

BOOK REVIEW

Susan Windley-Daoust, *Theology of the Body, Extended: The Spiritual Signs of Birth, Impairment, and Dying* (Hobe Sound, Florida: Lectio Publishing, LLC 2014), 270pp.

When the average Catholic, or person familiar with Catholicism, hears the phrase “Theology of the Body,” it is usually understood as having something to do with Saint Pope John Paul II’s specific development of the Church’s teaching on sexual morality. Some may even recollect that these teachings were delivered through his weekly papal audiences from 1979–1984. However, as Dr. Susan Windley-Daoust observes in the preface to this book: “... John Paul II made his arguments for a right sexuality and marriage in the *second* half of the audiences, *after* the exploration of what it means to be human” (p.xi). While not wanting to take anything away from the fruitful work that has been done exploring the importance of the Theology of the Body for properly understanding human sexuality, the author argues that, “... the greatest gift within the Theology of the Body literature is one that has been, in large part, missed...” (p.xii). Her view is that John Paul II’s Theology of the Body offers us a lens through which to understand the whole, human experience—not *just* our sexuality—and if properly applied that lens can help us, “to see rightly the lived experiences of childbirth, impairment, and dying” (p.xii). And, I believe she is correct. As such, Susan Windley-Daoust’s work is a welcome and necessary addition to the Theology of the Body literature.

The book follows a well thought out design, with four, over-arching chapters, which are then sub-divided into different topics within the general chapter themes. The first chapter provides an overview of the basic tenets of the Theology of the Body, the second addresses how the Theology of the Body can be extended to the beginning of life, the third moves on to discuss the connection to human impairment, and the fourth finishes off the book by exploring death and dying. Each chapter begins with a summary paragraph outlining its key concepts, while at the end of each chapter are collected extensive endnotes. The volume also includes a brief Afterword devoted to the theme of prayer. Overall, the author suggests that the Theology of the Body, properly extended in the manner she lays out, provides a lens through which we can see our entire lived, human experience from birth through natural death as one of “gift.” Fans of the Theology of the Body and newcomers to its perspective alike will find much to enjoy in this work.

Chapter 1, “Lord, I Want To See,” provides a basic introduction to the Theology of the Body as presented by John Paul II, noting that these theological reflections offer us a special way of “seeing” the reality of human experience. Windley-Daoust observes, “The importance of ‘seeing,’ of experiencing what appears, is the distinctive but often unnoticed cornerstone that undergirds much of John Paul II’s theological reflection” (p.10). This chapter basically has two parts. First, the author discusses several of the most significant background influences that impacted John Paul’s teachings of the Theology of the Body. To begin with, she attributes John Paul’s focus on “seeing” to both his artistic sensibilities and his background in phenomenology, which as a philosophical approach, is “rooted in perception” (p.12). She notes a number of philosophers of the phenomenological attitude who had a special impact on John Paul II, including such diverse thinkers as Max Scheler and Gabriel Marcel.

Windley-Daoust speaks at some length in this first chapter regarding the influence Marcel had on John Paul II's own Christian anthropology. First, she notes the importance of Marcel's distinction between the more scientific approach embodied in *primary reflection*, and that of *secondary reflection* which opens one up to the notion of mystery as part of the development of the phenomenological attitude. She addresses Marcel's concerns that secondary reflection was in danger of being lost in an ever-increasingly scientific world, which seeks to "answer" encounters instead of "experiencing" them. As Windley-Daoust notes, "To Marcel, mystery is not the unknowable, but the place where subject and object distinctions begin to lose their hard edges," making reference to discussions from Marcel's *Being and Having: An Existentialist Diary* (p.13). Seeing human life as something to be experienced as opposed to a problem to be solved is a foundational element of John Paul II's approach to the human person. Windley-Daoust also touches upon Marcel's notion of *disponibilité*, referring to the human person's availability to the world of mystery, observing that, "*Disponibilité* is both a decision for dispositional openness to another, as well as a way of association that enables and facilitates this non-objectifying relationship" (p.14). This concept of *disponibilité*, or being open and available to life, serves as a consistent theme throughout the book as the author addresses the specific experiences of birth, suffering, and dying in later chapters. Finally, Windley-Daoust makes a brief reference to Marcel's, "distinction between being and having as opposing ways of defining the human person," arguing that this distinction influenced the thinking of the Second Vatican Council, as well as the personalist focus of John Paul II (*ibid*; see especially footnotes #33 and 34).

Unfortunately, she dismisses the influence that St. Thomas Aquinas (and by extension, Aristotle) might have had on the development of John Paul's thought. She provides some commentary on the question of Thomas' potential influence in a footnote (Ch.1, #16), but it is rather unsatisfactory given clear evidence of such connections, especially regarding John Paul II's metaphysics. And while I concede that the relationship between John Paul's phenomenology and Thomism is a hotly debated topic, this section of the chapter would have benefited from a more nuanced discussion. Windley-Daoust also addresses key theological influences such as the thought of St. John of the Cross and Carmelite spirituality, noting that John Paul was, "unknown to many, . . . a third order Carmelite" (p.17).

The second part of the first chapter then lays out an overview of the Theology of the Body. The summary is brief, but clear, and provides a quite workable foundation for the rest of the book, even for those readers who may not have any familiarity with the Theology of the Body. Within this summary, the author explains the distinction between the two parts of John Paul's audiences—the first which focused on developing what he referred to as an "adequate anthropology," and the second which focused on sexuality and marriage. Windley-Daoust then reiterates that her goal is to explore the first part of the papal audiences and, "focus on the ensouled body as a created, fallen, and redeemed sign of the radical, healing love of God, seen and experienced through the bodily experiences of childbirth, impairment, and death" (p.29).

Chapter 2, "The Gift of the Birthing Body," is the first step taken in extending the Theology of the Body. Early in the chapter, Windley-Daoust writes, "Birth, I will argue, was given to us as a way to see how all souls, pregnant with the Holy Spirit, are transformed by cooperating with the Spirit, letting God 'make all things new'" (p.44). However, before we can make any headway into "seeing" birth as a spiritual sign, the author observes, we will need to rethink our contemporary way of looking at childbirth. She argues that the predominant way of viewing childbirth today is as a "disease" or a "problem to be fixed," or in Marcel's terms, birth is approached from primary reflection instead of through secondary reflection (p.45). With that,

Windley-Daoust launches into a substantive critique of our contemporary medical attitudes to childbirth in America. As she observes, “What bothers many is the reality that with the ‘industry’ of birth, the dignity of the mother, child, and process can easily be misplaced” (p.51). In keeping with the Theology of the Body, the author proceeds to offer a “phenomenology of natural childbirth,” working through the various stages of labor and delivery, noting that we need to take seriously the notion that these experiences were, “given to women as an opportunity to spiritually grow, to come closer to seeing God’s face” (p.57). She also addresses the issue of pain in childbirth, arguing that while pain is a real part of the birthing process, we do not have to let pain *define* childbirth nor make us fear this natural part of life. Rather, the experience of pregnancy and birthing provide ample opportunities for being in the moment, for “seeing” God’s hand, and for being available (Marcel’s *disponibilité* again) to one another.

Chapter 3, “The Gift of the Impaired Body,” delves into what I believe is one of the most difficult issues for Christians to grapple with—the reality of human impairment and suffering in light of faith in a loving and caring God. Windley-Daoust bravely asks, “Could a sign be present through the impairment? Could an impairment ever be a sign itself?” (p.107). Noting that human impairment is, “not the direct will of God, but a consequence of our fallen world,” (p.107) the author first explores the ways in which we “see” impairment within society today. A number of important themes are addressed, such as our preoccupation with normalcy and eugenic attitudes toward impaired individuals. Windley-Daoust explains how the thought of John Paul II can counter such negative influences and the fears they engender: “The Theology of the Body provides real insights into the relationship we each have with those who are impaired in any way, and how the sign of the body impaired still points to our union with God” (p.124). Many stories are shared in her reflections, including those of Jean Vanier and the L’Arche communities, highlighting the dual need to be present and available to persons with impairment, but without fear so that we may embrace our mutual vulnerability—yet another application of Marcel’s *disponibilité* to this important aspect of human experience (p.130-134). In sum, there is meaning in our limitations which helps us to “see” God ever more clearly. This chapter ends with three “Case Studies” applying the Theology of the Body perspective: one on Down Syndrome, a second on depression and dementia, and a final one on deafness/hearing loss (which, incidentally, is biographical).

The fourth and final chapter of the book is, “The Gift of the Dying Body,” which directly examines, “dying as a bodily and spiritual sign that points to God” (p.191). Here the author is careful at the outset to note that God does not have some people die—and in some cases, die very difficult deaths—just to teach the rest of us something. Yet, she insists that the dying process does indeed offer wisdom if we can but properly “see” what is offered: “Like the ensouled body itself, dying is never meaningless” (p.192). The challenge, of course, as with all three of the areas Windley-Daoust addresses in the book, is to actually “see” what is before us—a task that becomes difficult with dying loved ones as we “‘farm out’ being with the sick and dying to ‘professionals’...” (p.192). As in other chapters, the author begins by looking at the way people die in America today. As others have observed, today death is no longer viewed as a natural part of the human experience, but rather it is the “enemy” of medicine itself. Windley-Daoust suggests that a “phenomenology of death,” via the Theology of the Body, can help us “see” death and the dying differently. In short, “The Theology of the Body teaches us how to die, and for whom. It provides sight into what it actually means to join our suffering with the passion of Christ” (p.208). Again, stories are shared to illuminate the reality of death in this new way of “seeing.” Windley-Daoust touches on experiences from the hospice movement, and does not shy

away from difficult questions about suffering, including about what she acknowledges is becoming one of the most feared diseases of our day, Alzheimer's. These reflections are well worth the read. The Afterword further solidifies the grace that these moments of life—birth, impairment, and death—hold for us, if we but experience them openly and with a prayerful heart.

In close, I highly recommend Dr. Susan Windley-Daoust's book to all audiences from young adult on. It is quite readable, and would be suitable for personal use, book groups, and even college classes (both theology and bioethics from a Christian perspective). Perhaps the best way to describe my overall sense of the work is as one part academic (teaching and critiquing various ideas) accompanied by part spiritual direction (via the theological reflections in each chapter), providing a nice balance of the two and making the work accessible to diverse interests. But most of all, this is an important work that draws attention to the wider scope of John Paul II's Theology of the Body. The wisdom of John Paul's teaching through the Theology of the Body needs to be extended to our whole, lived experience as ensouled, bodily persons, lest we miss "seeing" all there is to be seen.

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