

Retranslating the *Theology of the Body*: An Interview with Michael Waldstein

GAMING, Austria, JUNE 1, 2006 (Zenit.org) — The discovery of Polish texts predating Pope John Paul II's pontificate sheds new light on his catechesis about love and sexuality, says a leading scholar.

Michael Waldstein, the founding president of the International Theological Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family, and a member of the Pontifical Council for the Family, changed his perspective on John Paul II after the discovery of the texts.

Waldstein, who is expecting the publication of his new translation of the theology-of-the-body series in September, shared his views on this catechetical work with ZENIT in this interview.

ZENIT: What is the necessity of publishing a new translation of John Paul II's theology of the body?

Waldstein: There are many problems in the existing translation. For example, the key concept "*significatio sponsale del corpo*" — spousal meaning of the body — which John Paul II uses 117 times, is translated in eight different ways. The reason is easy to understand.

On any given Wednesday when John Paul II delivered one of the catecheses at the general audience, the Italian text was sent over to *L'Osservatore Romano* and whoever was on duty at the English desk translated it. The translators did not have the work as a whole before them, but they translated each catechesis individually. These various inconsistencies indicate that there were several translators.

Later translators could not go back and change the translation, because it had already been published. The edition by Pauline Books and Media is simply a compilation of these translations.

And so there is a need for a systematic translation that considers the work as a whole to make decisions about particular terms in light of the whole.

I began to retranslate passages that I needed for the book about the theology of the body I have been working on for the past five years. At a certain point the decision to translate the whole text became the logical next step, so I contacted Pauline Books and Media.

It seemed a providential moment, because the Daughters of St. Paul had become increasingly aware of the need for a new translation and were praying that God would show them some way to produce it.

It has been both wonderful and fun to work with them. They are professional and animated by a strong love for John Paul II.

There is a second reason why we need a new edition. It is even more important.

The current translation does not contain John Paul II's own headings. Just imagine reading a complex work like Kant's "*Critique of Pure Reason*" with all the headings gone. You would get lost like someone in the fog. You wouldn't know where you are or where you are going. The headings help to organize the work as a whole.

ZENIT: Why did earlier editions not have these headings? Where did you find them?

Waldstein: I found them at the John Paul II archives in Rome. It was an exciting discovery.

Like many people, when I began reading the "*Theology of the Body*" I felt disoriented. A deep argument seemed to be going on, but its overall structure was not clear to me.

Some people say the "*Theology of the Body*" is like this because John Paul II was a phenomenologist rather than a Thomist, or a mystic rather than a theologian, or a Slav rather than a Western European. In the work for my book, I thought I had made some real progress in understanding the overall structure.

Still, I wanted to know how John Paul II himself thought of it. I felt sure he must have had an outline when he wrote the work.

So about half a year ago I went with a Polish friend to the Dom Polski, the Polish Pilgrim House in Rome, on the Via Cassia, where the John Paul II Archives are kept.

We looked through the Italian materials, but found nothing. We were disappointed, but asked the director of the archives if he had anything else. Yes, he said, we have the materials of the Polish translation, but you will not find anything there that is not in the Italian, because the Italian is the original text.

We decided to take a look nevertheless and found a Polish text that had a five level division with headings I had never seen before. It turns out that Cardinal Wojtyla wrote the theology of the body in Polish before his election in 1978. It seems to have been ready for publication.

We became fully sure about the priority of the Polish text only when we managed to contact the sister who actually typed the manuscript in Krakow before John Paul II's election.

In the archives we also found a handwritten note from John Paul II to his secretary that explains that the structure of the theology of the body would remain exactly the same when he adapted it for the series of catecheses.

Having these headings is a revelation. It opens up the text in amazing ways. You see how rigorous John Paul II's writing really is.

The reason why other editions don't have these headings seems to be the relatively isolated life of the individual catecheses. John Paul II delivered them one by one without, of course, saying, just to take one example, We are now in Part Two — The Sacrament; Chapter Two — The Dimension of Sign; Section Two — The Song of Songs; Subsection Three — Eros or Agape?

That would have been unintelligible. When he was finished, the catecheses were collected and assembled, but the knowledge of the structure of the whole was lost. Only John Paul II's Polish collaborators had this knowledge. I don't know why it did not cross the language barrier into Italian.

ZENIT: What reasons could you give for the growing attraction of people to the theology of the body?

Waldstein: To all men and women, their own body is very precious, and what happens with that body, especially in love, in erotic relations, is very significant.

Nobody can be indifferent to sexuality. To make sense of sexuality, deep sense, penetrating sense that shows the beauty of union between man and woman, and also the beauty of celibate life, is worth a good amount of effort.

This is the main reward of climbing the tall mountain of the theology of the body. You see your own body differently. You see it as being full of meaning. This is my experience and the experience of the many students with whom I have studied the theology of the body here in Austria.

ZENIT: What is particularly revolutionary about John Paul II's ideas of the human person and sexuality?

Waldstein: In his preface to the new translation, Cardinal Schönborn singles out three striking theses that are relatively new in Catholic magisterial teaching.

One, the image of God is found in man and woman above all in the communion of love between them, which reflects the communion of love between the persons of the Trinity.

Two, in God's design, the spousal bodily union of man and woman is the original effective sign through which holiness entered the world.

Three, this sign of marriage "in the beginning" is thus the foundation of the whole sacramental order.

I am not sure though whether "revolutionary" is quite the right word, because John Paul II's roots in the tradition are so deep and he stands in such substantial continuity with it.

In the introduction that I wrote for the new translation I show that John Paul II is deeply rooted in St. John of the Cross, in particular in the Mystical Doctor's spousal understanding of Christian life. On his deathbed, when his brothers prayed the traditional prayers for the dead, St. John of the Cross waived them off and asked them to read the Song of Songs.

Of course there are many tributaries to John Paul II's vision of sexuality, but at the very heart of his vision, John Paul II unfolds the implicit theology of marriage in St. John of the Cross. When Karol Wojtyla was 21, before he entered the seminary, he learned Spanish to read St. John of the Cross in the original, and seven years later he wrote his dissertation under Garrigou-Lagrange about his favorite poet and theologian.

In comparison with much theological writing about marriage in the Catholic tradition, which approached marriage often from the point of view of law — to help confessors and those who had to judge marriage cases — John Paul II's approach is decidedly "personalistic" and focused on the actual experience of love. He himself helped to form this fresh vision of love during Vatican II and it is the predominant form of his thinking in the theology of the body.

He explains that in some streams of the Catholic tradition sex itself got blamed for the trouble it seems to cause so many people because of the intensity of the pleasure.

The theology of the body rejects that mechanism of shifting the blame from the heart to sex. John Paul II is radically anti-Manichaean. Human sexuality is good, created by God as a "language of the body" to express love, to express the gift of self between man and woman.

ZENIT: What are some of the main themes emphasized in this new translation?

Waldstein: I try out to bring out in the introduction that the theology of the body responds to a split between the person and the body as seen in the history of philosophy.

It goes back to the reconstruction of knowledge for the sake of power over nature in Francis Bacon and Descartes and the scientific revolution they spearheaded. We owe the “scientific” rationalist way of looking at nature to this ambition for power.

John Paul II is very conscious of this history and of the modern split between person and body. He explicitly attempts to overcome it. There are many passages in which he says, directly against Descartes, that the human person “is a body,” not just “has a body.”

The human body with the sexual language created by God has a deep kinship with the person. The sentient body is created for the person as an expression of personal love.

In fact, the body is immediately and directly personal, because the person “is a body.” A great Thomist, Charles De Koninck, came up with a variation on Descartes' famous statement: “Sedeo ergo sum, I sit therefore I am.” This is much in the spirit of John Paul II.

It was important to get the passages about the relation between the person and the body absolutely clear. They were a bit obscure in the old translation.

One theme is very decidedly de-emphasized in the new translation, namely, lust. In the existing English translation, Jesus says, “Whoever looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” — Matthew 5:28, following the Revised Standard Version.

John Paul II's translation is much closer to the Greek original. It has “Whoever looks at a woman to desire her.” The difference is important. Desire can be good or bad; lust is a vice.

In the Italian text of the theology of the body, you can find the word “lust” — “lussuria” — four times. You can add six instances of lustful — “libidinoso” — and 11 of “libido” for 21 defensible instances of “lust.”

In the existing English translation, you have “lust” 343 times. That is a massive multiplication of “lust.” The reason is the RSV translation of Matthew 5:28 — “looks lustfully.”

When John Paul II discusses Jesus' words in detail and repeatedly uses the word “desire” — “desiderare” or “desiderio” — in agreement with his own translation — “looks to desire” — the existing English translation tries to preserve the connection with the term “lustfully” and often translates “desire” as “lust.”

It multiplies “lust” further by frequently using it to translate “concupiscenza.” But concupiscence is a wider concept than lust. Sexual concupiscence is only one of its species. The multiplication of “lust” introduces a note of pan-sexualism that is foreign to John Paul II.

ZENIT: Has the target audience changed from the original translation? Would the average lay person find this text easy to read, or is it more of a scholarly work?

Waldstein: The target audience is the universal Church. The theology of the body is a catechesis designed for the universal Church, for everybody, though in different ways.

It is a difficult work, though it has many passages that are fantastically powerful, poetic and clear. John Paul II seems to have written it as one would write a theological journal: with all the philosophical and theological resources available to him.

Vatican II says about preaching and catechesis that they are the primary means for a bishop to exercise his teaching office. In accord with that principle, the ordinary magisterium of the Pope consists mainly in his preaching and catecheses.

It is clear that John Paul II intended these catecheses for the universal Church. In that way, the theology of the body is for everybody. Since it is a difficult text, there needs to be much work of explaining and popularizing.

At the other end of the spectrum, in the academic world, the theology of the body has not been studied much. My Introduction is an attempt to open up the text a bit for academic study.

In the theology of the body John Paul II was really wrestling with the fundamental questions of our age, the question of progress, of the nature of science, of technology and its good as well as dangers, etc. It is a powerful contribution to the debate about those questions and deserves a hearing....

I am convinced it will increasingly speak to people and have a profound impact. It is what our culture needs.