

“Pornographic Interference” by Christopher West **Author and Presenter of “The Gift” “Theology of the Body” Study Group**

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I’ve been doing a lot of radio interviews lately promoting my new book *The Love That Satisfies*. Subtitled *Reflections on Eros and Agape*, this book offers a guided meditation on key quotes from Pope Benedict XVI’s encyclical *God is Love*. In the midst of our pornographic culture, like John Paul II before him, Benedict is helping us recover the true meaning of erotic love (*eros*) as an image of divine love (*agape*).

The other day someone contacted me who had heard me on the radio. She thought that, by appealing to erotic love as an image of God’s love, I was somehow debasing God. We obviously have to be careful in the way we apply this imagery. Heaven, for instance, is not going to be “sex in the clouds.” We use the loving union of man and woman only as an analogy of the love we will experience in the heavenly “Marriage of the Lamb” (see Rev 19).

I’d suggest, however, that what’s really involved in the difficulty we can experience applying erotic imagery to God is not a debasement of God, but a debasement of sex. We have been conditioned by our pornographic culture to think of sex in a radically distorted way. When this distorted vision appears as the “norm,” it becomes increasingly difficult to reclaim the pure meaning of sexuality and erotic love as an image of the divine. When we seek to do so, we are often overwhelmed by what we might call “pornographic interference.” Like static snow on a TV screen, you try to make out the true image, but interference distorts the picture.

This, I would suggest, is the precise goal of the deceiver, the one who is ultimately behind the terrible distortion of sex in today’s world. He is quite literally hell-bent on keeping us from recognizing the true meaning of our bodies and sexuality. Why? Because if we come to understand and live the true theology of our bodies, it will launch us like a rocket into the heart of the mystery of God.

As Pope Benedict explains, “The Prophets, particularly Hosea and Ezekiel, describe God’s passion for his people using boldly erotic images” (*God is Love*, n. 9). The story of Hosea taking a prostitute for a wife at the Lord’s command is well known. In this marriage we discover an image of God’s love for us, his unfaithful spouse. Betrothed love is the proper expression of *eros*. Hence, since this betrothal expresses God’s love for his people, God’s “love may certainly be called *eros*,” Pope Benedict tells us, “yet it is also totally *agape*” (n. 9).

God’s love is a love that yearns for intimacy with the “other” and rejoices in that other’s beauty. “As the bridegroom rejoices over the bride, so shall your God rejoice over you” (Is 62:5).

The Prophet Ezekiel’s imagery is even more explicit:

And you grew up and became tall and arrived at full maidenhood; your breasts were formed, and your hair had grown; yet you were naked and bare. When I passed by you again and looked upon you, behold, you were at the age for love. ...I plighted my troth to you and entered into a covenant with you, says the Lord God, and you became mine. (Ez 16:7-8)

Pope John Paul II taught that the body and erotic love have a “prophetic” meaning. The body “speaks.” The union of spouses proclaims a “great mystery” – the mystery of Christ’s union with the Church (see Eph 5:31-32). But wherever prophets are sent to proclaim truth, false prophets inevitably appear with cunning schemes to distort that truth and deceive God’s people. Pornographers are false prophets. And our difficulty as God’s people in seeing the true *theological* meaning of the body and erotic love is a measure of their success.

If we find it difficult or even impossible to see the mystery of God revealed through human sexuality, it’s probably because we have been “evangelized” by men like Hugh Hefner and Larry Flint, rather than by men like John Paul II and Benedict XVI. This is why our world (beginning with all of us in the Church), as both popes have insisted, is desperately in need of a new evangelization.