediscover Mary's ... abundant breasts" (*Crisis*, March 2002); referring to the "bloodied membrane" of the placenta as a "tabernacle" (*Colorado Catholic Herald*, 12/22/06); stating that, while "there are some important health and aesthetic considerations that can't be overlooked," "there's nothing *inherently* wrong with anal penetration as foreplay to normal intercourse," (*Good News About Sex and Marriage*, 1st ed., emphasis in original), though qualifying this in the revised edition and stressing the subjective dangers of lust in such activity; and, on Nightline, praising Hugh Hefner for helping rescue sex from prudish Victorian attitudes, saying that there are "very profound historical connections between Hefner and John Paul II," while emphasizing that John Paul II took the sexual revolution further and in the right direction.<sup>26</sup>

West's use of erotic language and symbolism is different from John Paul II's and the tone and content of his approach is criticized by Schindler for not only being "vulgar," and in "bad taste," but, more seriously, as indicative of "a disordered approach to human sexuality."<sup>27</sup> While he recognizes that West would argue for the orthodoxy of his thought, Schindler questions his agenda.<sup>28</sup> In a nutshell, Schindler criticizes West for his "under-emphasis on man's tendency to sin, known as concupiscence, and for a lack of reverence around weighty and sacred subjects."<sup>29</sup> John Paul II's theology of the body is not only about sexuality, but it also treats personhood, human dignity, male and female genderedness and the value of the body itself. Schindler argues that West omits these important themes from his analysis.

Alice von Hildebrand is another Catholic theologian and philosopher who takes issue with West. She accuses his approach of being overtly self-assured.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Patrick B. Craine, "Christopher West Takes Sabbatical to Reflect on Approach," *LifeSiteNews.com*. 12 Apr. 2010. Web. 14 Mar. 2011.  
<<http://www.lifesitenews.com/news/archive/ldn/2010/apr/10041214>>.

“She criticizes his presentations as irreverent and insensitive to the ‘tremendous dangers of concupiscence.’”<sup>30</sup> Hildebrand believes that West’s treatment of sexuality has led to his disconnect with the mystery of sexuality which John Paul II seeks to express. In a nutshell, Hildebrand accuses West of hyper-sexualizing *Theology of the Body*. She states that his work lacks an element of “*pudeur*”, i.e. the French word for what she refers to as “holy-bashfulness”, that is present in John Paul’s work on human sexuality.<sup>31</sup> While West addresses many important themes in *Theology of the Body* and reiterates a crucial point, namely that the importance of sexuality is not in engaging in sexual acts, but in knowing the value of sexuality by virtue of the value of the body, nevertheless Hildebrand accuses West of presenting *TOB* as a sex book.<sup>32</sup>

Michael Waldstein, the well-known translator of John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body*, also joined his voice to the critical discussion, but in support of West’s work:

West’s main strength lies in his effective communication of John Paul II’s teaching on a popular level. An academic might look down at such “popularizing” and disdain serious intellectual engagement with West. In fact, West’s theological penetration of John Paul II’s work and the expression of his insight in his published materials have high academic quality. They are worthy of serious scholarly engagement. In writing my own book about the *Theology of the Body* (which is

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<sup>30</sup> “Christopher West’s Ideas on Sexuality Ignore Tremendous Dangers, Alice Von Hildebrand Says,” *Catholic News Agency*. Web. 11 Mar. 2011. <[http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/christopher\\_wests\\_ideas\\_on\\_sexuality\\_ignore\\_tremendous\\_dangers\\_alice\\_von\\_hildebrand\\_says/](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/christopher_wests_ideas_on_sexuality_ignore_tremendous_dangers_alice_von_hildebrand_says/)>.

<sup>31</sup> Alice Von Hildebrand, “Dietrich Von Hildebrand, Catholic Philosopher, and Christopher West, Modern Enthusiast: Two Very Different Approaches to Love, Marriage and Sex.” *Catholic News Agency*. Web. 11 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/document.php?n=999>>.

<sup>32</sup> According to the Catholic News Agency, two other Catholic thinkers share Hildebrand’s criticism, namely Mary Shivanandan, author of *Crossing the Threshold of Love: A New Vision of Marriage in the Light of John Paul II’s Anthropology*, and Jose Granados, author of *Called to Love*. Shivanandan states that the depth with which John Paul II has treated human sexuality and love is not preserved in West’s appropriation: West’s comparison of the late pope’s thought with Hefner “no matter how well intentioned, can only diminish and degrade” the latter’s theory (“Christopher West’s Ideas on Sexuality Ignore Tremendous Dangers”). Granados states that West’s interpretation of *TOB* as a “sexual revolution” is “highly inadequate and open to serious misunderstanding” (Ibid.). Suffice it to say that these Catholic thinkers do not agree with West’s interpretation of *TOB*.

almost completed), I turn to West's commentary often and with profit.<sup>33</sup>

While Waldstein acknowledges some problems with West's effort to popularize *Theology of the Body* to an audience that more familiar with Playboy than Jesus, nevertheless he believes that West's least helpful and (perhaps) unorthodox remarks ought to be weighed against "the good he has evidently done in making many aware of the nature of John Paul II's thesis statements about the body, human sexuality and marriage."<sup>34</sup> One can agree with Waldstein in that West's use of certain analogies in his edited ABC interview jar the sensitivities of conservative Catholic scholarship, nevertheless, West's style of communication does not detract from the orthodoxy of his work, nor is it disrespectful of John Paul's *Theology of the Body*. Finally, he argues that it is misleading to state that West does not engage the nature of human sexuality, the body and the value of intimacy.<sup>35</sup> According to Waldstein, Schindler and Hildebrand's critiques of West regarding his supposed hyper-sexualisation of the *Theology of the Body* are incorrect and misleading.

Another conservative Catholic moral theologian, Janet Smith also sides with West. Smith argues that West's work does not actually focus on "tangential and sensational issues of sexuality."<sup>36</sup> For example, in specific regard to his comments on anal sex, one of West's discussion topics that generated much

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<sup>33</sup>Stephen Milne, "Michael Waldstein on Christopher West and Theology of the Body," *Witness to Love*. 1 June 2009. Web. 14 Mar. 2011. <<http://witnessstolove.blogspot.com/2009/06/michael-waldstein-on-christopher-west.html>>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> As a final note on the West controversy matter, the ongoing discussions and criticism of West's work led to an important decision on West's behalf: West took a six month Sabbatical in 2010 to rethink his theory and message. Soon after returning from his sabbatical, West states that he returns with great "insights" which he will soon share with his audience (Catholic News Agency, "Christopher West Ends Sabbatical, Says He Will Respond to Critics," *Catholic News Agency*. 8 Sept. 2010. Web. 14 Mar. 2011. <<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/christopher-west-ends-sabbatical-says-he-will-respond-to-critics/>>).

However, he further states that many of his critics continue to "misunderstand or misrepresent" his work in ways that have a great impact on the meaning of his message (Ibid.). How this discussion has had an effect on West is an interesting matter that could lead to a thesis of its own.

<sup>36</sup> Smith, Janet. "Moral Theologian Says Christopher West's Work Is 'Completely Sound'" *Headline Bistro*. Web. 12 Apr. 2011. <<http://www.headlinebistro.com/hb/en/news/janetsmithresponse.html>>.



criticism, she claims that West teaches against such practice and holds a more conservative theological approach than that of the Catholic magisterial tradition.<sup>37</sup> Smith bases her support for West's approach on the nature of his audience, that is "the sexually wounded and confused who have been shaped by our promiscuous and licentious culture."<sup>38</sup> She states that West's desire to address questions raised by his listeners will inevitably lead to issues regarding anal sex and praying over genitalia, for example. These issues have in turn lead to his use of examples which he himself notes to not be interest to many, but helpful to others, i.e. his audience. Schindler and Hildebrand, therefore, have misinterpreted West's approach and use of particular cases. It is interesting how John Paul II's theology of the body has been approached in different ways by these thinkers.

#### John Paul II and the Twentieth Century

Georges Bataille and Denis de Rougemont, like John Paul II, have struggled with the tensions between eroticism, sexuality, marriage, and mysticism. Like John Paul II, Bataille and de Rougement were intrigued with the creative conception of the erotic that emerged in the tradition of bridal mysticism and culminates in the work of John of the Cross. They hold conflicting perspectives about the erotic, the ecstatic and the nuptial<sup>39</sup> which contemporary

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> It is important to note that this paper does not use the terms 'conjugal union' and 'nuptial union' interchangeably. Nuptial union refers to the mystical and spiritual union of the human soul with God. A celibate union that (as will be seen in this paper) has long been described using erotic language. Nuptial union refers to the human spiritual longing to be united with God. The bible and Catholic Church refer to this union in terms of the relation between Christ and his church.

When using the term 'conjugal union' this paper is referring to the union between a man and woman on earth. This union takes place in the human flesh, in the union of two bodies. While marital union has a similar meaning to conjugal union, conjugal union is understood to mirror the intimate union between Christ and his church. A woman loves her husband as the church loves Christ: she gives herself freely and unconditionally. Similarly, man loves his wife as Christ loved the church: he gives himself to her as a gift.

While marital union is vital to the understanding of conjugal union, the two are not interchangeable. Marital union refers to the marital status that defines the relationship of a man and woman. Conjugal union not only refers to the union of a man and woman, bound in marriage, but also refers to the spiritual union of man and woman in the image of nuptial union. While this is not an extensive definition of these two important terms, suffice it to say that while

authors work out in very different ways. How exactly de Rougemont and Bataille's thought compare and contrast and how they relate to John Paul II's thought is further discussed below.

Denis de Rougemont (1906-1985), an important twentieth century Swiss thinker, critic and publisher of numerous articles on existentialism, is of particular interest when situating John Paul II's thought on the erotic. According to de Rougemont, mystics of the Middle Ages paint a vision of love, not based on their personal experience of love, but on their love of love itself. In simpler terms, the journey to love becomes the center of focus, union itself falls in second place. De Rougemont notes that this particular interest in love (namely the journey to love) does "not conclude in marriage and a satisfactory sexual relationship," but is "doomed to end in self-destruction, in a desire for death," because one cannot reach one's ultimate goal, that is the consummation of that love.<sup>40</sup> Love, eroticism and the intimate union of the body, therefore are concomitant of death by virtue of their unattainable nature. He further argues that the tradition of courtly love was a reaction to the Christian doctrine of marriage and the condemnation of the flesh.<sup>41</sup> The stronger the condemnation of the flesh became, the more "idealized adulterous love" grew within the tradition. This assumption is based on de Rougemont's belief that courtly love was "chaste, extra-conjugal and perpetually unsatisfied."<sup>42</sup> Eroticism, illicit love and chastity, are thus closely related themes for de Rougemont.

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nuptial union refers to the mystical union between Christ and his Church; nuptial union refers to the earthly union of man and woman which is in the image of the former.

<sup>40</sup> George Woocock, "The Bestowal of Love," Rev. of *Love in the Western World*. *The Sewanee Review* 1986: 272-79. *The Johns Hopkins University Press*. Web. 19 Nov. 2009. 273. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27544592>>.

<sup>41</sup> Roger Boase, *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love: a Critical Study of European Scholarship*, Manchester, Eng.: Manchester UP, 1977, 38.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

For him, troubadour love is equivalent with the fatal love of Tristan and Iseult who die in their adulterous journey towards conjugal union. According to de Rougement, the 'false' mysticism of erotic passion continues into the nineteenth century. De Rougemont believes that when western romanticism pursues the experience of love, it is actually pursuing a perverse form of love that desires transgressive intimacy. For de Rougemont, poetic love (like that of the troubadours) focuses on the journey of adulterous love. It dwells in fantasy because the other is typically spoken for. Passionate love never speaks of an actualized experience of love. It is always focused on the journey towards an imaginary and unconsummated love (Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, New York: Schocken Books, 1990, 44). In the same

Georges Bataille (1897-1962)<sup>43</sup> also sees a relation between love, mysticism, eroticism and death. Despite similarities, Bataille and de Rougemont ultimately diverge. Bataille, like De Rougement, explores a form of love that represents a quest for an ecstatic experience rather than interpersonal communion.<sup>44</sup> Bataille also sides with the tradition of courtly love in stating that erotic love leads to the affirmation of unconsummated love which ends in death. When one refers to love, according to Bataille, one is actually referring to the journey to experience love, and not consummated love. It is the unattainability of love's consummation that Bataille perceives to be the cause for Catholic mysticism's asexual conjugal symbolism. Sexual union has an elusive, unattainable, and in this sense transcendent significance. However, according to Bataille, this mystical eroticism denies the true "horror" which eroticism bears as its seal.<sup>45</sup> Dissolution and death, not transcendence, is the telos of erotic experience. In other words, erotic mysticism presents a false ideal of eroticism with an illusory transcendent object and does not attend to its violent a-theological telos, which according to Bataille is intrinsic to eroticism.

Curiously Bataille, de Rougemont, the tradition of courtly love, the tradition of Carmelite mysticism (e.g. the writings of John of the Cross), and even modern Catholic thinkers such as Schindler and Hildebrand, all agree that eroticism cannot find its fulfillment in marriage, i.e. consummated conjugal love.

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way that the troubadours sought union with a woman who is already promised to another man, making that love unattainable, western romanticism seeks after unattainable love, a false love that can only be experienced in transgression or adultery.

Further on the notion of taboo, Bataille treats the latter in terms of a sexual transgression. According to Bataille, eroticism is the factor which expresses human transgression the most. For this reason, he argues that there is simply no sexual liberation. Eroticism, therefore, is a paradox where it is both the place where one reaches death (by virtue of its transgressive nature) and where humanity is made fully aware of its humanity (in becoming aware of its loss) (Paul Hegarty, *Georges Bataille: Core Cultural Theorist*, London: SAGE, 2000, 106-107).

<sup>43</sup> He is a twentieth century thinker of great importance in French thought and had an interesting relation with Catholicism. Bataille turned to Catholicism in 1914 when he adopted an ascetic lifestyle and contemplated religious life, which he later abandoned in 1920. His interest in the erotic is apparent early on with the writings of pornographic novels (Hegarty, 3-4).

<sup>44</sup> The maternal character in one of Bataille's pornographic writings, *My Mother*, states: "I have never loved anyone but you, but what I love in you, make no mistake about it, is not you. I believe I love only love [...]" (Julia Kristeva, *Tales of love*, Trans. Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia UP, 1987, 366).

<sup>45</sup> Bataille, *Eroticism: Death and Sensuality*, San Francisco: City Light Books, 1986, 223-224.

However, they converge on this conclusion for different reasons. While de Rougemont testifies to the tragic nature of erotic love, he holds a positive view of marriage and denounces courtly love and romanticism for embracing a tragic and unattainable concept of love. Unlike Bataille, de Rougemont urges for a return to the ordinary non-erotic goods of conjugal love.

While these thinkers agree that the erotic is not compatible with conjugality, John Paul II presents a different argument: while concupiscence can cause tension between eros and conjugality, this does not mean that the erotic nuptial mystical and conjugality are necessarily incompatible.<sup>46</sup> John Paul II provides a new path where nuptial mysticism is not only expressed metaphorically, but is experienced and lived daily in the intimate bond of conjugal union.

### Thesis Components

This thesis argues that while John Paul II belongs to a religious tradition that is widely perceived to hold conservative and counter-cultural ideas concerning sexuality and the body, he offers an innovative approach that may open doors for a creative reengagement of Catholic thought with contemporary sexual ethics. John Paul II engages Catholic mystical theology and transforms it into a conjugal praxis rather than a form of ascetical contemplation of the divine. As Kerr suggests, the nuptial meaning of the body in John Paul II “is not just an idea,” rather, it is humanity’s experience of the body as a gift, and in turn, humanity’s sharing of that gift with one another.<sup>47</sup> While this thesis argues for the innovative nature of John Paul’s mystical thought, it does not argue for John Paul’s rejection of the tradition of Catholic mysticism. The tradition is crucial to John Paul’s theology of the conjugal body. He uses the main elements of bridal mystical theology to elaborate on a topic that has long been deflated, namely the

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<sup>46</sup> It is interesting to note that Bataille’s understanding of transgression is comparable to John Paul’s understanding of sexual deviances. For Bataille, “eroticism, unlike sexual activity, is a psychological quest independent of the natural goal: reproduction and the desire for children” (Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*, 11). In other words, Bataille views eroticism as a transgression unrelated to sexual reproduction. While John Paul II and Bataille agree that sexual practices disconnected from childbearing are transgressive, John Paul II perceives transgressivity as an obstacle rather than a pathway to authentic eroticism.

<sup>47</sup> Kerr, 177.

conjugal body. As will be discussed, the tradition of bridal mystics uses the conjugal body to shed light on the nuptial body. The conjugal body only has analogical value, but no intrinsic theological value. That is where John Paul II revises the analogy: he makes use of the analogy to shed light on the conjugal body.

John Paul II's work marks a fundamental shift in the tradition of Catholic nuptial mysticism. Catholic teaching has always prioritized the critical significance of mystical or spiritual marriage of the soul/Church and God over the importance of marriage between a man and woman. This hierarchical ordering of the spiritual nuptial union (i.e. nuptial union) over human conjugality (i.e. conjugal union) does not continue with the work of John Paul II. He offers a fresh engagement of nuptial mysticism that argues for the value of the body in the immanent world as a good in itself as well as offering a deeper theological valorization of the experience of nuptial sexuality.

The thesis question is three-fold: (1) what are basic contours of John Paul's theology of the body, gender, and nuptial mysticism, (2) how can one situate his contribution within the long standing tradition of Catholic nuptial mysticism, and (3) what are some of the original contributions of his approach to contemporary ethical debates about embodiment, gender and sexuality? The first chapter situates John Paul II's theology in the context of the wider tradition of nuptial mysticism, a tradition with deep roots in Catholic spirituality. John Paul II argues that the narrative arc of the tradition of nuptial mysticism reaches back to the Hebrew prophets and the New Testament writings. This discourse continues through a tradition of Christian commentary on *Song of Songs* beginning with Origen of Alexandria (185–254 A.D.) and culminates in a rich medieval tradition of mystical commentary on *Songs of Songs* where the spiritual and chaste union of humanity with God is portrayed through a liturgical language of erotic conjugal union.

The second chapter will explore the relevance and influence of John of the Cross's nuptial mysticism to the thought of John Paul II. The rationale for a focus on this seventeenth century Spanish mystic is two-fold. First, John of the

Cross is one of the seminal and most theological articulate figures in the tradition of Catholic nuptial mysticism. Second, John Paul II's thought is profoundly shaped by this Carmelite mystic. It will offer an analysis of John Paul's doctoral dissertation, *Faith according to Saint John of the Cross*. It will explore how John of the Cross's rendering of the nuptial union between the soul and God shapes John Paul II's conception of the nuptial union between woman and man. For example, John of the Cross's theology of mystical union portrays the union of the soul with God as a relation of equals. In the intimacy of the erotic bond between soul and God, authority and hierarchy disappear. John Paul's understanding of conjugal union is indebted to this egalitarian rendering of the spousal relation: when man and woman unite in the bonds of intimate love, they are two equals. Human dignity and equality is fully realized in the intimate act of love. This chapter will demonstrate how John Paul II makes use of bridal mystical themes to discuss conjugal union, that is the union of man and woman on earth, rather than nuptial union, that is the mystical union of God with humanity's soul. While he draws on bridal mysticism in his work, his focus on human eroticism and the body ultimately differentiates John Paul's mysticism from that of the tradition of Catholic bridal mystics.

The third chapter will focus on two of John Paul II's major studies: *Theology of the Body* and *Love and Responsibility*. This chapter will explore how John Paul valorizes the human body and sexuality by arguing for an incarnation of mystical nuptiality in the conjugal union. In so doing, this chapter will show that for, John Paul II, intimate human sexuality mirrors many attributes of mystical union that are explored within the tradition of nuptial mysticism. This leads him to a new and positive theological affirmation of the meaning of the human body and conjugal union when compared with earlier traditions of nuptial mysticism that explicitly deflate the value of human sexuality.

Finally, the fourth chapter will focus on John Paul's view of the female body. At a conference of Catholic feminist theologians, John Paul II once expressed the hope that he would be remembered as "papa feminista" (the feminist pope). He also argued for "a new feminism." This chapter will argue

for the relevance of John Paul's sexual ethics to contemporary Catholic feminism. It will argue that the approach to female embodiment, equality, and identity in his nuptial mysticism might offer a more interesting trajectory for Catholic feminist theory than the contributions of classic female mystics and visionaries such as Julian of Norwich or the modern Catholic mystics such as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, whose works are regularly appealed to by some theorists as important resources for Catholic feminism.

# CHAPTER 1

## Erotic Mysticism I: The Origins



John Paul II's theology of the body takes root in the biblical foundations of bridal mysticism. This chapter attempts to situate John Paul II's contribution in the light of the core concerns of the Catholic tradition of bridal mysticism. In this tradition the celibate union between humanity and God is explored through the metaphor of the intimate union of a bride and groom. The body is an important metaphor for discussing this deeply spiritual and chaste journey into divine-human love. Temporal and earthly erotic union, however, is viewed as carnal by this same tradition and largely devoid of theological significance. The earthly body and its sexual nature is a sign of concupiscence according to this early tradition. In order to better understand and situate John Paul's theology vis-à-vis his mystic predecessors, the origins of erotic mysticism and the beginnings of the use of the theme of spousal union in mystical theology must first be discussed.

This chapter will begin with a brief look at the history of the tradition of bridal mystical writings beginning with the *Song of Songs*. The influential mystical thought and theology of Origen of Alexandria (185-254), Dionysius (fifth or sixth century), Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) and John of the Cross (1542-1591) will be of interest. This chapter will then focus on the erotic poetry of John of the Cross for two reasons. First, his poetry and analysis of the interpersonal relationship of humanity with God is considered the culmination of bridal mystical literature and second, John Paul II focuses his PhD dissertation on John of the Cross' thought.<sup>48</sup> A brief biography of John of the Cross will be presented followed by this chapter's method of study. This will be followed by an analysis of John of the Cross' use of metaphor and allegory in *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*. It is here that important themes, such as darkness and spousal union, will be discussed.

This chapter's analysis of the tradition of bridal mysticism, and more specifically of John of the Cross' erotic poetry, shows how the erotic, spousal union and the body are never to be understood literally in this early tradition of Catholic mysticism. They remain important symbols that illuminate

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<sup>48</sup> John Paul II's dissertation thesis is concerned with John of the Cross' theology of faith.

disembodied and intangible forms of nuptial union between humanity and God. The tradition of Catholic bridal mysticism refuses to recognize the theological, ethical and personal significance of the body and of conjugal intimacy.

### **1- Origins of Erotic Mysticism:**

The study of the origins of erotic mysticism begins with the *Song of Songs*.<sup>49</sup> The Biblical poetic book of the *Song of Songs* inspired a robust industry of commentary in the medieval Catholic tradition.<sup>50</sup> Anne Matter argues that this tradition of commentary developed into an established genre of medieval religious literature:

Conventional medieval readings of the Song of Songs [...] influenced the symbolic understanding of the Church and the theological concepts of the relationship between the life of the body and of the soul, and thus between human and divine love. These conventional readings flourished as part of the monastic tradition of biblical commentary<sup>51</sup>

This tradition of commentary takes its roots in Origen's work.<sup>52</sup> His "biblical exegesis had the advantage of an enormously influential Latin patron, Ambrose, Bishop of Milan."<sup>53</sup> According to Jantzen, Origen is responsible for launching this influential theme in Christian spirituality:

the language and symbolism of erotic love as a way of speaking about the relation of God and the soul, and the use of the *Song of Songs* as the biblical grounding for erotic mysticism. The soul becomes the bride, God the divine bridegroom. God embraces the soul, she yearns for him and for his kisses of his mouth, he wounds her with the wound of love. The use of erotic language allows the language of passion and desire to become a part of Christian spirituality, and to see the longed-for union with God in terms of ecstasy and even ravishing.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> This text will hereafter be referred to as SS.

<sup>50</sup> One hundred commentaries and homilies in the sixth and fifth centuries alone. Ann E. Matter, *Voice of my beloved the Song of Songs in western medieval Christianity*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1990, 3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>52</sup> Matter notes that Hippolytus of Rome's commentary is actually dated earlier than Origen's. However, this commentary was in fragments once the eastern Middle Ages encountered it. For this reason, it is not of great use to scholarship, nor to this paper.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

Ambrose "was the most important expositor of the mystical senses of Scripture in the early Latin Church" (25). For this reason, he is of importance in the history of bridal mystical commentaries.

<sup>54</sup> Grace N Jantzen, "Love was His Meaning: Julian's Theological Method" in *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian*, London: SPCK 1987, 90.

Origen considers the mystical nature of biblical texts as being the most important channel of their meaning.<sup>55</sup> His use of eroticism is of great importance to his understanding of mysticism. While Origen does not speak highly of the experience of human eroticism, he does not shy away from using erotic language. In fact, he insists on using the word *eros* (a term loosely translated as ‘sexual love’) as opposed to *agape* (i.e. selfless love). For Origen, the *Song of Songs* is a celebration of “the erotic desiring, seduction, and wounding—the deep lacerations” or *jouissance*, as Roland Barthes notes.<sup>56</sup> Origen understands the *Song of Songs* as “an epithalamium, that is, a nuptial song, [...] that Solomon wrote in a dramatic form, and sang after the fashion of a bride to her bridegroom.”<sup>57</sup> The interpretation of the *Song of Songs* as the story of a lover and his beloved gives way to the tradition better known as ‘bridal mysticism’,<sup>58</sup> a tradition which uses erotic terminology to express the journey to love and the union between the human soul and God. The tradition of bridal mysticism, to which John of the Cross’ work belongs to, explores this form of “passionate love”.<sup>59</sup>

While this tradition of thought encourages the spiritual experience of union, it does not encourage physical union. “Love,” according to Origen, has two meanings: (1) the love of the flesh which according to him comes from Satan, and (2) non-erotic love of the spirit which according to him originates in God.<sup>60</sup> For Origen, conjugal eroticism is not seen in a particularly positive light. For this reason, he interprets the *Song of Songs* allegorically, rather than literally. According to Astell, Origen is concerned with two topics: “*amor* and *allegoria*,

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>56</sup> Matter, 32.

<sup>57</sup> Origen’s *Commentary* in Matter, 28.

The latter segment is taken from one of two of Origen’s major works of commentary on the SS (the other being *The Homilies*).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 31.

The tradition of bridal mysticism is present in the *Song of Songs* and in the works of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, Margery Kempe, Mother Julian of Norwich, Saint John of the Cross and even Father Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. These mystics made great use of erotic language in expressing their mystical experience of nuptial union. While these mystics believed that the body was a source of evil; they valued the human body as an emblem of nuptial union.

<sup>60</sup> Ann W. Astell, *The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages*, Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990, 3.

what the Song literally expresses (carnal love) and what it does not (spiritual love).”<sup>61</sup> Origen follows the general theological assumption that all things visible point to something invisible but similar in “likeness and pattern,” and he insists that the “literal carnality of the Song veils a spiritual meaning (*allegoria*).”<sup>62</sup> Origen concludes that the *Song of Songs* is making actual reference to mystical union between the Church and Christ, under the disguise of bride and groom. Nuptial mysticism and conjugal love, according to him, are mutually exclusive. The subsequent tradition of commentary built on this foundational interpretation of the *Song of Songs*.

The mutual exclusivity of nuptial love and conjugal love points towards the importance of reading and experiencing mystical erotic poetry metaphorically, rather than literally. One major problem in wanting to analyze mystical writings from an experiential point of view is rooted in the centrality of text in the development of religion throughout time: as Jantzen notes, such “bookless religions [i.e. mystical spirituality] are automatically classified as ‘primitive’” and hence have lacked due attention.<sup>63</sup> Luckily there are other writings that capture the liturgical nature of text.<sup>64</sup> Thus, while the writings John of the Cross,<sup>65</sup> for instance, are not given due attention, there are others, like Dionysus’, whose liturgical writings have been a central focus for the academia.

According to Jantzen, Dionysius (a sixth century Syrian monk who adopted the pen name of the Areopagite convert of St. Paul) develops the notion of mystical liturgical theology: “a theology which united the idea of the mystical meaning of scripture with the liturgical practices of the church.”<sup>66</sup> His writings

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>63</sup> Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, gender, and Christian mysticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995, 60.

<sup>64</sup> When referring to liturgy, this paper is referring to the religious texts that have a practical nature, rather than purely speculative. The writings of Dionysus, for instance, are meant to evoke the reader into action and ritual. Such texts are referred to as being liturgical, i.e. of pushing the reader into a particular action of ritual.

<sup>65</sup> This statement is based on the theory that John of the Cross’ text is an actual liturgy and is not just a theory.

<sup>66</sup> Jantzen, *Power, gender, and Christian mysticism*, 87.

grew to be of great influence on the writings of mystics to come, such as John of the Cross:

The striking metaphor of the ray of light penetrating the room, for example, which occurs in the first chapter of the pseudo-Areopagite's *De Mystica Theologia*, has been used continually by mystical writers ever since his time. The figures of the wood consumed by fire, of the ladder, the mirror, the flame of love and the nights of sense and spirit had long since become naturalized in mystical literature. There are many more such examples.<sup>67</sup>

Important symbolism and themes found in early writings relating to nuptial mysticism and mystical *eros* have made their way into the thought and theology of John of the Cross. His works (e.g. *The Living Flame of Love*) are filled with the Areopagite's theology of love and of the burning fire.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, while John of the Cross mentions only a handful of authors, he does mention Dionysius four times in his poetry: *Subida* 2.8.6; *Noche* 2.5.3; *Canticle* 14-15.16 and *Llama* 3-3.49.<sup>69</sup> His apophatic theology<sup>70</sup> was of great influence on later mystics, especially on the thought of fifteenth and sixteenth century Spanish mystics such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

Dionysius concluded that the spirit can be met when *practicing* liturgy (i.e. when *doing* what the word *says*).<sup>71</sup> In other words, the spiritual experience

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<sup>67</sup> Allisson E. Peer, *The Essential St. John of the Cross: Ascent of Mount Carmel, Dark Night of the Soul, A Spiritual Canticle, Twenty Poems* Radford: Wilder Publications, 2008, 31.

<sup>68</sup> This will be further discussed in the third section of this chapter when analyzing *The Ascent*.

<sup>69</sup> Sarah Coakley, *Re-thinking Dionysius the Areopagite*, Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 169.

<sup>70</sup> A form of mysticism based on emptying the self of logical reasoning and silencing the mind when faced with a spiritual or mystical endeavor, such as union with God or knowledge of God (Peter Kügler, 'Denys Turner's Anti-Mystical Mystical Theology,' *Ars Disputandi* <<http://www.ArsDisputandi.org>> 4 (2004), paragraph 1.

<sup>71</sup> Denys Turner's piece on Pseudo-Denys is quite interesting and relevant. It touches two important topics which are dealt with in this paper: (1) the lack of textual agency behind mystical religion and (2) Pseudo-Denys' mystical approach to text. Turner criticizes post-enlightenment's tendency of bifurcating the study of mysticism into two channels: the liturgical and the philosophical. To adopt a one-sided approach to the study of Pseudo-Denys's writings is erroneous as the text allows for philosophical discussion only because of its liturgical nature. Turner states that such bias is present in almost all studies of Pseudo-Denys except for the writings of Thomas Aquinas (431). Symbolism and allegory (which Pseudo-Denys uses in *Mystical Theology*) are linguistic tools used in order to refer to the ineffable (i.e. the mystical) (430). Thus, how valid can a study be, Turner asks, if one analyzes a text based on ritual, without making mention of its ontological root in experience? This bias is rooted in post-enlightenment scholarship's "recursive contradictoriness" where the very structure of the system of thought leads to the sanitization of the philosophical from the cultic (437).

of erotic union becomes part of mystical discourse as well as being a lens of study of mysticism itself.<sup>72</sup> Erotic experience is bridal mysticism's means of expression and interpretation at the same time. Denys Turner also agrees that Dionysius' writings are meant to be approached experientially rather than theoretically.<sup>73</sup>

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153), French abbot and primary reformer of the Cistercian order, is another important thinker in the history of bridal mysticism. According to many, his best known work is the *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, a commentary on the book of the *Song of Songs*.<sup>74</sup> Like other mystics, Bernard acknowledged the distinction between inner and outer sensation (where the former refers to spiritual and mystical experiences and the latter to physical and embodied experiences). He also argued that humanity can be united with God in the flesh, "it is our sins, not our bodies, that stand in the way [of experiencing God]."<sup>75</sup> While he expressed a more positive view of the body, he too failed to recognize the theological significance of the body and of conjugal union.

Bernard finds value in the body inasmuch as it is the seat for the spiritual journey to God: "the body does provide a gateway to a knowledge of" "spiritual and intellectual truths" regarding God.<sup>76</sup> He prioritizes the soul's importance over the fleshly body: man's body is the "remaining part of his soul being clearly of an inferior nature, and therefore belonging to a lower and baser form of being."<sup>77</sup> The body has no intrinsic theological value for Bernard. He refers to it as "this sensual and carnal thing [that] is regarded by the spiritual man as

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<sup>72</sup> Jantzen, 109.

Dionysius is believed to have actually given way to one of two existing strands of theological discourse: where love is at the center of God-talk as oppose to the other system of thought which follow non-Dionysius sources (that have an affective spin).

<sup>73</sup> Turner, 431-438.

<sup>74</sup> Martha A. Brozyna, *Gender and Sexuality in the Middle Ages: a Medieval Source Documents Reader*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland &, 2005, 62.

<sup>75</sup> Bernard McGinn, "The Language of Inner Experience in Christian Mysticism," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 1.2 (2001): 163.

<sup>76</sup> St Bernard of Clairvaux, "On the Four Kinds of Spirits - Sermon 5 on the Song of Songs by St. Bernard of Clairvaux," *Commentary On the Song of Songs. Paths of Love: Catholic Vocation Discernment*. 2008. Web. 01 July 2011, 5:3.

<<http://www.pathsoflove.com/bernard/songofsongs/sermon05.html>>.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 30:9.

unworthy to be called self.”<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, Bernard understands the body as an object, rather than a subject worthy of respect: “He [the spiritual man] judged it better to see it [i.e. the body] as something belonging to him rather than as adequately equipped to represent his personality.”<sup>79</sup> Bernard’s objectification of the body is not shared by John Paul II who is adamant about referring to the body as a subject.<sup>80</sup> For Bernard, while the body and soul unity is integral to what it means to be human, he is suspicious of the body’s carnal nature and deems it as necessarily tainted with concupiscence: “When I speak of my soul, think of that lower principle whose purpose as you see is to animate the body, and even share in its concupiscence. I once lived at that level, but not now, because I no longer walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit.”<sup>81</sup> For Bernard, concupiscence refers to what he refers to as “carnal lust,” “sin” and “the pleasures of the body.”<sup>82</sup> Therefore, while Bernard sees the body as a valuable means in understanding God, he fails to find theological value in the body itself.

## **2-Biography and Methodology:**

Bridal mystical literature is believed to have climaxed in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Spanish Carmelite mysticism and most particularly in the works of John of the Cross. John of the Cross was born in 1542 in Spain where at the age of twenty he entered the Carmelite order. He studied at the University of Salamanca, one of the most renowned universities at the time. Abuses of convent life had led Theresa of Avila (an important mystic saint) to lead a movement of reform known as the Discalced Carmelites, which John of the Cross later joined and led.<sup>83</sup> An emphasis on interiority and discipline was of

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 30:9.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 30:9.

<sup>80</sup> Fergus Kerr, "Karol Wojtyla," *Twentieth-century Catholic Theologians: from Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mysticism*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2007, 165.

<sup>81</sup> St Bernard of Clairvaux, "On the Four Kinds of Spirits," 30:9.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 30:9-10.

<sup>83</sup> According to Daniel Dombrowski’s *St. John of the Cross an appreciation* (Albany: State University of New York, 1992), such movements grew out of the nature of convent life at the time. According to the latter, “convents had become places where community gossip gathered and where gallants were given encouragement by nuns clad in jewels. The convents were precursors of the salons, where the idle rich conversed about art and literature” (39).

importance to the Discalced Carmelites. This movement towards interiority was not appreciated by the unreformed and therefore jailed John of the Cross. Nine months later, he escaped jail.<sup>84</sup> In El Calvario, he wrote an important work of his, namely *Dark Night of the Soul*. In *The Dark Night*, John of the Cross, like Bernard of Clairvaux, understood the body as a medium of experiencing God, of much lesser importance than the soul: “The Wise Man says: The corruptible body is a load upon the soul [Wis. 9:15]. Consequently the communications imparted to proficients cannot be very strong or very intense or very spiritual, as is required for divine union, because of the weakness and corruption of the senses that have their share in them.”<sup>85</sup> While the body is useful towards mystical union, it has no intrinsic theological value.

In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, John of the Cross compares the body to a prison for the soul:

for as long as it [i.e. the soul] is in the body, it is like one who is in a dark prison and who knows nothing, save what he is able to see through the windows of the said prison; and, if he saw nothing through them, he would see nothing in any other way. And thus the soul, save for that which is communicated to it through the senses, which are the windows of its prison, could acquire nothing, in the course of nature, in any other way.<sup>86</sup>

Like Bernard, John of the Cross believes that while the body and spirit unity offers a medium for union with God, the fleshly body also works to the detriment of the spiritual journey because of the body’s carnality. The body, for John of the Cross, is “ignorant of spiritual things.”<sup>87</sup> It has no spiritual worth in itself. It is the spirit that gives it value.<sup>88</sup>

John of the Cross’ writings were never meant for publication, but for spiritual counsel to those in need.<sup>89</sup> John of the Cross made extensive use of

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 38-42.

<sup>85</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Collected Works of Saint John of the Cross*, Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991, Book II, Chapter 1:2.

<sup>86</sup> St. John of the Cross, *The Essential St. John of the Cross*, Trans. E. Allison Peers. Radford, VA: Wilder Publications, 2008, 75.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>89</sup> An example of John of the Cross’ writings used as spiritual counsel is *The Living Flame of Love*. It was written in response to a request by Dona Ana de Penalosa, a Carmelite nun. John of the Cross wrote two more poetic works: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *Spiritual Canticle*



erotic language to explore the soul's relationship to God. Misleading readings and interpretations of John of the Cross' erotic poetry led to controversy and conflict within his religious community and beyond. Many today would argue that these misinterpretations of John of the Cross' eroticism were caused by the excessive asceticism of the sixteenth century Spanish Christianity.

An analysis of John of the Cross' use of erotic mystical language can be approached from numerous perspectives. For instance, one may choose to study root words in the Greek, Latin and Spanish nomenclature. Furthermore, one may compare the use and appropriation of language by male and female mystics of the time. Another possible approach would be to focus solely on Spanish Carmelite mystics and their use of erotic language throughout time. There are numerous other equally valid approaches.<sup>90</sup> This paper adopts a literary

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(at the request of Ana de Jesus). (Benedictine of Stanbrook Abbey, *Mediaeval Mystical Tradition and Saint John of the Cross*, London: Burns & Oates, 1954, 143-145).

<sup>90</sup> An exploration of the socio-religio-historical and political context of John of the Cross' life will shed light on his discussion of sexuality. Looking at his life and times; the reformation of the Carmelite order (which he assists); the formation of the Discalced order through a historical lens or studying the sociological influence of his close relationship with Saint Teresa of Avila (as spiritual counselor) can all lead to interesting conclusions regarding his interpretation of the body. Considering how a mystic is never found by himself as a social outsider, but rather is a production of his environment (where mystical experience, liturgy and praxis are his tools of expression, as oppose to scholasticism) the nature of the liturgical community within which he develops his thought can be of great interest. E. Allison Peer's *Handbook to the Life and Times of St. Teresa and St. John of the Cross* (London: Burn Oates, 1954)

Approaching his works through paintings and art works which help visualize his theology and thought is another credible and useful approach which can also be taken in order to better understand John of the Cross' use of erotic language. A source of interest for this approach is Antonio T. de Nicolas' *St. John of the Cross (San Juan de la Cruz) alchemist of the soul: his life, his poetry (bilingual), his prose*, forwarded by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. New York: Paragon House, 1989. De Nicolas states that John of the Cross' morals and his behavior with the nuns of the Carmelite order was questioned by Dorio, Vicar-General of the Carmelite order during the reformation of the order: Father Diego Evangelista was then sent to the convent "to open an inquiry against Juan de la Cruz [...] asking most impertinent questions, arranging the answer as he saw fit, editing the narrative [...], putting pressure on priests and nuns [...], finally managing to extract from a nun in Malaga that Juan de la Cruz had kissed her through a grating" (29). His analysis of John of the Cross' life in the order is of great interest, but given the method of study of this chapter, it will not integrate the latter approach.

Graham M. Schweig's analyses the reproduction of the crucifix drawing of St. John of the Cross. He claims that this work "is unique in the history of Christian art." Schweig interprets the drawing of the crucifix in light of John of the Cross' "stanzas from the seventh of his 'Romances'," where Christ speaks to the Father. Schweig concludes that "as these verses plainly express, Christ (the Bridegroom) wants to relieve the soul (the bride) of her suffering by taking it upon himself, and in doing so, restores the soul to the Father." This will no doubt be an interesting source for one who wishes to further his or her study of John of the Cross through visual art.

approach to John of the Cross' writings by looking at his use of metaphor and allegory. An academic study of the mystical theology of John of the Cross is not without its share of problems. Willis Barnstone's notes that "all commentary within the Spanish world [...] has denied the immediate level of the love experience" in the work of John of the Cross.<sup>91</sup> What this means for this study is that secondary works which deal with the theology of eroticism in John of the Cross are scarce.<sup>92</sup> To fill this gap I will attempt to situate John of the Cross' work within the wider tradition of bridal mysticism.

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<sup>91</sup> Willis Barnstone, "Mystico-Erotic Love in 'O Living Flame of Love,'" in *Revista Hispanica Moderna*. 37:4 (1972/1973) 254.

<sup>92</sup> There is one particular work which might have been of great assistance in the writing of this paper: Gomez-Avila, Maria-Tulia's *Phenomenological Existential Synthesis of Human and Divine Love in the Marriage Relationship, as Expressed in Spanish Medieval Poetry and Renaissance Poems of Saint John of the Cross*, published by the University of Saint Louis in 1985. This thesis work is entirely written in Spanish, but based on its title, it seems to be one of the most relevant academic works concerning John of the Cross' erotic mysticism.

Eugene Maio's *St. John of the Cross: the imagery of Eros* (Madrid: Playor, 1973) is another relevant source on John of the Cross' use of erotic language. In a nutshell, Maio believes that John of the Cross' sexualized language is the result of the meeting of Neo-Platonism and Christianity, which for John of the Cross comes about in his reading of Plotinus on the fusion of sexual love and spiritual desires which conclude in the "heavenly Eros" (57). Maio is convinced that Plotinus' mythical story of the parentage of Eros had an effect on John of the Cross' theology of union with the Divine. Plotinus describes the birthing of Eros by two polarities: on the one hand there is Penia (representative of "poverty and need") while on the other there is Poros (representing "resourceful initiative and energy") (59). In being similar to his mother, Eros is always in a state of "want"; while being like his father in his desire for "the beautiful and the good" (59). Therefore, Eros is in a state of neutrality always seeking the "ideal" (60). Similarly, in John of the Cross' poetry "the nothingness of the soul and the plenitude of God" are set at a comparable polarity to that of Plotinus' (60). It is in the effort of Eros (comparable to the role which 'Humanity' plays in John of the Cross' *LFL*) to reach the 'ultimate ideal' (analogous to 'God' in John of the Cross' theology) that the latter reaches its desire and does not fuse into plenitude or neutrality. Quite the contrary: when humanity reaches its ultimate desire, he experiences the ultimate state of fulfillment, or might one add, of *ecstasy*. This state of ecstasy is what makes erotic imagery fundamental in expressing the state of union (i.e. of experience of God) in light of Neo-Platonist influence:

*Touch* is the image employed by Plotinus to describe the super-rational experience of the divine... it is necessary for the perfect happiness of the soul that there be some contact with the One. Plotinus concluded that the One must be in some sense knowable and could be known only by being *seen* or *felt*. Therefore the only words which are suitable to express contact with the One are those designating sensible *impressions* and *not* those relating to *logical thinking*. [italics added] (Maio 247-248)

It is in using the experience of the erotic, which is not bound by words or language and that makes clear reference to human senses that the ineffable begins to be understood in both Plotinus (according to Maio) and John of the Cross' poetry.

### **3-Mystical Knowledge and Allegory:**

The importance of experience is apparent in John of the Cross' style of writing, namely poetic writing. Poetry is favored because poetic language lacks what this paper terms as a 'manual of usage', that is the use of expressions and of language that are limited to interpretive logic and deductive reasoning. John of the Cross' distrust of cognitive thought is what brings him to choose poetry over scholastic language. As Richard Monaco and John Briggs note, poetic language "cannot be understood the same way that ordinary language is understood."<sup>93</sup> Poetry does not limit the use of vocabulary and ideology to specific meaning. Poetry uses vocabulary to think outside the bonds of ideological codes and meaning and into the world of interpretive experience.

R. J. Werblowski makes a very interesting point concerning John of the Cross' distrust of ordinary language:

It is evident that St John's attitude is basically anti-cognitive. True, he is intent on cleansing the soul of the impurity of its desires and appetites, but not in order to prepare it for higher insights or perceptions. He demands the annihilation of the natural light, but not in order to make room for supernatural lights. Exchanging natural knowledge for divinely infused apprehensions is sheer waste of time because you remain enmeshed in the world of knowledge, i.e. of images, representations and concepts.<sup>94</sup>

Werblowski understands 'knowledge' as that which has to do with words, imagery and human concepts. He therefore reasons that John of the Cross argues for the importance of experience over 'knowledge'.

Deidre Green takes fault with Werblowski's reasoning in stating that there are different types of cognition, which in her opinion, Werblowski's analysis fails to consider.<sup>95</sup> While she is right in stating that experience is also a form of knowing and ought not be rejected, she is mistaken in accusing Werblowski of underappreciating experience as a form of knowledge. It seems that Green has misunderstood Werblowski's understanding of 'knowledge'.

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<sup>93</sup> Richard Monaco & John Briggs, *Logic of poetry*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974, xxvii.

<sup>94</sup> R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "On the Mystical Rejection of Mystical Illuminations," in *Religious Studies* 1.02 (1966), 180.

<sup>95</sup> Deirdre Green, "St John of the Cross and the Mystical 'Unknowing'" in *Religious Studies* 22.01 (1986), 29.

While Werblowski understands knowledge in terms of logical, rational and empirical modes of thought, he validates experience as a form of knowing, but separate from cognitive knowledge. Therefore, it can be said that while the two (Werblowski and Green) use ‘knowledge’ differently, they agree that for John of the Cross, experience is the primary method of understanding nuptial union.<sup>96</sup>

Furthermore on the nature of ‘knowledge’, according to Green’s analysis of the nature of nuptial union in John of the Cross’ poetry, the way by which one comes to know God is not comparable to any existing form of knowing:

nothing that the imagination can conceive or that reason can comprehend is like it. We cannot relate this type of knowledge to any familiar categories of understanding; it is quite unlike our usual modes of perception; for the more one advances in spiritual understanding, the more one ceases to identify particular objects or conceptions (however sublime) with Divine Reality.<sup>97</sup>

While spiritual wisdom exists, it is not a form of cognitive knowledge because the human intellect cannot comprehend it. No existing human cognition can rationalize it because there is no other experience or knowledge similar to it.

John of the Cross’ choice of poetry is what allows for the adoption of a non-cognitive approach to his theology rather than for logical deduction to take over. As Monaco and Briggs state, with poetry, “you *experience* it”, not just the literal meaning of the words, but that which the words are “*pointing* at.”<sup>98</sup> His erotic poetry is a means to communicate knowledge of that which is elusive to human logic, namely nuptial union. Erotic poetry captures nuptial union’s elusive nature in the metaphor of a bride and groom, so-to-speak, while

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<sup>96</sup> The importance and meaning of ‘knowledge’ in John of the Cross’ theology of nuptial union will be discussed later in relation to the importance of the darkness in his poetry.

<sup>97</sup> Green, 31.

<sup>98</sup> Monaco & Briggs, 2.

There are those who choose not to adopt an experiential lens to the study of John of the Cross. According to Grace Jantzen, modern day philosophers fail to grasp sixteenth century mystical language. Jantzen argues that mystics (like John of the Cross) did not have access to “post-Enlightenment categories of epistemology and philosophy of language” and thus must have understood ineffability in relation to “the beauty and wonder of God,” i.e. in relation to God’s nature; and not in terms of the experience of God (Jantzen, 281). However, Jantzen’s analysis does not acknowledge John of the Cross’ “training in Scholastic terminology and philosophy, which left its marks on his thought” during his stay at the University of Salamanca, (Robert Fastiggi and Jose Pereira, *The Mystical Theology of the Catholic Reformation: An Overview of Baroque Spirituality*, New York: University of America, 2006, 251).

scholastic thought would fail due to its tendency to categorize and codify that which is incomprehensible to human thought and logic.<sup>99</sup>

### Metaphor:

John of the Cross's use of metaphor is a key player in promoting the experience of text, rather than its deductive understanding. In *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*,<sup>100</sup> John of the Cross makes references to numerous metaphors in order to discuss his nuptial experience of the highly erotic and disembodied mystical union with God. Here is a short excerpt of the poem that captures a few of his metaphors:

Oh night that joined Beloved with lover, Lover transformed  
in the Beloved!  
Upon my flowery breast, Kept wholly for himself alone,  
There he stayed sleeping, and I caressed him, And the  
fanning of the cedars made a breeze.  
With his gentle hand he wounded my neck And caused all my  
senses to be suspended.<sup>101</sup>

John of the Cross writes from the perspective of a woman who seeks to be united with her lover. The sexual language used invokes the bride's desire for sexual union. John of the Cross comments on his poetry in the form of commentaries which form the bulk of his work in *The Living Flame of Love*. His commentary gives a detailed analysis of his poetry and of his use of the analogy of bride and groom meeting and consummating their love in darkness.

### Darkness:

While a literal reading of the poem interprets darkness as the ideal intimate setting for sexual union to take place; a metaphorical reading defines darkness as the purification of the body from sexual desires. Darkness is, according to John of the Cross, a necessary stage "to pass through" to get to union.<sup>102</sup> According to John of the Cross' theology, nuptial union depends "on

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<sup>99</sup> Jorge Guillen, "Ineffable Language of Mysticism," in *Language and Poetry: Some Poets of Spain*, Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1961, 91.

<sup>100</sup> This text will hereafter be referred to as *LFL*.

<sup>101</sup> *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* in Peer, *The Essential*, 64.

See full text in Appendix 1.

<sup>102</sup> *LFL*, 70-71.

the sublimation of every bodily desire,” and perhaps even “at the cost of self castration,” as Origen has argued in his analysis of the *Song of Songs*.<sup>103</sup>

Darkness is not only a metaphor for the purification of the body from sexual urges but is also a metaphor for the need to blindfold the human intellect in order to experience the elusive nature of nuptial union. Dionysius is of great influence on John of the Cross’ *Living Flame of Love* and *Dark Night*.<sup>104</sup> John of the Cross’ use of ‘darkness’ as a metaphor for the purification from earthly urges is traced back to Dionysus. Dionysius speaks of God in terms of ‘light’ as opposed to ‘darkness’. He makes use of an analogy where God is the sun and human intellect is the mind’s eye: to want to know God is as fathomable as being able to stare directly at the sun. It is here that the notion of divine darkness arises in Dionysius’ main theological idea: “God is uncreated light, a light beyond our vision,” met in blindness or darkness.<sup>105</sup> John of the Cross is believed to have incorporated Dionysius’ theology of darkness into his own description of union with God in his analogy of the lover and beloved.

In *The Living Flame of Love*, darkness represents the absence of earthly cognition and the presence of (what Green calls) “pure consciousness,”<sup>106</sup> that is the overtaking of human consciousness by the senses. It is this process of replacing empirical reason with discursive meditation that Green refers to as

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<sup>103</sup> Astell, 3.

<sup>104</sup> In fact, according to Jose Pereira and Robert Fastigi’s *The Mystical Theology of the Catholic Reformation*, other than for the main source of influence (i.e. the Bible), spiritual writers and scholastic theology are of influence on his works. Augustine’s maxim, Francis of Assisi’s prayer and stigmata and Dionysus’ *Mystical Theology* are integral to *DK* and *LFL*. Dionysus’ understanding of darkness is directly referenced in *DK* (5.3): “Hence when the divine light of contemplation strikes souls not yet entirely illuminated, it causes spiritual darkness [...]. This is why St. Dionysus and other mystical theologians call this infused contemplation a ray of darkness [...]. For this great supernatural light overwhelms the intellect and deprives it of its natural vigor” (25). Dionysus’ influence is very much existent in John of the Cross’ writings as well as Gregory the Great, Bernard of Clairvaux, Aquinas, the Victorines, Bonaventure and Lull; mystical language found in Eckhart, Harphius, Tauler and Ruysbroeck; Spanish writers such as Luis de Leon, Francisco de Osuna, Bernardino de Laredo and Teresa of Avila (251).

<sup>105</sup> William Harmless, *Mystics*, New York: Oxford UP, USA, 2007, 101.

The root verb of the Greek word for ‘mystic’ (μυστικός) is μύω and it means ‘to close’ in the sense of “closing one’s eyes,” notes Harmless in his analysis of the relation between ‘darkness’ and ‘mysticism’ (Harmless 261). Mysticism is then based on the idea of knowing God in darkness, i.e. in the shutting out of intellectual thought, in the absence of human logic and thought.

<sup>106</sup> Green, 31.

“unknowing,” i.e. to rid one’s self of what one already knows through logic and empirical reasoning.<sup>107</sup> To paraphrase John of the Cross, when the eye of the mind is shut, i.e. when in darkness, only then can one know God. John of the Cross’ meditative knowing is a type of “passive knowledge” (in that it does not make active intellectual search for wisdom, but rather, it receives knowledge in the form of experience). It is different from rational knowing; nevertheless, it achieves a form of credible knowledge.<sup>108</sup>

John of the Cross discusses his use of ‘darkness’ as a metaphor for ‘unknowing’ in his commentary. According to him, there are three stages to the dark night: (1) the first stage deals with when human senses are rid of what is “attached to things corporeal and temporal.”<sup>109</sup> At this stage, one detaches one’s self from temporal affairs, i.e. one engages in the disembodiment of the self. (2) The second stage of darkness represents faith (i.e. when the soul is sanitized from all human and earthly intellect). (3) Finally, the last stage takes place in an even darker night, where union takes place.<sup>110</sup> In retrospect, according to John of the Cross’ own commentary, his erotic poetry is about a disembodied human experience of the soul uniting with God. Basic to his understanding and experience of nuptial union is the rejection of the temporal body and its embodied nature and sexuality.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>109</sup> ‘Dark Night’ in *The Essential*, 72.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 72-73.

Evelyn Toft is correct in stating that the soul’s journey to God (according to John of the Cross’ theology) can be described in terms of a progression of negation. Using John of the Cross’ own words, this means that “by way of the denial and rejection of natural and supernatural apprehensions” the soul can find its way to God, detached from bodily urges and functions (Toft, “Some Contexts for the Ascetical Language of John of the Cross,” in *Mystics Quarterly* 17.1 (1991): 27-35. *JSTOR*. Web. 27 Jan. 2011. <<http://www.jstor.org>> 28). John of the Cross compares the journey of the soul to one’s journey into poverty: once one has been dispossessed of bodily goods, transcendence and union can occur (*The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, book 2, chapter 7, paragraph 3). The soul can unite with God only when it has escaped the body. The earthly body, therefore, is of no theological benefit to humanity, according to John of the Cross. It is more of a prison to humanity than a safe space to know (and unite with) God.

<sup>111</sup> Astell, 3.

### Spousal Union:

Further on his use of metaphor, like other bridal mystical theologians, he communicates his understanding of nuptial union by using the metaphor of bride and groom. Metaphor makes a literal approach to his theology impossible. As Evelyn Toft notes, John of the Cross encourages “discursive meditation,” that is a meditation that requires silence of the mind, rather than mental activity.<sup>112</sup> This is a form of contemplative meditation that triggers the function of human senses instead of mental cognition. Therefore, the interpretation John of the Cross’ mystical theology of nuptial union requires the use of bodily senses and underlines the importance of experience in its interpretation. Even after making extensive discursive use of the body and its erotic nature, the body remains a tool for communicating something other than itself, never being the subject of study itself.<sup>113</sup> Human eroticism and the body, therefore, are of importance to the tradition of bridal mysticism and to John of the Cross only in so far as they point towards the otherworldly and the disembodied, never to themselves. The temporal body and conjugal intimacy are not deemed of theological and ethical significance in order to make their way into his theology and God-talk.

### **Conclusion:**

This chapter’s discussion of the origins of bridal mysticism comes to the conclusion that conjugal intimacy was never the subject of discussion in erotic poetry and commentary on the *Song of Songs*. Origen of Alexandria interpreted the highly erotic text as a metaphor of nuptial union that is the union of humanity

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<sup>112</sup> Toft, 27.

<sup>113</sup> That being said, the use of metaphor in John of the Cross’ writings does not diminish the importance of eroticism, as opposed to what many (like Miller) argue, allegory emphasizes eroticism. Matter is correct in noting that Miller reduces the importance of eroticism to mere text, “and the banquet of lovers a banquet of words” (Matter, 33). Miller’s interpretation of literature is limited by the world of language: he understands poetry logically (and literally) instead of metaphorically. Miller is therefore limited by scholastic thought. Barbara Johnson refers to this problem as “the rhetoric of sexuality and literature” where the ‘body’ is understood as a mere word and is not understood as a vessel for an experiential understanding (33). This problem of sexuality is rooted in language’s acute ostensive quality and tendency to limit understanding to specifics, to words and ideas, to nothing other than the world of thought. John of the Cross, on the other hand, uses language in order to point towards experience. His poetry is therefore not limited by language (i.e. the world of semantics), but is the medium through which he is able to channel the use of the senses (sight, sound, taste, touch and smell). Language is used to lead towards experience, it is not an end in itself (as it is in Miller’s case), but is a means to the end, i.e. knowledge of the otherworldly through a fully embodied experience.



with God. Consequentially, the tradition of bridal mysticism built on this approach to the text and developed a theology of nuptial union which reached its climax in the works of John of the Cross. Like the tradition of Catholic bridal mystics, John of the Cross makes extensive use of erotic language in order to elaborate and communicate the spiritual and chaste union of humanity with God. In doing so, he fails to recognize the theological significance of the temporal body, but does not shy away from making use of the imagery of the body and of sexual intimacy in order to discuss something beyond carnal or conjugal union, namely nuptial union with God. What is interesting in the history of bridal mystical theology, as seen in John of the Cross' theology of the body as well as Dionysius' use of apophatic theology is that the tradition of bridal mysticism prioritizes mystical nuptial union over conjugal union. For this reason, the temporal body and its sexual function are of no theological significance for this early tradition. This tradition of bridal, however, is engaged and challenged by John Paul II's theology of the body. While John Paul II is greatly influenced by John of the Cross' thought, he shifts the focus of erotic mysticism from the otherworldly to the embodied and intimate union between man and woman on earth.

# CHAPTER 2

## Erotic Mysticism II: John Paul II and John of the Cross

In the early stages of the tradition of bridal mysticism, the body is not given theological significance due to the belief that the body's sexual nature imprisons humanity in "the world and its many snares."<sup>114</sup> This produces what Norris Seenivasan terms as an "escapist spirituality" where humanity is encouraged to reject basic bodily pleasures (such as eating and conjugal intimacy) and to embrace a life of asceticism and renunciation.<sup>115</sup> According to Seenivasan, a new approach to eroticism has emerged that goes against the dominant ascetical spirituality with its negative view of the physical world, including the body.<sup>116</sup> This approach is prevalent in the theology of bridal mysticism and takes its roots in the commentaries of Origen of Alexandria on the *Song of the Songs*. This tradition of bridal mysticism reaches its climax in the Spanish mysticism of the sixteenth century. While this new approach adopts a more optimistic stance vis-à-vis the erotic and the nuptial as critical symbols for mystical theology, it too fails to give intrinsic theological significance to the body, human sexuality and conjugal intimacy as false goods to be liberated from. This theological dismissal of the body and human sexuality in the tradition of bridal mysticism comes to an end with John Paul II's theology of the body.

The purpose of this second chapter is to argue that like other mystics, John Paul uses bridal mysticism to explore deep interpersonal union, but unlike other bridal mystics, he gives greater attention to the human body and its erotic nature. In fact, unlike the tradition of Catholic bridal mysticism, God-talk is necessarily related with sex-talk for John Paul. To argue this, this chapter adopts a comparative approach where John Paul II's theology of spousal union, the body and his use of eroticism is compared with his intellectual mentor, John of the Cross.

Like John of the Cross, John Paul II's writings on sexual union have not been without criticism. The writing of a celibate pope on the meaning of eroticism, written from within the confines of an ascetic and conservative church,

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<sup>114</sup> Norris Seenivasan, *The Mystical Dynamic of the Contemplation as an Impetus for Apostolic Service*, Diss. Regis College (Canada), 2004. Dissertations & Theses: Full Text, ProQuest. Web. 1 Oct. 2010, 59

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 59.

has evoked suspicion. This chapter will first deal with John Paul II's main critics. Then, it will explore the influence of John of the Cross on John Paul II through a brief analysis of John Paul's dissertation, *Faith according to Saint John of the Cross*.<sup>117</sup> This will be followed by an analysis of another important and relevant work of his, namely *Love and Responsibility*. The analysis of both of these works will illustrate two points: first, the deep influence of John of the Cross' theology of nuptial union on John Paul II, and second, how their approach to conjugal love and the body differs. In doing so, it will argue that John Paul II's analysis of John of the Cross is crucial in his development of methodological and analytical skills which he later uses in his discussion of the conjugal body which ultimately differs from John of the Cross.

### **1- Criticisms of John Paul's Thought**

A first criticism of John Paul's method of study concerns his understanding of the personal experience of sexual union. His critics raise the obvious question: How valid is the thought of a celibate man in relation to sexual union? For example, how can a celibate man elaborate on the nature of conjugal union and the experience of intimate union? This first criticism is concerned with the credibility of his thought concerning that which he has no personal experience of, namely conjugal intimacy. While it is true that John Paul has no personal sexual experience, he does mention having access to an abundance of factual material on the subject. As pastor, he has been in great contact with different people, experiences and situations, stories which have lead to his synthesis *Love and Responsibility* on the notion of marriage, sexuality and the body.<sup>118</sup> One can therefore argue that not only does John Paul have a good understanding of sexual intimacy, but given the abundance of experiences he encounters through his pastoral experience, he may be better positioned than others to discuss sexual intimacy.

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<sup>117</sup> As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the writings of John of the Cross represent the climax and culmination of the first stage of mystical eroticism. Therefore, when making parallels between John Paul's writings and John of the Cross', this paper is also making parallels between John Paul and the tradition of Catholic bridal mystics.

<sup>118</sup> *L&R*, 15.

John Cornwell challenges John Paul's understanding of subjective experience. He argues that "subjective experience" is barely evident in his writings.<sup>119</sup> *The Theology of the Body*, his major book expounding on the "notion of man and woman as sexual partners," offers a fairly abstract approach to the personal experience that grounds, according to John Paul II, his theology of the body.<sup>120</sup>

His commentaries are detached from the realities of sexual life. There is no attempt to describe the experience of love in terms of personal histories: emotion, financial and world stress, children, illness and age. [...] He talks of 'ecstasy' of sex as a quasi-spiritual experience in terms that are detached from real life. The Pope who wished to make an original contribution to the 'embodied' soul has produced a thesis about sex that is utterly disembodied.<sup>121</sup>

John Paul's writings on sexuality do not address many aspects of marital life that are commonly dealt with in marriage education literature. However, Cornwell's under-appreciation of John Paul's contribution is misleading. The argument against Cornwell is two-fold. First, sexuality is such a complex field of study and is related to most aspects of human life. It is inevitable that any academic study of sexuality will contain major lacunae, as does John Paul's.<sup>122</sup> To meaningfully address all significant aspects of the complexities of marriage would be a very demanding, if not illusory, expectation. Therefore, John Paul's analysis of human intimacy cannot be discredited due to its focus on the ethical, mystical and theological nature of conjugal bond between husband and wife.

Second, while the ethical and theological focus of John Paul's theology of the body may seem 'disembodied' from Cornwell's perspective, John Paul is not the first to have discussed conjugal union outside of its social environment, that is, outside its relation with family ethics, work ethics, gender roles in marriage, parenthood and more. The history of mystic commentators on bridal mysticism,

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<sup>119</sup> John Cornwell, *The Pontiff in Winter: Triumph and Conflict in the Reign of John Paul II*, New York: Doubleday, 2004, 139-140.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 139-140.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>122</sup> John Paul does not make claims to an 'end all' and 'all encompassing' theology of the body. Therefore, his theology of the body allows for further developments in the discussion of the body. New developments can adopt a more 'embodied' perspective, something which Cornwell could begin himself.

like John of the Cross, discusses conjugal union without referring to its social environment. John Paul follows this pattern of discussion, but is reprimanded for it by modern authors. Can one discredit John Paul's theology without discrediting the greater tradition of bridal mysticism? The answer is no. John Paul, like other mystics, discusses the meaning of conjugal union based on the experience of union alone.

Finally, John Paul's objective is to discuss the value of human sexuality based on the value of the body alone. For this reason, he treats human sexuality as a mystical good in itself, that is, a tangible good, i.e. embodied good, with intrinsic theological significance and importance.<sup>123</sup> While John Paul's theology of conjugal intimacy can be criticized for not branching out into social ties, his theology needs to be approached and understood from the angle with which he himself approaches the erotic: that is the essential core experience of sexual intimacy between a man and a woman and its direct relation to the meaning of the body.

## **2- The Influence of John of the Cross:**

### **Faith According to Saint John of the Cross:**

John Paul's interest in mysticism is found in the experience of love and of spousal union. He explains in the introduction of his dissertation the reasons for his specific interest in faith according to John of the Cross. John of the Cross' theological influences, namely pseudo-Dionysus and other individuals of importance in the making of the history of bridal mysticism, are important figures in John Paul's education. According to John Paul, Dionysus and John of the Cross' writings "are a witness to mystical experience," which John Paul is particularly interested in.<sup>124</sup> These thinkers' common interest in the mystical experience of erotic union is what leads John Paul to write his doctoral thesis on the thought of John of the Cross, whose writings "contain an explicit teaching on

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<sup>123</sup> The nature of his theology of the body and of human intimacy will be further dealt with in chapter three.

<sup>124</sup> Pope John Paul II, trans. *Faith according to Saint John of the Cross*. Thesis. Vatican City, 1985. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1981, 21-23.

the virtue of faith as the means of union [...] with God”.<sup>125</sup> John Paul is therefore interested in understanding faith because of its role in nuptial union: “a faith that is the only means proportionate to vital union with God.”<sup>126</sup> *Faith according to Saint John of the Cross* marks the beginning of John of the Cross’ influence on John Paul’s thought concerning nuptial union.

What is of particular interest in John Paul’s thesis is his approach to John of the Cross’ thought on the conjugal body. John Paul agrees with John of the Cross that personal experience is important to understanding nuptial union and that nuptial union cannot be known through a purely theoretical approach.<sup>127</sup> However, he disagrees with John of the Cross concerning the role of the conjugal body in the experience of nuptial union. In *Faith according to Saint John of the Cross*, John Paul states that according to John of the Cross humanity lacks likeness to God in its fleshly body.<sup>128</sup> This is why the early tradition of mysticism fails to find theological meaning in the body. Unlike the body, humanity’s faith in the love of God allows for likeness to exist between the human person and God:

The essential likeness of faith to God is the basis for its proportion of likeness, which is, in turn, the reason why faith is the proportion of likeness, which is, in turn, the reason why faith is the proportionate means of union with God. By reason of its essential likeness to God, faith is substantially supernatural; by reason of its proportion of likeness, faith is the proportionate means of union with god.<sup>129</sup>

Faith allows for nuptial union to occur according to John of the Cross. Humanity’s faith is not corporeal, it is spiritual and supernatural. It belongs to the mystical realm. It is otherworldly, like God, thus being the means for nuptial union with the divine. It is important to note that the body as such plays no decisive role in John of the Cross’ theology of union.

John Paul’s dissertation on John of the Cross leads to his development of a theology of the body that adopts an embodied and positive approach to the

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 21-23.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>127</sup> Margaret Sealey, "The Meaning of Human Sexuality According to Karol Wojtyla and Sigmund Freud," in *Ethics & Medicine*, 23.3, 2009, 159.

<sup>128</sup> *Faith according to Saint John of the Cross*, 239.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 239.

body. John Paul develops this theology by arguing that not only is faith supernatural, but it is part of humanity's ontology. Faith is both supernatural and an ontological human virtue. It creates an earthly (yet mystical) basis for likeness between humanity and God that allows for mystical union to occur. In John Paul's mystical theology, the conjugal body offers mystical likeness to God.<sup>130</sup> He reaches this conclusion by first stating that eroticism is part of the ontology of humanity. Second, the erotic experience of mysticism is found within the body, not outside of it. Finally, nuptial union is thus not only a transcendent matter, but it is present and experienced in the conjugal body. Therefore, the human body plays a crucial role in mystical nuptial union for John Paul. This is quite different from John of the Cross' theology which omits any positive discussion of the body. The theology of nuptial union is John Paul's springboard into the theology of conjugal union. John of the Cross' theology is therefore the foundation for John Paul's theology. This is why this thesis argues that while John Paul's theology differs in fundamental ways from the tradition of bridal mysticism, he does not reject the tradition, but builds on it.

John Paul analyzes John of the Cross' understanding of nuptial union in relation to conjugal union. He does this by likening conjugal union to nuptial union. Thus, conjugal union serves as a lens of study of nuptial union. Therefore, like the tradition of bridal mystics, John Paul uses the body and its conjugal nature to discuss nuptial union. However, unlike his predecessors he argues for the ontological likeness of the mystical body with the conjugal body.<sup>131</sup> John Paul argues that not only is embodied person created in the likeness of God, but that conjugal union images nuptial union.<sup>132</sup> Human sexuality, therefore, is part of this new understanding of mysticism.

#### Love and Responsibility:

*Faith according to Saint John of the Cross* not only marks the beginning of John of the Cross' influence on John Paul's thought concerning nuptial union,

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 56.

<sup>131</sup> The mystical body refers to the spiritual human body, the soul, namely that which is disembodied and otherworldly.

<sup>132</sup> Whether this is a possible or logical argument is of theological importance and for this reason, it is of no relevance to this paper.



but it also marks the beginning of a new approach to the body and conjugal intimacy in the tradition of bridal mysticism. John Paul like John of the Cross is interested in nuptial union, but unlike him, he develops a theology that incorporates the conjugal body in the mystical union between God and humanity. His early interest in the conjugal body is further developed in his later work *Love and Responsibility*<sup>133</sup> where the erotic is no longer discussed in relation to bridal mysticism, but in relation to conjugal intimacy.

John Paul II justifies his reasons tackling the problem of marriage in *Love and Responsibility* by the “very abundance of factual material on the subject [which] stimulates both general reflection and the effort to synthesize what is known.”<sup>134</sup> He notes that while the Bible’s key passages on marriage are important sources of influence (Matthew 5:27, 28, Matthew 19:1-13, Mark 10:1-12, Luke 20:27-35, John 8:1-11, 1 Corinthians 7 (throughout), Ephesians 5:22-33),<sup>135</sup> his account of marriage is primarily based upon his philosophy of conjugal union and his phenomenological analysis of ‘real experience’. H. T. Willets comments on the importance of human experience in the writing of John Paul:

This work is open to every echo of experience, from whatever quarter it comes, and it is at the same time a standing appeal to all to let experience, their own experience, make itself heard, to its full extent [...] *Love and Responsibility*, with this sort of methodological basis [i.e. experience] [...] need fear nothing which can be legitimized by experience.<sup>136</sup>

The importance of real and lived sexual conjugal experiences is basic to John Paul’s thought. *Love and Responsibility* gains its informative credibility from its personal dimension. One can state that *Love and Responsibility* is to married couples what *Faith* is to mystics. While the latter guides mystics towards nuptial union based on real experience of divine/human union, the former guides couples

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<sup>133</sup> Hereafter, this work will be referred to as *L&R*.

<sup>134</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*, Trans. William Collins Sons & Co. London: Ignatius, 1981, 15.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.* 16.

<sup>136</sup> Willets in *L&R*, 10.

towards conjugal union based on real experiences of the interpersonal union of man and woman.

As Mary Shivanandan states, while John Paul is always interested in the personal experience of love in general, he is even more interested in marital love. Even his plays display this interest.<sup>137</sup> *The Jeweler's Shop*, an early work of John Paul's, is an example of his great interest in marital love. It is a three-part play that focuses on love, marriage and its mystical dimension.<sup>138</sup> In the second act, a character by the name of Adam discusses the coming of the Bridegroom, i.e. God. He creates a connection between the love of the Bridegroom and the love of man and woman bound in marriage.<sup>139</sup> Conjugal love therefore has a mystical dimension to it which is referred to in *The Jeweler's Shop*. In retrospect, John Paul's early interest in love lead to his treatment of faith, love and spousal union in his study of faith as a vehicle of union in John of the Cross, which in turn lead to his interest in conjugal intimacy in *Love and Responsibility*. While his interest in martial union and love can easily be traced throughout his works even prior to when he becomes Pope, it is his understanding of love and intimacy that is of interest to this work. How does the body, its sexual function and real human intimacy, develop his understanding of God? Asked from a different angle, how does John Paul's theology understand the body, human sexuality and conjugal intimacy? In basic terms, how is God-talk related with sex-talk for John Paul? The latter is the question which this chapter seeks to answer.

In the fourth chapter of *Love and Responsibility* ("Justice Toward the Creator"), John Paul likens the mystical union of humanity with God to the union

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<sup>137</sup> Mary Shivanandan, *Crossing the Threshold of Love A New Vision of Marriage in the Light of John Paul II's Anthropology*, New York: Catholic University of America, 1999, xvii.

<sup>138</sup> *The Jeweler's Shop: a Meditation on the Sacrament of Matrimony Passing on Occasion into a Drama*, New York: Random House, 1980.

What is of further interest in the works of John Paul II is the importance of practicality rather than speculation. He focuses on real earthly human experience in *FaSJC* and *L&R* (*L&R*, 19). His interest in the practical use of mystical theology over its speculative use leads to his deep intellectual engagement with marriage and conjugal union as they are the embodiment of mysticism and of nuptial union.

<sup>139</sup> *The Jeweler's Shop*, 54-56.

of man and woman.<sup>140</sup> In this section of the book, John Paul develops the notion of self-giving in marriage: man and woman are to surrender both emotionally and physically (i.e. sexually) to one another and in so doing become one flesh.<sup>141</sup> His understanding of mutual self-giving between husband and wife is based on nuptial mystical self-giving, that is, on humanity's full surrender of his/her soul to God who in turn gives his love to humankind. To argue this, he 'likens' conjugal union to nuptial union. It is important to note that this comparison consists of the only passage in the book to make reference to the likeness of nuptial union with conjugal union.<sup>142</sup> What is interesting is that spousal union and the body are discussed without paying much attention to mystical union in a work written not long after John Paul's thesis where he focuses on nuptial union. However, his lack of attention to bridal mysticism must not be interpreted in terms of a lack of interest in the mystical, but in terms of an even greater interest in conjugal intimacy. Thus, John Paul does not reject the early tradition of bridal mysticism's focus on the disembodied nuptial union, but he is further developing other aspects of mysticism that have been omitted, namely conjugal intimacy and the earthly body.

In retrospect, the tradition of bridal mysticism and more specifically John of the Cross' writings are of influence on John Paul inasmuch as he focuses on spousal union and the body. However, an analysis of *Faith, Love and Responsibility* and other works of his have shown that whereas John of the Cross' theology focuses on nuptial union and the disembodied body, John Paul's theology focuses on conjugal intimacy and the conjugal body. Having discussed what John Paul and John of the Cross' individual points of interest are, a comparative analysis of their understanding of (1) union (i.e. nuptial and conjugal), (2) erotic imagery and (3) sex-talk (i.e. sexual intimacy) will shed light on how the two understand spousal union and the body in greater depth.

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 245, 249-254.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 251.

### **3- Bridal Mysticism in John of the Cross and John Paul II:**

As discussed in chapter one, the analogy of the bride and groom is at the very center of John of the Cross' writing.<sup>143</sup> He marries the analogy of spousal union with a highly erotic style of writing to communicate the intimate union of the mystical body with God. Here is an excerpt for John of the Cross' *Living Flame of Love* where the erotic is at the center of his thought:<sup>144</sup>

[...]  
 Will you, please, at last conclude:  
 Rend the veil of this sweet encounter!  
 [...]  
 O soft hand! O touch so delicately strange,  
 Tasting of eternal life  
 [...]  
 And in your fragrant breathing,  
 Full of goodness and grace  
 [...]<sup>145</sup>

In the *Living Flame of Love*, John of the Cross uses a specific vocabulary that paints an erotic and intimate scene of sexual union. The 'encounter', 'a soft hand', 'fragrant breathing' and other references to erotic longing and union are used as analogies for the mystical journey to love and nuptial union itself. In other words, John of the Cross' entire poem describes the spiritual longing of the faithful to unite with God, the experience of union itself and finally, the experience of spiritual ecstasy. The allegory of the bride and groom is fleshed out, so-to-speak, so as to further elaborate on the spiritual longing and journey to unite with God. Every line in the poem is a metaphor for a step in the spiritual journey to union, beginning with the very first stanza where the bride longs for her groom (a metaphor for the faithful who longs to meet with God); to the very last stanza where the bride mentions the previous secret meetings she has had with her groom (symbolizing the diverse experiences of union in the mystical relationship with God). The allegory of the bride and groom is used extensively

<sup>143</sup> This was discussed in chapter one and for this reason it is not further discussed here.

<sup>144</sup> Saint John of the Cross, "Living Flame of Love" *The Essential St. John of the Cross: Ascent of Mount Carmel, Dark Night of the Soul, A Spiritual Canticle of the Soul, and Twenty Poems*, USA: Wilder Publications, 2008.

See appendix 2 for the entire poem of the *Living Flame of Love*.

This poem will from now on be referred to as *LFL*.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

and quite thoroughly by John of the Cross in his attempt to communicate his understanding of nuptial union.

John Paul II, on the other hand, makes use of bridal mysticism and of the image of bride and groom within limits. In *Love and Responsibility*, for instance, John Paul limits his use of the analogy to a mere sentence or two. His discussion of the value of marriage and sexuality is not founded on an elaborate and extensive discussion of mystical union. In fact, the extent to which he likens nuptial union to conjugal union is limited to a few comments on mystical virginity. John Paul is interested in the analogy of the bride and groom in so far as it relates to conjugal union. Whereas the tradition of bridal mysticism interprets mystical union through the allegory of spousal love; John Paul turns his attention to conjugal union using the same theological lens.

While John Paul focuses on human intimacy and the earthly meaning of the body, his theology is part of the greater tradition of mysticism because of his deep interest in mysticism. Cornwell, a major critic of John Paul's theology, comments on the important role and influence of mysticism on John Paul I's thought on sexuality in *Theology of the Body*. The influence of mystical theology is further apparent in John Paul's theology when he discusses the earthly human person in relation to and in the image of God; sexual and gender difference, marital love and "sexual congress: and how they relate to Adam and Eve."<sup>146</sup> Thus, throughout *Theology of the Body*, he returns to the meaning of human sexuality, eroticism and the body when discussing mystical union.<sup>147</sup> In fact, John Paul shows interest in mystical union in so far as it validates human sexuality. Cornwell would therefore agree that while John Paul writes for the average person and on human intimacy, his theology is strongly connected with the tradition of bridal mysticism because of his strong use of mystical theology. What makes him an innovative mystic is that his mystical theology is directed towards the embodied person and human eroticism.

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<sup>146</sup> Cornwell, 139.

<sup>147</sup> This chapter's use of John Paul's *TOB* is limited because it is chapter three's major source of interest.

### Mystical Eroticism and Embodied Eroticism:

John of the Cross uses erotic language and imagery to best describe the experience of intimate union with God, of spiritual ecstasy. Although the term ‘ecstasy’ has a strong sexual connotation, it actually comes from the Greek word ‘*ekstasis*’ which means ‘standing outside oneself’:

The intellect proceeds as far as it is able, step by step on the secret mystical pathway of negation, until at last it has negated everything, including even negation itself. It can then go no farther, its state is ecstatic in the sense of standing outside itself, transcending itself [...]. Of course, when it reaches this point, *human language has also been surpassed*. [... Thus] God is none of the things we can say. [italics added]<sup>148</sup>

The experience of union is for John of the Cross what ecstasy is in the Greek language, it transcends human language.<sup>149</sup> Mystical union cannot be expressed in words alone, but it can be hinted to if it is like a more familiar and common human experience. Human intimacy, for instance, is also known to be ecstatic. Conjugal union is the single human experience that is similar to mystical nuptial union, and, for this reason, it is the primary experience to which nuptial union is likened in bridal mysticism beginning with the *Song of Songs*. John of the Cross, like the tradition of bridal mystics, communicates his experience of nuptial union by using human eroticism. In this way, the vocabulary and the erotic imagery used do not capture the meaning of nuptial union itself, but rather express conjugal union. In turn, the embodied experience of conjugal union hints towards the disembodied experience of nuptial union.<sup>150</sup> While the image of erotic conjugal union is key to understanding nuptial union, conjugal intimacy is of no particular theological significance in John of the Cross’ commentaries. As mentioned in the first chapter, for mystical union to occur, there needs to be ‘darkness’: the sanitization of the human body and intellect from sexual urges.

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<sup>148</sup> Jantzen, 106.

<sup>149</sup> This was discussed in chapter one and for this reason it is not further discussed here.

<sup>150</sup> According to William Harmless, apophatic theology is the means through which Dionysius expresses his knowledge of God in his books, especially in *Mystical Theology*: “at the peak of the ascent, the mind passes over into ecstasy. [...] ‘This type of [apophatic] knowledge can be understood only with great difficulty, and it cannot be understood at all except by one who has experienced it’” (Harmless, 101). Given the importance of Dionysius in the thought of John of the Cross, it is highly likely that he too uses this type of knowledge.

Eroticism is relevant to John of the Cross' thought only in so far as it allows for the communication and dissemination of his thought on mystical union by means of analogy alone. Human erotic experience actually has a negative meaning in his theology: human sexuality is a prison for the soul, so-to-speak.

John Paul, however, does not share this view of erotic intimacy. In John Paul's analysis of John of the Cross's thought in *Faith* he discusses the transformative power of love in favor of human eroticism:

By its nature love makes things equal and hence makes the lover similar to the beloved. The lover possesses the beloved in an intentional form which captivates the will and then the innate power of love causes the lover to adhere to the beloved. This means that the lover is united to the beloved and is transformed into the beloved by participation.<sup>151</sup>

He agrees with John of the Cross that humanity's faith in God's love is what unites the human soul with God. In fact, his analysis of faith is sparked by its uniting power:

“faith is seen [...] as a means of union of the soul with God. This is constantly stated in *The Ascent*, not always in the same words, but in different ways. [...] Very often it is simply stated that faith is the means of union with God [...]. Not infrequently the same thing is asserted in equivalent terms, as when it is said that though faith the soul approaches or is directed to union with God [...]. The same thing is expressed in those words in which the task of leading [...] to union is assigned to the virtue of faith. Sometimes the simple word ‘means’[...]”<sup>152</sup>

John Paul's great interest in faith's transformative power towards spousal union leads to his important discussion on love's transformative power to create equality between the human soul and God and, by extension, between man and woman in conjugal union.<sup>153</sup>

John Paul picks up on love's transformative power to create equality to argue towards the theological significance of the body and of human sexuality: if faith creates equality between the human soul with God and if faith is intrinsic to each person (body and soul) than human sexuality (that is part of the human

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<sup>151</sup> *FaSJC*, 112-113.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 33-34.

<sup>153</sup> Love, therefore is what likens nuptial union to conjugal union. It is what primarily interests John Paul in conjugal union. As will be seen in chapter three, for John Paul, love is at the basis of both nuptial union and conjugal intimacy and for this reason; human eroticism is a valuable human experience.

ontology) must be part of this union. Human sexuality is therefore of theological significance in John Paul's mysticism. This means that God-talk is related with sex-talk for him. This is how John Paul's bridal mysticism relates to the human person, the conjugal body and conjugal intimacy.

#### John Paul II's Sex-Talk:

While both John of the Cross and John Paul speak against 'sexual urges',<sup>154</sup> John Paul does not reject human sexuality in its entirety.<sup>155</sup> Here is Susan Tenbusch's analysis of John Paul's thought on sexual urge and the body:

The Pope warns that the rejection of such virtues as chastity and purity "largely reduces human sexuality to the level of something commonplace, since it interprets and lives it in a reductive and impoverished way by linking it solely with the body and with selfish pleasure." When sexuality's dignity in service to communion and the reciprocal donation between persons becomes degraded and reduced to a consumer good, the persons involved damage themselves psychologically and ethically and turn inward towards themselves instead of outward in self-giving.<sup>156</sup>

While John Paul states that chastity ought to be embraced, he does not argue that all individuals ought to be chaste. Conjugal chastity refers to the observance of what John Paul refers to as a "periodic continence" where a married couple adopts a "moral attitude" by choosing to abstain from sexual union in order to be responsible adults.<sup>157</sup> To observe this periodic sexual restriction is deemed 'moral' by John Paul because he states that such an attitude can be upheld only when both individuals are able to "resist the concupiscence of the flesh," that is to resist disordered utilitarian sexual urges and to perceive the human person as a valuable being whose sexuality ought also be valued as a gift, rather than an object that can temporarily gratify one's sexual urges.<sup>158</sup> Human sexuality is for

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<sup>154</sup> See chapter one for John of the Cross' thought concerning sexual urges.

<sup>155</sup> While this section is mostly concerned with John Paul's theology of the body than John of the Cross' (since the latter does not develop a theology of the body), this chapter does not go into great detail in discussing John Paul's theology of the body since chapter three focuses on this topic.

<sup>156</sup> Susan Tenbusch, *The Life and Writings of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Examined in the Light of the Teaching on the Virtues and Evangelical Counsels of Pope John Paul II*, Diss. University of Fribourg (Switzerland), 2010. Dissertations & theses: Full Text, ProQuest. Web. 1 Oct. 2010, 29.

<sup>157</sup> *TOB* 124:4.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 128:3.



John Paul, not only acceptable, but is valuable towards the meaning of human responsibility and morality.

He further argues that chastity sheds light on the positive meaning of human sexuality as a means to communion among persons, rather than an exchange of material goods. Chastity refers to the mentality with which one approaches the human body, the person and sexuality. It is expressed in the mentality and actions of a man and woman who have freed their understanding of the human body and sexuality from a utilitarian agenda, i.e. where the body and sexuality are used for one's temporary benefit. Chaste love is a non-exploitive love. When man and woman approach one another in chastity, they are capable of loving one another as valuable beings, rather than for the sexual gratification that they may procure one another: "Only the chaste man and the chaste woman are capable of true love."<sup>159</sup> For John Paul, therefore, chastity and conjugal intimacy are not mutually exclusive: man and woman can choose to express their sexual attraction to one another while being free from concupiscent motives. This is very different from John of the Cross' theology where he states that human sexuality works to the detriment of mystical union.

### **Conclusion:**

In retrospect, John Paul's theology is greatly influenced by bridal mysticism and more specifically, by the thought of John of the Cross. The latter's influence on the Pope's work and theology is felt in John Paul's adoption of erotic language, his interest in bridal mysticism and in his positive attitude towards the human body and sexual intimacy. His dissertation on the thought of John of the Cross concerning nuptial union serves as a springboard into discussions of eroticism, conjugal union and the body. In analyzing *Love and Responsibility*, one notices John Paul's greater interest in conjugal intimacy, that is the union of man and woman on earth, rather than nuptial union, namely the mystical union of God with humanity's soul. While he draws on bridal mysticism in his work, his focus on human eroticism and the body ultimately differentiates John Paul's mysticism from that of the tradition of Catholic bridal

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<sup>159</sup> *L&R*, 171.

mystics whose theologies center on the mystical and disembodied interpretation of human eroticism and who ultimately fail to give theological significance to the body. John Paul therefore changes bridal mysticism's focus from the disembodied person and directs it towards the conjugal body.

# CHAPTER 3

## The Body, Personhood and Love

A comparative analysis of the writings of John Paul II with John of the Cross shows that John Paul II's approach to mysticism differs from the latter as well as the tradition of Catholic bridal mysticism. While previous bridal mystics use the body as a symbol, and fail to find intrinsic theological value in the body, John Paul's theology incorporates the body at the central focus of his theology. The present chapter is interested in discussing the nature of John Paul's understanding of the body. How does he incorporate the conjugal body into his mystical theology? In order to answer this, this chapter will argue that John Paul discusses human sexuality in direct relation to God's love by arguing that conjugal union represents the incarnation of nuptial union. What this means is that the communion of persons on earth is an embodied and tangible union that expresses God's love for humanity. His approach to mystical union is therefore practical and experiential in nature: man and woman can experience nuptial mysticism within their bodies.

This chapter will first briefly discuss John Paul's major work on the conjugal body, namely *Theology of the Body*.<sup>160</sup> Second, it will discuss important themes in *Theology of the Body*, i.e. the conjugal body, human intimacy and conjugal intimacy, personhood, marriage, free will, love, and concupiscence versus gift-giving.

### **1-Theology of the Body:**

*Theology of the Body* is understood by many to be a solution to the so-called 'failure' of an earlier encyclical on conjugal love and sexuality by Paul VI. *Humane Vitae* was a response to the work of the Papal Commission for the Study of Problems of the Family, Population and Birth Rate, referred to by many as the "Papal Birth Control Commission."<sup>161</sup> In the highly political atmosphere following the post-Vatican II Church, *Humane Vitae* became one of the most controversial encyclicals in Catholic history.<sup>162</sup> Many concluded that the Church's encyclical was detached from their own personal sexual experience of

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<sup>160</sup> The *Theology of the Body* will hereafter be referred to as *TOB*.

<sup>161</sup> George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: the Biography of Pope John Paul II*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2005, 206.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

the body and of “sexual love”.<sup>163</sup> For these reasons, *Humane Vitae* was stigmatized as the “birth control encyclical” and was greeted with “hostility” and “suspicion”, as George Weigel notes.<sup>164</sup> Even staunchly conservative commentators like Weigel concede that the encyclical was “a pastoral and catechetical failure.”<sup>165</sup> While Wojtyla played an important role in the development of *Humane Vitae*, his more creative contributions did not carry much weight. For this reason, many believe that if Wojtyla’s thought had been taken into consideration, the encyclical would have been received differently. In order to renew the Church’s understanding of embodied sexuality, Wojtyla created his own diocesan commission to study the content of the Papal Commission.<sup>166</sup>

Wojtyla’s commission and *Humane Vitae* both touched important themes, such as Christian personalism, the good of sexual love, and the duty of responsibly planning one’s family by leading a chaste conjugal life.<sup>167</sup> Their conclusion in a nutshell was the rejection of the birth control. However, Wojtyla’s commission based its conclusion on the dignity of the human person, and particularly on the dignity of women, while the Papal Commission focused on morally acceptable and unacceptable sexual acts which gave it an insensitive pastoral edge, resulting in its popular rejection.<sup>168</sup>

As pope, Wojtyla continued this project to renew the foundations of Catholic sexual ethics with 129 general audience addresses over a period of four years, resulting in the publication of *Theology of the Body*.<sup>169</sup> This exploration of the Church’s position on human intimacy, love and the body in *Theology of the Body* is viewed by many as the Pope’s response to *Humane Vitae*’s so-called ‘failure.’

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<sup>163</sup>Ibid., 335.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 334-335.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>167</sup> Chaste conjugal union is discussed in chapter two.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 335.

It can be argued, as Weigel does, that *Theology of the Body*, communicates a less “rigidly conservative” outlook on sexuality and the body.<sup>170</sup> It is true that John Paul does not limit his address to “sexual morality,” but also expounds on the theme of “sexology” (i.e. love and sexuality), based on real human experience.<sup>171</sup> *Theology of the Body* deals with the conjugal body, sexual love and intimacy in the context of conjugal love.<sup>172</sup> That being said, it is important to note that this chapter does not argue that *Theology of the Body* is calling for a “sexual counter revolution,” as does Christopher West.<sup>173</sup> The argument is more limited: namely that John Paul’s approach to nuptial union finds intrinsic theological value in the conjugal body and conjugal intimacy.

## **2- Body and Human Sexuality:**

### **Flesh and Soul:**

John Paul’s basis for integrating the human body in his mystical theology is found in his particular understanding of the unity of the body and soul. For the greater tradition of mystics (like John of the Cross and Bernard of Clairvaux) while the body and soul are part of an entity integral to the meaning of being human, the body refers to the flesh alone.<sup>174</sup> The tradition of bridal mysticism views the fleshly body as a “good companion” to the soul in its journey to God.<sup>175</sup> However, this tradition also views the body as being necessarily tainted with concupiscence.<sup>176</sup> For John Paul, on the other hand, the body refers to the inseparable union of the flesh with the soul: “The spiritual and immortal soul is the principle of unity of the human being, whereby it exists as a whole--*corpore*

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>171</sup> John Cornwell, *The Pontiff in Winter: Triumph and Conflict in the Reign of John Paul II*, New York: Doubleday, 2004, 138-139.

<sup>172</sup> Weigel. 341.

<sup>173</sup> Christopher West, *Theology of the Body for Beginners: a Basic Introduction to Pope John Paul II's Sexual Revolution*, West Chester, PA: Ascension, 2009, V.

<sup>174</sup> John of the Cross and Bernard of Clairvaux’ separation of body and soul is discussed in chapter two.

<sup>175</sup> Marian Maskulak, "The Love Mysticism of Bernard of Clairvaux and Julian of Norwich," *Review for Religious* 68.4 (2009): 365.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 365.

*et anima unus*--as a person.”<sup>177</sup> John Paul differs in his approach to the body in arguing for the theological value of the body in its inseparability from the soul: to think less of the body than of the soul is to misunderstand and violate the unity of the body and soul. For example, he states that to approve of the use of contraception on the basis that the spiritual love between a man and woman is superior to their bodily integrity is to violate the unity of the body and the soul.<sup>178</sup> The “*body and soul are inseparable: in the person, in the willing agent and in the deliberate act they stand or fall together.*”<sup>179</sup>

John Paul’s understanding of the body is summarized by Tenbusch: “John Paul II warns against Rationalism, which radically divides body and spirit, and against a new Manichaeism, which places body and spirit in radical opposition.”<sup>180</sup> In his *Letter to Families*, John Paul II states:

The separation of spirit and body in man has led to a growing tendency to consider the human body, not in accordance with the categories of its specific *likeness* to God, but rather on the basis of its similarity to all the other bodies present in the world of nature, bodies which man uses as raw material in his efforts to produce goods for consumption [italics added]. Man, [...], ceases to live as a person, as a subject, and inevitably becomes an object (section 19).<sup>181</sup>

When the body is separated from the spirit, it becomes "a complex of organs, functions and energies to be used according to the sole criteria of pleasure and efficiency. This approach leads to regarding human sexuality “more as an area *for manipulation and exploitation* than as the basis of that *primordial wonder.*”<sup>182</sup> For John Paul, the conjugal body and conjugal intimacy is "the sign, place and language of love, that is, of the gift of self and acceptance of another, in all the other's richness as a person.”<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Susan Tenbusch, *The Life and Writings of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Examined in the Light of the Teaching on the Virtues and Evangelical Counsels of Pope John Paul II*, Diss. University of Fribourg (Switzerland), 2010. Dissertations & theses: Full Text, ProQuest. Web. 1 Oct. 2010, 22.

<sup>178</sup> John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth: Veritatis Splendor*, Boston: Pauline & Media, 2003, section 50.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., section 49.

<sup>180</sup> Tenbusch, 22.

<sup>181</sup> *Letter to Families* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1994), par. 19.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid, 19,

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, 19,

John Paul's understanding of the body/spirit unity makes the body a "spiritualized body" and the spirit "an embodied spirit".<sup>184</sup> "*The body, therefore, can never be reduced to mere matter* [italics added]."<sup>185</sup> With John Paul's emphasis on the unity of body and spirit, the body is more than the seat of the spirit, it is one with the spirit and is therefore a core dimension of the subject, rather than an object. John Paul resists any form of objectification of the body. The objectification of the body is the subordination of the body to the will of another: "the means [i.e. the body] is subordinated to the end [i.e. the desire of another body], and at the same time *subordinated to some extent to the agent* [not the author of the body]."<sup>186</sup> It is this insistence on the intrinsic subjectivity of the body that differentiates his theology from that of the tradition of bridal mystics. "*The person, including the body, is completely entrusted to himself, and it is in the unity of body and soul that the person is the subject of his own moral acts.*"<sup>187</sup> John Paul's anthropological understanding of the human person combines the spiritual with the biological "inclinations" of man and woman, so-to-speak.<sup>188</sup> The conjugal body finds intrinsic theological meaning in John Paul's mysticism because of its ability to make moral decisions, rather than being necessarily tainted with concupiscence.

#### Personhood:

John Paul states that the human ability to make moral and ethical decisions resides in humanity's *personhood*: that is a person's ability to reason and to express their right to choose.<sup>189</sup> John Paul develops this notion of personhood in relation to "beginning", that is, the genesis story where Adam, the first created human, is alone and in need of a companion or helper: " 'It is not good that the man' (male) should be alone; I [God] want to make him a helper similar to himself.'"<sup>190</sup> In the second account of the creation story, the focus is on

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<sup>184</sup> Tenbusch, 22.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>186</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*, Trans. William Collins Sons & Co. London: Ignatius, 1981, 25.

<sup>187</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, section 48.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., section 50.

<sup>189</sup> John Paul II, *L&R*, 24.

<sup>190</sup> Genesis 2:18 in *TOB*, 5:2.



how man (without referring to his gender) is “alone”.<sup>191</sup> John Paul concludes that humanity is created as a social being by nature. It is therefore in reference to human nature that John Paul develops the notion of the “original solitude,” namely humanity’s need of being in a spousal relation with another being.<sup>192</sup> The ‘original solitude’ refers to a time where the first human is alone on earth and is part of a spiritual union with God alone.<sup>193</sup>

John Paul continues his discussion of the ‘original solitude’ and this time, he refers to the first creation story where male and female genders play an important role: Adam is defined as male only once the female human, Eve, is created.<sup>194</sup> Thus, the secondary meaning of solitude refers to the solitude of both the male and female gendered persons and of their natural need to be in union with one another. The creation of gendered beings is God’s answer to the original solitude. When humanity is first in a spousal relation with God, the human person is still, in some sense, ‘alone’. The creation of opposite genders allows for man and woman to become part of a new spousal relation with one another experienced in the body in conjugal union.<sup>195</sup> While there are other bodies (namely animal bodies) which Adam is in contact with, the biblical narrative states that none of these bodies are like his. Eve’s body, on the other hand, is similar to Adam’s and is therefore a fit companion. Personhood is therefore a spiritual and material reality revealed in the human body from the very ‘beginning’, for John Paul.

The original solitude of Adam and the creation of Eve as a fit body support John Paul’s statement that embodied personhood and reason are exclusive to humanity alone, thus differentiating the human body from the animal body. John Paul makes no difference between male and female personhood. Males and females are both equally free agents: they are “two different ‘incarnations,’ that is, two ways in which the same human being,

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<sup>191</sup> *TOB*, 5:3.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:3.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:5.

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:3.

<sup>195</sup> The importance of the male and female union is further discussed in the section on marriage.

created ‘in the image of God, is a body,’” argues John Paul in *Theology of the Body*.<sup>196</sup>

While personhood is exclusive to humanity, the power to choose is limited to one’s own embodied personhood. To choose for another is to violate personhood and to strip the body of its subjectivity; this implies treating the other as an object, rather than a subject—the relation between the two is no longer one of equality and reciprocal submission, but one of abuse where a person is approached as an inferior being, as ‘something’ rather than ‘someone’.<sup>197</sup>

Nobody can use a person as a means towards an end, no human being, nor yet God the Creator [...] since by giving man an intellect and free nature, he has thereby ordained that each man alone will decide for himself the ends of his activity, and not be a blind tool of someone else’s ends.<sup>198</sup>

Personhood precludes the right to choose for another. “No one else can want for” another, for “no one can substitute his act of will for” another.<sup>199</sup> Each body possesses the unique ability to choose uniquely for one’s self, but not for another: free will is “*alteri incommunicabilis*—not capable of transmission, not transferable.”<sup>200</sup>

The nature of the relation between a man and woman can therefore either dignify the body as a constitutive dimension of personhood, or undermine the body through objectification. This means that for John Paul, the nature of sexual union can be dignified, while for the tradition of bridal mystics, it is necessarily mired in concupiscence. On the other hand, for John Paul, sexual intimacy is undignified when it takes place outside the bonds of conjugality, for instance.<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> *TOB*, 8:2.

<sup>197</sup> In *L&R*’s treatment of utilitarianism, John Paul sets the difference between ‘use’ and ‘abuse’. He provides a basic template for an analysis of all forms of sexual abuse (25-39). Abuse is discussed in John Paul’s sexology and will be further discussed in the section on ‘conjugal union’.

<sup>198</sup> *L&R*, 27.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>201</sup> It is important to note John Paul’s theological influences in matters of marital value. According to Mary Shivanandan, “Wojtyla’s interest in the psychological aspects of love and union, which can be discerned from his theses on St. John of the Cross and Max Scheler, develops further in his analysis of marital love since the emotions play such a large part in sexual love. His affirmation of the emotions and the senses, when integrated with mutual self-giving in

His reasoning behind the importance of marital love as opposed to extramarital love is rooted in his understanding of marriage and what it offers to the sexual experience of a couple.

Marriage:

John Paul begins his discussion of the bodily experience of sexual love in his work on marriage, namely *Love and Responsibility*, with a simple question: in marriage, does “a woman constitute for a man, in the sexual relationship, something like a means to the various ends which he seeks to attain within that relationship? Equally, does not a man constitute for a woman the means towards the attainment of her own aims?”<sup>202</sup> In other words, John Paul is concerned about the ethical interpretation of sexual intimacy and the meaning of marriage. What is the role of the body in marriage? How is sexuality expressed and what is its meaning and purpose in marriage?

While a discussion of the modern understanding of love and marriage is beyond the scope of this thesis, the modern drift towards extramarital sexuality,<sup>203</sup> and active homosexual lifestyles is fairly pronounced.<sup>204</sup> John Paul views these trends as part of an increasing tendency to see the body as an object which can be used towards the temporary sexual gratification of the body: “anyone who treats a person as the means to an end does violence to the very essence of the other.”<sup>205</sup> A utilitarian approach to embodied personhood utilizes

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marriage, constitutes one of his major contributions to the Church’s understanding of marriage. It takes away the ‘suspicion’ concerning the goodness of sexuality [...]” (Mary Shivanandan, *Crossing the Threshold of Love: a New Vision of Marriage in the Light of John Paul II’s Anthropology*, Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1999, 36).

<sup>202</sup> *Love and Responsibility*, 26.

<sup>203</sup> Eleanor D. Macklin’s study “Education for Choice: Implications of Alternatives in Lifestyles for Family Life Education” (*Family Relations* 30.4 (1981)) agrees that while traditional family ethics teaches post-marital sex and intra-marital childbearing, the latter is no longer the case (Ibid., 567). In 1970, 40% of American households consisted of married couples with children. In 1978, this number dropped to less than one-third (Ibid., 567). This number keeps decreasing each year.

<sup>204</sup> According to Joseph Fried’s chart on the percentage of male homosexual relations in the United States (beginning in 1988 until 2006), male homosexuality has almost tripled since (*Democrats and Republicans--Rhetoric and Reality: Comparing the Voters in Statistics and Anecdotes*. New York: Algora Pub., 2008, figure 7). From 1988 until 1992, a total of 4.6 % men were engaged in homosexual relations, while in 2000-2006, this number increased to 8.8% (Ibid.).

<sup>205</sup> *L&R*, 27.

the body as a means to an end: “*To use means to employ some object of action as a means to an end*—the specific end which the subject has in view.”<sup>206</sup>

Conjugality is crucial to John Paul’s understanding of sexual ethics. The permanent bond between a man and woman,<sup>207</sup> expressed in the form of marital vows, represents (for John Paul) man and woman’s deep respect of one another as persons, rather than mere objects that can be discarded after a temporary exchange of bodily pleasures: “Giving oneself only sexually, without the full gift of the person to validate it, must lead to” utilitarianism, namely the violation of personhood.<sup>208</sup> While John Paul is aware that not all sexually involved individuals choose to enter into a conjugal union with their partner, he believes that a first step towards the expression of personhood is to enter into conjugal union. He confirms this stance in his letter to families where he discusses the union of a wife and husband, i.e. the family, as the first place where human beings begin to discover personhood: “*the affirmation of the person* is in great measure to be referred back *to the family* [...] the family is in many ways the first school of how to be human.”<sup>209</sup> Conjugal union is thus crucial to the development and respect of personhood, for John Paul. While John Paul argues

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<sup>206</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>207</sup> Anderson, 63.

While divorces do occur, John Paul’s understanding of marriage as a permanent bond is not affected: “one cannot give into the divorce mentality,” states John Paul (*Address of John Paul II to the Prelate Auditors, Officials and Advocates of the Tribunal of the Roman Rota*, Jan. 28, 2002, <[www.Vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul-ii/speeches/2002/January/documents.html](http://www.Vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul-ii/speeches/2002/January/documents.html)>, (July 5<sup>th</sup> 2011), segment 5). John Paul encourages the opposition to legal acts of divorce as well as the opposition to homosexual unions and other so-called “de facto unions” (Ibid., segment 9).

<sup>208</sup> *Love and Responsibility*, 39.

Sexual intercourse must always be about an encounter and communion of persons:

the sexual urge in a human being is always in the natural course of things directed towards another human being—this is the normal form which it takes. If it is directed towards the sexual attributes as such this must be recognized as an impoverishment or even a perversion of the urge. [...] The natural direction of the sexual urge is towards a human being of the other sex and not merely towards ‘the other sex’ as such. It is just because it is directed towards a particular human being that the sexual urge can provide the framework within which, and the basis on which the possibility of love arises (L&R 49)

When two individuals long for a communion of persons rather than the temporary satisfaction of sexual desires, such sexual longing or so-called ‘sexual urges’ are natural and ethical for John Paul.

<sup>209</sup> John Paul II, *Letter to Families*, Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1994, 15.

that conjugal union is the single union of man and woman where human intimacy is dignified, he notes that sexual abuse does sometimes take place in the bonds of marriage.

### **3- Conjugal Intimacy and Abuse**

It is clear that for John Paul, the human body can become implicated in abusive human relationships if it is understood or treated as an object rather than a subject. The objectification of the body “is precluded by the very nature of personhood, by what a person is,” i.e. a free and unique agent, authoritative over his or her own body.<sup>210</sup> However, while conjugal union should exclude any form of utilitarian exploitation of the other, it does not prevent the abuse of the body. According to John Paul, the ‘use’ or ‘abuse’ of the body is the anti-thesis of ‘love’: he presents “‘love’ as the opposite of ‘using’.”<sup>211</sup> To respect the body and personhood is to show love towards the body and the person. In John Paul’s opinion, to love a person (i.e. to respect his/her personhood) is distinguished from a utilitarian approach to the person in the attitude with which one approaches a person:

Love in human relationships is not something ready-made. It begins as a principle or idea which people must somehow live up to in their behaviour, which they must desire if they want—as they should—to free themselves from the utilitarian, the ‘consumer’ attitude (Latin *consumer* e= ‘use’) towards other persons.”<sup>212</sup>

Love is expressed in one’s understanding of the self and of the other as equal persons, not as ‘consumer goods’, that is objects for self-gratification.

The desire for a permanent relation of inter-dependence and respect for personhood is contingent to the reciprocal submission of man and woman to a common good or goal: “love between two people is quite unthinkable without some common good to bind them together.”<sup>213</sup> To reach consensus on a common goal depends on man and woman’s willingness to reject utilitarian and selfish

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<sup>210</sup> L&R, 26.

<sup>211</sup> L&R, 28.

The capacity to love, according to John Paul, is found in human relationships alone: “Love is exclusively the portion of human persons” (L&R 29). The animal world, for instance, is not capable of being part of a love relationship.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid., 28.

goals: “Man’s capacity for love depends on his willingness consciously to seek a good together with others, and to subordinate himself to that good for the sake of others.”<sup>214</sup>

Furthermore, the mutual subordination of man and woman to a common goal creates a union of equals, of two subjects.<sup>215</sup> The communion of two persons respects the body and sexual love as gift rather than objects of desire. Sexual love is therefore valorized in John Paul’s theology as tangible mystical goods. In this sense, Stephen John Heaney is correct in stating that John Paul’s discussion of “lust and shame” gives importance to the body, rather than underappreciating it.<sup>216</sup>

#### **4-Concupiscence vs. Gift-Giving:**

For John Paul, sexuality is a mystical good; concupiscence, however, is a distortion of this good: “concupiscence, [is] an inclination to sin which John defines as the lust of the eyes, the lust of the flesh, and the pride of life [which] burdens the mutual relationship of man and woman.”<sup>217</sup> In other words, concupiscence is a distorted understanding of love that treats the body as a slave to sexual urges. It is a negative approach to human sexuality and the body:

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>215</sup> John Paul further discusses the implications of love of the body versus abuse of the body in relation to the power dynamics in a marital relation. He refers to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant concerning the human person. Kant states that one should “act always in such a way that the other person is the end and not merely the instrument of your action” (*L&R* 28). Kant states that a person’s body should never be used as a means to an end, but that a person’s body should constitute the end in itself. What John Paul disagrees with in Kant’s approach to conjugal union, however, is the idea of ‘mutual enjoyment’ which he interprets as ‘mutual use’.

Unlike Kant, John Paul is determined to offer a more thorough challenge to any form of utilitarian thinking about the role of the body in marriage: “‘Domination’ indicates the disturbance and *loss of the stability* of that *fundamental equality* which the man and the woman possess in the ‘unity of the two’ and this is especially to the disadvantage of the woman, since only the equality resulting from their dignity as persons can give to their mutual relationship the character of an authentic ‘*communio personarum*’” (*Mulieris Dignitatem* 10). In fact, for the latter, to use another for one’s own aims is never condoned under any circumstance. Use always means abuse, for John Paul II. John Paul develops a Kantian principle to argue that respect among persons requires respect for their distinct personal ends: “whenever a person is the object of your activity, remember that you may not treat that person as only the means to an end, as an instrument, but must allow the fact that he or she, too, has or at least should have, distinct personal ends” (*TOB* in *L&R* 28).

<sup>216</sup> Stephen John Heaney, *The Concept of the Unity of the Person in the Thought of Karol Wojtyła (Pope John Paul II)*, Diss. Marquette University, 1988. Dissertations & Theses: Full Text, ProQuest. Web. 1 Oct. 2010, 10.

<sup>217</sup> *L&R*, 29.

[it] leads man "to treat as his own possession another human being[...]." A "love" "reduced only to the satisfaction of concupiscence (1 Jn 2: 16), or to a man's and a woman's mutual 'use' of each other, makes persons *slaves to their weaknesses*."<sup>218</sup>

It is concupiscence (and not the fleshly body) that leads to the domination of one being over another: "the tendency is to dominate and possess the other as an object, and to give a partial or temporary gift of self in return."<sup>219</sup> Concupiscence is not exclusive to the flesh. Concupiscence is a response of the person in his or her entirety (flesh and spirit): "the sexual urge is somehow a property of the whole human, not just of one part or sphere," namely the sexual sphere.<sup>220</sup> The sexual body is therefore, not the centre of concupiscent tendencies, for John Paul: "Sexuality is an enrichment of the whole person--body, emotions and soul."<sup>221</sup> Unlike the tradition of bridal mystics, John Paul does not presume that sexual desire burdens or derails the soul, to the contrary, to deflate human sexuality, as John of the Cross and Bernard did, is to ultimately reject mystical union.

Concupiscence is not only expressed in the use of another body for one's own pleasure, but is expressed in the misunderstanding of one's body as an object: man and woman begin "to exist intentionally as an object for the potential satisfaction of the sexual need inherent in his masculinity [or femininity]," according to John Paul.<sup>222</sup> A person overcome by concupiscence offers his or her own body as a mere commodity to another rather than a gift of love. Woman, for instance, misunderstands her body when she presents herself as an object for man's satisfaction:

[she] perennially exists 'for the man,' expecting that for the same reason he also exists 'for her'—[...] has become a mere

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<sup>218</sup> Tenbusch, 29.

<sup>219</sup> *L&R*, 29.

<sup>220</sup> Stephen John Heany, *The Concept of the Unity of the Person in the Thought of Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II)*. Diss. Marquette University, 1988, Dissertations & Theses: Full Text, ProQuest. Web. 1 Oct. 2010, 11.

<sup>221</sup> Pope John Paul II, "Familiaris Consortio - John Paul II - Apostolic Exhortation (November 22, 1981)," *Vatican: the Holy See*. Web. 01 Oct. 2010.

<[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html)>, 37.

<sup>222</sup> *TOB*, 41:1.

object for the man: *that is, she begins to exist intentionally as an object for the possible satisfaction of the man's sexual urge that lies in his masculinity.*<sup>223</sup>

Concupiscence distorts the meaning of the body and of personhood by treating the body as a commodity that is at the disposition of others, instead of being in the sole possession of its owner. Concupiscence “brings with it an almost constitutive *difficulty in identifying oneself with one's own body.*”<sup>224</sup> According to John Paul's philosophy of personhood, to be master of one's own body allows a person to present his/her body as a gift, rather than an object:

Concupiscence in general—and the concupiscence of the body in particular attacks precisely this ‘sincere gift’: *it deprives man, [...] and in some sense ‘depersonalizes’ man, making him an object ‘for the other’.* Instead of being ‘together with the other’—a subject in unity, [...]—man becomes an object for man, the female for the male and vice versa.<sup>225</sup>

As Andre Ong states, it is self-possession that allows for gift-giving to take place.<sup>226</sup>

According to John Paul, concupiscence leads to a change in the nature of the spousal relation between man and woman: man and woman are no longer in communion with one another, they are in each other's possession. “From the moment in which the man ‘*dominates*’ her, *the communion of persons*—which consists in the spiritual unity of the two subjects who gave themselves to each other—is replaced by a different mutual relationship, namely, by a relationship of possession of the other as an object of one's own desire.”<sup>227</sup> The relation between man and woman is then no longer one of mutual subordination, but of a utilitarian nature. Therefore, it is concupiscence, and not sexuality in its essence, that distorts a positive conception of the nature of the body, sexual desire and sexual intimacy for John Paul II. As such, John Paul moves away from traditional mysticism's under-appreciation of the body and moves towards a

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 41:1.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 29:4.

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 32:4.

<sup>226</sup> , John Paul II's *Philosophy of the Acting Person: a Personalistic Approach to Life*, Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 2008, 185.

<sup>227</sup> John Paul II in Ong's *John Paul II's Philosophy of the Acting Person*, 254.



renewed appreciation of the body based on the personalistic norm where the body finds meaning in its inseparability from the soul.

### **5-The Incarnation of Nuptial Union in Conjugal Union:**

John Paul II's sex-positive approach to the body is based on his understanding of the dignity of personhood, the meaning and importance of marriage and the appreciation of the body as embodied subjectivity rather than an object or means. Critical to John Paul's understanding of personhood, mutual self-giving, and concupiscence is how these themes contribute to his mystical theology of the body. While these themes argue for the positive meaning of the body based on the role of man and woman vis-à-vis the body, these themes are also part of John Paul's mystical theology of the body as he explores the meaning of human intimacy in direct relation to God and, more specifically, to nuptial intimacy.

For John Paul, the body, for instance, is the embodiment of God's love in the flesh, so-to-speak:

This is *the body*: a witness to creation as a fundamental gift, and therefore a witness to Love as the source from which this same giving springs. Masculinity-femininity [...] is the original sign of a creative donation and at the same time the sign of a gift that man, male-female becomes aware of as a gift lived so to speak in an original way.<sup>228</sup>

Like God's love, the human body cannot be grasped as an object, but as a person "knowledge of whom comes through a relationship of mutual donation."<sup>229</sup> The intimate union of male and female persons on earth is the embodiment of the mystical communion of persons in nuptial union.<sup>230</sup> The mutual donation of man to woman and vice-versa is the embodiment of God's gift of love to humanity and humanity's spiritual surrender to God. Thus, man and woman present themselves as gifts to one another as God gifts humanity with love, hence the

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<sup>228</sup> *TOB*, 14:4.

<sup>229</sup> Shivanandan, 21.

<sup>230</sup> As mentioned in chapter one on John of the Cross' mystical theology, God takes form in a mystical body, and in the role of the divine groom. God cannot be grasped as an object, but can be known as a person because of his "*personalist* character" (Mary Shivanandan, *Crossing the Threshold of Love A New Vision of Marriage in the Light of John Paul II's Anthropology*. New York: Catholic University of America, 1999, 21).

importance of personhood and of ‘gift-giving’ in John Paul’s mystical theology of the conjugal body.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Shivanandan is correct in stating that John Paul’s approach to the body as a gift is an innovative approach to “traditional Catholic teaching on sexuality.”<sup>231</sup> John Paul’s theology of the body restores the body’s positive sexual meaning by stressing concupiscence as the cause for negative forms of sexuality rather than blaming sexual desire as a whole.<sup>232</sup> Human sexuality and human sexual desire is embraced in John Paul’s mystical theology. Sexuality is ethically sound when couples engaging in sexual acts do not approach sex from a utilitarian perspective. When human sexuality is embraced as being inseparable from the soul, and when it is understood as the embodiment and expression of God’s gift of love to humanity, human sexuality and the body find mystical value. Thus, while the tradition of bridal mystics understood the body as a separate entity and an object tainted with concupiscence, John Paul understands the body as a tangible mystical ‘gift’. John Paul’s understanding of *personhood* and of God’s *personalism* builds a bridge between conjugal intimacy and mystical nuptial intimacy: to receive the body as a gift and to engage in a mutually submissive relationship of self-giving between persons is to experience mystical love in the flesh, so-to-speak.<sup>233</sup>

With John Paul’s theology of the body, the human body is more than a symbol for something other than itself (as in the tradition of bridal mysticism); the temporal body is the culmination of mystical experience, so-to-speak. John Paul’s sex-positive approach to the temporal body understands nuptial union from a practical point-of-view where the average individual can experience the mysticism of communion in the earthly human realm in one’s personhood and body. While John Paul’s theology of the body differs from the tradition of bridal mystics in its positive attitude towards human sexuality, his understanding and mystical valorization of the body and conjugal union draws on the conceptual

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<sup>231</sup> Shivanandan, 138.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>233</sup> Ong, 183.

resources of bridal mysticism and the theology of nuptial union. The flesh finds value in its inseparability from the soul; human sexuality finds value in its embodiment of mystical love and the human body is valorized as a gift for its resemblance to God's gift of mystical love. Bridal mystical theology is therefore crucial to John Paul's theology of the body. While this chapter has argued for John Paul's innovative approach to mystical theology and focus on human sexuality and the body, his approach represents an innovative development of, rather than a break from, the tradition of bridal mystical theology. He does not, therefore, reject the earlier tradition of bridal mysticism, but builds on that same tradition drawing it towards a sex-positive theological approach to the conjugal body.

# **CHAPTER 4**

## **The Female Body and Sexuality: Does Equality Preclude Gender Difference?**

At a conference of Catholic feminist theologians, Pope John Paul II once expressed the hope that he would be remembered as ‘papa feminista’ (the feminist pope). His encyclicals (beginning with *Redemptor Hominis*) also argue for ‘a new feminism’.<sup>234</sup> This chapter explores the case for the relevance of John Paul’s theology of the body, more specifically his understanding of personhood, for modern feminist thought. However, it does not argue that John Paul’s theology embraces a feminist agenda. What this means is that while John Paul’s theology hoped to argue for the dignity of woman, he did not fight for popular feminist cause, such as the right to abortion, reproductive choice (contraception, reproductive technologies), female ordination, and so on.

The first part of this chapter compares John Paul’s theology of the female body with the tradition of bridal mysticism. I argue that his approach to female embodiment, equality, and identity offers a more interesting trajectory for Catholic feminist theory than the contributions of classic female mystics and visionaries such as Julian of Norwich or the modern Catholic mystics such as Teilhard de Chardin, whose works are regularly appealed to by some theorists as important resources for Catholic feminism. The second part of this chapter attempts to situate John Paul’s thought vis-à-vis modern feminist thinkers such as Luce Irigaray and Tina Beattie. In so doing, it discusses both the compatibility of John Paul’s thought on the female body and sexuality with certain trajectories of modern feminism as well as the significance of his theory on *personhood* for modern feminist theory.<sup>235</sup>

### **1- The Feminine in Catholic Mysticism:**

As Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel notes, from the beginning of feminist movements, the “male redeemer Jesus” has been a cause of conflict for women.<sup>236</sup> This is because institutions, societies and cultures insist on describing

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<sup>234</sup> Pope John Paul II, *Redeemer of Man: Encyclical Redemptor Hominis*, Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1979, paragraph 1.

<sup>235</sup> It is important to note that crucial to this chapter’s thesis are important theological notions discussed in great detail in chapter three, such as personhood, person and God’s personalism.

<sup>236</sup> Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel, “The Women’s Jesus” in *A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey*, NY: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1986, 117.

the Christian God in a male and patriarchal fashion. In *Womanguides: Readings toward a Feminist Theology*, Rosemary Radford Ruether raises the question of whether an exclusively male Christ alienates women from claiming their humanity. How can a woman affirm the dignity of her body when her incarnate human redeemer is male? These questions are representative of how modern feminism's understanding of the meaning of woman's body is based on the meaning of the male body. Many modern feminists turn to the tradition of Catholic mystical theologies of love and nuptial union as theological resources to shed light on the meaning of the female body. How does this tradition of mysticism serve modern feminism and how does John Paul's thought contribute to this tradition?

While there are numerous Catholic mystics whose writings are concerned with the body, nuptial union and erotic imagery, not all of their writings can be incorporated in this chapter due to lack of space.<sup>237</sup> The focus of this chapter will be on two mystics: Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth century visionary (1342-1413), and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1884-1955), a Jesuit priest, paleontologist and geologist.<sup>238</sup> The reason why these two mystics have been chosen is two-fold. First, given the role of feminist theory in this chapter, it was important to have both a male and female mystic who represent both classical and modern approaches to nuptial mysticism. Second, both Julian and Teilhard are important mystics in feminist theory. According to Dr. Thomas L. Long, "modern feminist criticism and feminist theology in the past two decades has claimed Julian of Norwich as a proto-feminist."<sup>239</sup> Furthermore, according to feminist author

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<sup>237</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153) was one of the pivotal medieval proponents of the mystical vision of rhapsodic nuptial love (Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love: Plato to Luther*, New York: Random House, 1966, 184). Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), a mystic greatly influenced by Bernard of Clairvaux maintained that virginity is the highest form of nuptial union, after which follows motherhood and conjugal union for the spiritually and carnally weak (Anne H. King-Lenzmeier, *Hildegard of Bingen an Integrated Vision*, Plengg/Munchen: WRS-Verl., 2001, 28).

<sup>238</sup> Omega Institute, "Faculty Profile, Ursula King," Web page. 6 October 2007.  
<<http://www.eomega.org/omega/faculty/viewProfile/56e12d50304dcdaalc912e899e5c84c8/>>

<sup>239</sup> Thomas L. Long, "Julian of Norwich: Essentialist and Feminist?" Proc. of Julian of Norwich: Essentialist and Feminist, Society for Feminist Studies Open Panel, Modern Language Association Annual Convention. 29 Dec. 1998. Web. 10 July 2011.  
<[http://community.tncc.edu/faculty/longt/papers/Julian\\_Essentialist\\_&\\_Feminist.html](http://community.tncc.edu/faculty/longt/papers/Julian_Essentialist_&_Feminist.html)>.

Ursula King, Teilhard is one of the few authors in contemporary society whose writings reflect what she terms as a “neo-feminist consciousness,” “which recognizes gender polarity but transcends gender polarization and seeks to develop a new holistic spirituality based on participatory consciousness and on a new paradigm of social relationships which replaces domination and submission by communion” of the male and female bodies.<sup>240</sup> This next section looks at their theology of female body and compares it with John Paul II’s theology.

#### Julian of Norwich:

The middle ages are the “Golden Age of the English Recluse,”<sup>241</sup> according to Clifton Walters. It was also a time where Catholic mysticism has a distinct female voice, and for this reason, Man Wai Yuen calls it the “Golden Age of women mystics.”<sup>242</sup> Religiosity and zeal were shown in choosing a life of “meditation on God and withdrawal from society.”<sup>243</sup> What drew men and women to lead a religious life was the “spiritual quest,” that is, the journey to find love.<sup>244</sup> These men and women led religious lives with the desire to find an answer to Richard Rolle of Hampole’s important question:<sup>245</sup> “What is love?”<sup>246</sup> Julian of Norwich, for instance, answers “God is Love.”<sup>247</sup> Julian’s *Showings* or documented visions are infused with a theology of love and spousal union that creates an interesting alliance between God’s love and the “feminine significance,” as Jennifer Heimmel notes.<sup>248</sup>

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<sup>240</sup> Ursula King, *Religion and Gender*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1995, 43.

<sup>241</sup> Clifton Walters, “The Recluse are Corwyche: Introduction,” *Julian of Norwich Revelations of Divine Love*, Trans. Clifton Wolters, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1985, 22.

<sup>242</sup> Man Wai Yuen, *Religious Experience and Interpretation: Memory as the Path to the Knowledge of God in Julian of Norwich’s Showings*, New-York: Peter Lang, 2003, 64.

<sup>243</sup> Walters, 21.

<sup>244</sup> Yuen, 54.

Like other bridal mystics, she expresses her theology of God's feminine love through a romanticized language where God and humanity unite in the form of bridegroom and bride: "Christ speaks to humankind as the bridegroom to the bride."<sup>249</sup> Unlike most mystics, however she argues that God's love is feminine in nature: God loves humanity as a mother loves her child. Grace M. Jantzen is one of many feminist scholars interested in Julian's theology of motherhood.<sup>250</sup> While Julian's visions of a feminine Christ are interesting, her theology is not new, according to Jantzen. The Montanist Priscilla, for instance, is said to have seen Christ appear to her in the form of a woman who is brought to the cross:<sup>251</sup> "Christ came to me in the likeness of a woman, clad in a bright robe, and planted wisdom in me."<sup>252</sup> However, what differentiates Julian's writing from other female mystics is her attempt to articulate a coherent theology of the feminine Christ.<sup>253</sup> Her vision of Jesus as 'Mother' is basic to her argument towards a new meaning of the feminine.<sup>254</sup> While Jesus is a male redeemer, he shows compassion and redeems humanity by virtue of his feminine ability to love.

Furthermore, the complementarity of femininity and masculinity is portrayed in Julian's understanding of God as two-fold: Mother and Father. As Benedictine monk Jean Leclercq indicates: a woman can claim her humanity as a woman based on the fact that Father God alone does not constitute God in its entirety, Mother God completes the Godhead.<sup>255</sup> While the history of Catholic

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<sup>248</sup> Jennifer P. Heimmel, *God Is Our Mother: Julian of Norwich and the Medieval Image of Christian Feminine Divinity*, Queenston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1999, 1.

<sup>249</sup> *A Revelation of Love*, chapter 58:13 in Nicholas Watson and Jacqueline Jenkins' *The Writings of Julian of Norwich: a Vision Showed to a Devout Woman and a Revelation of Love*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State UP, 2006.

<sup>250</sup> Grace M. Jantzen, "Love was his Meaning": Julian's Theological Method," in *Julian of Norwich: Mystic and Theologian*, London: SPCK, 1987, 90.

<sup>251</sup> Moltmann-Wendel, "The Women's Jesus," 119.

<sup>252</sup> Priscilla in Rosemary Radford Ruether's *Sexism and God-talk: Toward a Feminist Theology: with a New Introduction*, Boston: Beacon, 1993, 131.

<sup>253</sup> According to Bridget Mary Meehan and Gloria Ortiz, Julian makes reference to Mother God eighty-three times in *Revelations* and thirty of these references refer to a maternal Christ (Mary Meehan and Gloria Ortiz, *Delighting in the Feminine Divine*, Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1994, 100).

<sup>254</sup> Julian of Norwich, "The Forty-Sixth Chapter," in *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, Trans. Edmund College and James Walsh. The Classics of Western Spirituality; NY: Paulist Press, 1978, 260.

<sup>255</sup> Jean Leclercq, "Preface" in *Julian of Norwich: Showings*, Trans. Edmund College and James Walsh. The Classics of Western Spirituality; NY: Paulist Press, 1978, 12.



mysticism refers to God and Jesus with male pronouns, according to Julian's theology, women are not excluded from the Godhead. Women can make claim to the male redeemer Christ in his feminine quality to love and to the Godhead in its dual nature, male and female. Julian's extensive use of "the female body as female-identified literary tool" creates a textual space for women to identify with God through religious text.<sup>256</sup> It is the space that Julian creates for femininity in her God-talk that is of particular interest to feminist scholars. She develops a theology of the feminine that allows for feminists to talk about the meaning of woman in direct relation to God.

Furthermore, while Julian's theology of the feminine allows women to claim equal right to God and Jesus, her conception of femininity finds meaning *as opposed to or distinct from* that of masculinity: the female body/person finds intrinsic theological value in Julian's theology of mother God in relation to its masculine counterpart, namely Father God. Mother God works according to the will of Father God: "Our Father decides, our mother works."<sup>257</sup> Julian's Mother God does not function with equal agency as Father God does in the Godhead. Woman's intrinsic value depends on the masculine whereas the masculine finds meaning in its own gender. This is where John Paul's theology of the female body can offer a more interesting trajectory to feminist authors in his understanding of the female body and its intrinsic theological value independent of man's body.

John Paul's theology of the embodied human *person* created in the likeness of God's *personal* nature develops a gendered theology of two equal incarnations of God that are not in opposition to one another. For John Paul, gender difference does not preclude equality: "Woman complements man, just as man complements woman: men and women are *complementary*."<sup>258</sup> Womanhood expresses the 'human' as much as manhood does, but in a different

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<sup>256</sup> McAvoy Liz Herbert, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe*, Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2004, 12.

<sup>257</sup> Julian in Gwilym Beckerlegge's *The World Religions Reader*, London: Routledge, 1998, 108.

<sup>258</sup> Pope John Paul II, "Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women," *Vatican: the Holy See*. Web. 10 Jan. 2011, section 7. <[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/letters/documents/hf\\_jp-ii LET\\_29061995\\_women\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/letters/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_29061995_women_en.html)>.

and complementary way.”<sup>259</sup> Woman can claim her equal right to the male redeemer by virtue of her embodied likeness to God. While Julian’s Mother God creates a portal for women to claim exclusive feminine rights to equality; for John Paul, gender exclusive claims to God further develops the gap between man and woman on earth. While man and woman are two different gendered bodies, nevertheless, they are equal persons by virtue of their equal personhood.

#### Pierre Teilhard de Chardin:

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin is another mystic who, like Julian, finds meaning in the feminine body by virtue of her gendered qualities. Teilhard’s writings have a very personal and almost intimate approach to God that is of interest to modern feminism. Catherine Mowery Lacugna notes how feminism is deeply concerned with “the personal and relational.”<sup>260</sup> Teilhard’s understanding of God is precisely in terms of a “religion of the Personal.”<sup>261</sup>

Like Julian, Teilhard conceived of a personal and loving feminine Jesus. His description of Christ as a mother is what interests King as a feminist scholar:

eyes ‘so gentle and filled with pity that I thought my mother stood before me’; eyes ‘like those of a woman, passionate and filled with the power to subdue, yet at the same time so imperiously pure that under their domination it would have been physically impossible for the emotions to go astray.’<sup>262</sup>

Teilhard’s theology of the feminine Christ is based on his understanding of love as a feminine attribute. Woman finds meaning for Teilhard in her ability to express love, which is a God-like attribute. It is important to note that for Julian and Teilhard, the feminine finds meaning in her gender’s exclusive ability to love as God loves humanity. On the other hand, woman does not find meaning in her fleshly body. Therefore, while Julian and Teilhard find meaning in the feminine, her feminine body does not find meaning. An important question arises here:

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid. section 7.

<sup>260</sup> Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel, “The Women’s Jesus” in *A Land Flowing with Milk and Honey*. NY: Crossroad Publishing Co, 1986, 267.

<sup>261</sup> Lubac, Henri, *The Faith of Teilhard de Chardin*. Tr. Rene Hague, London: Burns & Oates, 1964, 17.

<sup>262</sup> Ursula King, *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin: Writings Selected with an Introduction by Ursula King*, New York: Orbis Books, 1999, 60.

how can woman claim equal rights to the male redeemer in her female embodiedness? In *Womanguides: Readings toward a Feminist Theology*, Rosemary Radford Ruether, a feminist, asks this very question: Won't an exclusive male Christ ever alienate women from claiming their humanity as women?<sup>263</sup>

While many feminists would argue that Teilhard and Julian's feminine God and Christ solve women's problem of spiritual alienation, nevertheless their mystical and disembodied theology does not give meaning to the temporal female body. For Julian, for instance, the female body is a means of explaining her mystical experiences and to elaborate on the insight gained from them.<sup>264</sup> For Teilhard, the feminine is a source of theological insight into the cosmos and into the creative ability of God. Paul Santmire is correct in stating that: "elements of the material order, and human erotic attraction in particular, are to be cherished for what they can elicit, for what they can draw forth in terms of spirit, not for what they are as such."<sup>265</sup> However, woman's body finds no value in his theology. Simply stated, woman does not find dignity in her temporal body in either Teilhard or Julian's theology. This is where John Paul's theology of the body can offer a solution.

With John Paul, the feminine's source of equality and dignity is *personhood* which is not dependent on the masculine, but on the body itself: the male and female are both persons, they are "two different 'incarnations,' that is, two ways in which the same human being, created 'in the image of God, is a

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<sup>263</sup> Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Womanguides: Readings toward a Feminist Theology*, Boston: Beacon, 1985, 112.

<sup>264</sup> Liz Herbert McAvoy's book on Julian's writings discusses the relevance of the feminine body in Julian's mysticism (McAvoy Liz Herbert, *Authority and the Female Body in the Writings of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe*, Woodbridge, Suffolk: D.S. Brewer, 2004). Concerning the role of the feminine body, according to McAvoy's study of Julian, the fleshly female body does not play an important role in the dignity of the feminine in Julian's thought. It creates a new feminine language with which she discusses God, but it does not make any claims towards the intrinsic theological value of the fleshly body.

<sup>265</sup> H. Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature: the Ambiguous Ecological Promise of Christian Theology*, Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985, 168. His study of Teilhard states that according to the mystic, sexual relations ought not take place (168).

body,”” argues John Paul in *Theology of the Body*.<sup>266</sup> The feminine in John Paul finds meaning in her body, in her own personhood, that is, in her likeness to God’s *person*. John Paul’s understanding of the feminine stands on her own two feet. Thus, John Paul’s theology lifts the problem of temporal alienation with his theology of personhood where man and woman find divine meaning and dignity in their earthly bodies.

## **2- John Paul and Modern Feminism**

John Paul’s understanding of the body as the source of female dignity is an argument towards gender equality. Both man and woman find meaning in their individual bodies because they are each equally dignified by their personhood. Personhood, the source of human dignity, is not exclusive to man or to woman, but is a feature of humanity as a whole. That being said, there are those who remain doubtful of the equality of the female body in relation to the male body. Mary Hadden Lemmons, associate professor of philosophy and Catholic studies at the University of St. Thomas, states that many criticise John Paul and the Church for presenting different gender roles for man and woman. They argue that the Church is not committed to gender equality since it prohibits the ordination of women:

This argument presupposes that equality precludes gender differentiation. If so, then differentiated gender roles reflect inequality. But is this right? Must all forms of equality obliterate all differences? Or, is it possible for there to be an equality of difference? [...] So the question becomes whether the commonality that allows comparison must be identical; must ‘equality’ be a univocal concept?<sup>267</sup>

For these critics, a person’s function in relation to society determines their equal dignity.

Lemmons makes an interesting observation: do different gender roles presuppose gender inequality? John Paul argues that there are no ‘gender roles’ in his theology of the body, as opposed to what his critics state. What does exist

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<sup>266</sup> *TOB*, 8:1.

<sup>267</sup> Mary Hayden Lemmons, "Equality, Gender, and John Paul II" *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture* 5.3 (2002): 111-30. *MUSE*. Web. 24 Mar. 2010, 111. <<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/logos/v005/5.3lemmons.pdf>>.

according to him are ‘natural gender dispositions’ that create differences between man and woman “*not only from the physical and psychological points of view, but also from the ontological.*”<sup>268</sup> Man and woman are naturally inclined towards certain inclinations that are different from one another but that do not set man and woman in a hierarchy of persons: “*Man is a person, man and woman equally so, since both were created in the image and likeness of the personal God.*”<sup>269</sup> Man and woman are equal by virtue of their personhood and not their gender dispositions or functions.<sup>270</sup> Different natural gender dispositions do not preclude equality, for John Paul.<sup>271</sup>

John Paul’s approach to the female body is similar to French feminism’s approach where humanity is understood not as one, but as two, male and female. Feminist scholar Tina Beattie is not opposed to the idea of having her thought compared to John Paul’s interpretation of sexual difference. She makes her own comparison of John Paul’s thought with French feminism by comparing the latter with the important French Feminist Luce Irigaray. Feminist theorists Sylviane Agacinski and Irigaray, whose views are compared to John Paul’s would perhaps be horrified by their comparison to a conservative male Catholic leader of a church that rejects female ordination based on her sex alone. That being said, John Paul’s theology of the female body is related to ‘new feminism’ and is therefore relevant for modern feminist scholarship. The following section will discuss Agacinski and Irigaray’s point of views in comparison with John Paul II’s.

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<sup>268</sup> John Paul II in *Equal and different: Edith Stein and John Paul II on Women* edited by Woodruff, Elizabeth Anne, M.A., University of St. Michael's College (Canada), 2008, Dissertations & Theses: Full Text, Proquest. Web January 13<sup>th</sup> 2011, 35-36.

<sup>269</sup> John Paul, II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 6.

<sup>270</sup> In *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul states: “men and women are mutually enriching in their differences” (John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 7, 22). Gender difference has a positive effect on male and female relations, it does not create a hierarchy of genders.

<sup>271</sup> When referring to natural gender dispositions, this chapter refers to the different vocations of man and woman defined by their different genders. For instance, in *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul discusses the vocation of women that is exclusive to their gender and which also dignifies women in their female bodies, such as motherhood (section 6). Woman is dignified as a mother in her unique claim to the *theotokos* (mother of Jesus) (section 2:4).

## New Feminism

As Lisa Sowle Cahill notes, feminism's interest in personal experience is based in its relatively new found interest in women's experience of womanhood across the globe: "over the past decade and a half or so, feminism has shifted into a postmodern gear in which cultural and experiential differences among women have moved to the center of attention."<sup>272</sup> Gender role differences among different cultural communities find new bases for finding "common grounds" if not "universal" grounds towards female advocacy.<sup>273</sup> What makes this new feminism different from other forms of feminist theory is (1) its Catholic philosophical foundation and (2) its understanding of 'difference feminism', i.e. that men and women have different strengths and roles, nevertheless, they remain equals.<sup>274</sup>

The predominantly Catholic philosophical foundation of new feminism is a first major reason why John Paul's theology of the body can be incorporated into feminist theory. New feminism is not new to the Pope. As Michele Schumacher notes, "the challenge of founding and articulating a *new feminism*" has already been dealt with in *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical.<sup>275</sup> In this encyclical he argues for the inviolability of human life based on man and woman's equal rights including their inviolable rights over

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<sup>272</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill in *A Just & True Love: Feminism at the Frontiers of Theological Ethics: Essays in Honor of Margaret A. Farley*,. Ed. Maura A. Ryan and Brian F. Linnane, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2007, 20.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>274</sup> Tina Beattie, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory*, London: Routledge, 2006, 19.

It is ironic that John Paul II's new feminism (that is comprised of Catholic feminism and is linked to other feminist movements, such as French feminism), is focused on the dignity and the role of women alone. His focus has largely been on the significance of women in *TOB*. One might ask, what about the role and dignity of men? To which John Paul has no written answer.

Women seem to be in a better position than man to relate with John Paul's theology of the body and with bridal mysticism as well, because of their feminine gender. In bridal mystical theology, the writer writes from the perspective of a woman. Jeffrey Kripal picks up on this in his criticism of bridal mysticism (Jeffrey J. Kripal, "Heroic heretical heterosexuality," *Cross Currents*, FindArticles.com. 12 Jul, 2011.

<[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m2096/is\\_3\\_54/ai\\_n8680880/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2096/is_3_54/ai_n8680880/)>). Kripal states that Catholic mysticism makes it difficult for a heterosexual male to identify with the voice of the bride uniting with Christ, the groom. While the female gender "fits" with this model of mystical heterosexual love, he believes that the male gender does not fit.

<sup>275</sup> Michele M. Schumacher, *Women in Christ: toward a New Feminism*, Ed. Michele M. Schumacher Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004, ix.

their own bodies.<sup>276</sup> John Paul's theology of the female body argues for woman's rights to choose for herself as an agent equal to man. Second, like many Catholic theologians and philosophers, such as Edith Stein, John Paul II emphasizes the "equal dignity and worth of women" while insisting on "the difference between" men and women.<sup>277</sup> Given these two important similarities between John Paul's thought and new feminism, how can his thought contribute to feminism?

The relation of the soul with the body is key to John Paul's theology of the female body. According to Sr. Prudence Allen's study, John Paul's approach to the meaning of woman is not new: "the starting point for several philosophies of the person and of woman's identity proposed throughout the history of philosophy" begins with the relation of woman's body with her soul.<sup>278</sup> John Paul writes in *TOB* that the female body like the male body is in equal likeness to God by virtue of her equal claim and likeness to God in her personhood:

[the male and female bodies are] two 'incarnations' of the same metaphysical solitude before God and the world—*two reciprocally completing ways of 'being a body' and at the same time of being human*—as two complementary dimensions of the self-knowledge and self-determination, and at the same time, *two complementary ways of being conscious of the meaning of the body.*<sup>279</sup>

Like Edith Stein, John Paul argues that woman like man finds God in her temporal body.<sup>280</sup> The human soul which is one with the body is not gender specific.<sup>281</sup> It is manifest in the body: "The body makes visible the invisible soul."<sup>282</sup> The body, male or female, embodies God equally. Man and woman's bodies are thus equally dignified.

What John Paul's thought offers feminist theory is a different source for gender equality: while most feminists understand gender equality in terms of

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<sup>276</sup> Pope John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life: [Evangelium Vitae]*. New York: Random House, 1995, #99.

<sup>277</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Equality, Difference, and the Practical Problems of a New Feminism," in *Women in Christ* by Schumacher, 304.

<sup>278</sup> Prudence Allen, "Philosophy of Relation in John Paul II's New Feminism," in Schumacher, 69.

<sup>279</sup> *TOB*, 10:1.

<sup>280</sup> Prudence Allen, 69.

<sup>281</sup> See chapter three on the oneness of the human body with the soul.

<sup>282</sup> *TOB*, 19:4.

occupying similar socio-political and religious roles, John Paul understands the body (i.e personhood) as the seat for gender equality. For the former group, woman finds dignity outside her body, that is in her relation to man. For John Paul, woman finds dignity inside her body and in relation to God's personalism. "*Both man and woman are human beings to an equal degree, both are created in God's image.*"<sup>283</sup> "*Man is a person, man and woman equally so, since both were created in the image and likeness of the personal God.*"<sup>284</sup> John Paul's theology of personhood offers woman new grounds for gender equality where the meaning of the feminine stands in direct relation to God, without needing the masculine as a measuring stick for her human dignity.

### Feminist Theory

Tina Beattie makes an interesting comparative analysis of John Paul II's thought, a Catholic conservative on the one hand, with the thought of a "radical French philosopher of sexual difference,"<sup>285</sup> Luce Irigaray, on the other hand. "Is Luce Irigaray a Catholic? Is the Pope John Paul II a feminist? Most feminists (and probably most Catholics) might say 'no' to these questions," but Tina Beattie is less certain.<sup>286</sup> Her comparative discussion of the two thinkers supports the argument that John Paul's thought is relevant for feminism. She focuses on that which is basic and innovative to John Paul's thought, namely that women's source of equality is found in "themselves" rather than in men, and it discusses its relevance for modern feminists, even as radical as Irigaray.<sup>287</sup>

Irigaray understands sexual difference as woman's source of meaning and sexual dignity. Gender difference, therefore allows for the full realization of the sexual meaning and function of the body: man and woman's unique ability to

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<sup>283</sup> John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 3:6.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:6.

<sup>285</sup> Tina Beattie, "Carnal Love and Spiritual Imagination: Can Luce Irigaray and John Paul II Come Together?" in *Sex These Days: Essays on Theology, Sexuality and Society*. Ed. Jon Davies and Gerard Loughlin. Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic, 1997, 160.

<sup>286</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

To use Beattie's interesting word play, "perhaps Luce Irigaray and John Paul II are occasionally dancing to the same tune, even if they are not quite dancing cheek to cheek" (161).



unite sexually and to form one body that gives theological value to the conjugal body. In *Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray discusses the patriarchal tendency of our society by discussing the economy of relations and how these relations have one common denominator, namely man: “man and god(s),” “man and man,” “man and world,” and finally, “man and woman.”<sup>288</sup> Woman, the world, God, and man find meaning in their relation(s) to man. Woman, for instance, is dignified in her sexual body in her intimate encounter with man.

On the other hand, as mentioned previously, for John Paul, the function of the body does not give meaning to the body; it makes visible that which is already part of humanity’s ontology, namely personhood. The intimate union of man and woman therefore does not give meaning to the male and female body. However, man and woman alike, are dignified through their individual personhood, a theory which John Paul develops in relation to the book of Genesis, more specifically the creation stories.<sup>289</sup> John Paul’s theology of personhood leads to his theology of the “original solitude,” namely humanity’s need of being in a spousal relation with another human.<sup>290</sup> The ‘original solitude’ refers to a time where the first human is part of a spiritual spousal union with God but feels alone on earth.<sup>291</sup> The creation of conjugal union (in the creation of gendered bodies and of Eve) is God’s answer to Adam’s solitude. Therefore, John Paul’s understanding of personhood and by extension of individual dignity goes back to the first spousal relation that is with God. The dignity of the female body is therefore in direct relation with the original spousal relation with God, namely nuptial union as opposed to conjugal union (with man), which is what Irigaray claims.

John Paul II and Irigaray’s thought further differs in their understanding of sexual ecstasy. For John Paul, the gift of self, child-bearing and motherhood are primary goals of female sexuality.<sup>292</sup> Irigaray, like Beattie and Susan Ross,

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<sup>288</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1993, 9.

<sup>289</sup> See chapter three where personhood is explained in relation to the book of Genesis.

<sup>290</sup> *TOB*, 5:3.

<sup>291</sup> *Ibid.*, 5:5.

<sup>292</sup> However, John Paul does argue for the value of sexual pleasure in the life of a woman as well as in the life of a man. In fact, in the last chapter of *Love and Responsibility*, John Paul

thinks differently. She argues that the clitoris (for woman), unlike the penis (for man), is “purely” a sexual organ meant for pleasure alone:<sup>293</sup>

For him, orgasm and the means of fertilization are physically inseparable. For her, there is a more complex relationship between orgasm, sexual intercourse and conception. Unlike the man, she can reproduce without orgasm, and her orgasm has no reproductive function. The clitoris symbolizes this otherness and difference.<sup>294</sup>

Sexual pleasure is inseparable from sexual pleasure for man, argues Irigaray. While the two are separable in woman’s case, she further argues. Woman’s sexual organ can function towards orgasm alone without necessarily leading to reproduction. The argument for the purely ecstatic nature of the female pleasure organ is meant to open doors towards a new ethical stance on “non-reproductive sexual pleasure,” where one can talk about sexual pleasure without reproduction.<sup>295</sup> While John Paul holds a conservative Catholic view of sexual intimacy, where child-bearing is an integral goal of every intimate union, he does make a claim for the importance of sexual ecstasy that is often neglected in many discussions regarding Catholic sexual ethics.

In the last chapter of *Love and Responsibility*, he writes that woman’s personhood comes to a full sexual realization when she experiences orgasm.<sup>296</sup> While he agrees that when a woman is denied orgasm, “her basic biological capacity, her fertility,” is not affected,<sup>297</sup> he argues that the denial of female orgasm is the denial of her human sexuality “woman is robbed of various goods—she is denied orgasm,”<sup>298</sup> and by extension, of her body and personhood. This means that for John Paul, female orgasm is more than a pleasurable experience; female orgasm is the full realization of woman’s sexual difference, her personhood and human dignity. John Paul, unlike Irigaray and other

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writes to men and advises them to bring their wives to a sexual climax (*Love and Responsibility*, 282-285).

<sup>293</sup> Beattie, 178-179

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 178-179.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 180.

<sup>296</sup> John Paul II, *Love and Responsibility*, 273.

<sup>297</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 283.

feminists, attributes a greater meaning to female orgasm and her sexuality and does so in direct relation to the meaning of female bodily dignity.

### **CONCLUSION:**

While John Paul holds a conservative view regarding female sexuality and the body, this does not preclude a fairly robust affirmation of the equality of man and woman's bodies. John Paul, like other mystics such as Julian of Norwich and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, argues for the meaning of the feminine based on her personal relation with God. Unlike those who deflate the intrinsic theological significance of the sexual body, John Paul not only incorporates the temporal female body in his theology, but understands it, more specifically as a central dimension of personhood, as the embodiment of God's personal self-giving, and therefore develops a theology on the dignity of the sexual feminine body.

Furthermore, while man and woman are equal 'incarnations' of God, John Paul argues that they image God differently in their gendered difference. While a number of feminists argue that gender difference precludes equality, John Paul and new feminists reject this view. Such arguments fail to understand woman for her unique and different inclinations from man.<sup>299</sup> Human dignity is not dependent on the function of the body, but on the body itself. Unlike Luce Irigaray who argues for the meaning of the female body in relation to its sexual encounter with man, John Paul's theology points to woman's body as the seat of her human dignity and meaning. What this means is that Irigaray's understanding of woman is in relation to man, while John Paul II's understanding of woman is less relational: woman has an autonomous and independent source of validity which is personhood. Personhood, in turn, is dependent on the original spousal relation with God, rather than with man. This means that woman's primary relationship is with God, not with man. This does not suggest that the conjugal relation is secondary to nuptial relation, but that nuptial mysticism is brought into the dimension of conjugal union. In other words,

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<sup>299</sup> Fox-Genovese in Schumacher's *Women in Christ*, 297.

nuptial union is not deflated by John Paul, but is reintegrated in the discussion of conjugality.

In retrospect, Irigaray, Julian and Teilhard's understanding of the meaning of the feminine is found outside the female body and in relation to the masculine, while for John Paul, the meaning of the feminine is found inside woman's ontology and body, namely in her personhood. John Paul's embodied approach to woman's personhood is a window of opportunity for feminist theorists to discuss the meaning of female sexuality and the female body based on woman's ontology. This is John Paul's major contribution to feminist theory.

## CONCLUSION

As discussed in this paper, John Paul II's approach to the body begins with his understanding of the Genesis story. Genesis gives rise to his theology of sexuality based on the original spousal union, between God and man, which this paper has referred to as "nuptial union." The Genesis story has also given rise to his particular theology of human sexuality based on the first human spousal union, between Adam and Eve, man and woman, referred to as "conjugal union." This has in turn developed into an innovative theology of the conjugal body that finds intrinsic value in human sexuality and the body through John Paul's distinctive deployment of the resources of nuptial mysticism. However, as discussed in the introduction, as well as in chapter one of this thesis the history of Catholic mysticism has not always viewed the body and human sexuality through a positive lens. The Church Fathers, for instance, struggled with the place of sexuality and sexual desire in Christian life.<sup>300</sup> This long-standing tradition of spirituality argued for the critical importance of celibacy. Only recently do we find a more positive account of the relationship of bridal mysticism to conjugal intimacy. John Paul II has played a critical role in this development.

This paper has argued that while the history of Catholic bridal mystical theology prioritizes the spiritual mystical experience of marriage, love and erotic desire over the experience of human intimacy, John Paul II explores the positive value of the body, sexuality and conjugal intimacy. Marriage to God no longer overrides any concern for human conjugal union in John Paul II's theology.<sup>301</sup> Conjugal intimacy finds significant theological meaning and value alongside divine-human nuptial intimacy. Crucial to this thesis is the argument that while John Paul's mystical thought is innovative in his positive approach to the conjugal body; he does not reject the tradition of Catholic bridal mysticism. To the contrary, the founding arguments to his theology of the body are rooted in bridal mysticism. This paper has argued for this thesis along four lines: first, a

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<sup>300</sup> Martha A. Brozyna, *Gender and Sexuality in the Middle Ages: a Medieval Source Documents Reader*, Jefferson, NC: McFarland &, 2005, 31.

<sup>301</sup> Maura A. Ryan and Brian F. Linnane, eds., *A Just & True Love: Feminism at the Frontiers of Theological Ethic: Essays in Honor of Margaret A. Farley*, Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2007, 32.

brief history of the theology of bridal mystical theology was presented in chapter one; second, the particular relevance and influence of the bridal mysticism of John of the Cross was elaborated in chapter two; third, John Paul II's theology of the conjugal body was analyzed in chapter three; finally, the relevance of John Paul II's theology of the conjugal body and human sexuality for Catholic feminist discourse was briefly examined.

The first chapter concludes that conjugal intimacy is never the subject of discussion in early Christian commentary on key biblical texts such as the *Song of Songs*. Origen of Alexandria interprets the highly erotic text as a metaphor of human-divine nuptial union. The tradition of bridal mysticism builds on this metaphorical and allegorical approach to the text and develops a theology of nuptial union which reaches its climax in the works of John of the Cross. While John of the Cross makes extensive use of erotic language in order to elaborate and communicate the spiritual and chaste union of humanity with God, he fails to recognize the theological significance of the temporal body. In a nutshell, the tradition of bridal mysticism prioritizes mystical nuptial union over conjugal union. For this reason, the temporal body and its embodied sexuality are of no theological significance for this early tradition.

This paper argues that while John Paul is greatly influenced by John of the Cross' thought as well as the tradition of bridal mystics, he shifts the focus of erotic mysticism from the otherworldly to the embodied and intimate union between man and woman on earth. This is the basic argument at the heart of chapter two. Chapter two discusses how John of the Cross' rendering of the nuptial union between the soul and God shapes John Paul II's conception of the nuptial union between woman and man. His dissertation *Faith According to Saint John of the Cross* serves as a springboard into discussions of nuptiality, eroticism, conjugal union and the body in his later theological works. John of the Cross' influence on the Pope's work and theology is most visible in John Paul's adoption of erotic language, his interest in bridal mysticism, the erotic and sexual intimacy and spousal union.

In analyzing John Paul's *Love and Responsibility*, one notices John Paul's great interest in spousal intimacy in his focus on conjugal intimacy rather than divine-human nuptial union. While he draws on bridal mysticism in his work, his focus on human eroticism and the body ultimately differentiates John Paul's mysticism from that of the tradition of Catholic bridal mystics whose theologies center on the mystical and disembodied interpretation of human eroticism and who ultimately fail to give theological significance to the body. John Paul therefore changes bridal mysticism's focus from the allegorical and disembodied spirituality of the nuptial journey and directs it towards the embodied conjugal body.

The third chapter focuses on John Paul II's major studies on marriage and the conjugal body, namely *Theology of the Body* and *Love and Responsibility*. This chapter argues for the incarnation of mystical nuptial union in the conjugal union. While the evolving tradition of bridal mysticism employs the body as a symbol and fails to find intrinsic theological value in the body, this chapter shows how John Paul's theology incorporates the conjugal body as a central focus of his theology. John Paul's theology of the body restores the body's positive sexual meaning by targeting concupiscence, a deformed exploitive form of sexual desire, as the cause for negative forms of sexuality rather than blaming sexual desire per se. John Paul's understanding of *personhood* and of God's *personalism* builds a bridge between conjugal intimacy and the human body with mystical nuptial intimacy and God: to give and to receive the body as a gift as well as to engage in a mutually submissive relationship of self-giving between persons is to experience the mystery of love in the flesh.

John Paul's sex-positive approach to the conjugal body understands nuptial union from a practical point-of-view where the average individual can experience the mysticism of communion in the earthly human realm in one's personhood and body. While John Paul makes new claims towards the conjugal body, he does so in direct relation to the importance of mystical union. The conjugal body finds value in its mystical relation with God discussed in the Genesis story.

While John Paul holds conservative views regarding male and female sexuality and the body, this does not preclude a fairly robust affirmation of the equality of gender different embodied persons. This is further discussed in chapter four in its argument towards the relevance of John Paul's thought vis-à-vis the body for modern feminism. This chapter analyzes John Paul's thought vis-à-vis two other mystics whose thought has been viewed as relevant to Catholic feminist discourse, namely Julian of Norwich and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. It concludes that unlike the latter two who deflate the intrinsic theological significance of the sexual body, John Paul not only incorporates the temporal female body in his theology, but understands it, more specifically as a central dimension of personhood, as the embodiment of God's personal self-giving. Therefore, he develops a theology of the dignity of the sexual feminine body.

Furthermore, while some traditions of feminism argue that attention to the significance of gender difference undermines the gender equality project, John Paul rejects this view. John Paul's theology points to woman's body, that is to herself and not her relation to man, as the seat of her human dignity and meaning. Woman's personhood is dependent on the original spousal relation with God, rather than her relationship with man. This does not suggest that the conjugal relation is secondary to nuptial relation, but that nuptial mysticism is brought into the dimension of conjugal union. What this means is that John Paul's theology of the conjugal body is rooted in mystical nuptial union: man and woman are dignified in their bodies from the very beginning in the story of Genesis where God decides that wo/man is alone and therefore needs a fit helper (i.e. another body/person). This chapter reaffirms a point made earlier, in chapter three, namely John Paul's theology of the conjugal body is mystical at its roots and finds ontological theological dignity and meaning in the human flesh and sexuality. John Paul II's mystical understanding of woman is therefore defined less in relation to the opposite sex in contrast to difference feminists such as Luce Irigaray, for instance, who define the dignity of woman in her stance of relationality to man.



In short, this thesis has therefore argued that while John Paul II belongs to a religious tradition that is widely perceived to hold conservative and counter-cultural ideas concerning sexuality and the body, he offers an innovative and mystical approach that may open theological doors for a creative reengagement of Catholic thought with contemporary sexual ethics.

## Appendix 1

*Dark Night of the Soul* by Saint John of the Cross translated by Kieran Kavanaugh.

### Stanzas of the Soul

1. One dark night,  
fired with love's urgent longings  
- ah, the sheer grace! -  
I went out unseen,  
my house being now all stilled.  
2. In darkness, and secure,  
by the secret ladder, disguised,  
- ah, the sheer grace! -  
in darkness and concealment,  
my house being now all stilled.  
3. On that glad night,  
in secret, for no one saw me,  
nor did I look at anything,  
with no other light or guide  
than the one that burned in my heart.  
4. This guided me  
more surely than the light of noon  
to where he was awaiting me  
- him I knew so well -  
there in a place where no one  
appeared.  
5. O guiding night!  
O night more lovely than the dawn!  
O night that has united  
the Lover with his beloved,  
transforming the beloved in her  
Lover.  
6. Upon my flowering breast  
which I kept wholly for him alone,  
there he lay sleeping,  
and I caressing him  
there in a breeze from the fanning  
cedars.  
7. When the breeze blew from the  
turret,  
as I parted his hair,

it wounded my neck  
with its gentle hand,  
suspending all my senses.  
8. I abandoned and forgot myself,  
laying my face on my Beloved;  
all things ceased; I went out from  
myself,  
leaving my cares  
forgotten among the lilies.

Appendix 2

*Living Flame of Love* by Saint John of the Cross translated by Antonio T. de Nicolas.

(Songs that the soul sings in her intimate union with God, her beloved  
Bridegroom.)

O Love's living flame,  
Tenderly you wound  
My soul's deepest center!  
Since you no longer evade me,  
Will you, please, at last conclude:  
Rend the veil of this sweet encounter!

O cautery so tender!  
O pampered wound!  
O soft hand! O touch so delicately strange,  
Tasting of eternal life  
And canceling all debts!  
Killing, death into life you change!

O lamps of fiery lure,  
In whose shining transparence  
The deep cavern of the senses,  
Blind and obscure,  
Warmth and light, with strange flares,  
Gives with the lover's caresses!

How tame and loving  
Your memory rises in my breast,  
Where secretly only you live,  
And in your fragrant breathing,  
Full of goodness and grace,  
How delicately in love you make me feel!  
How gently and how lovingly.

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