

Book Review

Jean-Claude Larchet, *Theology of the Body* (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2017), 107 pp. \$19.00

Reviewed by Patrick Steckbeck

Overview

JEAN-CLAUDE LARCHET'S PURPOSE IN *Theology of the Body* is to set forth a Christian view of the human body in systematic fashion, drawing from the Scriptures and the church fathers. He focuses on the Greek fathers, being a Patristic scholar in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. He accomplishes this end in a concise yet substantial way; his book is packed with depth, yet it is only 97 pages long. His understanding of classical philosophy and theology is evident from the multitude and quality of his citations and his ability to summarize the views of those from whom he draws his views. This book is worth reading, especially for those interested in a Theology of the Body. More broadly, it will appeal to anyone looking to understand the method, doctrine, and emphases of Eastern Orthodoxy in a precise and concise manner, without any excess.

Summary

THE BOOK IS DIVIDED INTO SIX CHAPTERS that begin with man in his created state and end with man in his resurrected state. For Larchet, man is a tripartite being composed of body, soul, and spirit. Being made in God's image, the spirit is how he exercises self-determination (15-17). This self-determination is key for man to attain "likeness" to God through participation in God's energies given to him as a gift of grace. By freely participating in God's energies, man attains "god" status. This is the purpose of man: to become a partaker of the divine nature by grace. Man participates in this divinization with the whole of his nature, including his body.

The Fall, however, resulted in ancestral sin that affected both man's body and his spirit. Through ancestral sin, the body becomes "...the favored instrument of this fleshly pleasure that from now on replaces the spiritual pleasure Adam and Eve had begun to know in paradise..." (34-35). Instead of ascending by grace to become a god, mankind descends to become more like beasts. The body, meant to become deified, becomes the center of the passion of self-love, which is an "egotistical, passionate love of oneself" (35). Through sin, man is set against himself and oth-

ers. He has desires in a thousand contradictory directions. His body has acquired a “materiality, a thickness, and an opacity that it did not originally possess” (38). He is subject to death, having lost the grace whereby he could attain the “likeness of God.”

Larchet then presents the incarnation of Christ as bringing salvation to mankind, even mankind’s body. The Son of God assumed true human nature, including a human body. Christ, being God, is filled with the divine energies, even in the body. This is most apparent in the transfiguration where the “eyes of those apostles present were suddenly opened by the Holy Spirit so that they were able to see his body become transparent to the divine energies; and when, through his body, Christ’s human nature was shown to be bathed in them, filled, enveloped, and totally permeated by them” (46). In filling human nature with the divine energies and in voluntarily taking upon himself non-culpable passions (hunger, suffering, etc.) and triumphing over them and the Devil in the cross, resurrection, and ascension, He opens up a way of salvation for mankind through participation in him.

This participation is the focus of the fourth chapter, and this participatory salvation occurs through the Christian church, the body of Christ on earth. The salvation of Christ is conveyed through the sacraments, which are participated in through the body. Furthermore, through grace and the will, man can lead a virtuous life, controlling his body through grace and asceticism so that he can devote himself to prayer and worship. This spiritual transformation has a positive effect on man’s body as well as his soul. This grace makes the body “young” and “radiant” (87). This is manifest in the example of the saints and even in relics (87-91). Importantly, in man’s final, resurrected state, Christians will not experience “limitation, constraint, or restriction, but will be freed from the laws of nature as we now know them . . . we shall experience perfect bodily health, total and definitive, so that we shall be able to receive in body as in soul the fullness of grace . . .” (96). Man, through the salvation of Christ, can attain the “likeness” of the divine nature for which he was made.

Evaluation

THIS BOOK ACCOMPLISHES MORE than it initially appears. It certainly presents a Theology of the Body, but it does so in such a manner that clearly articulates many of the distinctives of Orthodox Christianity (icons, Eastern liturgy, prayers for the dead, the centrality of theosis, etc.). If the reader has a basic understanding of the emphases, style, and distinctives of Orthodox theology, this book will help order in his or her mind the various parts (icons, asceticism, sacramentology) to the broader structural whole (participation in God vis-à-vis the divine energies through the will participating in grace) of that theological tradition.

Furthermore, the book proves to be exceedingly practical. The longest chapter, spanning pages 51-86, offers an exposition of the body in a person's spiritual life, covering the roles of sacraments, dietary practices, sexual conduct, prayer, and worship in detail. Most of these aspects of practical theology are readily applicable to the average reader. In this manner, the book, while not being extensively polemical, serves as a forceful challenge to the ungodly gluttony and sloth that characterizes much of contemporary American culture.

This book does not focus on contentious cultural and political issues like other Theologies of the Body. While there are some references to his disagreements with Western theology, one won't find extensive arguments engaging with issues like transgenderism, abortion, euthanasia and homosexuality (though abortion is mentioned). However, this is a positive because these polemics relative to the body can be found elsewhere and would interrupt the orderly and concise flow of the book.

Notably absent from the book is a section on the afterlife for the damned. While the book provides ample material regarding the resurrected state for the righteous, it does not explain the nature of hell for the wicked. What is the nature of the body for the damned? Do the unrighteous experience bodily torment?

The largest stumbling blocks for many will stem from Larchet's views of pleasure in general and the sexual nature of man in particular. For Larchet, not all pleasure is evil; indeed, man is to pursue pleasure in God. However, bodily pleasure is something that Larchet discusses with a high degree of suspicion (though without denouncing it entirely). Further, he expresses the view that sexual reproduction is a result of the Fall. When sanctified by marriage, sex is not evil, but it is still a consequence of the Fall. The book would have been better if he made an argument for this position (yet, keeping with his method, an appeal to the fathers is sufficient grounds of belief for Larchet).

Christians of the Lutheran confession will likely receive this book with mixed feelings. All Lutherans—inasmuch as they are truly Lutheran—will view Larchet's emphasis on the freedom of the will with considerable suspicion, though, one hopes, with charity and theological nuance. Moreover, the book lacks any clear emphasis on the forensic or legal aspects of justification.

That said, Lutherans who value and seek to live out Article VI of the Augsburg Confession ("Of the New Obedience") and Article V of the Apology ("Of Love and the Fulfilling of the Law") will find much that is practically useful in Larchet's treatment of the body and Christian obedience. These sections can serve as a helpful resource for living faithfully in a manner consistent with the spirit of the Book of Concord.

Conclusion

THIS BOOK ACCOMPLISHES WHAT IT sets out to accomplish and more. For anyone who is looking for an in-depth and concise introduction to the Theology of the Body, this book is well worth the read. Further, for those interested in Patristic theology and Eastern Orthodox theology, this book is a worthwhile introduction to that theological tradition. Finally, this book is worthwhile for any Christian who desires to grow in bodily discipline and virtue. Its practicality, conciseness, and precision set it apart from other books on the Theology of the Body.

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