



The Body and Relationships – Chapter IV

Celibacy and the Resurrection of the Body

UNDERSTANDING

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UNDERSTANDING

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THIS PASSAGE?

Context: Another Dilemma

As we bring our reflections on the *Theology of the Body* to a close, we will return to a familiar situation. Jesus is once again being questioned, this time by a group of Sadducees who hope to trick Him into denying the resurrection. The resurrection (life after death) is an ancient teaching held by the Israelites long before the time of Christ. Unfortunately, instead of accepting this teaching as part of the faith, the Sadducees treat the teaching as a hypothesis to be disproven (TOB 65:3). Jesus is used to this sort of questioning — now let's see how He responds:

That same day Sadducees came to him, who say that there is no resurrection; and they asked him a question, saying, "Teacher, Moses said, 'if a man dies, having no children, his brother must marry the widow, and raise up children for his brother.' Now there were seven brothers among us; the first married, and died, and having no children left his wife to his brother. So too the second and third, down to the seventh. After them all, the woman died. In the resurrection, therefore, to which of the seven will she be wife? For they all had her." But Jesus answered them, "You are wrong because you

know neither the Scripture nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven. And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God is Isaac, and the God of Jacob? He is not God of the dead, but of the living.' And when the crowd heard it, they were astonished at his teaching (Mt 22:23 – 33).

Essentially, Jesus, makes two observations: that the Sadducees know neither 1) the "Scriptures" nor 2) the "power of God." It's important that we understand both of Jesus' points.

First, the Scriptures. The verse to which Jesus refers is the story of the burning bush in which God says to Moses, "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob" (Ex 3:6). God does not say I **was** the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (past tense); He says I **AM** the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (present tense). God "is not a God of the dead, but of the living!" Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are not dead; in fact, they are alive! The prophets are not people of the past. They exist in the present!

And this leads to Christ's second point, that the Sadducees do not know the "power of God." Using the first point as a springboard, Christ calls the Sadducees into deeper faith. He knows their puzzle is not a genuine confusion about Scripture so much as it is a lack of faith. The Sadducees need more than knowledge of Scripture: They need faith! Thus, Christ challenges the Sadducees to have greater faith in God and His power to conquer death! Christ's challenge to the Sadducees is also a challenge to us. Do we have the faith and courage to believe in the dignity of our bodies?

Main Thing: The Resurrection and the Heavenly Marriage

Christ begins His response to the Sadducees by getting to the root of their question, and He then uses the question to teach the Sadducees something new. The Sadducees' question about marriage stems from the law of Levirate marriages. This law, contained in Deuteronomy 25:7 – 10, concerned brothers who lived under the same roof. If one of them died without leaving children, the brother of the deceased had to take the widow as his wife. The child born from this marriage was recognized as the son of the deceased. This way the dead brother's bloodline would not become extinct (cf. Gen 38:8). Jesus knew about this law, but He also knew about heaven. More specifically, He knew that marriage and procreation do not exist in heaven. Thus, the Sadducees' puzzle is not a problem. Levirate wives will not be married to multiple men because Levirate women will not be married at all.

What? No marriage in heaven? That means that, no matter how much we love someone in this life, it will still come to an end. Isn't this depressing? Well, no, it's not — and here's why. Throughout this entire Bible study, we have discussed how earthly marriages sacramentally correspond to spiritual realities like the Trinity and Christ's spousal love for the Church. The beauty of heaven is that we will no longer need sacramental experiences of these realities; in fact, the realities themselves will be visibly present. To state things simply, in heaven we will not need sacraments of Trinitarian life; instead, we will have a direct experience of the Trinity itself. And in heaven, we will no longer need sacraments of Christ's love; instead, we will experience Christ's love face to face! To have sacraments in heaven would be like looking at a roadmap when one has already arrived at the destination!

One might think of the Church's position on marriage and heaven as a denigration of the body, but nothing could be further from the truth. John Paul II takes this opportunity to articulate the beauty of heavenly

life, most especially the resurrection of the body. As Christians, we believe we will have bodies in heaven. In fact, if you're Catholic, you profess this belief every time you attend Mass. The Church is never more pro-body than in her teaching on the resurrection of the body. That is, as Catholics, we do not believe in a purely spiritual heaven. We believe our bodies will be involved in the heavenly experience! When we enter paradise, our earthly marriages will give way to a much deeper, more fulfilling union — a union with God — and we will experience this union not as pure spirits, but as embodied creatures! So once again, in heaven there is no need for the sacramental realities because heaven involves a direct experience of God and each other, not as pure spirits, but as embodied creatures. But here is one of the most amazing things about heaven: We will experience God in our bodies!

Upon hearing about the resurrection of the body, we might be tempted to be like the Sadducees, doubting the “power of God.” How, we might ask, could God ever glorify this body? I hate my body! My body often tempts me to sin! Bodies are imperfect: They get sick, old and eventually die! All this is true — but at the heart of the Church's teaching on the resurrection of the body, there is an affirmation that bodies are not bad. In fact, bodies are so good that they will exist for all eternity! The beauty of the resurrection of the body is that the bodies we have in this life will not cause us to sin and suffer in the way our bodies do now. Instead, we will enjoy redeemed bodies without any physical imperfections, deformities or temptations. In this way, the resurrection of the body is a message of hope! In the midst of the contemporary sexual brokenness — pornography, divorce, sexual infidelity, body dysmorphia, etc. — the Church has the courage to proclaim that, even though we might do bad things with our bodies in this life, and even though our bodies are imperfect in this life, our bodies are ultimately good things. And our experience of the body will be perfect in the life to come.

You might think of the resurrection of the body as the final, definitive statement of the Church, conclusively declaring her utterly positive view of the body and sexuality, as the *Catechism* says:

“The flesh is the hinge of salvation” (Tertullian, *De Res.* 8,2: PL 2, 852). We believe in God who is creator of the flesh; we believe in the Word made flesh in order to redeem the flesh; we believe in the resurrection of the flesh, the fulfillment of both the creation and the redemption of the flesh.²

Thus, once again, the teachings of the Catholic Church are not anti-body. In fact, the opposite is true. The teachings of the Catholic Church are not repressive; they are a challenge, a challenge to believe the body is good — very good — perhaps better than we ever thought. The question for us is this: Will we be like the Sadducees and doubt the resurrection of the body, or will we have the courage to believe that, despite our struggles with the body here on earth, the body is beautifully and wonderfully made?

Application: Celibacy and Marriage

Several weeks ago, at the beginning of this Bible study, we talked about the spousal meaning of the body. Men and women are complementary in their bodies. A man’s body is made for a woman, and a woman’s body is made for a man. We see this in the very nature of the male and female body. We are made for self-gift, and man “does not find himself save through a sincere gift of self.” But here you might ask, if we are made to give of ourselves in marriage, what about priests and nuns? The Catholic Church clearly thinks some people shouldn’t be married? How do they fit in the picture?

² CCC 1015

Yes, the Catholic Church teaches that some men and women are called to remain celibate — but to understand this teaching, let's take a look at the Gospel of Matthew:

For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom. (Mt 19:12)

First off, a clarification: Jesus uses the term “eunuch” to imply a certain self-denial implicit in the celibate vocation. Make no mistake, celibacy is difficult. Those called to it must deny themselves the pleasure, companionship and comfort of an ordinary sexual relationship. That said, John Paul II says that celibate persons do not renounce their sexuality; they just experience it in a different way. The celibate person makes a complete gift of their sexuality to God. Everyone is called to love God in different ways — and the celibate person is called to love God in way that parallels and pre-figures the heavenly marriage, the marriage involving the resurrection of the body (TOB 74). When Jesus refers to those who “make themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom,” He is referring to men and women who decide to forego the sexual relations to devote themselves in a special way to God.

Thus, the celibate person still realizes the spousal meaning of their body — they just do so in a different way. Priests, nuns and all consecrated celibates reserve themselves exclusively for God and the Church. They literally take God and the Church as their spouse. Thus, the celibate person *is* married; it's simply a different sort of marriage. In fact, it's like the heavenly marriage. Remember, Christ said that in heaven “they are neither married nor given in marriage,” but instead all are devoted exclusively to God. This is similar to celibacy! The celibate person voluntarily chooses to give their heart to God and God alone.

John Paul II says the two vocations are mutually illuminating. Married couples give priests and nuns a concrete example of spousal gift, whereas priests and nuns remind married couples what their marriage is all about. What does that mean? Consider a priest who is struggling to remember what God's love is like. He might wonder, "God, what is your love like? I gave up everything for you, but I don't understand you!" All this priest needs to do is look to a married couple in love, and it's as though God is saying, "My love for you is like that!" And the same is true for marriage. No marriage is perfect, and we can never find our complete fulfillment in another person. Priests and nuns are there to remind us that, in the end, it's not about our earthly marriages. The whole point of an earthly marriage is to point us towards the heavenly marriage, something the celibate person witnesses to every day. In this way, the two vocations shed light on each other. Married couples give a concrete witness. Celibate persons give a transcendent witness.

Have you ever considered that Christ might be calling you to such a witness? Jesus never accuses; He calls. While every vocation, married or celibate, will involve suffering and difficulty, our vocations are not a punishment: They are our means to fall more deeply in love with our Lord. Matthew 19:11 says, "Not all men can receive this precept, but only those to whom it has been given." An invitation to the priesthood or consecrated life is a gift! Yes, it might be a difficult gift to receive, but it is a gift!

Have you ever considered where God might be calling you? If so, how will you respond? Jesus can make us happy wherever He calls us; the only question is how we'll respond to His call. Will we respond like the Sadducees, doubting the power of God? Or will we take courage and trust in the Lord's saving message?

DISCUSSION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR YOUR BIBLE STUDY

BEFORE WE BEGIN...

Note: If possible, it would be great to bring along a male or female religious into this discussion. A local chaplain or religious would help to make this conversation concrete.

Context

1. State: As we bring our reflections on the *Theology of the Body* to a close, we will return to a familiar place. Jesus is once again being questioned. It's a similar situation, and this time a group of Sadducees hope to trick Jesus into denying the resurrection of the body.
2. Read Matthew 22:23 – 28.
3. Explain: The question of the Sadducees plays on an old Israelite teaching that if a man's brother dies leaving a spouse, the brother is obligated to take the widow as his wife. These are called Levirate marriages. As usual, Jesus looks deeper than the Sadducees' puzzle.
4. Read Matthew 22:28 – 33.
5. How does Jesus respond to the Sadducees? What do you think He is saying?

Response: Allow the group to discuss, then from the first section of the Leader Guide.

Main Thing

1. Read Matthew 22:29 – 30.
2. What does this mean? Is there marriage in heaven?

Response: Allow the group to discuss.

3. If there is no marriage in heaven, what does that mean for marriage on earth?

Response: In short, throughout this entire Bible study we have discussed how earthly marriages correspond to spiritual realities like 1) the Trinity and 2) Christ's spousal love for the Church. The beauty of heaven is that we will no longer need sacraments because the realities themselves will become fully, concretely present. Heaven is the definitive marriage between God and humanity! We no longer need the earthly sacraments of God's love because we will behold and experience the fullness of God's love. We no longer need a foretaste of Trinitarian life because in heaven we will be intimately united with the Trinity. We no longer need marriage as a sacrament of Christ's love because in heaven we will behold God face to face!

4. If there is no marriage in heaven, what does this say about the body? Do we lose our bodies in heaven?

Response: No, there are bodies in heaven. Remember the Nicene Creed and Apostles Creed which state, "I believe in the resurrection of the body." Even though we are not married in heaven, heaven is still an embodied experience. Our bodily experience of marriage on earth is a foretaste of our embodied experience of heaven!

5. How does this make you feel? Is it good to have a body in heaven?

Response: Allow the group to discuss. Make sure to note that our heavenly bodies will be free from all weakness, sickness and imperfections. Our earthly bodies suffer from the effects of the Fall. This is not the case with our heavenly bodies.

6. Does it seem bad to have a body in heaven? Can we trust that God will perfect our experience of the body?

Response: The resurrection of the body is in a sense the Church's definitive statement that the body is good. Think about it: Our experience of God in heaven will be an experience of God IN OUR BODIES! The world trains us to separate anything bodily, especially anything sexual, from God. Further, sometimes our own perception of the body is something bad. We might be frustrated with our bodies, whether because they're imperfect or because they lead us to sin. But, unlike the Sadducees, do we have the courage to trust God and believe that the body is good?

7. What is keeping you back from believing in the goodness of the body?

Response: Allow the group to discuss.

Application

1. So what does all this have to do with priests, nuns and celibacy?

Response: Explain celibacy as it is articulated in the application section of the Leader's Guide. Male and female religious reserve themselves exclusively for God. In this way, they witness to the heavenly marriage. Furthermore, this heavenly marriage is experienced *in our bodies*! The Church doesn't ever affirm the body more clearly than in the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. In heaven we will keep our bodies, though they will be healed of any infirmities and glorified!

2. Read Matthew 19:12.

3. What strikes you about this passage?

Response: Allow the group to discuss.

4. What does Jesus mean when He refers to “eunuchs for the kingdom”?

Response: This is Jesus' teaching on the good of celibacy. Some are called to give up the gift of marriage and sexuality to devote themselves more exclusively to God. These people experience a foretaste of the graces we will all receive in heaven!

5. Are priests and nuns married?

Response: Yes! Nuns take Christ as their spouse, and priests are married to the Church. The vocation of a celibate is to witness to the marriage to come!

6. How is a priest's or a nun's vocation a gift to the Church?

Response: By devoting themselves exclusively to the Lord, celibates are able to serve the Church in a way others are not. Priests, for example, are able to focus exclusively on their congregation because they're not distracted by a wife and children. They're able to give of themselves completely to their bride, the Church.

7. How does celibacy help us understand marriage, and vice versa?

Response: As explained in the Leader Guide, discuss how marriage and celibacy are mutually illuminating. Marriage makes the divine marriage concrete, and celibacy helps us take a transcendent view of earthly marriages.

8. Have any of you ever felt like you might be called to priesthood or religious life? If so, what have you done to explore this option?

Response: Allow the group to discuss. Encourage students to actively discern their vocations, whether to priesthood or the religious life. Perhaps you might share something about where you're at in your own vocational journey.

