

# Interview with Bishop Jean Laffitte on Theology of Human Love

By CNA Staff

**CNA:** Blessed Pope John Paul left a significant doctrinal corpus known as the “Theology of the Body”. This doctrinal corpus has had a significant impact in the US. From your perspective, how is this development perceived?

**Bishop Laffitte:** The doctrinal corpus you are talking about consists of the 133 catecheses that were pronounced by Pope John Paul II from 1979 to 1984.

These catecheses are very well structured because they start with a meditation from the Pope, in a philosophical manner, on the nature of man and woman in their original state.

He talks about original solitude, showing how woman and man are made one for the other as reflected in the action of creation by God in the second chapter of Genesis.

The entire catechesis must be seen from the intention of the Creator, at the beginning. Pope John Paul II first refers to the dialogue that Christ has with the Pharisees when they asked Jesus, “Don't you know that Moses gave us a law allowing us to divorce our wives?”

To which Jesus said, “Yes he did, but it was because of your hardened hearts. At the beginning, it was not so. God created man and woman, and man will leave his father and his mother and will be united with his wife and both will make one flesh.”

It doesn't say “one person” but one flesh. It means that both remain two different persons as moral subjects free to choose to act accordingly to their own nature – man as a man and woman as a woman.

So, the interesting thing is that for the first time in the history of the Church the Pope, the successor of Peter, pronounced this publicly every Wednesday for five years ... which means that there is an intention to teach something on the matter.

Significantly, the corpus of the Catecheses belongs to the Magisterium of the Church, even though it's not an encyclical or a dogma. However, it was the intention of John Paul II to teach on this matter as Pope.

It was the first time a reflection of the Church had been made on human love and on the manner one human person relates to another person in conjugal love, and a contemplation of the mystery.

We have to keep in mind that the Pope is talking about mystery – the mystery of creation, the mystery of the beauty of man and woman, and mystery of the relationship between God and the two human beings, both created in His image and likeness.

And the mystery of what they are naturally.

They are created in their humanity, concretely in their bodies, and their bodies are different. He made man and woman capable of a particular union, which is so particular that at the same time it can express the deep feeling and aspiration to be united to the other person ... To express human love in this highest and deepest meaning, and at the same time in such a way that it can have as its result the coming into existence eventually of a new human being, if nature so allows.

That's extraordinary – it means that it's the only possibility in nature for a new human life to come into existence – through the loving union between a man and a woman.

So if we contemplate this point, we understand why for the Church the two mysteries – of union and procreation, love and giving life – are intrinsically connected and thus cannot be separated.

The key to the correct interpretation of this catechesis on human love is to contemplate its mystery. We are talking about God's intention – the union of two persons both created in His Image.

This teaching is not only a general or personal reflection of the Pope, who happened to have been a philosopher, and a very good and deep one.

One of the Pope's seminal works *Love and Responsibility* was written in 1960, eighteen years before he became Pope. Consequently, the Catecheses of which we are speaking are in fact the magisterial fruit of a work that already had reached its maturity in 1960.

So, it's a very, very important doctrinal corpus.

Obviously such contemplation is focused not only on the creational aspect -- and on the metaphysical, ontological and anthropological aspects – but the mystery also includes what was God's providential intention for the loving union to become.

It should become a sacrament ... Such a loving union should symbolize and realize in itself an action of God and a union of God Himself, that being between Christ and the Church.

So, there's a sacramental part to the Catecheses but also an ethical part, a moral part, because when you are created in such a manner, then what you are doing in your sexual union with your husband, with your wife, is so meaningful, so mysterious, so great.

Then, of course, the truth of the matter is that you cannot use this faculty in whatever way you please. The sexual faculty is something that belongs to nature but also belongs to a human being who is called to eternity, to an eternity of love with God.

**CNA:** What do you identify as the blessings of Blessed Pope John Paul's doctrine on love, the human body and human sexuality?

**Bishop Laffitte:** The first blessing is that this doctrine has given people a tool through which to understand their own nature, their own aspiration to love and to be loved.

Pope John Paul II always referred to such fundamental experiences, which are the deepest in the heart of man.

Among these fundamental experiences are the desire to contribute to society, to create something in life, to build a family – all of these things are fundamental experiences we all have in our hearts. But perhaps the essential one is the desire to love and to be loved.

And so, this development by John Paul II allows everyone to understand himself, who he is or who she is.

Marriage is the perfect mediation for such experience because through marriage you discover not only the fulfillment of human and natural aspiration but also the spiritual. Marriage conveys the grace it gives you as a sacrament, the grace of God and the dynamism of this love that is not only human but also is divine.

The blessing is to have answered the question that everybody has had since childhood or adolescence.

Personally, I can say I've taught for nearly 20 years on this matter across the continents, in fact in more than 20 countries and in various languages.

Everywhere I go, people have the same questions.

**CNA:** Do you identify any problems in the manner that Blessed Pope John Paul's teachings on this issue have been popularized, particularly in the English-speaking world?

**Bishop Laffitte:** The question you ask on this topic refers to the possibility that Pope John Paul II's Catecheses and their wonderful deepening of human love could be misunderstood or wrongly interpreted by some individuals unilaterally stressing "my way" or another way.

One of these problems to which you refer – the debates about which you know in English-speaking countries – concerns the so-called "Theology of the Body."

I know that "Theology of the Body" is the title or English translation of what originally has been called the Catecheses on Human Love.

"Theology of the Body" is not a wrong expression on the condition of respecting the intention of John Paul II, that he was talking about human love and not only a partial focus on the body and on sexuality, being a bodily expression of love.

The problem, then, is how best to articulate the truth of Blessed John Paul II's teaching on human love.

Certainly the body has a theological dimension, and this dimension involves God's design of human love and what within the nature of man and woman belongs to the fulfillment of the design.

If God has created man and woman to be united and to give human life, the Creator wanted the human being to be His own mediator in the action of creation – and that's indeed extraordinary.

He had directly created Adam and Eve. He could have done so for everybody else, but God's design was different. From that moment, in His providential intention, the man and woman whom God had created would be the future mediators through whom He would continue to give life to the human race.

This is the mystery of sexuality – the expression of a divine and human love that is both integrated and interpenetrated.

Considering the mystery of human sexuality, it is impossible to isolate such sexuality or the body from the mystery of nature, to isolate the creature from the Creator.

The problem is that if you focus only on sexuality, you cannot develop beyond that level, that such beauty is a gift, something given to mankind by the Creator but within a much broader context.

Attraction to the beauty of human sexuality and the human body is normal because it is true and real.

What can become a problem, however, would be to regard human sexuality in a kind of mystical way. Pope John Paul II embraced no form of mystic sexuality. What the Blessed Pontiff did in fact say is that sexuality has a mystical perspective and dimension.

It means that the mystery is not only the unity of the body, but rather it is the union of these bodies that are animated by God and express a spiritual love, from themselves individually but also from the two in union together with God.

When Pope John Paul II talks about the body, it is crucial to understand that we are talking about an animated body, which is the body of a person.

The union of two persons is thus a personal event, and the sexual act of two spouses is a spiritual event, a mutual gift ... and not only a biological event. The desire here is to be united not with just any person, but with this person in particular: This is my wife, this is my husband.

There's personalization in this dynamic, and it's not interchangeable.

If we develop a mysticism of sexuality, in a reduced meaning of the word, then we could make the argument of an interchangeable sexuality.

And why not? If sexuality were wonderful only in this aspect – mere intercourse between a man and a woman – then why should it not be the same for this man and another woman, and another, and another?

No – it's not like that at all. It's a personal event. Such union is between two persons, one made for the other in God's Providence.

Personally, I don't agree with contemplation of the sexual phenomenon without providing the entire context of the mystery of creation, the mystery of God's calling to experience and to live human love.

The English translation of Blessed John Paul II's doctrinal teaching as "Theology of the Body", while not incorrect in a strict sense, does not typify the entirety of his Catecheses on human love. The Catecheses were originally what the Blessed Pope himself chose in 1985 to be the first critical publication made by the John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Rome.

The professors of the Institute were charged with introducing each cycle of the Catecheses with the Pope's original intent, and the title was not "Teologia del Corpo Umano." Rather, the title given was Catechesi sull'Amore Umano.

So, "Theology of the Body" is not wrong. However, if people have no formation on creation, on God's design, on the anthropology of man and woman, or on the differentiation of the sexes, they then have no ability to defend against the gender ideologies rampant in our secular world today.

If you talk only about sexuality, then there eventually will be no problem, for instance, with homosexual intercourse as an expression of affection and love and as a person's desire to offer his own love to the other.

And what could be said to that? Nothing, if we're not capable of relating the mystery of love according to God's design.

We are Christian, and thus it's our obligation not to keep quiet concerning the role of God in creating us and in giving us the possibility to be united with our spouses.

There is a danger of vulgarizing here a crucial truth of our Faith that needs rather to be contemplated. It requires a silence. Sometimes in reading Blessed John Paul II's Catecheses, you read only half of a page and then have to stop ... you cannot continue ... because it provokes within you a kind of loving meditation of what God has made. You enter into the mystery.

"Theology of the Body" may be clear for you, but it won't be for people who have never thought practically about creation or of God's love and design.

Here lies a problem and risk in transmitting the Catecheses.

In order to transmit this beauty and this truth, we have to emphasize that the act of creation was a loving act of God.

God is not a cold, removed architect who sets arbitrary demands on His creation. Rather, He is a loving Father who knows what is within the heart of man and woman -- He created them sexually, physically, personally and morally.

Then, extraordinarily, we can see that the intention of the Creator was to create man and woman in such a way that no one could ever say he or she in himself or herself contains the totality of humanity.

If I am a man, I cannot say that in myself I have the totality and the richness of what it means to be a woman and vice versa.

John Paul II said that man and woman not only reflect the image and likeness of God in their solitude but indeed do even more so in their communion. This truth reflects the mystery of the divine communion of the Holy Trinity.

We cannot understand creation well without relating the communion between man and woman to that of the divine persons of the Holy Trinity.

We have to demonstrate this truth, insisting that the call to love and to be loved leads to authentic happiness – not only because it's an aspiration that comes from the deepest part of our nature – but because it originates from God's design, which is a loving design.

God knows what is good for man, and what is good for woman. The Catecheses need to be understood in this light.

Pope Benedict XVI is in total continuity with Pope John Paul II's teachings. Certainly John Paul II focused his attention on the anthropological and ethical aspects of human love and the existential and philosophical meditation of the mystery. Pope Benedict now emphasizes the holiness of human love, and for him, he contemplates in human love the divine love that exists in God.

In Pope Benedict's first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*, he is very audacious when he speaks of a "divine eros", which is the design that God has for human love ... It's amazing! This teaching is a step forward that illustrates the continuity between the two Popes' teachings.

The beauty of the body reflects the presence of the spirit, which is a mystery. And yet, we still have to contend with the reality of sin.

Man and woman have sinned, and in our bodies we bear the consequences of this wound in our nature.

That's why it's unrealistic – even a kind of angelism – to imagine that we can discuss or express our sexuality in an indifferent manner.

There is a dignity, there is a loving manner to be united ... There is a respectful expression of love and God's design needed in relating this teaching.

**CNA:** Certainly the intent to make the Pope's teachings widely accessible is good, albeit misdirected at times. How then, would you recommend people go about making the Catecheses known?

**Bishop Laffitte:** It's fundamentally a good thing to have the desire to transmit the Catecheses on Human Love as far as possible to as many people as possible.

It's an evangelization so needed today as human love has been so disfigured in modern society. May I add that we can never talk of a new evangelization without emphasizing conjugal and family life in the perspective we have just illustrated ?

So, how can we do that?

Personally, I am against any notion that we should reduce all difficult thought, or any difficult articulation of ideas, assuming in advance that people are unintelligent.

Perhaps at times we may encounter people who are not cultivated, who may not enjoy the habit of dealing with philosophical and anthropological topics on a regular basis.

However, a person of good faith always is able to be sensitive to mystery, because a person lives and experiences without necessarily knowing how to describe it.

Even when a person cannot read and write, when he falls in love with someone he enters into an extraordinary mystery -- exactly the same mystery experienced by someone who might be able to describe it with more finesse.

The problem involves not the formulation, but rather the respect for the mystery with which we are dealing.

It is essential to present these teachings with reverence, with meditation, with silence. We're dealing here with an endeavor in genuine education, not merely a strict transmission of knowledge.

The Catecheses of which we speak are not a "gnosis" only understood by an elite, but rather they serve as an extraordinary deepening of human understanding, in what every man and woman is called to experience.

Every single person within any culture can understand the questions: "What do you want in your life? What are your deepest desires?"

The transmission must be a holistic one – it means being conscious of the nature of the person. You wouldn't speak to a 15 year-old in the way you would a 20 year-old, or a married couple or an elderly couple. But all of them can understand the nature of the mystery.