Among the earliest accomplishments of Pope John Paul II was the presentation of his extensive and thorough theology of the body during his Wednesday audiences between 1979 and 1984. From the beginning of his pontificate John Paul II was a man in the middle, a pontiff in the literal sense of the word: a bridge connecting two great events. From the one side he sought to implement the Second Vatican Council; toward the other he sought to prepare for the third millennium of Christendom. Both required the Holy Father to put his energies into a change of culture, from the increasingly secularized to a culture of life. His first practical step was his extended teaching on the identity of the human person.

The starting point for John Paul II’s theology of the body was Jesus’s response to the Pharisees’ question about the legitimacy of divorce (Matt. 19: 1-9), in which Jesus directs them to “the beginning,” quoting directly from the two Genesis accounts of the creation of the human person. The Holy Father follows Jesus’s direction in his excursion into the identity of the human person created in the image of God. John Paul II’s theology of the body is so profound that only with time have even the most scholarly minds begun to understand the categories and content of the catechesis.

George Weigel, in his biography of the Holy Father, Witness to Hope, noted that a secondary literature is needed for ongoing reception of the theology of the body. Most broadly, John Paul II’s catechesis is an affirmation of the Church’s teaching on the dignity of the human person in general and on human sexuality in particular. Specifically, however, the theology of the body has inaugurated new developments in theology on at least three levels. First, the catechesis develops our understanding of human sexuality within a detailed and coherent Christian anthropology. Second, it forms a response to the accumulation of errors from Descartes onward which have led to the deconstruction of the identity of the human person. Third, it invites deeper reflection on basic categories of human identity, showing that the New Evangelization is not just another rendition of central beliefs, but an original expedition into the contemporary world with the tradition of the Church as a steadfast guide.

In the initial flurry of popular texts meant to “explain” the theology of the body, one text rises above the others: Angelo Cardinal Scola’s The Nuptial Mystery. The text is less a secondary source about John Paul II’s teaching than a companion volume. Scola is well suited to guide the reader through the late pontiff’s teachings. Like John Paul, Scola earned doctorates in both philosophy and theology and is the author of numerous books and articles on a wide range of topics, including philosophical and theological anthropology. He served on the faculty of the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family in Rome for more than twenty years, including seven years as its president. He was also rector of the Pontifical Lateran University from 1995 to 2002, when he was appointed Catholic Patriarch of Venice by John Paul II. Scola was created Cardinal the following year. During his tenure as rector of the Lateran University, Scola published Il Mistero Nuziale in two volumes; in 2005, the work was published in English in one volume, titled The Nuptial Mystery. Upon Scola’s departure from the Lateran, his colleagues honored him with a collection of articles on his contribution to the study of the nuptial mystery, Dialoghi sul Mistero Nuziale.

Scola’s categories refresh and draw together responses to contemporary challenges to the dignity of the human person. He notes that “the term ‘nuptial’ … highlights the relational character of love” (xxii) and that nuptiality is inscribed in fundamental human experience “as an inseparable intertwining of three factors: sexual difference, love in
its proper sense (relation to the other, gift), and fruitfulness” (xxiii). Scola’s study takes his reader from ontology to anthropology, ethics, and theology and back again to show the interrelation of them all.

The first part of The Nuptial Mystery, “Categories of the Nuptial Mystery: Two Original Theses of Mulieris dignitatem,” examines the theological foundations of John Paul II’s teachings on the man-woman pair. It looks specifically at the two anthropological theses of Mulieris dignitatem. John Paul’s 1988 apostolic letter on the dignity and vocation of women—the analogy “between the dual unity of man and woman and the relations between the three persons in God,” and the affirmation of human sexuality as an integral part of the imago Dei (5).

Personal identity is manifested in and through the human body as male or female. The capacity of the man includes standing before the woman in an affirmative “lack,” which indicates the man’s openness to the woman, and vice versa: “Man exists always and only as a masculine or feminine being. There is not a single man (or woman) who can by himself alone be the whole of man. He always has before himself the other way of being human, which is to him inaccessible. . . . The duality of masculine and feminine ‘gender’ thus presents itself at once as internal and external to the ‘I.’ Or rather, the ‘I’ registers a lack within himself that opens him to one ‘outside of himself’” (7). This favorable lack is resolved only by the gift of self. The capacity for this gift and the gift itself constitute a sign in which sexual difference is revealed in its fullness of meaning as an original dimension of man (9).

Scola emphasizes that sexual difference is not an evolved social construct or mere descriptive fact; it is an irreducible reality of the identity of the human person. Sexual difference is an event, a search: “The mystery of the man always, in some way, lies with his ‘counterimage,’ the woman, and vice versa, that of the woman with the man. And yet this ‘other,’ which the woman represents for the man and the man for the woman, can never be dominated: there remains an element of difference between the two which indicates their irreducibility” (74). The other, who is different from me, always eludes me, but nonetheless draws me forth in search. The difference constitutes an opening of one to the other, which allows the actual exchange of the gift of self. Sexual difference is the precondition for the gift of self, which is oriented toward communion with the other. Man and woman, in the particularity of their masculinity and femininity, manifest the fundamental sign of the reciprocal gift of self on which all reality is predicated.

One central theme of The Nuptial Mystery is the rehabilitation of the imago Dei. John Paul II repeatedly explored the significance of not only the rational dimension of the imago Dei, but also the relational, or communal, dimension. Theological expression has long favored the classic Augustinian assertion that the imago Dei resides in man’s rational soul; Leonine and Thomistic thought affirms the Augustinian emphasis. Without diminishing the classical teaching, John Paul II, in both Mulieris dignitatem and the theology of the body, makes a significant articulation of the communal quality of the imago Dei. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, in the teaching under “Man: The Image of God,” treats the relational likeness in n. 1702, before treating the rational image in nn. 1703 and 1704. The imago Dei is so central to Christian anthropology that the proper expression of its dimensions and meaning will always be a delicate and essential task—a task for which The Nuptial Mystery will serve well as a model for ongoing reflection.

In the second part of the book, “The Nuptial Mystery: A Theological Perspective,” Scola continues to build on the basic categories of nuptiality. Rooted in bodiliness, human love reflects the biological, psychological, and spiritual totality of the person. To be a creature includes the fundamental experience of love that involves the totality of the human person. One can truly resolve the meaning of one’s being only through a gift of self in love which bears always and everywhere a nuptial character. In the gift of self, one emerges into a unity which is always a dual unity: the other person remains ungraspable.
and exists even in love in such a way that he or she can never be dominated. At the same time, the encounter prevails in the self-gift of love, which brings a fullness in unity offered in no other way. In fullness, love is fruitful. When the gift unites the two, the difference always makes space for a third.

Scola furnishes his reader with a clear diagnosis of the ills of modern culture in the third part of the book, “The Nuptial Mystery and Cultural Changes: The Tasks of Marriage and the Family.” The deconstruction of the identity of the human person has reduced the categories of man’s experience to the measure of autonomy, acquisition, materialism, hedonism, consumerism, and utilitarianism. Disregard for objective meaning has numerous effects on the unity inherent in culture. The disruption of marriage has paralleled disintegration on other levels: the divorce of reason from faith, the separation (rather than distinction) between the various fields of theology, and the dissolving of ethics from the workplace. This flight from unity has had a devastating impact on culture and identity. Scola’s work uncovers the beauty of married love itself as a practical response to the ideologies that plan its demise.

The most palpable effects of these ideologies have been on the family. The separation of sexuality from marriage, and the further disassociation of sexuality from procreation, are blistering outcomes of deconstructions that began prior to Descartes. The nuptial mystery—the interconnection of sexual difference, love, and fruitfulness—stands against the ideologies of separation. It is a path of integration and restoration, the integration of sublime mystery with basic experience. It lays an ontological foundation for Christian anthropology, bioethics, education theory, and traditional theology, and responds to the modern crisis of fatherhood. Its comprehensive understanding of human sexuality provides profound and effective answers to the questions thrown up in modern debate about the meaning of marriage.

In the fourth part of the book, “The Nuptial Mystery: Marriage and the Family in the Light of the Christian Mysteries,” Scola reveals how the categories refined in the theology of the body are operative in the central mysteries of the Catholic faith, how “in the trinitarian relations and missions, which culminate with the genesis of the bride church in the paschal sacrifice of the bridegroom Christ, we discover difference, gift, and fruitfulness, the three constitutive factors of the nuptial mystery, inseparably interwoven” (294). The expression of Trinitarian theology, Christology, pneumatology, Mariology, ecclesiology, and sacramental theology are each refreshed by reference to John Paul’s seminal teachings. Scola completes the volume with seven appendixes.

Scola’s explication of the teaching of John Paul II is also a working document for culture change, speaking to fundamental human experience. The teachings on sexuality, marriage, and family form a profound and compelling response to three hundred years of Cartesian deconstruction and progressive secularization. Scola anchors what others find abstract. These themes are developed within the context of the sacramental nature of the human body. Scola’s categories are new even to some theologians. His patient, clear, and careful development allows for a systematic unfolding of complex notions. He takes the blueprint developed by John Paul and shows us persuasively that the theology of the body, the earliest work of John Paul’s Petrine ministry, coincides with the Holy Father’s proposal for the third millennium: the New Evangelization.


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