



(Michael McArdle photo)

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Theology - Christopher West

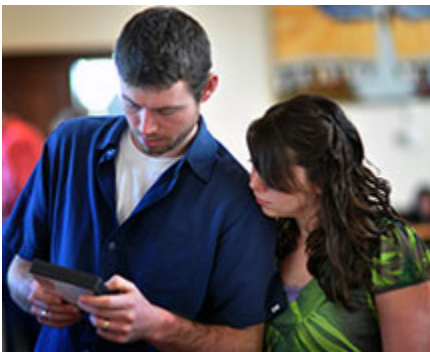
'Our bodies make visible God's invisible mystery'

Story by Steve Euvino

This story has been edited for Web space.

Entire story can be read in the print edition dated February 27, 2011.

SAINT JOHN — The body, said Christopher West, is not just biological but theological as well. “Our bodies reveal something absolutely critical about who we are and how we are to live to experience true happiness,” West said at St. John the Evangelist, Feb. 19.



St. Michael parishioners Dana and Katie Trudeau browse through information at booths during a break in the lecture by speaker Christopher West Feb. 19 at St. John the Evangelist Church in Saint John. (Michael McArdle photo)

A founder, research fellow, and faculty member of the Theology of the Body Institute, West devoted six hours that Saturday to four of the 129 talks given by Pope John Paul II between 1979 and 1984 that comprise this theology.

These talks are biblical reflections on the meaning of human embodiment as male and female, particularly the call of the two sexes to become “one flesh.”

"If you have a body, this theology is for you," said West. He incorporated movies, music, and humor as he addressed a subject he knew his audience might prefer not to discuss in church – sexuality.

For West, though, there is no better place than church to talk about male-female relations. "Our bodies make visible the invisible mystery of God," he said. As stated in *Theology of the Body*, the body "has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it." This mystery is the Trinitarian life and love – God's eternal Communion as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. "God has destined for us to share in that love," West said, adding that humans are created for the infinite. People miss the mark – the literal translation of sin – when they seek satisfaction in finite things. While things of this earth are given as signs or icons, people must not make idols of icons. Noting that the Bible begins and ends with marriages — Adam-Eve and Christ-Church – West said that through spousal love people can learn that God's plan is to espouse people to himself forever. Spousal love, West continued, is "meant to point us to Christ and his love for Church. No wonder the devil is after our sexuality."

West called pornography the "counterfeit of *Theology of the Body*." The problem with porn, he said, is the way the naked body is portrayed, to arouse lust. "Pornography shows too little of the human person. It obscures the dignity of the person. The body is objectified, divorced from the person," he said. "You are beautiful," West added, warning his audience not to listen to all the media lies about bodily appearance.

West had spoken in this diocese in 2007. Julie Zasada, who coordinates St. John's Catholic Family Institute, said that first visit "changed my life. I wanted to be able to share that with others." Zasada was changed in that she and her husband changed their minds about family size and are now expecting their fourth child.

Debbie DeVault, from Ss. Peter and Paul, Merrillville, and married 25 years, said West's talk "opened a lot of doors. It's not just about sex. It's about applying this material to all aspects of your life."

On man and woman becoming "one flesh," Pope John Paul said the term refers not only to the joining of two bodies but also a "sacramental expression which corresponds to the communion of persons." In other words, man "becomes an image of God not so much in the moment of solitude as in the moment of communion. ... On all this, right from the beginning, the blessing of fruitfulness descended."

The devil, West said, hates human fertility. The serpent, he said, wants to turn the womb into a tomb, while Christ seeks just the opposite. "We are not created for cheap love. We are created for a love that lasts forever," West said. "When used right, sex can lead us to the heights of human happiness before love." Why was Christ so compassionate toward sexual sinners? "Because he knows they were looking for him," West said. Comparing life to a banquet, West said too many people settle for a "fast-food menu." If parents do not teach their children the sanctity of life's banquet, he said, they "will eat from the fast-food menu, which is on display everywhere." Parents, he said, need to "feed our children with the glory. Let the glory in, so we can get the junk out." Noting that "heaven is not a shotgun wedding," West said God forces no one to follow his path. "It all comes down to trust," he said. "Do you believe in the gift [of self-giving love]?" Using an analogy of repaying a \$1 debt with \$10 or doubling a \$10 debt, West said, "When we entrust to God, we're never disappointed. God is never outdone in generosity."

The audience of several hundred people included older couples, singles, and couples with infants. Joyce Beishline, married 50 years and from St. Joan of Arc, Merrillville, called West's talk refreshing. "It was totally out of everything you learned growing up," she said. "It connected me to being part of a couple." Several groups had displays in the SJE narthex, among them Couple to Couple League, Rachel's Vineyard, Worldwide Marriage Encounter, and Retrouvaille. Tony Canganelli, representing Retrouvaille, which seeks to strengthen marriages, noted "how sad it is, the number of people who don't understand that the purpose of marriage is to lead us to heaven. The joy comes one you realize that, you don't have to be sad anymore." Gail, his wife, added, "I was touched by the fact that we're not doomed by the fall of Adam and Eve. We can get back to what God wanted marriage to be." West concluded his talk by saying that while understanding sexuality is a challenge, the rewards are everlasting. "My challenge to you is to let it challenge you," he said.