

The following is an excerpt from the revised, updated, and expanded edition of *Theology of the Body for Beginners* by Christopher West (Beacon, 2018).

### **Christ Appeals to the Beginning**

When some Pharisees questioned Jesus about the meaning of marriage, Jesus responded, “Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female...?” (Matt 19:4).

If we need proof of the pertinence of these words today, look no further than the fact that Facebook recently listed over fifty gender options to choose from when filling out a personal profile. After complaints that terms such as “intersex,” “cisgender,” “gender fluid,” “gender nonconforming,” “gender variant,” “neutrois,” “non-binary,” “pangender,” “two-spirit,” and multiple other variations on these themes were too limiting, the site added a “free-form field” in which people can now “customize” their gender identity. “We recognize that some people face challenges sharing their true gender identity with others,” said Facebook’s diversity team in a statement, “and this setting gives people the ability to express themselves in an authentic way.”

What does it mean—really—to speak of “true gender identity” and to express it “in an authentic way”? According to Christ, the answers can only be found by returning to God’s original purpose for making us male and female before the confusion of sin obscured it. Only by doing so can we save the term “gender” from the insanity of a world untethered from reality.

The root “gen”—from which we get words like generous, generate, genesis, genetics, genealogy, progeny, gender, and genitals—means to produce or give birth to. A person’s *gen-der*, therefore, is based on the manner in which that person is designed to *gen-erate* new life. Contrary to widespread secular insistence, a person’s gender is not a malleable social construct. Rather, a person’s gender is determined by the kind of genitals he or she has. While the sexual and feminist revolutions of the twentieth century were right to challenge certain roles conventionally limited to one or the other gender, there are two roles—one belonging only to men and the other only to women—that are irreplaceable and absolutely indispensable for the survival of the human race: fatherhood and motherhood. When we understand the gender-genitals-generation link, we also understand why a de-gendered society is bound to de-generate. Indeed, failing to honor the God-given meaning of gender places the future of the human race in peril.

Pope Francis observed that today “various forms of an ideology of gender ... envisage a society without sexual differences, thereby eliminating the anthropological basis of the family. This ideology ... promote[s] a personal identity and emotional intimacy radically separated from the biological difference between male and female. Consequently, human identity becomes the choice of the individual, one that can also change over time... It is one thing to be understanding of human weakness and the complexities of life,” says Francis, “and another to accept

ideologies that attempt to sunder what are inseparable aspects of reality.” We “are called to protect our humanity,” he insists, “and this means, in the first place, accepting it and respecting it as it was created [by God]” (AL 56). Christ calls us to this respect by reminding us of “the beginning” when God created us as male and female (see Matt 19:4).

Inevitably, the question arises in this context about those people born with ambiguous genitalia. While acknowledging that this is indeed a painful reality of our fallen world, John Paul II nonetheless observes that everyone “belongs from birth to one of the two sexes. This fact is not contradicted by [those rare cases of] hermaphroditism—any more than any other sickness or deformity militates against the fact that there is such a thing as human nature” (LR, p. 47). In other words, the anomaly doesn’t alter the norm. The hope for those who suffer with this anomaly, and for all those with gender confusion of any kind, lies not in science to “assign” a new gender, but in Christ to restore the original order of our humanity through the gift of redemption.

Whatever number of “genders identities” the modern world may claim exists, Christ’s teaching is definitive: “he who made them from the beginning made them male and female.” Then, quoting from Genesis, he adds, “‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh.’ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together”—the two genders, through their complementary genitals, for the sake of generation—“let not man put asunder” (Matt 19:4–6).

### **From the Beginning it Was Not So**

Shocked by Jesus’ insistence on the indissolubility of marriage, the Pharisees retorted, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce, and to put her away?” In response, Christ appealed to the beginning yet again: “For your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so” (Matt 19:8).

Jesus does not accept the normalization of our fallen humanity. In effect, he is saying something like this: “You think all the tension, conflict, and heartache in the male-female relationship is normal? This is not normal. This is not the way God created it to be. Something has gone terribly wrong.” As the *Catechism* expresses it, the disorder we notice so painfully in the male-female relationship “does not stem from the *nature* of man and woman, nor from the nature of their relations, but from *sin*. As a break with God, the first sin had for its consequence the rupture of the original communion between man and woman” (CCC 1607).

Because of the effects of sin, it’s as if we’re all driving around town in cars with flat tires. The rubber is shredding off the rims; the rims are getting dented up; and we think it’s all normal. After all, everyone’s tires look this way. Jesus is saying to the Pharisees (and to all of us), “In the beginning, they had air in their tires.” At the same time—and this is the good news!—Christ is injecting his listeners with hope ... hope of restoration ... hope of healing ... hope of redemption. For “Jesus came to restore creation to the

purity of its origins” (CCC 2336).

If we look honestly at our lives, we will all at a new level just how far we are from “the beginning.” But do not despair! Christ came into the world not to condemn those with flat tires. He came into the world to reinflate our flat tires. While we cannot actually return to the state of innocence, by God’s grace we can receive his original plan for our sexuality and live it (see CCC 1615). This is good news!

Everything the Church teaches about marriage and sexuality flows from this good news, this hope of restoring God’s creation to his original intention through the redemption won for us by Christ.