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Book review - 'Gift and communion: John Paul II's theology of the body' by Jarosław Kupczak

AUTHOR

Matthews, Pia

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GIFT AND COMMUNION JOHN PAUL II'S THEOLOGY OF THE BODY
Jarosław Kupczak, Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2014 £46.69

Jarosław Kupczak OP has written extensively on the thought of Karol Wojtyła, Pope John Paul II, from the late Pope's anthropology to his philosophy. So it comes as no surprise that he has now tackled what some regard as the late Pope's most significant legacy, his Wednesday Catecheses, the Theology of the Body. In his introduction, Kupczak suggests that the Theology of the Body is 'inaccessible', due in part to attitudes of some Western theologians in the aftermath of Paul VI's encyclical, *Humanae vitae*. Furthermore, he thinks that the papal catecheses 'are difficult and demanding', lacking in 'footnotes, explanations, references and bibliography' (pp.xx-xxi). Nevertheless, referring to George Weigel's phrase, Kupczak says that the Wednesday Catecheses are a 'time bomb' that will go off with 'dramatic and positive consequences for the Church' (p. xviii) and he offers his book as a 'detailed instruction manual' to aid in activating it (p.xx).

Kupczak's analysis of an intense series of catecheses is itself intense. In some of the chapters Kupczak usefully indicates the sources of Pope John Paul's thought as well as significant influences, before turning to specific themes in the Pope's catecheses. Thus, in Chapter 1, 'Discourse on Method', Pope John Paul's theology is situated in opposition to a Cartesian philosophical method that presents both a reductive and dualistic approach to human beings. In describing Pope John Paul's 'adequate anthropology' and its focus on human experience, Kupczak draws attention to the influence of some important Polish philosophers. Nevertheless, Kupczak stresses that the Pope's thinking is rooted in the traditions of Augustine and Aquinas. Kupczak usefully places this anthropology in the context of the Pope's encyclical, *Fides et Ratio* in order to demonstrate the mutual relationship of faith, critical reflection, theology, philosophy, and hermeneutics. Kupczak's reflection on modern hermeneutics, and in particular his comparison of the approaches of John Paul and Paul Ricoeur, tease out this notoriously difficult concept. Similarly, in Chapter 3, 'The Gift That Creates Communion', the concepts of gift and *communio*, concepts that Kupczak calls the 'main pillars' of Pope John Paul's theology of the body (p.xxii), are given their contexts in philosophy and cultural understandings of gift, and in the theology of the Second Vatican Council. Kupczak identifies a nascent understanding of the communion of persons in the Pope's book, *Love and Responsibility*, (1960). However, he notes that the concept of the communion of persons only comes to the fore in the Pope's thinking during the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council. Significantly, and unlike some other commentators on the Theology of the Body, Kupczak calls attention to the clear limits that the Pope draws in his analogy between the divine Trinity and the human community (p.151). Chapter 5, 'The Language of the Body', gives a general overview of body language, commonly understood as non-verbal communication, before locating the sources for the Pope's famous 'language of the body' in the Pope's philosophical anthropology and in his critique of phenomenology. The Pope's philosophical anthropology recognises sensuality and emotion. However, with his focus on the exercise of virtue and conscious decision-making in love and marital ethics that are the foundations for an authentic and deep interpersonal relationship, the Pope demonstrates that the 'essence of love consists in the affirmation of the other person for his or her own sake, and not because of his or her attributes' (p.182). Kupczak's analysis of the Pope's critique of phenomenology in the context of the Pope's book *The Acting Person* (pp. 182-184), is an important reminder of the Pope's holistic approach to the human being in light of the modern tendency to absolutize consciousness. In contrast to those who idealise consciousness, the Pope restores the body to the human being by asserting that the subjectivity of the human being is profoundly related to the body. Furthermore, Kupczak

explains that Pope John Paul's understanding of the language of the body builds on and develops from Pope Paul VI's references to the natural law in *Humanae vitae* (pp. 201-204). Kupczak's exposition of the Pope's theology concludes with reflection on the depth of the Pope's thinking that moves beyond ethics by resting in the mystery of creation, salvation and the sacraments.

While Kupczak identifies and explains the sources that seem to have influenced Pope John Paul's catecheses on the theology of the body, Kupczak leaves until last his assessment of the Pope's approach to scripture. In Chapter 2, 'The Body That Reveals', and Chapter 4, 'Man As the Image and Likeness of God', Kupczak simply describes the Pope's 'philosophical exegesis' (p.146) of the two creation accounts in Genesis that inform his theological anthropology. Certainly, Kupczak explains that the Pope has a 'unique' interpretation of biblical texts (p.xx), and Kupczak notes the Pope's scholarly use of the historical-critical method of reading the Bible (p.210). Nevertheless, a more extensive comment on the Pope's exegetical method would be helpful, particularly since some consider his method to be more akin to eisegesis. In his last chapter, 'Final Remarks', Kupczak does see Pope John Paul's theology of the body as an illustration of 'postliberal theology' which is characterised by 'a renaissance of the language of biblical revelation' that avoids the dangers associated with 'reduction and adaptation of revelation to modern categories and notions' (pp.207-208). He suggests that the Pope's hermeneutics 'attempts to find a "compromise" or a "third way"' between Bultmann, who advocates a demythologization of texts, and Barth who thinks that 'the theological meaning of biblical texts must remain intact' (p.210). Kupczak also recognises that 'the whole Catholic Church', as well as the Pope, is indebted to the Second Vatican Council for a renewed theological focus on Scripture (p.211). Undoubtedly, Kupczak seeks to demonstrate a continuity of Pope John Paul's thinking with the thrust of the Second Vatican Council, notably the Council's openness to dialogue. However, his assertion that the Pope's biblical interpretation is possible due to the Pope's 'concept of human experience and his conviction that the nature of the inspired biblical author and of the contemporary reader is the same' seems to require further unpacking. That said, Kupczak's book is a useful tool for delving into Pope John Paul's significant theological legacy.

Pia Matthews