**The Wonder of Me: Disability and Pope John Paul II’s Theology of the Body**

Current philosophical anthropologies tend to separate out the human person from the human being by reasoning on what is significant for being a person. Taking pride in rational cognitive approaches, these philosophies often question the status of people with cognitive disabilities and so judge certain lives as not worth living, not worth protecting or not worth treating in the same way as other human persons. This pride ultimately results in fear and hopelessness since the status of being a person only seems to last as long as certain rational capacities still exist.

The solution to this pride in our abilities is to call upon people with profound disabilities. People with disabilities challenge those who think that a disabled life is not worth living by the way in which they can live life fully, in celebration and in hope. They challenge the narrow view that philosophy is just about logic, reason and the accumulation of knowledge. People saturated by contemporary philosophies have forgotten to look with wonder at the world and at people who will always remain a mystery to us. We have forgotten to look with the heart. People who live an affective rather than a cognitive life remind us all that philosophy is concerned with wonder, wisdom and beauty. Enjoying the moment and the beauty of the world around us is part of living fully. Beauty is found in diversity and each human being is like a whole new world, a surprise and a gift for me. And the wonder of creation, of others like me and of myself leads to God the Creator.

Pope John Paul II was acutely aware of the limitations of certain philosophies, in particular philosophies of consciousness that seem to regard the human body simply as raw material. The Pope’s Theology of the Body was in part a response to such philosophies and its title, with its focus on the body, might appeal to those who think that too much emphasis has been placed on the mind, on cognitive abilities. It may then come as a surprise to point out that Pope John Paul’s Theology of the Body is about the body, but not principally just about the body.

According to the Pope neither a philosophy of consciousness nor a philosophy of body does justice to human beings as we are: they fail to see that the body is my personal reality; it is where and how I relate not only to the world and to other people, but also to God. So, for his theology of the body, it is of utmost importance to keep body, soul, mind together. Yes, these are different aspects of being human but they are not separate. The Pope explains that the fact that theology also considers the body should not astonish or surprise because in the Incarnation the body entered theology through the main door. All creation, and all human beings are a part of God’s good creation and God establishes a particular relationship with all human beings as created in his image. But what is truly wonderful is that through his incarnation, life, suffering, death and resurrection Jesus has raised the humanity of each one of us to a dignity beyond compare – we are called to participate in the very life of God.

Although his Theology of the Body is seen primarily as catechesis on marriage, the Pope takes up some themes that are particularly relevant for people with disabilities. First, the Pope’s theology of the body is essentially a theology of gift: life is always a gift from God and parents are called to welcome their child, whether abled or disabled, as a gift. The community and society are also called to welcome everybody. Moreover, people with disabilities play an important part in creating a new civilisation of love, where all are welcome as brothers and sisters, children of God, and all are gifts to each other.

Second, in his theology of solitude the Pope recognises that people with disabilities are often particularly vulnerable to loneliness. However, he speaks of solitude as expressing the relationship of this particular unique human being with God who wants her for her own sake. Being wanted for my own sake is an affirmation of me no matter my condition or situation. His reflection on the Enclosed Garden emphasises the uniqueness and inviolability of every human being and their need for genuine and appropriate relationships.

Third, the Pope’s theology of *communio* develops relationship beyond a notion of friendships and bonds shaped by society. *Communio* primarily has a sacred meaning linked to the Eucharist. It is a mode of being and acting (in common) through which the persons involved mutually confirm and affirm one another, a mode of being and acting that promotes human fulfilment of each of them by virtue of their mutual relationship. In theological terms, *communio* is also helping each other on the path to holiness.

Fourth, the language of the body refers to my body as my own personal reality. Even the involuntary or compulsive acts of the person with disabilities disclose something about that person and may be used to help identify difficulties that the person cannot express. However, f my acts disclose who I am, then we must also consider the laughter and pure joy that often accompanies the activities of people with cognitive disabilities who live and celebrate life fully.

As adopted sons and daughters of God, it is excellence that matters. And excellence is not the same as perfection. So, according to Pope John Paul ‘for disabled people as for any human being, it is not important that they do what others do but that they do what is truly good for them, increasingly making the most of their talents and responding faithfully to their own human and supernatural vocation’.[[1]](#endnote-1)

1. Pope John Paul II, *On the Occasion of the International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the*

   *Mentally Disabled Person* (5 January 2004), 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)