

Robert,

What do you think of this interview given by Ms. Randy Engel about John Paul II's "Theology of the Body," and Christopher West's promotion of it?

Thank you,

Brian

http://www.4marks.com/audio/details.html?audio_id=674

R. Sungenis: Brian, with all due respect to Ms. Engel as a very talented investigative reporter, after listening to her lecture I believe she is off the mark in a few areas. Let me explain.

First, there is a big undercurrent in the Traditionalist movement that marital sex is for the sole purpose of procreation, and any talk beyond those parameters is simply not permissible. Ms. Engel says "it is not Catholic." This is a grave mistake. Marital sex is not just about procreation, and I would simply challenge anyone who believes otherwise to show us from Catholic doctrine where procreation is the sole reason for marital sex. Most advocates of the "procreation only" view appeal to Thomas Aquinas, but Thomas' view of sex was incomplete. For the record, this is the problem we get into when we elevate Thomas as the *sine qua non* of Catholic theology. Thomas was very good. One of the best Catholic theologians we have ever had. I'm going to name my newborn son after him. But Thomas didn't know everything, and his views on sex are heavily influenced by his philosophy and environment. Thomas, as far as I've read him, sees sex as a mere biological function. At the risk of being a little crude in my judgment, if sex is only a biological function, then the human sex act is little different than two gorillas mating in a zoo.

Granted, what is produced is a person made in the image of God and that alone separates a person from a gorilla, but I'm not talking about the product. I'm talking about the act that led to the product. In other words, when it comes to sex, the ends does not justify the means. If the product is made in the image of God, then so is the sex act that produced the product. You cannot separate them. As the product is composed of intellect, will, and emotion, so is the sex act that produced the product. The problem is that Thomas never brought out the emotional side of the sex act. But that's a major problem with Thomistic philosophy in itself – it hardly ever deals with the emotional side of human existence. To Thomas, emotion was a mere secondary reaction, not an intrinsic human makeup with ontological foundation. Even his love of God was never really described by incorporating the emotional dimension.

A reaction against his view was noted in the Catholic mystics that came during and after Thomas' theology (St. John of the Cross, Theresa of Avila, *etc.*). Unfortunately, the resulting tension between the intellect and the emotions was never really solved in Catholic theology. The next eruption we had was in the Baroque period, where emotion ascended in competition with the intellect, but the tension remained, and that is because it is a hard tension to resolve.

But Traditionalists, such as Ms. Engel, really don't appreciate this tension, or, they more or less dismiss it as unimportant because they have staked their claim with Scholasticism which had little room for emotion. I've always enjoyed the illustration that, if you were going on a date with a girl in the Scholastic period, instead of buying her a beautiful rose as a gift, you should probably buy her a frog, since frogs are much more complicated and stimulating to the human intellect on a pound-for-pound basis than a rose. Never mind the beauty and the human sensation of delight one can get from a rose. To Thomas,

those characteristics were just “phenomena,” but nothing to do with real substance and meaning. Today we might call this a little “nerdy,” reminiscent of the skinny, four-eyed school boy who sits behind a computer all day or builds robots for a hobby, but has great difficulty relating to people or enjoying the beauty of a flower. We often say that such a person is “not in touch with his emotions,” and there is a lot of truth to that statement.

Speaking of “phenomena,” Ms. Engel makes reference to the philosophy of phenomenology that John Paul II advocated. She claims that his phenomenological approach to life is the reason that he developed his “Theology of the Body.” That is true. But the implication from Ms. Engel is that phenomenology is something evil and to be totally rejected by Catholics. I’m afraid that this is a case of the medicine being worse than the disease. Phenomenology is not anti-Catholic. Many well-respected Catholic theologians have accepted it (e.g., Dietrich von Hildebrand, William Marra, Josef Seifert, et al.). In fact, phenomenology comes to the rescue for Catholic theology since it answers a lot of questions and problems that Thomism couldn’t, such as what to do with emotion and beauty, especially in marital sex. What man has had sexual relations with his wife and has not been enraptured with intense emotion for her, and what man has not been led to that by the physical beauty he sees in his wife? If you haven’t experienced these things as a married man, then I feel very sorry for you. You have been brainwashed not to see these aspects of the sexual union by the narrow minded “traditional” view of marital sex. The fact is, there is a tremendous amount of emotion and beauty in marital sex. If we don’t put these two important aspects in the proper Catholic categories, then we leave them for the world to categorize, and the world will invariably put them in vulgar and distasteful categories. That is, if we confine emotion and beauty in sex to merely the intellectual category of human function, then the emotion and beauty dimensions will be left hanging out for the world to distort. We can expect this to happen if we arbitrarily categorize marital sex as merely a biological function for the sole purpose of procreating. Emotion and beauty get reduced to being a biological function instead of significant realities in themselves of the human experience.

This is where the philosophy of Phenomenology comes into play, for it has a special category for emotion and beauty. (For the record, when we use the term “Phenomenology,” we are not referring to the philosophy of Edmund Husserl. Catholic phenomenology is different. One of the best proponents of Catholic phenomenology was Dietrich von Hildebrand. Before he died recently, I also had the privilege of learning about von Hildebrand’s view from traditionalist, Dr. William Marra. I should also say that the school of philosophy run by Dr. Josef Siefert in Lichtenstein is of the same persuasion). Phenomenology gives us philosophical spectacles that allow us to see things as they are in themselves instead of always being put in Thomistic categories they may not fit. Thomism was forced to put sex, emotion and beauty into the category of the biological, since it had no other category. Phenomenology doesn’t insist on dispensing with intellectual categories, but it does insist on not allowing pre-set intellectual categories to rule our interpretation of the world, for if our categories are wrong or inadequate, we will certainly get a distorted view of the world, and I have the conviction that Catholics who believe that sex is merely for procreation have a distorted view of the world.

Unfortunately, Ms. Engel’s view of Phenomenology is quite negative and distorted. For example, in the interview she says that Phenomenology is “not reality” but “how we wish everything to be.” This makes Phenomenology out to be some type of Alice-in-Wonderland worldview, but that is hardly true. If you believe that the only realities are Thomistic categories, well, yes, I guess you will see everything else as a “non-reality.” But I must interject that one of the more significant “non-realities” is to judge Thomism as somehow an omniscient viewpoint that can determine the reality of everything in the world. Thomas never claimed to be omniscient. It is one thing to honor Thomism and make it the principle philosophy

of Catholic thought, but it is quite another to make it the exclusive perspective from which all must be viewed. No pope or council ever taught such exclusiveness. From listening to Ms. Engel talk about it, I don't think she has really studied the philosophy of Phenomenology in depth.

I also have a problem with some of Ms. Engel's own interpretations she expressed in the interview. For example, she says this (and I will underline the problematic statement): "Genesis is not about Adam and Eve's voyage of self-consciousness, their voyage of self-discovery and their self-actualization process that they enjoyed in Paradise. Genesis is not about the sexual life of Adam and Eve simply because our first parents did not live as husband and wife in Paradise. Rather, Genesis is a story of our first parents, how they broke the bonds of friendship with God...It's not an anecdotal Dr. Ruth."

Perhaps Ms. Engel was speaking off the cuff. Perhaps she didn't realize what she had just said in a fastmoving radio interview when sometimes the first thought that comes to your head is blurted out without proper reflection. Nevertheless, there it is. According to Ms. Engel's remark, Adam and Eve, perhaps although they WERE husband and wife, did not live as husband and wife, namely, they did not have sexual relations. Where would Ms. Engel get such an opinion? I don't know, for the text of Genesis implies just the opposite. After all, did not God tell them to be fruitful and multiply prior to their sin at the tree? Does not the text say they were naked and felt no shame toward one another? My guess is that Ms. Engel is saying that since Genesis 4:1 is the first time the text says that Adam "knew his wife, Eve," this was the first time they had sexual relations, but since this incident was after the Fall in recorded in Genesis 3, she feels it proper to conclude that Adam and Eve had no sexual relations prior to the fall. Well, if that was the case, then Adam and Eve simply wouldn't be husband and wife until Genesis 4:1, but that is not what we read in Genesis 2:23-24 where, according to Jesus' own interpretation of that text in Matthew 19:1-7, Adam and Eve were united in the bonds of marriage and the marriage was consummated from the very beginning. This is why Genesis 2:25 follows with: "And the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed." Now, I will grant that it is sometimes dangerous to make conclusions without the text being explicit, but does the text really have to spell it out for us, (e.g., "Adam and Eve had sexual relations") after he said "the two shall become one flesh" in the previous verse and then follows it up with "and the two were naked and were not ashamed"? The very reason the Genesis writer is telling us that they were naked and felt no shame is because this is precisely the blissful mental state married couples experience in intimacy. They can be naked in front of each other and not feel any shame. In fact, the nakedness enhances their relationship, because only the two of them can experience the intimacy. Genesis 2:25 is not trying to teach us that the nakedness of Adam and Eve was going to set the precedent for how everyone eventually born in Paradise would have been walking around in their birthday suit all day long if Adam and Eve had not sinned (a wrong impression believed by a lot of people), but merely that, since Adam and Eve were the only human beings alive at this time, they, in their privacy, could be naked in front of each other just as a married couple today can be naked in the privacy of their own bedroom. Once Adam and Eve's children grew beyond infancy, the nakedness of the family would have been covered, since nakedness can only be shared between the proper people, even if there is no curse of sin on the earth (cf. Lev. 18-20).

The key is this: when spouses sin against each other and God, shame enters into the relationship and married couples will scurry to cover their nakedness. It is a natural phenomenon. One of the first things spouses do when they get into an intense argument or have some level of animosity between each other, they will cover their nakedness. Nakedness can only be shared with someone you completely trust, and even then it is confined to certain areas of life. Once the trust is broken, nakedness is covered. Suffice it to say, Ms. Engel simply cannot conclude with any amount of certainty that Adam and Eve did not have sexual relations prior to Genesis 4:1. In fact, it is precisely her narrow view of Genesis 4:1 that

probably leads her to believe that marital sex is only for procreation, since right after the text says Adam “knew” his wife, Cain was born. (“Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, saying, “I have gotten a man with the help of the LORD. And again, she bore his brother Abel. Now Abel was a keeper of sheep, and Cain a tiller of the ground”). To Ms. Engel, since she has already dismissed Genesis 2:23-25 as teaching that Adam and Eve consummated their marriage, the consummation only comes at Genesis 4:1 and the immediate result is procreation. But this is simply a myopic way of reading the text. The whole chapter of Genesis 4 is a severely truncated assortment of events. Obviously, since the text goes right from the birth of Cain and Abel to the incident when they both offered sacrifices and Cain killed Abel, there is a lot missing from the text that the author chose not to reveal, yet we can be certain that other events related to their life actually did occur (e.g., Cain and Abel ate, drank, slept, played, worked, conversed, thought, walked, ran, etc.). But the same would be true of Adam and Eve. They did many things that the text may not explicitly state.

Hence, Genesis is not as Ms. Engel says, merely a “story of our first parents, how they broke the bonds of friendship with God,” but also a story, prior to the breaking of those bonds, of personal and sexual intimacy with one another in the bonds of marriage (Genesis 2:23-25) all of which was predicated upon the fact that God told them to be fruitful and multiply in that sexual relationship (Genesis 1:28). Ms. Engel has no reason to be dismayed at Christopher West’s quip that “John Paul II takes us behind the fig leaves,” because prior to the fig leaves, that is, prior to the fall, the most blessed and satisfying marriage relationship was being developed by Adam and Eve. To suggest, as Ms. Engel does, that Adam and Eve had no such intimacy prior to the conception of Cain, is not only prudish, it is biblically and theological erroneous. It is one thing to criticize Mr. West’s excesses in his crusade for the Theology of the Body; it is quite another thing to deny a sexual relationship between Adam and Eve until Cain and then create a whole theology of sex based on that erroneous notion.

Ms. Engel made another statement that I believe is off the mark. She said “The Theology of the Body, in many ways, resembles those esoteric occult religions of the east in which sex is seen as the gateway to Nirvana.” This is little more than theological demagoguery, at least from what John Paul II taught about it. From Ms. Engel’s interpretation of Genesis 1-4 in which she states that Adam and Eve did not live as husband and wife, it is obvious that she is basing her opinions on something that she has severely misunderstood. When we don’t understand something and we feel it is a threat to us personally and theologically, the tendency is to demonize it to the point that our audience (in this case a radio audience) who understands less of the subject than the host, will walk away with all kinds of horrible images and feelings. But I believe it is Ms. Engel who is doing a disservice to her audience. It is one thing to criticize the excesses of Mr. West in his handling of John Paul’s teaching (and there are many such excesses), but it is quite another to misrepresent what John Paul II was trying to do. John Paul II used the phenomenological approach for sexual matters because he saw the inadequacy of previous Catholic philosophy to do so. If the best a philosophical system can do to explain sex is say it is merely a biological function for the sole purpose of procreation, then that philosophy is inadequate. It has not lifted man closer to God; rather, it has brought him closer to the animals. John Paul II was trying to give substance and meaning to sex, and that can only be done, in any ultimate sense, by relating it to theology and spirituality. It is the particular approach of Phenomenology that allows us to do so, since it sees intrinsic value in sexual union far and above the biological category to which Thomistic philosophy confines it.

Ms. Engel also said something else that relates to this problem. In reference to Mr. West’s teaching program, she says: “The teen program stresses the personalist norm for marriage. Marriage is discussed in terms of union, a gift of self. You would not see the idea that you have children and raise a family.

That is simply put aside. All this personalist phenomenology is intertwined throughout the entire text.” First, I find it hard to believe that “having children and raising a family is...put aside.” Ms. Engel’s complaint is benign. Even if it were not stressed in the text, who in their right mind does not know that a personal sexual union between spouses who love each other does not often result in “having children and raising a family”? Second, as I said earlier, if sex is just a biological function for procreation, we can easily see why Mr. Engel wants to divorce sex from any “personal” element. The truth is, sex is very personal. In the marital state, it is one of the most personal experiences spouses can have with each other. I think it is high time that we stop viewing sex as an afterthought in the human experience and more as one of the most intimate relationships God has created for the human person. If we refuse to properly categorize the emotional and physical aspects of the sexual union properly, then the world will take that vacuum and put its own vulgar spin on it. Do we really need more of that?

Robert Sungenis