

Teaching the Truth of the Body in a Pastorally Loving Way

BY MONICA ASHOUR

“I use TOB to give people the positive, life-changing ‘whys behind the whats’ of the truth of the body. Young people who understand this then see that God’s law is not an imposition that squelches their ability to experience love; rather, they see ‘God’s law as an inheritance,’ one rich in experiencing real love.”



LAST WEEK, I CHANGED THE LIVES of 36 engaged couples (most of whom are already sexually active) in seven hours. More accurately, God and I changed their lives through Pope St. John Paul II’s theology of the body (TOB).¹

What is it about TOB that reaches others, whether young or old, parent or student, married or single? I’d like to unpack that for those of you whose mission is “boots-on-the-ground”: parents, catechists, classroom teachers, diocesan officials, and anyone else who may need it. As a former Confirmation leader, RCIA director,

¹ John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Pauline, 2006), cited in text by catechesis number and paragraph as TOB.

and educator for over 25 years—and as a single woman with no children—I approach the theology of the body very differently



from others. With this background and over 27 years of studying TOB, allow me to outline three very concrete, practical phrases that can help us teach the truth of the body in a pastorally loving way.

The Body Matters

Start teaching every**body** by using this phrase: “the body matters.” For instance, let’s say you are teaching children in a catechetical setting, and they ask, “Why do we have to go to Mass?” or “Why do I have to eat well?” or “Why did God become human?” The answer: because *the body matters!*

- Mass is important because *the body matters*—your body, everybody’s body, and most importantly, Jesus’ Body matters! If we want to be close to God spiritually, we can start by being close to God physically. Jesus’ Eucharistic Body is received into your body; that’s why it is called Holy Communion: you are now intimately connected with God in Christ.
- Eating well is important since *the body matters*. Without healthy food, it is harder to function in life, and so it is harder to love others.
- The Son of God became human because *the body matters*. He knew humans are embodied persons, and since he wanted to save us, he too became embodied.

As St. John Paul II says, “Through the fact that the Word of God became flesh, the body entered theology . . . through the main door” (TOB 23:4). In other words, *the body matters*.

What Is Your Body Teaching You?

Another phrase to draw attention to the truth of the body that all catechists ought to use is: “*What is your body teaching you?*” When I give talks to children (and adults, for that matter), I ask various questions. “How do you know you are human?” Typically, people don’t know the answer, or a little one says the best answer: “Because I have a nose!” Indeed, all humans have a human nose—*your body teaches you* that! Building upon that, I ask, “How do you know you are hungry, thirsty, tired, sick?” Children finally realize the answer: the *body!* *Their body teaches them* such things. Then, I might ask a teen boy, “How do you know you are a boy?” That draws laughter, and I quickly respond for him: “You have a **boy** body! And Susie has a **girl** body! *Your body teaches you* that.” St. John Paul II coined the phrase, “*The ‘language of the body’ speaks to the senses*” (TOB 111:5). In other words, the body has deep meaning—certain bodily actions mean certain things.

The Body Is a Gift

This third phrase is a bit more complex since we tend to think of things like gifts as *something* not *somebody*. But to have people conflate *gift* and *body* and *love*—that is priceless! I’ll say something like, “Show you are friends, without your body.” Children rightly stand there, not knowing what to do. Then, I direct them to hug or give high fives. This teaches them that *they are gifts to each other through the body*. Next, I’ll say, “Can you help your friend with math without your body or their body? Nope. *You are a gift through your body*.” After establishing this concept, children say things like, “Mommy, *I’m a gift. With my body*, I took my plate into the kitchen.”

Simple phrases like this can help children understand profound TOB principles. As St. John Paul puts it, “The human body . . . contains ‘from the beginning’ the ‘spousal’ attribute, that is, *the power to express love: precisely that love in which the human person becomes a gift* and—through this gift—fulfills the very meaning of his being and existence” (TOB 15:1).

Pastorally Applying the Three Sayings to Sexuality

When children are taught these three TOB-inspired sayings from an early age, they will learn to view the world in a sacramental way. They will instinctively see that matter matters; the visible gets us in touch with the invisible; or, as Pope Benedict puts it, “[Through] the ‘transparency’ of the biological, [persons] can glimpse the spiritual and eternal.”²

Imagine, now, when children and youth are taught this from the beginning. Catholic teaching makes sense; it is all of one piece because the body is one. When it is time to teach sexuality to children and youth, and since they have learned these foundational phrases, they can see there is no “targeting” of people. Their uncle who lives a gay lifestyle or their abortion-minded friend or their cousin who identifies as transgender—all of them are going against the truth of the body. (Note: The moral value of this list is not meant to be egalitarian; it is meant to show that we should take the body seriously in all aspects of life.) They will have good and reasonable answers to these questions:

- Why not steal from others or gossip or have an abortion? Because *the body matters*.
- Why not spend time only playing video games or engage in homosexual acts or transgender surgery? Because *the body teaches many things*.
- Why not betray your friend or use your parents only for money or use a condom? Because *the body is a gift*.

When we teach young people this sacramental vision, the Catholic faith makes sense. They can see that TOB is not a mean-spirited, judgmental teaching; it is meant to preserve and protect love. TOB exists so that we, as embodied persons, will experience real love, not a cheap counterfeit. This is why it is important to understand TOB as a holistic Christian anthropology and not merely a sexology.

When I give talks at schools and parishes, when I lead marriage preparation, instead of focusing on “why *not*,” I use TOB to give

² Joseph Ratzinger, “Theology of the Liturgy”, Joseph Ratzinger: *Collected Works* (Ignatius Press, 2014), 158.

people the positive, life-changing “whys behind the whats” of the truth of the body. Young people who understand this then see that God’s law is not an imposition that squelches their ability to experience love; rather, they see “God’s law as an inheritance,”³ one rich in experiencing real love.

Engaged couples are so hungry for the truth that they don’t even know what they are missing. And when they receive it in a pastorally sound way, they always say the same thing: “Why didn’t the Catholic Church teach us TOB earlier? We would have lived our lives differently.” Most importantly, they see that “the one and only key for understanding the sacramentality of marriage is the spousal love of Christ for the Church (see Eph 5:22–33)” (TOB 81:4).

TOB exists so that we, as embodied persons, will experience real love, not a cheap counterfeit.

Jesus would never divorce, abuse, or contracept with his Bride, the Church. Nor does the Church say no to his bodily gift of self. That means that couples ought to live as Christ and the Church live: according to the truth of God’s design for the body. Moreover, when receiving Jesus Christ at Mass, each of us should see his *total gift of self, teaching us through his Eucharistic Body* that he wants union and communion with us. Because *the body matters*, now and for eternity.

Monica Ashour is President, co-founder, and international speaker for the Theology of the Body Evangelization Team (TOBET). She is the author of 28 books, including the PreK-eighth grade series The Body Matters. For more information about The Body Matters, go to tobet.org.

Art Credit: A painting of Virgin Mary, St. Joseph, and young Jesus in the carpenter’s workshop, Dennis Jarvis, Flickr.com.

³ The title of the last chapter of TOB is “He Gave Them the Law of Life as Their Inheritance.”