

Human Sexuality in the Language of the Body in John Paul II: A Semiotic Analysis

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Abstract: The article attempts at a biosemiotic elucidation of John Paul II's concept of human sexuality as contained in the doctrine of the "language of the body" which he expounded on in his "theology of the body." It purports that the conventional human expressions used in marriage rites or ceremonies such as "I take you as my wife – as my husband – and I promise to be always faithful to you..." iconically symbolize what the male and female bodies "express" in the conjugal union. To elucidate the meaning of the two "texts" in question, a Peircian-Sebeok framework is used as a linguistic tool. This framework, which builds on the principles of Peircian semiotics and the Modeling Systems Theory of Thomas A. Sebeok, can be applied to both anthroposemiotics and biosemiotics. With the aid of this tool, one sees that the manner a male or female person expresses his masculinity or her femininity (SMS) bears a semiotic relation with the male and female body (PMS) as the person draws intrinsic signals from it. The cross-indexicality of the male and female bodies signifies its spousal meaning and its telic nature—a singular emerging entity as its ultimate interpretant. The verbal exchange within the rite of Marriage (TMS) iconically reflects the truth expressed in the language of the body (PMS) whereby husband and wife, male and female, become *una caro* [one flesh] in a *communio personarum* [communion of persons]. The framework can serve to reread the language of the body more diligently, hence, elevate the significance of human sexuality, highlight the beauty of marriage, and ultimately create a culture that we truly deserve.

Keywords: John Paul II, language of the body, Charles Peirce, Thomas Sebeok, biosemiotics, marriage, human sexuality

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Marriage in practically all human societies is a symbolic act. Among Catholics, it is one of those rites known as a Sacrament, a visible sign of an invisible reality. John Paul II writes that the “sacramental sign (of marriage) is constituted in the order of intention insofar as it is simultaneously constituted in the real order.”¹ In saying this, John Paul II claims that marriage is not only an event that is confined to the moment when symbolic actions are exchanged between intending subjects. Rather, there is also an emerging reality that is constituted the moment two persons, a man and a woman convert themselves to be the visible sign of Marriage, while having the intention of becoming to one and the other husband and wife.

The act which constitutes the visible sign is the valid exchange of spoken words: “I take you as my wife – as my husband – and I promise to be always faithful to you...” John Paul II clarifies that the spoken words “would not, *per se*, constitute the sacramental sign of marriage unless there corresponded to them the human subjectivity of the engaged couple and at the same time the awareness of the body, linked to the masculinity and femininity of the husband and wife.”² Ultimately, it is the body—male and female—that carries a spousal significance.³ The binary modality of the body as male or female allows persons to be, for one to the other, husband and wife. This condition proves indispensable for the reality that is Marriage to emerge.

The emergence of marriage as a Sacramental reality from the exchange of words between a man and a woman speaking as male and female constitutes the core significance of John Paul II’s reference to the “language of the body.” Guided by these general ideas about language and the body, this article attempts to elucidate John Paul II’s concept of human sexuality as contained in the doctrine of the language of the body using the principles of semiotic analysis applied to biological systems or biosemiotics.

Inasmuch as it is used by a subject to express something and at the same time serves as an indispensable medium for the subject to know something, language fulfills a twofold function. It is a means to transmit and acquire knowledge; however, language as a medium or as a tool can be used to either achieve these objectives effectively or to frustrate them altogether. This happens when the subject fails to communicate the originally intended message, resulting in the acquisition of knowledge that does not reflect what

¹ John Paul II(JPII), *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (TB) (Pauline books, 1997), 355.

² JPII, TB, 356.

³ Ibid.

was initially meant to be expressed. We see this more clearly when the intention for the transmission of knowledge is meant to elicit a specific behavioral response. When one says to another, “Please offer your seat to this elderly person” and the other person does exactly that, we can conclude that the transmission of knowledge has been carried out effectively and that the use of language has served its function. The attainment of intended results in the use of language serves as the gauge for the correctness in its use and ultimately its functionality. Thus, one can make a legitimate claim that the achievement of intended results is a strong indicator of the proper use of language. Rules govern the acceptable use of language such that when one subjects herself to the rigor of these conventions, greater are her hopes to yield expected outcomes. John Paul II considers the yielding of concurrence essential for the use of any form of language as expression of knowledge.⁴

Biosemiotics, A Tool to Understand the Language of the Body

“The human genome consists of all the DNA of our species, the hereditary code of life. This newly revealed text was three billion letters long and written in a strange and cryptographic four-letter code. Such is the amazing complexity of the information carried within each cell of the human body (...)”⁵ Based on this description made by one of the world’s leading scientists, Dr. Francis Collins, the director and head of the Human Genome Project which unveiled the DNA sequence in humans, one can already appreciate the acknowledged fact that the human body is a language system. In his speech marking that momentous event of unveiling the code before an expectant international audience, then President Bill Clinton said, “Today, we are learning the language in which God created life.”⁶

Biologists have long considered that the human body consists of codes which carry information meant to be interpreted, i.e., unraveled and understood. In fact, biological processes have been reduced to understanding and subsequently explaining either the chemical or the physical phenomena taking place within an organism. However, such reductions have become increasingly untenable. Only very recently has it been implicitly assumed that the use of such terms as “message,” “signal,” “code,” and “sign” in the context of biology was ultimately metaphoric. But the human body can, in effect, be

⁴ JP II, TB, 3360.

⁵ Collins, Francis S., *The Language of God* (New York: Free Press of Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2006), 1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

considered as a semiotic system or a system of signs and sign relations where communication takes place.

It is in the wake of such that the interdisciplinary research project of biosemiotics attempted to revive the dialogue both across the life sciences as well as between the life sciences and the humanities regarding what precisely such terms as “meaning” and “significance” might be in the context of living and complex adaptive systems.⁷ As an upcoming field, biosemiotics defines its domain as the study of signs, communication, and information in living organisms.⁸ Biosemiotics is an interdisciplinary research agenda investigating the myriad forms of communication and signification found in and between living systems. It is thus the study of representation, meaning, sense, and the biological significance of codes and sign processes, from genetic code sequences to intercellular signaling processes to animal display behavior to human semiotic artifacts such as language and abstract symbolic thought.⁹

Biosemiotics aims to extend the notions and principles of general semiotics to apply to all life processes in the biosphere. It derives its semiotic principles from the model proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). He maintains that signs are characterized by a basic structure that is triadic in nature, i.e., of sign, object, and interpretant. The three are intrinsically related such that the sign assumes the object it signifies and, as a consequence of signifying, causes the emergence of the interpretant. The manner of signifying is causal in nature such that the object determines the sign which in turn causes the interpretant to emerge. Signification hence follows a trajectory from object to interpretant. Furthermore, the interpretation of signs, which stems from the discernment of the nature of the relations among signs, is an essential component of semiosis as a study of sign systems.¹⁰ Signs can be related to their objects in terms of likeness for which they represent their objects as icons. Signs can also act as pointers and serve as indicators of their respective objects for which they represent their objects as indexes. Finally, signs can signify their objects as symbols within a context of conventional representations. Thus, the action of signs specifies their nature as icons, indexes, or symbols.

The subject matter of semiotics is the exchange of any messages whatsoever; in a word, *communication*.¹¹ Biosemiotics considers how messages

⁷ From the website of the International Society of Biosemiotic Studies: <http://www.biosemiotics.org/>.

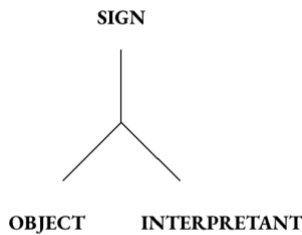
⁸ Oxford Dictionary of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 72.

⁹ <http://www.biosemiotics.org/>.

¹⁰ Sebeok, Thomas, *A Sign is Just a Sign* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 13.

¹¹ Sebeok warns against the temptation to jumble three incommensurate semiotic practices and their corresponding appellations: “communication,” “language,” and “speech.” Communication is a universal

are successively generated, encoded, transmitted, decoded and interpreted, and how this entire (semiotic) process is worked upon the context.¹² A message is a sign or a string of signs transmitted from a sign producer or source, to a sign receiver or destination. It admits under scrutiny any source and any destination whatsoever for so long as it is a living entity or the product of a living entity. In whatever way the sign is used to signify, the ultimate indicator of a successful transmission of messages in any system would be the conformity to a norm or an ideal, *in fine*, its iconicity. Using Peircian terms, the test of truth ultimately lies in iconicity: truth is iconic.



This representation shows the intrinsic causal relation the sign holds with both the object it signifies and the interpretant it causes in the receiver of the sign. The involvement of such causal relations account for the objective realism of Peircian semiotics.

It was Thomas A. Sebeok who formulated a model adopting the triadic scheme of Charles Sanders Peirce—first in zoosemiotics (semiotics applied to animal behavior) in 1963, then in the more general field of biosemiotics. He distinguishes three distinct modeling systems¹³ that are generated as a consequence of a system’s capacity to organize semiotic relationships and formalize models to aid in recognizing patterns in things as well as transmitting messages. Modeling in a broad sense is a product of semiosis. He designates the three as a Primary Modeling System (PMS), a Secondary Modeling System (SMS), and a Tertiary Modeling System (TMS).

The Primary Modeling System (PMS) allows communication through the modeling of iconic and indexical signs by a quasi-mind. This may be considered

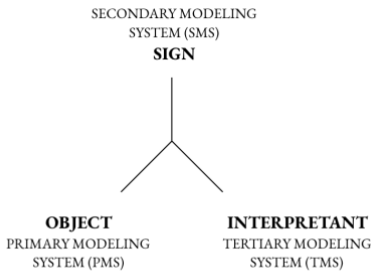
attribute of the living. Language is a universal attribute of hominids — a “languageless human” is an oxymoron. One cannot speak without having a language, but having a language does not enjoin that it be vocally exhibited or indeed externally manifested in any other manner such as script, sign languages of the deaf, Monastic sign languages, drum and whistle speech, or the like. These three phenomena evolved quite separately in phylogenesis as well as emerge severally in human ontogenesis. The labels are thus by no means interchangeable. Thomas A. Sebeok, “Semiotics and the Biological Sciences: Initial Conditions,” Discussion Papers No. 17. *Collegium Budapest/Institute for Advanced Study*, November (1995) [ISSN 1217 - 5811 ISBN 963 8463 27 9].

¹² Sebeok, Thomas, *An Introduction to Semiotics* (London: Pinter Publishers, 1994), 106.

¹³ Thomas A. Sebeok and Marcel Danesi, *The forms of meaning: Modeling Systems Theory and Semiotic Analysis* (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000).

as an originary or primitive language. The Secondary Modeling System (SMS) is generated by the human mind that has the capacity for symbolic semiosis. The human modeling capacity takes shape in various forms of language systems. Tertiary Modeling Systems (TMS) are generated from the capacity of humans to create entire texts which hold significance not only for individuals but can define a collective mind, a worldview, and a culturescape.

Using the Peircian semiotic framework, the three modeling systems are thus related as PMS (Object) – SMS (Sign) – TMS (Interpretant).¹⁴



The sign-object-interpretant relationship involves complex semiotic systems. For the Tertiary Model to reflect the truth about its object which is the Primary model, the system has to reflect its primordial source iconically. This is the norm that the doctrine of the language of the body wishes to acknowledge and abide by.

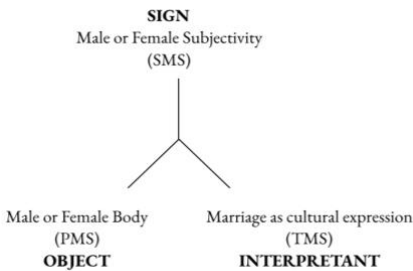
Language of the Body Explained

John Paul II claims that the human body is primarily a sign of “man’s presence in the visible world” and as such is the first “expression of the person.”¹⁵ In Peircian terms, this can be understood as such: the human body, being the sign, is the entity that unites the object or the physical body, and the interpretant or the representation of the person in the world. Such a view is compatible with John Paul II’s personalist doctrine which assumes the unitotality of persons as body and spirit and shuns the dichotomous notion of the human person as “a spirit enclosed in a body.” Through the human body, persons become cognizant of themselves while distinguishing themselves as individuals. Among other evident characteristics, the body is a visible expression of the identity of the person in either maleness or femaleness.

¹⁴ A more extensive discussion on this Peirce-Sebeok semiotic framework has been done in my doctoral dissertation entitled “A Semiotic Analysis of Human Sexuality Using a Peirce-Sebeok Framework,” April 2014.

¹⁵ JP II, TB, 113.

We shall use the above statement to illustrate further the notion of the three modeling systems. The physical body has a primary modeling capacity by which it manifests itself as either male or female and serves as the basis of the “language of the body” (PMS). The male or female subject’s cognition of the language of the body is the source of a secondary modeling (SMS) of the expressions they formulate in relation to their male or female identities. This subjective modeling of the language of the body is eventually the source of cultural models (TMS) among which we find Marriage as one of its expressions.



This figure illustrates the semiotic relation between the manner a male or female person expresses his masculinity or her femininity (SMS) as drawing from intrinsic signals from the male and female body (PMS). The verbal exchange within the rite of Marriage (TMS) reflects iconically the truth expressed in the language of the body (PMS).¹⁶

Within the language of the body as PMS, the signs of masculinity or femininity exert a kind of polarity that draws the personal subjects to a cross-indexical relation. The very signs that are the cause of the iconic dichotomy male-female and which are integrally inscribed in the physical structure of the male and female body are, at the same time, the very signals that initiate the male and female cross-indexicality. This semiotic phenomenon manifests in sexual attraction.

Ordinarily, the body’s sexual trajectory takes the course of development either as a male or as a female, and from there, persons derive typically masculine or feminine traits. However, masculinity and femininity cannot be taken as qualities constituted by disjunct psychological categories on one hand, and physiological categories on the other. Rather they are inherent qualities that affect the human person, that is, the man and woman integrally as a unitotality. Masculinity as modeled by the male person serves as an index of maleness and likewise femininity an index of femaleness. This secondary

¹⁶ Maria Asuncion Magsino, “A Semiotic Analysis of Human Sexuality Using a Peirce-Sebeok Framework” (Doctoral diss., University of the Philippines Diliman, 2014).

modeling or SMS of indexicality further enhances cross-indexical attraction, a phenomenon that verifies the polarity between femininity and masculinity.

This masculine-feminine polarity expressed by persons as reflected in the language of the male and the female body signifies the spousal meaning of the body.¹⁷ Here once more we have another biosemiotic exemplar of the triadic relation “sign-object-interpretant” applied at the level of personal union. We can designate the male and female persons as the individual objects, the expression of masculinity and femininity respectively, namely, as co-indexical signs that will eventually point out to a singular emerging entity as its ultimate interpretant.¹⁸ The semiotic analysis of this phenomenon, i.e., sexuality taken in its entirety in consideration of its telic nature, sheds light to understanding the meaning of the phrase “the spouses become ‘one flesh.’” Far from losing their individual identity, male and female in a co-indexical spousal relation¹⁹ *una caro* institute an entirely new entity which John Paul II calls the *communio personarum* as its emergent interpretant. Hence, through an individual’s masculinity and femininity, the communion of persons is achieved in the mutual personal donation²⁰ culturally modelled in marriage.

The words uttered by the male and female during the rites of marriage, a tertiary modeling of co-indexicality of male and female, prophetically signify the body’s expression of its spousal significance. In the verbal exchange of vows within the marriage ceremonies, the male person intends to express the message “I am for you your husband” to a female person whom he intends that message to be received as “You are for me my husband.” The female person in the very act of receiving the male person’s message herself expresses the message “I am for you your wife,” which the male person receives as “You are for me my wife.” These messages are ordinarily communicated through the use of human language in the dialogue between a man and a woman during the celebration of the marriage rite.²¹

¹⁷ JPH, TB, 362.

¹⁸ Peirce designates an indexical sign something that points out to an entity as its object. In this case, the reality “una caro” is strictly speaking a “communio personarum” of which male and female in complementarity and as spouses are co-indexical signs of. The semiotic analysis of the development of human sexuality in male and female which proceeds to the cross indexical continuity leading to its ultimate interpretant which is the conception of another human person is treated at length in the Chapter “Semiotic Analysis of Sexuality” in Magsino, “A Semiotic Analysis.”

¹⁹ This takes place in the union of male and female persons and not merely of their gametes.

²⁰ JPH, TB, 113.

²¹ JPH, TB, 355. He elaborates that, “the words of the newlyweds form a part of the integral structure of the sacramental sign, not merely *for what* they signify but also, in a certain sense, *with what* they signify and determine,” that is, the masculinity and femininity of the human body.

In uttering these words, man and woman also imply²² that they intend to communicate the very same messages to each other by making the body “speak” using the language of the body. Here is where the male person through his masculinity allows his body to express the message “I am for you your husband” to which the female person responds by receiving his masculinity in her femininity and through her body expresses the message “I am for you your wife.” These words, expressed using human language,²³ have their equivalent signifiers in the language of the body necessitating the involvement of a male body and a female body. The meaning of “being man” is understood in the face of the presence of a woman. The knowledge of “being man” is consummated in the body of woman. This is the first requisite for the language of the body to yield the “knowledge” it hopes to express simultaneously to man and woman who communicate complementary messages to each other through their bodies.

In the dialogue man and woman carry out making use of the language of the body, it should be noted that the human body by itself “speaks a language which it is not the author of in the proper sense of the term.”²⁴ Rather, the author of the message communicated is the person, male or female, who uses the instrumentality of the language of the body to convey its spousal significance. The words of matrimonial consent uttered by man and woman during the marriage rites therefore assume the intention, decision, and the choice of the spouses “to act in conformity with the language of the body, reread in truth.”²⁵ The spousal dialogue enacted using the language of the body cannot be taken as merely a phenomenon where the body expresses itself. Rather, it is a genuine dialogue where two persons—male and female—permit their bodies to speak using the language exclusively that of the body, on his and her behalf in the name of the man and woman and with their authority.²⁶ Thus the marriage rite as a tertiary model, mediated by the dialogue that takes place between future husband and wife, reflects iconically the spousal meaning of

²² Another use of language (pragmatics) was brought up by H.P. Grice in his work “Logic and Conversation.” He noted that in ordinary conversations, one says something but intends a meaning that is not reflected by what she says hoping that the person she is conversing with figures out that intended meaning. This phenomenon reflects what he calls implicatures in conversations. “Implicature” denotes either (i) the act of meaning, implying, or suggesting one thing by saying something else, or (ii) the object of that act. Ref. A.P. Martinich (ed.), *The Philosophy of Language* (3rd ed.) (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 156-67.

²³ As the person becomes aware of the message from the body, he represents what he picks up using modeling systems, which in this case is human language.

²⁴ JPIL, TB, 362.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ JPIL, TB, 364.

the body that is primordially modelled in the binary modality of male and female.

The language of the body has an intrinsic intention or a telic significance. All semiotic processes are telic in nature—the sign movement being defined as directed from object to interpretant. The manner the human body was designed as male and female is meant to serve a biosemiotically-defined purpose. The teleological meaning of the female body is motherhood as the woman stands before man as the “subject of the new human life that is conceived and develops in her, and from her is born into the world.”²⁷ This maternity is the “particular potentiality of the female organism”²⁸ that is ordained to conjugal communion. This potentiality is what the female offers to the male as she expresses the message “I am for you your wife” using the language of the body. The “mystery of man’s masculinity, that is, the generative and fatherly meaning of his body”²⁹ is understood by man as he *knows*³⁰ woman, that is, as he expresses the message “I am for you your husband” and simultaneously receives the message “I am for you your wife” from the female. This act accounts for the generation of “knowledge” in the conjugal union. The male and the female expression of who they are before each other as male-husband and as female-wife, using the language of the body therefore actualizes the potential meaning of the male body in fatherhood and of the female body in motherhood³¹ or their potential capacity for the co-causal emergence of *communio personarum* through conjugal love. Herein lies the “knowledge” of man and woman in the consummation of marriage.³² This is the second requisite for the “language of the body” to communicate the message it sets out to express, which assumes the acknowledgement of its *telos*.

With the generation of a new person, procreation brings the reciprocal and simultaneous “knowledge” of man-husband and woman-wife to bear its ultimate significance. Their mutual knowledge of themselves before each other now includes a new revelation of themselves in the child as a living image of themselves, of their humanity. “Knowledge” emanating from the dialogue

²⁷ JP II, TB, 81.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 77-80.

³¹ John Paul II says that man and woman “give (marriage) an intentional expression on the level of intellect and will, of consciousness and heart. The words, ‘I take you as my wife/my husband’ imply precisely that perennial, unique and unrepeatable language of the body.”

³² JP II, TB, 81 “The consummation of marriage is also enclosed in this knowledge. In this way the reaching of the “objectivity” of the body, hidden in the somatic potentialities of the man and of the woman, is obtained, and at the same time the reaching of the objectivity of the man who “is” this body. By means of the body, the human person is husband and wife.”

between man and woman using the language of the body involves a particular consciousness of the meaning of the body, bound up with fatherhood and motherhood.³³ Rightly so, the father and the mother can actually claim the child to be *the flesh of their flesh and the blood of their blood*, not anymore as two individuals but “as one.” This reality in its entirety is summed up in the biblical concept of marriage in which man and woman, using the language of the body, effect a union that makes these two individuals *una caro* [one flesh].

This completes the full significance of the words exchanged by man and woman during marriage rites. The words of human language that were spoken—“You are my husband” and “You are my wife”—are intentionally expressed once again by man and woman, and accomplished in the body. In fact, the masculine and the feminine bodies are necessary to give the verbal utterance its complete meaning: male is husband and female is wife. These gender roles, husband and wife, acquire a perduring significance insofar as they find their grounding on the binary reproductive role designated to male and female, that is, male impregnates female and female gestates offspring.³⁴ The language of the body makes up for the inadequacy of the human language. The use of the two languages together, signifying the same meaning, may be considered a singular performative utterance.³⁵ As man and woman declare themselves husband and wife to each other, they indeed become so and thus constitute marriage.

Implications of this Doctrine on Understanding Human Sexuality

The eventual union of man-husband and woman-wife is a form of communication between individuals using the language of the body, that is, through the objective and formative use of conjugality. As in any form of communication where human language is used, the use of the language of the body can yield truth but it can unfortunately generate untruth as well.³⁶ The outcome of communication depends on the use of language, which is usually governed by rules and conventions. Thus, it is of paramount importance for male and female as the author of that language to reread the language of the

³³ JPIL, TB, 81-2.

³⁴ Dr. Lawrence S. Mayer, et al., “Gender Identity in ‘Sexuality and Gender.’” *The New Atlantis Journal of Technology and Society*, no. 50 (Fall 2016): 89.

³⁵ J.L. Austin observed that there are certain statements which say something and at the same time put to effect what they say. He called them “performative utterances.” Ref. Martinich, *The Philosophy of Language*, 120-9.

³⁶ JPIL, TB, 360.

body, i.e., the expressions of the human body linked to masculinity and femininity in the truth, and reflect them iconically. This is crucial if man and woman were to confer on their behavior and actions, the significance of masculinity and femininity congruent with their clear-cut meanings.³⁷ John Paul reiterates:

There is an organic bond between rereading in truth the integral significance of the language of the body and the consequent use of that language in conjugal life. In this last sphere the human being—male and female—is the author of the meanings of the language of the body. This implies that his language which he is the author of corresponds to the truth which has been reread. (...) If the human being—male and female—in marriage (and indirectly also in all the spheres of mutual life together) confers on his behavior a significance in conformity with the fundamental truth of the language of the body, then he also “is in the truth.” In the contrary case he is guilty of a lie and falsifies the language of the body.³⁸

This provides the ground for marriage to necessarily involve the union of a male and a female. Besides, man and woman in a truthful dialogue by using correctly the language of the body are expected to uphold the twofold significance of the singular act of conjugal love, which is its spousal and procreative meaning. This unity of significance emanates from the nature of persons as a unitotality of body and spirit. Thus, the spousal aspect is more than copulative and the procreative aspect is more than reproductive. As in any decent human dialogue, this communication process leading to the communion of persons through the use of the language of the body should uphold the criterion of truth.

According to the criterion of this truth, which should be expressed in the language of the body, the conjugal act signifies not only love (subjective ‘unitive’ significance) but also potential fecundity (biological ‘procreative’ significance). Therefore it cannot be deprived of its full and adequate significance (...). In the conjugal act it is not licit to separate the unitive aspect (significance) from the procreative aspect (significance), because both the one and the other pertain to the intimate truth of the conjugal

³⁷ JPH, TB, 363.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 364-65.

act. The one is activated together with the other and in a certain sense the one by means of the other.³⁹

John Paul II arrives at this conclusion following a rereading of the language of the body in truth.⁴⁰ The intrinsic inseparability of the twofold significance of the marriage act is a reasonable doctrine discovered through an adequate understanding of the language of the body. The marriage act proceeds from the spousal significance of the body which opens it to a potential conjugal union, thus it is not merely copulative. The marriage act is ordained to fulfill the telic significance of the conjugal union thus making it procreative and not merely reproductive. Echoing the very same doctrine contained in a previous document (*Humanae vitae* of Paul VI),⁴¹ John Paul explains that this dual significance is embedded in the fundamental structure of the marriage act: that while it unites man-husband and woman-wife in the closest intimacy, the very same act simultaneously brings into operation laws written into the nature of man and of woman for the generation of new life (HV12).⁴² The truth communicated through the language of the body therefore has an ontological dimension (“fundamental structure”) and a subjective and psychological dimension (“significance”).⁴³

The true significance and grandeur of conjugal consent rest on this doctrine.⁴⁴ The full significance of the language of the body is derived from the unchanging fundamental structure that nature has endowed the human body. This reality is the same setting that bestows its permanent significance upon the words of conjugal consent exchanged between man and woman within the marriage rites. As the human words “I am your husband” and “I am your wife” are translated to the marital act using the language of the body, the significance of the message breaks away from the temporality of the present moment since the act itself assumes paternity and maternity—possible realities belonging to the future. The generation of a new person seals the truthfulness

³⁹ JP II, TB, 398.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 388.

⁴¹ Ibid.: “(HV) considers and even emphasizes the subjective and psychological dimensions when it speaks of the significance, and precisely of the “two significances of the marital act.

The significance becomes known with the rereading, the (ontological) truth of the object. Through this rereading, the (ontological) truth enters (...) into the cognitive dimension – subjective and psychological.” This is the reason he insists on the fact that the persons, man and woman, are ultimately the authors of the language of the body.

⁴² Ibid., 387.

⁴³ Ibid., 388.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 365.

of the dialogue between man-husband and woman-wife, giving the initial verbal marital consent its permanent value. John Paul II writes:

In this sphere man is the cause of the actions which have, per se, clear-cut meanings. He is then the cause of the actions and at the same time the author of their significance. The sum total of those meanings constitutes in a certain sense the ensemble of the language of the body, in which the spouses decide to speak to each other as ministers of the sacrament of marriage. The sign which they constitute by the words of matrimonial consent is not a mere immediate and passing sign, but a sign looking to the future which produces a lasting effect, namely, the marriage bond, one and indissoluble. (...) [T]he essential “truth” of the sign will remain organically linked to the morality of matrimonial conduct. In this truth of the sign and, later, in the morality of matrimonial conduct, the procreative significance of the body is inserted with a view to the future—that is, paternity and maternity (...).⁴⁵

Thus, the ultimate significance of the human body in its duality as male and female can be gleaned only from understanding the language of the body in the “full context of a correct vision of the values of life and of the family.”⁴⁶ It is clear that this teaching is not contrary to human reason.⁴⁷

However, the intrinsic moral implications of such a way of thinking about human sexuality have long been held suspect. Issues arising in relation to human relationships, marriage, and family are often relegated to the socio-cultural sphere as “present-day phenomena” meant to be described and not to be judged. There is a pervasive worldview that human realities are mere constructs and products of man’s strategic decisions, and thus subject to his ever-changing perception of things. Human whim ultimately dictates the norm for acceptable behavior.

Acknowledging the presence of the “language of the body,” which inherently bears a significance both spousal and procreative at the same time and allowing our behavior to reflect the truth derived from rereading what the body communicates to us can be the basis for moral norms governing human acts in the sphere of sexuality. The language of the body can be used by persons

⁴⁵ JPII, TB, 363.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 400.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 390: “We believe that our contemporaries are especially capable of seeing that this teaching is in harmony with human reason.

On his part Paul VI confirms this (normative) order by seeking at the same time to shed light on that “non-contradiction,” and thus to justify the respective moral norm by demonstrating its conformity to reason.”

of diverse belief systems since it is the body itself that communicates itself to us. What becomes imperative, and in this sense is identified as the moral norm, is the rereading of the language of the body in truth.⁴⁸ The truth hence reflects the intended result inherently contained in the body's binary modality of maleness and femaleness. This sign is the very means to communicate the singular spousal and procreative significance of the sexed body.

What does the truth about the human body constitute? In the first place, the human body is more than a sexual organism. It is an *organon*, the primary instrument man uses to express himself in his totality. For this reason, the language of the body is an indispensable medium to forge interpersonal relationships and particularly reciprocal relationships between man and woman.⁴⁹ As an illustration, the woman is known as a female person through the entire exterior constitution of a woman's body. The constitution of the woman is different from man even in the deepest bio-physiological determinants and the construction and form of her body attest to that.

Her body is the external sign of her internal constitution configured for potential maternity. This reality is derived from the language of the body.⁵⁰ Even the feminine qualities of physical beauty, of compassion, tenderness and caring, which highlight attractiveness, are closely linked to motherhood.⁵¹ Since eventually, it is through the language of the body that man and woman are drawn together in a dialogue, a correct rereading of this language and the conformity of succeeding expressions to this language is a requisite to observing the norm of upholding the language of the body in truth. As John Paul II explains:

Man and woman carry on in the language of the body (a) dialogue. (...) This language of the body is something more than mere sexual reaction. As authentic language of the persons, it is subject to the demands of truth, that is, to objective moral norms. Precisely on the level of this language, man and woman reciprocally express themselves in the fullest and most profound way possible to them by the corporeal dimension of masculinity and femininity. Man and woman express themselves in the measure of the whole truth of the human person.⁵²

⁴⁸ JP II, TB, 387-89.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 397.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁵² JP II, TB, 398.

Pope Francis in *Amoris laetitia* enjoins couples to consider that even when the physical signs that had caused initial attraction would have faded, the emerging love for the person who had been a co-causal sign of the *communio personarum* should prevail.⁵³ This co-causality in fact persists until the demise of one of the spouses.

Another area of interpersonal communication where the language of the body needs to be reread by man and woman in the truth is that of exchanging gestures of affection. Indeed, in many instances, love is more truly shown in deeds than in words. However, it is also quite reasonable to believe that “(t)he most profound words of the spirit—words of love, of giving, of fidelity—demand an adequate language of the body.”⁵⁴ Man and woman communicate in their conduct and comportment, by means of gestures and reactions, expressions of acceptance, esteem, pleasure, and love. What the ancients designate as “the passions” linked closely to their bodily condition contribute significantly to the forging of married life.⁵⁵ The body, by means of a dynamism brought about by its masculinity and femininity, in its action and interaction, in tension and enjoyment, “speaks” on behalf of the person who is its rightful author.⁵⁶ As a consequence of rereading the language of their bodies in all the truth which is proper to it, mutual reactions of excitement and emotion may be elicited. Although they appear to be joined in a singular experience, it is expedient to recognize excitement and emotion as two distinct and different experiences of the human “I.” Their distinction lies essentially in the intention of the persons man and woman who are the authors of the language of the body, to enter into the spousal dialogue.

Excitement seeks above all to be expressed in the form of sensual and corporeal pleasure (...) [I]t tends towards the conjugal act which (depending on the natural cycles of fertility) includes the possibility of procreation. On the other hand, emotion, caused by another human being as a person, even if in its emotive content it is conditioned by the femininity or masculinity of the “other,” does not per se tend toward the conjugal act. But it limits itself to other manifestations of affection, which express the spousal meaning of the body, and which nevertheless do not include its (potentially) procreative meaning.⁵⁷

⁵³ Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, no. 164.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 359.

⁵⁵ Pope Francis, nos. 143-48, 152.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 397-98.

⁵⁷ JP II, TB, 413.

A highly subjective and eroticized reading distorts the truth of the language of the body.⁵⁸ The virtue of continence on the other hand gives man and woman the capacity to govern and direct excitement toward its correct development⁵⁹ thus uphold the truth of the expressions of masculinity and femininity of the human body. It also guides the line of emotion itself by orienting it toward the acquisition of deeper, purer, and more mature expressions.⁶⁰

A final and controversial area where the correct reading of the language of the body is very important is related to its significance as a gift of oneself done in freedom. The element of freedom in the dialogue between man and woman who intend to use the language of the body is indispensable. It entails, after all, that any communication of persons needs to be done in freedom if it were to be carried out truthfully. Indeed, the respect for truth embedded in the language of the body entails the dimension of the liberty of the gift of person including the gift of one's masculine and feminine body.

Where the violation of freedom persists, especially notable in recent times of marked individualism,⁶¹ the integrity of the significance of the spousal dialogue using the language of the body is also put at risk. The communion of persons in the conjugal act demands that in rereading the language of the body in truth, man and woman unite their intended meaning to the integral truth of the act, using the language of the body as the expression of their intent. Where this truth is lacking, the interior order of the conjugal union is also violated. This violation⁶² thus constitutes the essential evil of the contraceptive act.⁶³

According to the criterion of this truth, which should be expressed in the language of the body, the conjugal act signifies not only love (subjective 'unitive' significance) but also potential fecundity (biological 'procreative' significance). Therefore, it cannot be deprived of its full and adequate significance (...). In the conjugal act it is not licit to separate the unitive aspect (significance) from the procreative aspect (significance), because both the one and the other pertain to the intimate truth of the conjugal

⁵⁸ JPIL, TB, 407.

⁵⁹ Karol Wojtyła, *Love and Responsibility*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), especially the Chapter on "The Problems of Continence," 194-208.

⁶⁰ JPIL, TB, 413.

⁶¹ Pope Francis, nos. 33-34.

⁶² *Ibid.*, no. 42.

⁶³ JPIL, TB, 398.

act. The one is activated together with the other and in a certain sense the one by means of the other.⁶⁴

Diligence in Rereading the Language of the Body

If we were to appeal for responsible behavior in the expressions of sexuality, a diligent rereading of the language of the body is the best place to start. It may give individuals a better understanding of what sexual orientation is and therefore guide them in choosing their consequent behaviors. It may help young people take hold of their passions and emotions which this highly eroticized culture has manipulated to the hilt, and sadly to serve consumerist reasons. It may help married couples make informed decisions and be individually responsible as husband or wife, and together as parents too. It may help those working for the welfare of fathers, mothers, and children to proactively seek solutions in keeping with the dignity of these individuals and society as a whole. Lastly, it may help all of us recognize the human being's true worth and consequently create a culture that we truly deserve.

⁶⁴ JPII, TB, 398.

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