

Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Newark

[Home](#) [Archbishop](#) [Ministries](#) [Parishes](#) [Education](#) [Contact Us](#)

December 8, 2002

**“And the Word became Flesh (Jn 1:14)”:
A PASTORAL LETTER
A Theological Reflection on the Human Body**

1. This is the season when we celebrate God's entrance into history in bodily form. The word Advent comes from the Latin *Adventus* -- “the coming.” God came to dwell among us in a particular and profound way in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, who was and is truly God and truly man. We Catholics express our reverent awe for the incarnation of Jesus, the son of God, like us in all things but sin, by bowing our heads (or, at Christmas, kneeling) at the words of the creed: “By the power of the Holy Spirit he was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man.” We commemorate special moments of his human life in our calendar: his incarnation at the feast of the Annunciation (March 25), his birth at Christmas (December 25), his presentation in the Temple (February 2), his transfiguration on Mount Tabor (August 6), his passion, death, and resurrection at Easter.

This document setting out Catholic teaching on the human body holds up and affirms truths about what it means to be a bodily person. It emphasizes the body's goodness and corrects certain false views of human existence. In publishing it, I hope to spark discussion and teaching about the good news of our creation and redemption as bodily beings. I invite all who read it to meditate on what it means to be truly and fully human—bodily persons created in the image and likeness of God.

In short, this pastoral letter is intended to draw us into a conversation as a community. From grade schools to universities, in homilies and families, let us consider the implications for our daily lives of this fundamental fact: we are bodily persons.

A Biblical Reflection

2. Paul's Letter to the Romans is his most systematic work, highly structured like all of his writing. Its central portion is divided into two major sections: doctrine and morals. At the beginning of the moral section Paul makes a comprehensive statement as the basis for his teaching:

I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourself to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect (Rom 12:1-2).

Paul here states two fundamental truths of moral theology: the need for each and every Christian to offer his or her entire self to God, and the requirement that our minds, our way of thinking, be renewed by the transforming power of God's grace.

“Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice.” To Paul, offering one's body meant offering God one's entire existence in space and time. But, aware that right living flowed from right

thinking, he called upon the early Christians to begin by changing the way they thought. Rather than conform their thinking to the fads of the day, they should drink deeply from the wellsprings of eternal wisdom in the teaching and person of Jesus Christ.

We might say Paul challenged the early Church at Rome and all Churches of all time to think biblically—to think with the mind of Christ: “The mind in you must be the mind that is in Christ” (Phil 2:5). This is particularly true of how we think about ourselves as human persons—bodily beings created in the image and likeness of the triune God.

Over the centuries, what it means to be a person has often been distorted, and it often is distorted today. Some have repudiated the bodily nature of the human person, seeing a human being as a "ghost in the machine"—a spirit or mind lodged in a material body. Others have denied the spiritual essence of the human person, and looked upon a human being as a material entity and only that. Against radical dualism or materialism or any other false notion of humanity, biblical wisdom makes it clear that the human person is a psychosomatic unity of body and soul.

3. Among the disorders that mark our society, confusing people and leading many astray, is a misunderstanding of human sexuality rooted in deep misunderstanding of the human person and the human body. Often, these misconceptions serve as a basis for public policy and personal decisions; church leaders sometimes are criticized for not speaking clearly enough about such matters.

In this pastoral, then, I want to set out the Church's doctrine and to do so in a fundamentally positive way. The approach is based on the 'theology of the body' that, though thoroughly consistent with the Church's faith across the centuries, is one of the great themes in the teaching of Pope John Paul II. I hope to help Catholics and others grasp the fact that our teaching is not negative—that it expresses profound respect for the human person, the human body, and human sexuality.

Pope John Paul II Teaches About the Human Person

4. Pope John Paul's genius for innovation, visible in so many ways throughout his pontificate, extends to his teaching on human bodiliness. Starting in 1980 and continuing for four years, he used his Wednesday audience talks to set out an exciting new approach to this subject. This is the theology of the body.

For a Christian, the body's significance is good, inescapable, and central; Christianity itself cannot be understood apart from an appreciation of the body. It is a myth that the Catholic Church teaches as it does about sexuality because it undervalues sex. The Church teaches as it does because it values human sexuality so highly. And in valuing sexuality, it necessarily values the body.

5. That is hardly new. Standing in the Areopagus of Athens two millennia ago, Paul proclaimed the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Many of his sophisticated listeners laughed him to scorn. For although they thought of themselves as tolerant folks—they even had an altar dedicated to "an unknown god," lest any touchy, anonymous deity feel left out—they couldn't abide the idea that the body had such extraordinary dignity (cf. Acts 17.22-32). Didn't all the cleverest people say the body was evil and corrupt? So how could this itinerant preacher, Paul, ask up-to-date Athenians to believe in a god who would stoop to rising from death with a human body? Too foolish for words!

St. Paul nevertheless understood that a version of Christianity that left the body out of account would be worse than incomprehensible—it would subvert Christianity from within. "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins," he bluntly told the people of Corinth (1 Cor 15.17). John Paul II also grasps the fact that central dogmas of Christianity like creation, the Incarnation, the redemption, and the truths of eschatology cannot be understood without reference to and profound respect for the human body.

A Signpost to Truths of Faith

6. The body points to the doctrine of creation. God created our first parents as bodily beings. "Male and female he created them" (Gen 1.27), a distinction most evident on the bodily level. God's deliberate creative design means women aren't "misbegotten males," as Aristotle erroneously believed. Nor is the difference between the sexes a biological accident, a cultural artifact, or some kind of mistake.

Sex, then, is not a code word for discrimination or what the civil rights lawyers call a "suspect category." We are obliged to take sexual differentiation seriously, indeed to reverence it, for, written into our very chromosomes, it is part of the gift of creation and an expression of God's will.

God gives only good gifts. As one of these, our bodiliness is a blessing. The refrain running through the first chapter of Genesis—"And God saw that it was good"—drives home this point. And after the creation of man and woman (in God's own image, we are told), there is an important shift: "And behold, it was very good" (Gen 1.31).

7. The body points to the doctrine of the Incarnation. In Jesus Christ, God became a flesh-and-blood human being. The gospel of John puts it with uncompromising clarity: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1.14). The late Stefan Cardinal Wyszyński, Primate of Poland, expressed this in a phrase of exquisite domestic tenderness: in Jesus Christ, he said, we encounter "God in diapers."

All the same, the reality of Jesus' bodiliness has been a stumbling block for many from St. Paul's day to ours. Ancient heresies with names like Arianism, Nestorianism, and Monophysitism sought to evade the fact of Jesus' corporeality and avoid its consequences. Like the skeptical Athenians before them, their adherents couldn't abide the fact that God had a human body. They have counterparts today.

8. The body points to the doctrine of our redemption by Christ. Jesus suffered and died to redeem us. Mental suffering—fear, dread, anguish—is a reality of course, and Jesus surely suffered that way. But his Passion was something more: bloody sweat on a human forehead, a back shredded by scourging, thorns thrust into a man's head, three body-wracking falls under the weight of a cross, spikes driven through arms and legs. John scrupulously records the flow of blood and water from Jesus' pierced side (cf. Jn 19.34) to underline the fact that he was a real human being who suffered in a real human body.

Jesus died for us. His body was anointed, shrouded, and placed in a grave. We don't say, "Jesus' body died for us," but, "Jesus died for us." His body is no appendage, not something borrowed but not really his. His identity as God incarnate and the fullness of his redemptive life and death both are bound up with his human body.

So much so, in fact, that his victory over death is signaled by bodily resurrection. Jesus did not conquer sin and death only by dying. All good people die, but Jesus' victory was accomplished in his rising. He is our redeemer, and our redemption will be fully accomplished when "the last enemy...death" (1 Cor 15.26) is abolished by the power of the risen Lord and we rise in our bodies with him.

9. The body points to eschatology—the Christian doctrines concerning the end times or final things. We say in the Creed, "we believe in the resurrection of the body"; and we believe that on the last day, at the end of time, all men and women will enter body and soul into that life of eternal fulfillment called heaven or else into that "second death" called hell (Rev 21.8). Just as we have lived good or evil lives body and soul, in this world, so also, body and soul, shall we be rewarded or punished in the next.

God does not bestow bodily resurrection on human beings arbitrarily. If Jesus rose from the dead, then his body rose. From the first ages of the Bible to the last it is clear that the primary curse brought on us by sin is bodily death: To disobey God is to die. But our God is the God of the living (cf. Mt 22.32, Mk 12.27, Lk 20.38), who opens graves and raises bodies. This resurrection of the body is part of the reintegration and restoration of all things in Christ, who "fills all in all" (Eph 1.23). And in the end, "death shall be no more" (Rev 21.4).

Lessons of Experience

10. Along with the truths of faith, our own experience also points to the importance of the human body. Although the tangibility and immediacy of our bodies can hardly be ignored, thinkers over the centuries sometimes have sought to downgrade the body's significance and, instead of recognizing the body as a constitutive element of the human person, spoken of it as something apart from our core identity.

From ancient Manichaeism to the "cogito ergo sum"—I think, therefore I am--of the seventeenth-century philosopher Rene Descartes, whose thought took scant notice of the human body, errors of this sort express what generically is called body-soul dualism. This alien anthropology, which takes a false view of the unique body-soul composite that is the human person, is incompatible with Christianity. Yet it persists. It is alive and well—and profoundly destructive—today.

On some level, of course, everyone knows perfectly well that the body is intrinsic to his or her identity. Think how we speak. If I suddenly and unexpectedly struck you, very likely you would demand, "Why did you hit me?" Not "Why did you hit my body?" but "Why did you hit me?" We all know that someone or something that touches our bodies is touching us. That is why crimes like assault and battery are crimes against the person, not just property violations.

A Philosopher-Pope Speaks of Sexuality

11. Up to this point I haven't said a lot about Pope John Paul. There is a reason for this. No matter how indebted we are to him for the theology of the body, we need to make it our own. Studying and quoting the Pope are all well and good; but the theology of the body is not just an object of study, to be examined and then returned to the shelf. This way of thinking—this way of seeing reality—must be applied to contemporary life. There can be no greater tribute to John Paul than for others to carry his thought forward; there could hardly be a greater betrayal than to pay only lip service to what he says.

Although the expression 'theology of the body' has become widely familiar only since he became pope, Karol Wojtyla began developing this theology as an important part of his academic work as a professor and his ministry as a priest. This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of his first writings on sexual morality: in 1952, as a young priest, he wrote an article called "Instinct, Love, and Marriage" that discussed the virtue of purity.

Seeking, unlike some of his predecessors and contemporaries, to develop a positive understanding of the virtues, Wojtyla says purity is not negative, not fundamentally a 'no,' even though practicing the virtue requires saying no to some forms of behavior. Purity is primarily a 'yes,' a positive response to two things: what the human sexual instinct stands for and what sexual intercourse symbolizes.

12. A human being, the future pope points out, is more than a collection of bones, muscles, organs, and tissues, \$3.95 worth of this and that, plus a few gallons of water. And what comes into existence as a result of sexual intercourse is a human being. Not a potato, not a toad, not a mass of cells—a human being. Thus the human sexual instinct has more than biological meaning; it has existential meaning, since it is oriented to human life. This orientation is important for two reasons: because what's at issue in any concrete instance is a living human being; and because the link between the sexual instinct and the transmission of life was placed there by God the creator, who only gives good things.

A man and woman ought to experience sexual intercourse as a mutual giving and receiving in open self-surrender to each other; it is a kind of communication—the language of the body—a sign of sincere giving of self and sincere acceptance of the other's gift, and of their mutual opening up to God's gift of life. This kind of giving and receiving without reserve requires the foundation of stable, permanent love.

Thus, considered as communication, intercourse outside marriage and contraceptive intercourse both are lies told with bodies; the two parties do not truly give and receive openly and unconditionally but only use each other for pleasure. They do not say with their bodies, and from their hearts, what they speak with their lips. Indeed, all sexual sins are at their heart sins of dishonesty.

For Karol Wojtyla, purity is a yes to the goodness of God's creation, including the share spouses have in it through the use of the sexual instinct, and a yes to the unreserved and permanent commitment of love that sexual intercourse symbolizes and expresses. Purity is needful not because there is something unclean about sex but because the body's language should be consistent with the language of the heart and mind. It is a way of ensuring honesty and integrity of heart, mind, speech, and bodily act. One ought only to say with one's body what one can rightly mean with one's heart.

13. Pope John Paul is a staunch defender of marriage. It is interesting to consider why. Certainly his stand is grounded in Tradition, Church teaching, and Sacred Scripture, but his defense of marriage also comes in large part from the theology of the body.

If sexual intercourse naturally expresses the giving and receiving of love that is open to the possibility of life—of children—then the love itself requires certain things of sex, and sex already images certain unavoidable requirements of love.

Among these are: unity—one beloved, one husband, one wife; exclusivity—this man, this woman; permanence—not for a single encounter, nor a brief season, but for all the rest of life; totality—complete giving and receiving, with no strings attached (how strange it would be if a man said to a woman, "I love you eighty-five per cent"); and life-giving—because the language of the body means giving to and receiving from a spouse in the totality of his or her being, which includes the fact of fertility that sometimes, through the grace of God, results in conception, new life—a new human being. The Church's teaching in effect is that someone who here and now can't mean what sex intrinsically means shouldn't 'say it.' The message is: Be honest, don't lie.

14. Children have a right to be conceived, born, and reared through and in the love of their parents. This is why in vitro fertilization and other techniques of producing human beings that violate the bodily integrity of sexual intercourse are wrong. These technologies separate the creation of a new human person from the only human context worthy of it—the loving conjugal union of husband and wife. Children conceived by these means are truly human of course; and because they are, they deserve better.

Techniques of this kind reduce human embryos to the status of products of technology. That is clear in the routine discarding of 'imperfect' embryos and the production of 'spare' embryos to be subjected to experiments and then destroyed. Today we are learning to our horror that these assaults against the dignity of the human person pave the way to human cloning (whether for experimentation or reproduction). This is another step in replacing the language of the body with the language of the laboratory dish.

In Defense of Human Dignity

15. Sometimes you hear it said that "Sex is between two people and only them. It is nobody else's business." One implication is that the fundamental reality of sex is a psychological interchange between consenting adults.

This represents a central part of the rationale for homosexual sex. Defenders of homosexual intercourse do not take the body too seriously but not nearly seriously enough. Sex is not exclusively or essentially a psychological encounter, and it cannot be divorced from the meaning and language of the body.

Confused thinking on this subject—an updated version of our old Manichaeian and Cartesian nemesis, body-soul dualism—goes a long way to account for the fact that marriage no longer has a clear, specific meaning in some people's minds. They imagine that 'marriage' refers to something altogether fluid, shifting, malleable, and manipulable, subject to constant reshaping and revision to suit changing preferences, including the preferences of homosexual partners who want their relationships recognized as marriages.

16. And, after all, if marriage is just a mental state, a psychological something-or-other and only that, why not say two men or two women (or three men, or two women and a man, or any other recipe for gender stew that suits somebody's taste) are 'married'? Start down this road, and marriage can be redesigned at will. Or at least it can be until such time as the redesigners come face-to-face with the reality of the human body and its language.

As this suggests, in insisting on the body's significance, the Church is fighting for human dignity. "We are in the front line of a lively battle for the dignity of man," Cardinal Karol Wojtyla already pointed out in 1976 as he preached that year's Lenten retreat for Pope Paul

VI. As Pope himself, John Paul II has powerfully delineated the opposing worldviews now battling for human hearts, minds, and bodies. He calls them the culture of life and the culture of death. Appealing for a new evangelization, he asks all Catholics, all Christians, and indeed all people of good will to join in proclaiming the Gospel of Life.

Some may proclaim that Good News from philosophical conviction about the dignity of the bodily human person and the cause of human rights. Some may proclaim it from commitment to God as creator and redeemer, the one who made us and saves us as bodily persons. Some may even proclaim it from self-interest—for most people see the merits of the culture of life when the life involved is their own. Wherever the impetus comes from, the proclaiming of this Gospel of Life is an instance of practical ecumenism that embodies a shared vision of human dignity that all men and women of good will can embrace and advocate.

17. The Second Vatican Council in the 1960s encouraged Catholics to take note of the 'signs of the times' in the awareness that the gospel must be preached in many different cultural circumstances. In that spirit, today's disciples seek to respond to the imperatives of the new evangelization by proclaiming the Gospel of Life.

This work begins at home. Christians, says Pope John Paul, "need to begin with the renewal of a culture of life within Christian communities themselves. Too often it happens that believers...end up separating their Christian faith from the ethical requirements concerning life" (The Gospel of Life, n. 95). The family, the basic Christian community as well as the fundamental cell of society, must be a "sanctuary of life" (ibid., n. 92), where life is welcomed and cherished.

Then this vision of the dignity of human life must radiate from the family and the community of faith and inform society and the sphere of civil law and policy. Recall that *Pacem in Terris*, the great encyclical of Blessed Pope John XXIII whose fortieth anniversary we mark next spring, begins with the simple yet profound words: "Peace on earth...can never be established, never guaranteed, except by the diligent observance of the divinely established order" (Peace on Earth, n. 1).

Implications of the Theology of the Body

18. So far we have utilized John Paul II's theology of the body to reflect especially on the meaning and purpose of the family and human sexuality. But it has many more implications besides. These extend to how we live and enjoy our bodiliness and the threats and dangers associated with our bodily existence.

19. Human persons should always strive to participate fully in the good of bodily health and life. Christian faith condemns any practice or thing that harms health or threatens life, from the abuse of drugs to intemperance in food or drink and unsafe driving. We are to be good stewards of our life and health. Exercise, healthy diet, access to and use of proper health care are all part of this stewardship.

This also is part of the reason why we should embrace the cycle of work and rest intended by the Creator. "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:9-10a). For Catholics, keeping holy the Sabbath means active and full participation in the communal worship in the Holy Sacrifice of the

Mass together with observing a day of rest and recreation. The weekly Sunday holiday is good for individuals, families, and the whole community.

20. Faith also recognizes the goodness of a healthy life of the senses. Recreation and exercise, good music and good food, art and aesthetic experiences all belong to a full life. As G.K. Chesterton says in his biography of St. Thomas Aquinas, a Christian is someone "who believes that deity or sanctity has attached to matter or entered the world of the senses."

Sometimes Christians are depicted as people who don't enjoy life. The way we have presented our faith or lived our lives may sometimes have lent support to this caricature. But it is far from the truth. Jesus came that we "may have life and have it to the full" (Jn 10:10), in this world as well as in the next. Again and again scripture and the Church's teaching speak of life in heaven as complete fulfillment in all the goods of human existence (cf. Rev. 21, Gaudium et Spes 38-39). Participating here and now in human goods like friendship and beauty and truth is a foretaste of what heaven will be.

21. Bodiliness also deeply affects how we worship and pray. This is clearest in the sacraments. God uses tangible, 'fleshy' things like bread, wine, oil and water as signs and symbols of his sacramental grace. He takes us most seriously as bodily beings in the Eucharist. By allowing us to receive his very Body and Blood, Jesus forges a one-flesh unity between himself and someone who receives him. This unity – akin to the one-flesh unity of husband and wife made tangible in the physical act of love-making – is both spiritual and physical.

What is true of the sacraments is true also of the rest of the life of prayer. Our bodies participate in our praying. We spontaneously kneel in the presence of our Lord and God when engaged in either communal or personal prayer. We turn naturally to physical objects and sensual signs—candles and bells, incense and statues, stained glass and crucifixes, rosary beads and holy cards, chant and sacred music, icons and countless other sacramentals—to help us pray.

22. God takes us seriously as bodily persons by himself becoming bodily. He sanctified all created reality in this way, enabling us to experience him in his creation and honor the divine artist in his art. It is right to find God in the beauty of his creation. Pope John Paul reminds us that prolife commitment should extend to care for the environment and created reality.

23. Important as it is to emphasize the positive implications of the theology of the body, the threats and dangers can't be ignored; they must instead be resisted and overcome.

The most serious of them may be precisely the practical denial of bodiliness and its consequences. As we have seen, this underlies the present campaign to claim the dignity of marriage for homosexual relationships. Still more destructively, it gives impetus to the attacks on human life originating with the culture of death: euthanasia, abortion, techniques of research and reproduction that violate human life.

While the euthanasia movement advocates killing the sick and incapacitated, its supporters know most people would be horrified by a proposal to kill another person. Thus they seek to depersonalize the sick or handicapped. To kill them, it is said, is merely to terminate bodily life that has become burdensome, not an assault on the person at all. Killing a body doesn't count.

The same mentality is at work among those who support abortion. The genetically unique bodily being who came into existence at conception and now is growing beneath his or her mother's heart is—so we are told—not a person but merely a 'blob of tissue' or a 'mass of cells.' Remarkable—a mass of cells with a beating heart at 25 days, a brain producing brain waves at 43 days, eyes that begin to form at 19 days, tiny fingers that open and close during the sixth week! That this bodily being is a child preparing to be born is censored out.

Still less do we hear about abortion's bodily consequences. How often do proponents of 'choice' mention the little arms and legs ripped off in vacuum aspiration abortions in the first trimester of pregnancy? When was the last time an abortion propagandist in the media spoke or wrote of the scalded skin of a body aborted by saline infusion in the second trimester? When was a 'personally opposed' politician brave enough to admit that, yes, the face in the surgical bucket after a third-trimester hysterotomy really does look troublingly human? How likely are we to see, outside the pages of prolife publications, a child's fingers distended as surgical scissors are plunged into her or his skull in a partial-birth abortion?

Abortion in any of its forms is a grievous violation of the dignity and rights of the human person by a direct assault upon the person's bodily integrity and life—the deliberate and direct killing, as Pope John Paul puts it, of "a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth" (The Gospel of Life, n. 58). Abortion includes the deliberate interruption of pregnancy before viability, the deliberate prevention of the embryo's implantation in the mother's womb by the use of 'morning-after pills' or other abortifacient drugs, including so-called contraceptives that produce their effect by early abortion, and the direct killing of an unborn child after viability is reached. Abortion in any of its forms is one of the deeds condemned as "abominable crimes" by the Second Vatican Council (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, n. 51).

24. The body and the view one takes of it are central to all human life issues. No doubt that is one reason why such pains often are taken today to deny or ignore the human person's bodily reality. Abstract arguments for the 'right to choose' and the 'right to die' are at risk of being overwhelmed by the flesh-and-blood reality of a human body. No wonder the culture of death tries so hard to avoid it!

In an old movie called "The Guns of Navarone," one character asks another why he hesitated to kill a villain only an arm's length distant. The answer: "You shoot a man at two hundred yards, he's just a moving target. You kill him with a knife, you're close enough to smell him. I smell them in my sleep." The culture of death sleeps better at night by keeping reality two hundred yards away.

But the body puts people immediately, tangibly, in touch with reality. That experience in itself can have a salutary restraining influence on evil impulses, something like the bracing effect of a splash of cold water in the face. It is easy to talk about termination of pregnancy, perhaps not so easy to look at a dismembered baby. The difference is the body, which obliges us to confront reality as it is.

25. If denying the body's reality is dangerous, so is its unreal glorification to excess. In today's cult of the body, physical appearance becomes a matter of absolute, ultimate importance. Consider the obsessive fixation on youthful looks and fashions that leads to the squandering of money, time, and resources in pursuit of Hollywood's idea of beauty while futile attempts are made to deny the facts of age and mortality. The cult and culture of the

body make it cause for stigma, marginalization, and severe loss of self-esteem to be ill, elderly, or merely less than super-glamorous according to somebody else's notions.

The scourge of pornography is another byproduct of this mentality. Both the gross hard-core pornography trafficked in films, magazines, and pervasively on the Internet and the soft-core pornography that pervades the media, especially advertising, cheapen and distort human beauty and sexuality. Those involved in any way in the production and dissemination of pornography corrupt themselves and contribute to the corruption of others by encouraging the moral evils of sexual arousal outside marriage, masturbation, and the sexual abuse of women and children. No society sincerely concerned with the well being of its members can tolerate the evil of pornography.

26. At the root of many threats to and abuses of bodiliness lies concupiscence. This is the tendency to sin remaining in us even after baptism. It is not sin in itself but is the tendency to sin resulting from disordered passions. As a result of concupiscence, we do not always easily think, feel, and will as we should; often we are drawn, sometimes strongly, to what isn't good for us.

This makes cultivating a strong, active spiritual life imperative. Through grace, God's supernatural help, it is possible to resist temptation; and if we cooperate consistently with grace, disordered passions over time are healed and brought into line. Especially helpful in this struggle to win the authentic freedom of self-control are frequent reception of the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist, a strong, daily life of prayer, fasting and mortification of the senses, and devotion to the Mother of God, especially by prayerful recitation of her Rosary.

State of Life as Total Gift

27. As bodily beings, we are called to offer our entire existence in space and time to “God, our spiritual worship.” Two ways of doing this, traditionally called states of life, are marriage and celibacy (or consecrated life for the sake of the kingdom). In marriage, a man and woman give themselves completely, each to the other, in a stable, permanent commitment that lasts until death, thus forming the community of life and love—the family—that is the suitable place for the begetting and rearing of children. As a community of persons, the family is akin to the community of life and love that is the Triune God.

Celibacy or consecrated life for the sake of the kingdom is another way of offering oneself as a sacrifice pleasing in the eyes of God. This charism also involves a total gift of self, by which one enters into a nuptial relationship with Christ and his Church. This gift empowers men called to celibacy to devote themselves fully to their bride, the Church, and enables women to give themselves totally to their spouse, Jesus Christ, in loving and serving him and the Church. Both marriage and celibacy or consecrated life are ways of making a bodily gift of self; both are ways to love as Jesus loves; both call for total, intimate, unreserved love.

Conclusion

28. At the start of this pastoral I spoke of the familiar fact that in the season of Advent and Christmas we celebrate the coming of the Son of God into human history as Jesus of Nazareth. Because he was born into a human family, we celebrate in a particular way the gift of family life.

But we also look forward in this season to Jesus' second coming at the end of history. Together with Christians of every age we pray Maranatha—"Come, Lord Jesus!"

Living between two advents, two comings of Jesus, we live in history. That is to say: we live as bodily beings in space and time. Praying Jesus will come to us in grace, to sustain and sanctify us and the entire world, we respond to his advent in our lives by offering our selves entirely to him—an oblation of heart, mind, body, and soul.

We do this in communion with the whole Church extended through space and time—those living and also those who have gone before us “marked with the sign of faith or whose faith is known to God alone” (Fourth Eucharistic Prayer). Especially we are united with Mary of Nazareth, who already shares bodily in the Resurrection of Her Son. In her we see the ultimate meaning and purpose of bodily existence – total and complete union with Jesus.

We human persons are bodily beings. Only a philosophy, a theology, and a system of law that take the body seriously as an integral part of who and what we are can protect real human beings and defend real human rights. Pope John Paul II has pointed the way.

God creates us as bodily persons. Jesus Christ, our brother in human flesh, redeems us by his bodily life, death, and rising. By the power of the Holy Spirit, we are called to rise with Jesus from death and to live forever, body and soul, with God. Let us ask Mary, who bore the Deity in diapers, who was and is Theotokos—Mother of God, and who exemplified the meaning and dignity of the human body for her Son, to be our model and patroness in the work that lies ahead.

Given at my Chancery,
December 8, 2002 – 2nd Sunday in Advent,

Most Reverend John Joseph Myers
†Archbishop of Newark

ATTEST:

Sheri Rickert
Chancellor



About the Archbishop