

“Man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.”
 Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, #24

Body language: Speaking the Truth with Our Bodies

In the novel *The End of the Affair* by Graham Greene, a woman named Sarah has made a vow to live chastely. Frustrated by the difficulty involved, she impulsively wishes that she didn't have a body. But then she contemplates a scar on the body of Maurice, the man she loves. He got the scar protecting a man from a falling wall, and she realizes that she wants that scar to exist forever. “Then I began to want my body that I hated, but only because it could love that scar,” she thinks. “We can love with our minds, but can we love only with our minds?”¹

Sarah came to the same realization that guided Pope John Paul II in presenting what is called the “theology of the body.” While people often think that Christianity denigrates the body, the truth is the exact opposite: Christianity celebrates the body, because the human body is God's gift to help us love.

Love is invisible. Despite what cartoons present, hearts and cupids don't pop up around someone who loves. So how do we show another person that we love them? Sarah hit on the answer: with our bodies. Our bodies make self-giving love visible. Human love expresses itself

through smiles, handshakes, hugs—and through thousands of other bodily actions.

Think of the love of parents for their children. One mother shared an experience of feeling overwhelmed by the repetitive work that holds a household



together. As she was putting away laundry, she contemplated a shirt that she had washed numerous times for a succession of children.

“All of a sudden I felt snagged on a point of self-pity—the futility of it all. I cried out, ‘God help me! How many times am I going to wash this shirt? What is the point of all this repetitive work?’ Almost immediately, the Lord brought to mind a simple but marvelous thought: ‘Think how many children you have been able to love, week after week, through this one little shirt.’”²

The body is like that small laundered shirt: it speaks a language of love.

The Special Love of Marriage

Most love (like the love of parents) is non-sexual. The body, as we have seen, has a special role to play in expressing all love, but it is specifically fitted to express the love of husband and wife. Our maleness and femaleness are designed so that we can give of ourselves to someone of the opposite sex in a face-to-face marital embrace. Every human body, in its sexual differentiation as male or female, reveals that we are all made for fruitful, self-giving love.

Some of us are called to loving self-gift in the supernaturally intense way of consecrated religious sisters or brothers

or as priests—in other words, as celibates. They sacrifice family life in order to become spiritual mothers and fathers. Others live out their fruitfulness in the chastity of single lay life. Those of us called to marriage fulfill the possibility of sexual self-gift in married love that is total, lifelong, exclusive, and open to life.

In other words, husbands and wives express their special kind of love—the lifelong, life-giving love of marriage—with a special kind of body language: the language of sex, the conjugal act.

Sexual love is a specific kind of love, in which the body expresses the desire to be with the other person forever. The conjugal act can communicate this true love because it is inseparable from the possibility of new life. As the fruit of marital love, children embody the love of their parents!

Giving Ourselves in Sex

The intrinsic connection between sex, new life, and self-giving love has been forgotten in our culture. Sex is too often made to be only about pleasure. Of course, sexual pleasure is a good thing; after all, God invented it! But it is because sex is necessary for the survival of humankind and is meant to serve self-giving love that God made it pleasurable. If sex is reduced to pleasure, it becomes a kind of lie. The body says, “I’ll love you forever and have children with you,” even while the mind says, “I’m doing this for pleasure.”

In true and loving sex, the whole person gives his or her whole self, without reserve. If we hold back part of ourselves (like our fertility or our commitment), we are not really giving ourselves totally. When we don’t give ourselves totally, we aren’t loving the way God made us to love. And that makes us unhappy and, indeed, unfree.

“We should say what we mean and mean what we say with sex. And sex says marriage. Sexual intercourse is the body language which accompanies and expresses, again and again, the wedding vows.”

Australian Bishops Conference, *Marriage in the Catholic Church: Frequently Asked Questions*, 2006

Free Enough to Love Completely

We sometimes think that freedom means the right to choose whatever we want, as long as no one seems to get hurt. But if we choose to go against God’s loving plan for our happiness, then we end up hurting ourselves and others. Freedom is first and foremost directed to something; it is the freedom to love.

The freedom to love enables man to “fully find himself...through a sincere gift of himself,” as the Second Vatican Council says.³ Chastity is the name of the virtue that makes this freedom to love possible: it is the intelligent integration of our sexual desires in the light of the truth written into our bodies. Chastity makes us free enough to give ourselves away. And only then can we flourish as human beings.

Of course, God doesn’t ask us to become this way on our own. We are able to master our selfishness only through God’s grace. He will make us free enough to love. He does this first and foremost through the sacraments (such as the Eucharist, Reconciliation or Confession, and Matrimony or marriage).

Then we are made able to live as He wants us to live: free, holy, happy. Then we can truly love and honestly express love with our bodies. And only then can sex really say what it was created to say: “I love you so much that I want to be with you forever and have children with you.” That is speaking the truth with our bodies, the truth that sets us free.⁴

¹Graham Greene, *The End of the Affair* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1951), p. 110. ²Kimberly Hahn, “The World after the Wedding,” from *Catholic for a Reason*, vol. IV: *Scripture and the Mystery of Marriage and Family Life*, ed. Scott Hahn and Regis J. Flaherty (Steubenville, Oh.: Espmnaus Road Publishing, 2007), p. 21. ³*Gaudium et Spes*, #24, www.vatican.va. ⁴There are many great resources on the theology of the body. See, for example, Christopher West’s work at www.ChristopherWest.com.

