

Book Review

J. Brian Bransfield, *The Human Person According to John Paul II* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2010), xvii + 263 pp. \$19.95

Reviewed by Patrick Steckbeck

Scope and Style

BRANSFIELD'S AIM IN *The Human Person According to John Paul II* is not just to comment on John Paul II's theology of the body, but also to relate his teaching to the broader teaching of the Roman Catholic Church and to the thoughts of various theologians. He does this all to "...help readers more easily understand what the theology of the body is all about" (3). He divides his book into three parts: Part 1 explains the factors that shape Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II). Part 2 discusses the Theology of the Body in relation to creation and the fall— including original innocence and original shame. Part 3 covers the Theology of the Body in salvation, or, what John Paul II calls "life according to the Spirit." He ties this section to the call of the Second Vatican Council for the renewal of moral Theology (3).

Stylistically, the book is characterized by the author's wide reading and creative syntheses. He connects John Paul's Theology of the Body to numerous theologians from ancient, medieval, and modern periods. Additionally he demonstrates a solid understanding of the various concerns of church councils. With this, his writing remains engaging and accessible, avoiding dryness or obscurity. He integrates anecdotal stories from his own life, quotations from church fathers, references to literature, and expositions of Bible stories to illustrate his points. The author's richness of detail, combined with lively prose, makes the book enjoyable to read. However, the array of quotations and different ideas being synthesized can overwhelm the reader, making it difficult to discern whether what is being said is John Paul II's Theology, the quoted theologians, or the author's own opinions. This book is not a simple popular-level exposition of John Paul II's Theology of the Body, nor is it purely academic. Instead, it strikes a balance suitable for the well-educated layperson or member of the clergy.

Content

THE FIRST SECTION OUTLINES THE MAJOR experiences that shaped John Paul II (Karol Wojtyła). The author explains that three revolutions are central to his formation: (1) The Industrial Revolution, (2) The Sexual Revolution, and (3) The Technological Revolution/Mass Media. It isn't necessary to reflect much on how these three "revolutions" might influence a man to develop a Theology of the Body. What's notable about these sections is that they serve as helpful summaries of how humans relate to themselves and their bodies. He most effectively summarizes the impact of these revolutions in a single phrase: *acquire pleasure quickly*—where "acquire" comes from the industrial revolution, "pleasure" comes from the sexual revolution, and "quickly" from the technological revolution. For John Paul II, however, the human being must *give beauty slowly*. The issues raised by these three revolutions compound the problems of original shame and reveal, more profoundly, our need for Life According to the Spirit.

Bransfield explores *original innocence* and *original shame* in Part II. Notable for original innocence are some concepts that many believers do not regularly consider. Bransfield also examines other commonly discussed topics, such as the image of God and creation. However, he also discusses intriguing topics such as *original solitude* (83-92), *original unity* (93-103), and *original nakedness* (104-112). While many Christians today are prone to overlook the creation accounts and what it means to be human, Bransfield offers a thorough analysis of topics ranging from consciousness to contraception. In his section on *original shame*, he considers original sin, temptation, choice, and the effects of original sin. What is particularly fascinating is his "seven steps" of sin: the ritual of temptation. In this section, he outlines the descent of man in sin, which will later be linked to with other "sevens" (seven deadly sins, seven virtues, seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, etc.).

After outlining John Paul II's views—as well as the views of other theologians—on sin and the human person, Bransfield enters the third part of the book on "life in the Spirit," a phrase often favored by John Paul II. In connection with his "seven steps" of sin, he discusses a curious section on the "seven steps" of grace. He derives these seven steps of grace from the Gospel of Luke, beginning with the structure of the Holy family (Jesus, Mary, and Joseph) and culminating in the Magnificat. The creativity here is clear; however, one might wonder if the seven steps of sin and the seven steps of grace are actually in the text of Scripture. One of the most beautiful sections of the book follows after this part; it focuses on the effects of grace, which the author titles, "The Efficacious Nature of the Self-Gift of Jesus." Many Bible lovers will appreciate the depth of analysis and ability to draw connections that Bransfield demonstrates in his discussions of Jesus' Cry of Abandonment, His Opened Side, the Prodigal Son, and the Good

Samaritan. One excerpt from his treatment of His Opened Side illustrates the significance of this section.

Just as Adam's side was opened as he slept in paradise, the body of Christ is opened as he sleeps in death upon the cross. Whereas Adam's body gave forth woman, Christ's body gave forth the Church. The spear pierces into the curve of eternal love, and the curve yields, giving itself up to include even all the sins of man. And in this yielding of love, the wound transforms the spear into a gift... God gives an even more superabundant gift: access to the open heart of Christ. The heart of God, the innermost core of love itself, pours forth in a never-ending cascade of mercy upon man, heals man's sin, and restores his dignity... (177).

Evaluation

CONFESSIONAL LUTHERANS WILL RECEIVE THIS book somewhat in a mixed way. While they will appreciate the cultural critique Bransfield provides when situating Pope John Paul II's life and influences, and how his cultural critiques impact our Theology of the Body, they will also value insights into the nature of Roman Catholic Theology. In the second section, they will appreciate depth of the author's analyses, especially in prompting gratitude for being made in the image of God.

The section on *life according to the Spirit* is where Lutherans will have the most pause, qualification, and concern. Though the Lutheran Confessions emphasize that we grow in *love* and in *fulfillment of the law* more and more, these same confessions are always concerned with works-righteousness and over-introspection (the will curved in on itself). They will likely agree with many points made in this section, but they will find a problem with the author's strong emphasis on what God is currently doing *in me*, rather than on what Christ has done outside of me. Again, these are differences in emphasis; Lutherans believe God works *in them* through sanctification, but the emphases differ.

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