

Partners of the Absolute

A reflection on childhood, the unborn and John Paul II's "original solitude"

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"What dies but what had life?" – John Milton *Paradise Lost* X: 790.

Introduction: The alienation of childhood

In this article, I would like to examine the implications of John Paul II's concept of "original solitude" from his *Theology of the Body* for understanding the ontological structure and existential significance of childhood. In order to effect this, I will also refer specifically to the context of abortion and the threat it continues to pose to the unborn in contemporary western culture. It is in the three catecheses from his catechesis on marriage and human sexuality *Theology of the Body*, given between October 10th and October 31st 1979, that John Paul II focuses on what he calls "*the meaning of man's original solitude*"[\[i\]](#).

By rereading Genesis chapters 1 and 2, he provides a twofold context for understanding 'maleness' and femaleness' as well as their relationship in *communio*. From here, he develops an analysis of the meaning of the body in relation to man's subjectivity, always an important theme for him. Further, he examines how "*the structure of this body permits him to be the author of genuinely human activity*" (*TOB*, 7.2) – that is, the author of human acts that come under the sign of death and immortality. Here the author of *Veritatis Splendor* and *The Acting Person* brings to bear his personalism upon the essential anthropological problem – the alternative between death and immortality lived in the body as either male or female.

For John Paul, the solution to this problem is Christ who brings redemption to both man and woman, placing them firmly within the circle of eternal life by the recovery of the *communio personarum* – redemption lived in the body outside of the circle of death. In order to reveal how this is possible, John Paul's analysis begins with what "original solitude" means. In Genesis 2:18, we find that "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make a helper fit for him". Derived from man's condition in Genesis 2:18, he suggests that what he calls "original solitude" has two separate but related meanings. The first derives "*from man's very nature*", the second "*from the relationship between male and female*" (*TOB*, 5.2).

Of the two meanings suggested by John Paul for "original solitude", the fact that "man is alone turns out to be a fundamental anthropological issue" that is in an existential sense prior to man's being male and female (*TOB*, 5.3). In John Paul's analysis, "original solitude", as a dimension of man's experience before the fall gives way to "original unity", but retains an essential anthropological reality. This is that "*the created man finds himself from the first moment of his existence before God in search of his own being...in search of his own definition*" or as we might put it today in search of his own "identity" (*TOB*, 5.5).

For the children of our society, aloneness is an experience that is all too common.[\[ii\]](#) When children's lives are sundered from the mutuality and *communio* of the family, when they experience the loneliness of poverty and abandonment, they begin to live under the sign of what John Paul calls *alienation*: "Alienation is the opposite of participation; it is its antithesis...essentially a personalistic

problem...alienation contributes to or...creates an occasion for depriving people in some respect of the possibility of fulfilling themselves in community...alienation as the antithesis of participation signifies a constriction or alienation of everything through which one human being is another self for another human being.”[\[iii\]](#)

For John Paul (as Karol Wojtyła), such alienation subverts the lived experience of *the truth of the person* and their essential worth and dignity. So much so, that the concept of “neighbour” easily gives way to that of the anonymous “other”, “stranger” or even “enemy”.[\[iv\]](#) Without the restoration of authentic family life in which two biological parents care for their children, it will be difficult for our secular society to live *the truth of the human person* or to see children “with the eyes of Christ”.[\[v\]](#) To see them as Pope Benedict XVI suggests, as persons made in the image of God: “Going beyond exterior experiences, I perceive in others an interior desire for a sign of love, of concern...If I have no contact whatsoever with God in my life, then I cannot see in the other anything more than the other, and I am incapable of seeing in him the image of God.”[\[vi\]](#)

This is especially so in relation to the unborn, for whom such “sight” must be an interior vision, illuminated by the Word in all its truth and an accepting Love that sees beyond appearances (*TOB*, 11.4). Under the “primordial” relationship of man and woman in marriage, a child flourishes like a young tree, watered by love and suffering. But when this is broken, the “original solitude” – deliberately overcome by God in granting men and women to each other in marriage open “to God’s salvific action” (*TOB*, 100.4) – falls with the full weight of tragedy upon the child. It is an existential weight no child is made to take, a weight that burdens them with troubling echoes of the solitude of mankind when man could find none “like unto himself” until God, always the giver, gave him Eve, the mother of all living persons.

Pushed towards alienation by such a rupture, the child is also threatened as a personal subject whose meaning and transcendence is only fulfilled in self-giving. *Rejection of the gift* of personal communion in marriage – a rejection that goes so deeply against the nature of the person, made for communion and love – only leaves the child wondering what the meaning of a world is in which gifts are cast away so casually from the hands of those to whom they are given. Whereas “Love...is the fundamental and innate vocation of every human being”[\[vii\]](#), the child placed under the burden of separation or divorce may as a consequence also find the Eucharist harder to accept as a sign of God’s love – a love that should never be broken by the separation of parents.

Identity and the objective order

Man’s happiness depends a great deal on his ability to conform to the conditions of the first covenant with man (*TOB*, 5.4). In the “beginning”, this was accomplished, says John Paul by the “test” of his ability to name the creatures and distinguish himself from them and from the rest of Creation. Man’s happiness depends, in a profound way, upon conformity to God’s provision as “Legislator” and to man’s subjective recognition of the order of Creation and his place within it. This order is first and foremost an objective order but it includes within it a recognition that childhood, for its health, depends upon an intimate relationship to ordered norms of a moral and spiritual nature. To secure a child’s happiness, these are best communicated and nurtured by both parents from within their married love, a love that is (as John Paul puts it elsewhere) “essentially a gift” and for which, “children...are a living reflection of their love, a permanent sign of conjugal unity and a living and inseparable synthesis of their being a father and a mother.”[\[viii\]](#)

The child, like man himself, “cannot be put on a par with any other species of living beings on

earth” (*TOB* 5.4). To treat children as less than human, to deny them personhood contradicts the Creator’s legislation that man *is* superior to the animals. In particular to deny the unborn their personhood[[ix](#)] is an especially pernicious and prevalent tendency today such that, being non-human or non-persons they can be eliminated by abortion or handed over to experimentation without any qualms or guilt. Equally destructive, at the ontological level, is the recent development in the United Kingdom toward the creation of animal-human hybrids, initially at the embryonic stage[[x](#)]. The denial of man’s distinctness or uniqueness as a being made in God’s image leads to treating human life no differently to that of the animals. This is especially so where it may be manipulated with impunity on the basis that the embryo appears to lack resemblance to the ‘human’ and cannot resist.

The definition of the human, however, is fundamental to John Paul’s analysis of “original solitude”, just as it is fundamental to his whole anthropological project. An important aspect of this in the *Theology of the Body* is found in how the first, or “*created man* finds himself from the first moment of his existence *before God* in search of his own being...in search of his own definition (*TOB*, 5.5). In contemporary culture, it is unquestionably the meaning and significance of the human being that is at stake in debates about sexuality, contraception and abortion. In attempting to locate childhood within this debate, the same search for identity and meaning needs to take place.

For John Paul, the human being is always a particular *suppositum* and “a concrete self, in every instance unique and unrepeatable”. In the dimension of objective reality, the human being is also someone who exists and acts but who is also the personal subject of that existence and action. This subjectivity plays an essential role in John Paul’s anthropology, being in many senses *that which is irreducible* about the person in terms of experience[[xi](#)].

As *being* created before God, is this unique unrepeatability not also true of the unborn child from the moment even of conception?[[xii](#)] Does not this search for identity begin in a mysterious way at conception when, in fact, the child begins to unfold progressively towards greater and more visible definition and identity where his or her identity is at first “hid with Christ in God” (Col. 3:3)? Does not this process for each person (including ourselves), continue in an unbroken continuum through time from this moment as reality progressively reveals itself to us and we are revealed to reality? [[xiii](#)] Mysterious as this process is, it is an unfolding before God that is also bound up, ultimately with our destiny before God. To deny this is to deny the *transcendence* of the human person as one “*before God* in search of his own being” (*TOB*, 5.5), a being who is incomplete without the Other. In his “Letter to Families”, John Paul expresses it this way: “Like his parents, the *new human being is also called* to live as a person; he is called to live a life “in truth and love”. This call is not only open to what exists in time, but in God it is open to eternity” [[xiv](#)].

Man goes beyond himself in *transcendence* and it is the tragedy of contemporary secular and atheistic humanism that it “strips man of his transcendental character, destroying his ultimate significance as a person.”[[xv](#)] Yet to ‘search for oneself’ is almost a cliché today, the subject of countless films and novels and it is intrinsic to our natures - existentially speaking to be *within this search*. In one sense it is a search begun by every parent whose love brings forth a child – a person whose identity they must safeguard and protect against threats to his or her very integrity. This search, as others have pointed out[[xvi](#)], cannot take place in isolation or within the parameters of the kind of individualism offered to so many children by contemporary culture. It is only properly meaningful within a community whose narrative the child can apprehend, a narrative that affirms the transcendence of the person and that can be lived in relation to the Other [[xvii](#)].

To safeguard the integrity of this transcendence, we must return to the observation made earlier by John Paul that in “original solitude” man, and by extension the child, cannot “identify himself essentially with the visible world of the other living beings (*animalia*)” (*TOB*, 5.4). It must not be nurtured by that which is only *animalia*, just living or material; it must have roots in the moral and spiritual climate natural and ontologically definitive for man. As a ‘rational animal’, the child needs a climate that nurtures his rational being – his speech, imagination, sense of good and evil, order, worship and relationship to death. Most cultures, in the past, have provided such nurture through the religious practices common to their milieu; secular culture, however, has replaced (or is attempting to replace) religious culture with barren attempts to provide alternatives that will satisfy the deepest nature of man. Barren because they mitigate against “original solitude”, against the special prerogatives of children to wonder about their origins and destiny, against the true formation of children in an objective and authentic moral and spiritual culture [xviii].

Secular man, as *homo reductus*, offers no authentic spiritual culture to the child but only a moral culture imbued with subjectivism and a consumer-driven model of utilitarianism towards others. Such a mentality, however, tends to relegate others to a means to an end and to render pleasure “as the sole or at any rate the greatest good, to which everything else in the activity of an individual or a society should be subordinated.” [xix] By contrast, children need to learn what John Paul (as Karol Wojtyła) also calls the *personalistic principle*: that “the value of the person is always greater than the value of pleasure” [xx] in order to be able to develop healthy friendships and in future life, loving marriages.

Conception and Incarnation: The delineation of the unborn child

To continue his fifth address, John Paul suggests that part of man’s “original solitude” includes self-knowledge. In John Paul’s analysis however, this self-knowledge is distinctively of man “as a human person, with the proper subjectivity that characterises the person” (*TOB*, 5.6). For children, such self-knowledge surely depends upon the stability of their primary relationships in the world [xxi]. To a child, the other helps (indeed ensures) their self-definition just as it does for adults. To aid this development of self-knowledge the child also needs “knowledge of the world, of all visible creatures, of all living beings” (*TOB*, 5.6) – in other words an education sufficient to ensure his or her understanding of the both the cosmos but also the world created by God which includes the natural moral law and the spiritual transcendence of man.

Without this, the child is limited to a strict naturalism that will not be sufficient to enable such self-knowledge for without moral and spiritual roots, children become further alienated from the echo of “original solitude” in which man discovered his own distinctness from the material world itself. In this way, the child may be led to believe that he or she is merely another facet of the material, a being with no distinction on the moral, spiritual nor existential plane [xxii].

However, in reality the child is a person who retains the existential dimension of being derived from the subjectivity that characterises the person given in John Paul’s discovery of “original solitude”. This dimension is essential to the foundations of moral and spiritual growth of the child and to recognising the dignity of childhood in its subjectivity and personhood. From the moment of conception, simply because man does not depend on and is not co-terminus with “the world”, personhood begins to develop along with consciousness and subjectivity. Consciousness in particular is not merely a function of “being born”, as if exposure to the air or to the direct gaze of human eyes could bestow such an interior quality; unborn children are known to experience a wide degree of sensual responses to their world [xxiii] and the bodily functions that characterise their

daily lives are not just static but continually developing along a teleological path set long before by both genetics and God's creative power.

The “*delineation* of the human being *as a human person*” (TOB 5.6) in the existential moment of “original solitude” is in a special way reflected in the existence and ontological state of the unborn who are both “original” (unique and unrepeatable) and in a condition of “solitude”, though only in the sense that we cannot listen to their thoughts or hold explicit dialogue with them. This “solitude” is held within the body and blood of the mother, whose sacrificial love holds daily, hourly and most intimate concourse with her child. Indeed, “can there be any other “*communion*” comparable to that *between a mother and a child* whom she has carried in her womb...?”[\[xxiv\]](#)

This communion, what Pope Benedict XVI in the same place calls the fundamental anthropological figure is also a “graphic depiction of the essence of human existence in general”. In this figure, being “for”, “from” or “with” another is unavoidable in human life such that I am always thrown back upon being-for another even though I might prefer my “independence”. Because of this, my freedom has limits that I must live “not out of competition but in a spirit of mutual support.” In a special way the unborn child's existence contains within itself a dialogue of love begun in the parents' love and daily nurtured with both parents' presence and concern. Such a child is both a being-for the mother as well as a being-from the parents' love, just as the mother is a being-for the child – an existential fact that contradicts the contemporary trend toward individualism and ‘choice’[\[xxv\]](#).

The structure of the unborn child's body, his or her heartbeat and supple fingers being shaped in a dramatic, mysterious and beautiful act of creation signifies a whole world of knowledge still mysterious to us. Christ, who underwent the same path as fully God and fully man lived in the womb of His Mother, from whom He was born into the world. Because of this, because the God who took on human form knows the unborn from within we can be confident that every unborn child is therefore sacred, made luminous just as all of human life is made luminous by His touch and presence with us. The unborn Christ, God incarnate sacralises every unborn child, investing his or her with God's blessing, God's presence and Mary's *fiat* (Lk 1:38). Because Christ was from the moment of conception both God and man, it is impossible that each unborn child could be less than a person as a result; the personhood of each individual is affirmed definitively by Christ in Mary's womb, unseen, unspeaking, unborn.

In one of his letters. St Augustine suggests how Christ bestows such dignity on the unborn: “That very greatness of His power, which feels no narrowness in narrow quarters, enriched the Virgin's womb, not by an externally caused but by an intrinsic childbirth; that power took to itself a rational soul and thereby also a human body, and chose to better all mankind without suffering any diminution itself, deigning to take the name of humanity from man, while granting him a share in the divinity.”[\[xxvi\]](#)

The child as partner of the Absolute

Throughout John Paul/Karol Wojtyla's anthropology, there is a particular emphasis on the question of self-determination. In his sixth address of 24th October 1979, he gives us the subtitle “Solitude and subjectivity” to emphasise the interior dimension of “original solitude” he now wishes to consider. The focus, stated almost immediately now becomes “*the person with the subjectivity characterizing the person*”, an emphasis that will be familiar to students and readers of *The Acting*

Person. Considering Genesis chapter 2 as a first sketch of man as a person, he continues: “When God-Yahweh gives to the first man, formed in this way, the commandment concerning all the trees that grow in the “garden in Eden”, above all the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, this adds the aspect of choice and self-determination (that is, of free will) to the outline of man...” (TOB 6.1)

To continue his analysis of man as a “subject constituted as a person” (TOB, 6.2), John Paul also designates the person a “*partner of the Absolute*”. But is not the child, like the first man in “original solitude” also a partner of the Absolute in the sense that he or she must also learn “to choose between good and evil, between life and death”? Is not the child also set into a “*unique, exclusive, and unrepeatable relationship to God*” (TOB, 6.2) though one that is marred and wounded by sin – both Adam’s and the sins of the world into which he or she is conceived and born? Made in God’s image and likeness, children thus share in the theological definition of man in the first Creation account (Gen 1:26). Yet in contemporary discourse about children – especially within education – these realities are either ignored or used as a reason to impose upon the child a strictly secular and materialistic model of development. The same might be said of contemporary discourse about the family and the child’s place within the structure of what is essentially a *communio personarum* – a community of persons within the circle of love.

To restore a more complete vision of the child’s personhood to contemporary culture, it is necessary to uncover John Paul’s analysis of the meaning of man as a body-person, a being whose structure has an objective anthropology anchored in *transcendence*. Man, says John Paul, is a “body among bodies” and so shares in the visible created world but is at the same time aware of being “alone”; an awareness he calls “original solitude” (TOB, 6.3). It is here that the body plays a decisive role in helping man to reach this awareness of his distinction among the *animalia*. But does not the body of the unborn child also reside in some sense “alone”; and is it not “visible” to God and to his or her parents who know *by an interior sight* that their child already lives? Once born of course, children are more than visible with their ceaseless energy and boundless vitality that demands so much yet gives so much to parents!

Within the womb, it is easy to dismiss the body of the unborn child because of a supposed “invisibility”; but this is really an illusion as modern science has so dramatically demonstrated through photography and film[xxvii]. Because of the very presence of the body, the unborn child cannot be equated merely with matter, just as the child cannot be seen as co-terminus with “the world” and subject to the same manipulation that mere matter is subjected to. A body-person, the child’s dignity reaches back to this “original solitude” in which man knew himself a person, distinct from the rest of the Creation. The body of the unborn child – however much “on the way” to completion – therefore has *a profound meaning* and is not meaningless or without content, thus to be disposed of like junk or rubbish or so much “empty tissue” or “cells”[xxviii]. This meaning is in the link between body and person established in “original solitude” but yet in so much need of the perspective of Redemption since the Fall. The meaning of man’s bodiliness - apart from enabling and disclosing man’s capacity for action, self-determination and self-knowledge – is in the incarnation of his personhood *as an aspect of being*. For the unborn, action, self-determination and self-knowledge are of course quite limited but their existence as a body within a body cannot be denied, despite the rhetoric of contemporary advocates of abortion.

This denial, like that of the Garden of Eden, is first and foremost a denial of the God of the covenant, the God who “creates out of love”[xxix] and who made the body as a visible sign of the invisible reality of Love. As an expression of the anti-Word, this denial is not just a rejection of God’s basic design for Creation, but it is also a rejection of the order of Creation in which being

itself is equivalent to goodness. By destroying the unborn, man takes it upon himself to determine the basic ontological structure of the world; he decides, as Satan suggested he should, what is good and what is evil for himself. In this sense, abortion takes on a terrible rejection of the body, of its capacity to show forth God's love and beauty. In a Manichean rejection of the flesh, redeemed since the Fall by the Incarnate Word, Christ, abortion *destroys being itself* in perhaps its most beautiful and mysterious manifestation. The logic of this rejection is however faultless – if the body is simply a material object which does not express a personal presence, then its destruction cannot be considered problematic[xxx]. Abortion, in one sense, represents the fruit of a dualism that radically separates mind and body and that has been central to Enlightenment thought since Descartes.

Only a radical recasting of the vision of the person can overcome such destructive tendencies in modern culture, a recasting that can only accompany a spiritual and religious revolution or conversion. This is because attitudes to abortion are reflected in wider attitudes today towards sexuality, sexual relationships, marriage and even friendship; in fact the whole personalistic basis of our society is saturated with assumptions about the body and the nature of man that are in radical opposition to the Christian and Catholic view of man. John Paul's personalistic vision of the "spousal meaning" of the body, by contrast: "...is characterized by *a transformation of the human person's conscience and attitudes*, both the man's and the woman's, *such as to express and realize the value of the body and of sex* according to the Creator's original plan, placed as they are at the service of the "communion of persons", which is the deepest substratum of human ethics and culture." (TOB, 45.3)

This original plan, outlined in John Paul's *Theology of the Body*, consistently emphasises the work of transformation at the cultural and political level for its restoration. It consists above in "*the primacy of being over having, of the person over things*"[xxxii]. When Genesis declares "man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7) with a wonder that is supposed to make us pause and take note, should we not also consider the unborn child, a living being brought forth in the womb of the mother by an act of gratuitous mystery? Is the unborn child not living, does he or she not have existence and being? Is the unborn child also not distinct from all other beings "in the world"? Children, at this age and for many years to come cannot "subdue the earth" and so define themselves that way; they remind us instead of *pure being itself*, especially at first when their capacity to act in the world is more limited, in one sense. In another sense of course, each child whether born or unborn acts as a sign of Love and therefore "acts" in the most important and significant way "in the world".

Pilgrims of the Unseen: The sufferings of the unborn

For John Paul, man's *action* – the *actus humanus* - is definitive for the development of the person, but also for the moral life. As he puts it in continuing his catechesis, in this activity "the body expresses the person": "*The structure of this body* [in Eden after Creation, but also man's body in general] *is such that it permits him to be the author of genuinely human activity*" (TOB, 72.)

Because of the body, we "see" and experience man as a person through the body in its materiality but also come to know the person who is disclosed through action[xxxiii]. But do not unborn children "cause" actions and produce effects in the world; in men, in women, in families and in those whose hatred they bear without complaint?

I find it mysterious and very moving that the unborn child, so much the object of scorn and humiliation at the hands of adults today in some ways bears the Cross in our age in a way many

older children and adults do not. Because of this, they must be seen as pilgrims of the Unseen; like us, on their way to God. Their sufferings are our sufferings and God's, their humiliation and rejection Christ's; in this way, it seems to me that they have the possibility of Redemption by the unity of their blood with Christ's blood. This is because, as John Paul puts it in *Evangelium Vitae*, "Death is anything but an event without hope. It is the door which opens wide upon eternity and, for those who live in Christ, an experience of participation in the mystery of his death and resurrection."[\[xxxiii\]](#)

Is it not also astonishing how, in receptive hearts, the unborn child produces a wonderful effect – an effect completely impossible were the "foetus"[\[xxxiv\]](#) merely a group of cells or "tissue"? Because he or she constitutes a personal presence with its own ontological structure (and prospective mothers and fathers know this instinctively), the being of this new person *calls forth love in others*, especially the parents. Where this does not happen, it is not the child's fault but a failure of love in the parents; in many respects it also mirrors the loss of the sense of the sacred and of being "answerable before God" in contemporary outlooks, a sacredness so often expressed by Pope Benedict XVI: "Wherever two people give themselves to each other and, between them, give life to children, this touches the holiness, the mystery of human existence, which goes beyond the realm of what I can control and dispose of. I simply do not belong to myself alone. There is a divine mystery within each and every person."[\[xxxv\]](#)

This absence of love and loss of contact with what is truly sacred about human existence perhaps constitute two of the greatest problems for contemporary man. They are also two of the greatest kinds of injustice and poverty we can inflict upon a child, unborn or otherwise.

In considering the body of the unborn child, is it not also in possession of its own "materiality" and also "penetrable and transparent" (*TOB*, 7.2) like the adult's? Since the availability of photographs of the unborn, this transparency is now especially obvious, the kind of transparency that allows light to pass through matter and that even holds light within itself – in this case the light of truth. The truth that all children, from conception onward, are made in God's image and are on the way to "consciousness and self-determination" (*TOB*, 7.2)[\[xxxvi\]](#). Like us, they are therefore also pilgrims who *are not yet complete* but who can live in the light of Redemption offered by Christ.[\[xxxvii\]](#)

Light penetrates darkness to show us the materiality of the unborn which is human through and through; in their fleshliness and vulnerability they should be accepted in love. To cast away an unborn child constitutes an essential rejection of the body and of the flesh, the kind of rejection that underlies a Manichean hatred of the body and thus a heretical attempt to privilege reason, "the spiritual", "choice", "convenience" and ratiocination over and above the dignity of the body, sanctified and blessed by the Incarnation. This destruction also corrupts what John Paul elsewhere calls the "person-communion-gift"[\[xxxviii\]](#) between man and woman, as well as between mother and child; it destroys the possibility that the new person conceived in the mother's womb will be able to live a life "in truth and love" and so insinuates the Original Lie into the heart of fatherhood and motherhood. It therefore strikes at the heart of what it means to be human and of the capacity of the person to answer the "call" of truth and love.[\[xxxix\]](#) This call is effectively negated by abortion in which the new person's openness to eternity is dramatically closed before he or she even enters fully into the world of time.

Childhood, death and immortality

In the continuation of John Paul's catechesis, which in the original text he titled "The Alternative

between Death and Immortality”, he points out how in “original solitude” man is confronted for the first time with death. God’s words “You shall die” were heard by man without him having any familiarity with the experience of their true meaning. Because of this, “...this word appeared before him as a *radical antithesis of all that man had been endowed with*” (TOB, 7.3).

At the Fall man entered, by his own free choice “into the circle of the antithesis revealed to him by the Creator together with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (TOB, 7.3). He thus appropriated the experience of dying and death to himself. For children, and in a special way, this has a particular importance. This becomes more apparent when considered in the light of the original situation of man who lived, initially, in the dimension and under the sign of immortality from which he fell. As John Paul points out so often in his opening addresses, “the ‘invisible’ determines man more than the ‘visible’” (TOB, 7.4) – the “invisible” movement towards self-determination, towards consciousness as it grows; but also the invisibility of immortality, hidden from man since the Fall and yet since revealed in the God-man Christ. For the child, at least in secular terms, the antithesis of material life is simply material death; immortality has no meaning, no objective content. This is because secular man lives only in the dimension and under the historical sign of death, a death that permeates all his acts and which haunts his every plan and passion, his every love and hate, a point made clearly by *Gaudium et Spes*: “The enigma of the human condition becomes greatest when we contemplate death. Man suffers not only from pain or the slow-breaking-down of his body, but also from the terror of perpetual extinction...[but] He is more than matter, and the seed of eternity he bears within him rebels against death.”[\[xl\]](#)

For children, this antithesis often makes no sense, especially if they experience life as a gift; after all, meals, clothes and other material necessities often appear as if out of nowhere and without any effort on their part. Indeed, there is a pernicious tendency abroad today to render death and all its historical conditions *severed from the possibility of Redemption* manifest to children as soon as possible. For some adults today, children must be exposed to the materiality of death without Redemption as if it were their right or as if they were (from an adult perspective) entitled to see all of death’s creatures at close quarters to ensure that they are inoculated against the reality of immortality. Desperate as some secularists are, children must now be “de-flowered” of the so-called lie that there exists a real antithesis to death, or that there is anything more real than death[\[xli\]](#).

Associated closely with this is another tendency dependent upon it for it falls “within the circle of the antithesis” originally revealed to man: that of bringing the nature of good and evil into this “circle” and subjecting it to its own “death”. Where good and evil are treated purely under the sign of death, they lose their permanence and like all things become subject to change. This is why, tragically, children fall so frequently into the “circle of death”, victims of a distorted and disfigured knowledge of good and evil and victims of a culture that – by rejecting the alternative, immortality – *has chosen death*.

Word and anti-Word: abortion as a spiritual evil

In fact, however, the wonderful invisibility of the unborn should remind us of how important the “invisible” is in relation to the visible, sensible world. In a way, the mother’s body proclaims this during pregnancy – just as Mary’s body proclaimed the presence of the invisible God *in our midst* before the birth of her child Jesus. St. Ambrose describes how in her meeting with Elizabeth, it was the unborn Baptist who recognised the unborn Lord of Creation in Mary’s womb as Elizabeth declared He himself and her who bore Him “blessed”: “Elizabeth was the first to hear the voice; but John was the first to experience grace... She recognised the arrival of Mary; he the arrival of the

Lord. The woman recognized the woman's arrival; the child, that of the child...The infant leaped, the mother was filled with the Spirit. The mother was not filled before the son, but after the son was filled with the Holy Spirit, he filled his mother too." [\[xlii\]](#)

More fundamentally – and in a sense more obviously – abortion involves death; it brings death to the womb and therefore the body of the woman as well as the child. It represents a withering of that Tree of Life into which man's "origins" are plunged – and not just by virtue of Original Sin but because of the ability of all men and women to chose their actions, even actions undertaken within structures that promote and encourage sin and death.

Whether the unborn are seen as "things", "objects", "parasites", "inconveniences", "non-persons" or simply "cells", death is still the result of abortion; what was living is killed. Abortion, whether it is defended by the denial of the humanity of the unborn or not, drinks deeply from the cup Our Lord himself tasted on Golgotha. Its bitterness is such that it poisons life at the very wellspring, making the purity of chastity or nuptial fidelity much harder to attain by couples as well as by society as a whole. It therefore also contributes to making the whole area of sexual love between the sexes and the friendship between the sexes fraught with tensions, conflicts and difficulties. Indeed, abortion is a toxin that has deadly effects on the attitudes men and women have towards each other and to children. Having placed themselves within the "circle" of death's anti-thesis, individuals and societies must "reap the whirlwind". Christopher West, in his commentary of the *Theology of the Body*, suggests that this anti-thesis has as its progenitor the anti-Word itself: "God's eternal plan for man as *symbolized* through the body is union, communion, marriage – this brings life. The deceiver's counter-plan for man as *diabolized* through the body is separation, fracture, divorce – this brings death... The body proclaims the Word. The spirit that denies this 'incarnational reality' is none other than that of the anti-Word (see 1 Jn 4:2-3)." [\[xliii\]](#)

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I am convinced that the treatment of the unborn in our society has a diabolic and thus supernatural element. This is because it goes so contrary to nature and to the common good that it cannot have a purely human origin – except in so far as human ideas have produced a culture that tends to separate mind, spirit and body. Descartes' legacy is indeed powerfully expressed in today's rationalistic worldview; but there is more at work here. For men and women to approve and actively promote the killing of the unborn, sometimes with a zeal and fervour that implies a deep almost religious, emotional and even spiritual commitment, one has to conclude that the values to which they are attached have no origin in the "Gospel of Life" but in the "Gospel of Death" – the creed of the anti-Christ who wishes to destroy Mary and her Son (cf. Rev. 12:4), to render impotent man's capacity for good and to establish once and for all the reign of death and evil upon earth.

Lest this seem an exaggeration, how is it that grown men and women sanction, fund and carry out the killing of unborn children as if it were a good – indeed a Great Good for individuals (especially women) and for society as a whole? [\[xliv\]](#) Not just occasionally, but on what has become an industrial scale with currently between 500 – 600 abortions carried out every day in the United Kingdom alone [\[xlv\]](#). Man's appropriation of death brings with it its own condemnation as it brings within the circle of the antithesis revealed to him also "the tree of knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2:17) – a tree that man simultaneously tries to appropriate for himself, casting its branches, leaves and roots in his own image. But in doing so he forgets that the tree of "the knowledge of good and evil" was not born nor created in or for the "circle of the antithesis", the world of sin and death. It has its roots in eternity and in the boundaries set by the Creator to the nature of good and evil. When man tries to usurp these, he surrenders the beauty of God's creation leaving it to decay and to the world of death [\[xlvi\]](#).

Conclusion: Fatherhood and the Civilisation of Love

This means that the protection of children in our time depends upon a willingness for men and women, but especially men and fathers, to live in the hope and perspective of Redemption. This is because “*Original sin attempts...to abolish fatherhood*, destroying its rays which permeate the created world, placing in doubt the truth about God who is Love.”^[xlvi] To do so is to rely upon Christ’s restorative power to enable and to cultivate within us and within the wider culture an adequate and authentic understanding of the human person and of good and evil, an understanding sufficient to bring about what John Paul II calls “a Civilisation of Love”.

To defeat the scourge of abortion in our midst, the debate needs shifting from arguments about “rights”, “choice” or even the personhood of the unborn child. Childhood itself needs rehabilitating from a debilitated understanding of man himself, a creature who has lost touch with the transcendent dimension of his existence. The ground upon which contemporary men and women walk and upon which they meet needs redefining so that future generations will begin to see the absurd and tragic destruction of unborn life as not just abhorrent, but unthinkable because created and called by eternal Love.

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References

[i] All references to the *Theology of the Body* are from the edition by Michael Waldstein in which each catechesis is referred to by number. See John Paul II *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston, MA: Pauline Books and Media, 2006). References are shortened to *TOB* for brevity.

[ii] Nearly 4 million children in the United Kingdom for example, now live in poverty, with 43% of these living in households headed by a lone parent^[ii]. Many of these children never eat meals together and, according to the UNESCO (2007) report *Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Well-being in Rich Countries*, 80% of British children have televisions in their bedrooms, more than have their biological fathers at home. The same report rated the United Kingdom the worst place to be a child out of 21 economically developed countries in the modern industrialized world. The United States of America was ranked bottom but one and on “family and peer relationships”, the UK and the USA remained at the bottom of the list.

[iii] Karol Wojtyła, “The Person: Subject and Community,” in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, ed. Teresa Sandok (New York, Peter Lang, 1993): 255-256. Originally published in 1976.

[iv] *Ibid.*, 256-257.

[v] Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (“God is Love”), 18. All Church documents are referred to by name and author only.

[vi] *Ibid.*, 18.

[vii] John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (“Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World”), 11.

[viii] *Ibid.*, 14.

[ix] Pope Benedict XVI, as Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger once pointed out that “the conclusions of science regarding the human embryo provide a valuable indication for discerning by the use of reason a personal presence at the moment of the first appearance of a human life: how could a

human individual not be a human person?" Only too clearly, the rejection of the humanity of the unborn is not just against nature, it is against reason. See "The Problem of Threats to Human Life," in *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI: His Central Writings and Speeches*, eds. John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 386. Originally published in the April 8, 1991, issue of *L'Osservatore Romano*.

[x] The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Bill passed its third reading in Parliament on 22nd October 2008 by 355 votes to 129. For more details see <http://www.spuc.org.uk/lobbying/hfe/> (accessed 27.10.08).

[xi] See Wojtyla, *The Person*, 220-222 and Karol Wojtyla, "Subjectivity and the Irreducible in the Human Being," in *Person and Community: Selected Essays*, ed. Teresa Sandok (New York, Peter Lang, 1993), 209-217. Originally published in 1988.

[xii] As John Paul reminds us earlier, the first chapter of Genesis provides us with an anthropology and ethics in which "*ens et bonum convertuntur*" – being and good are convertible (*TOB*, 2.5). So, from the moment of conception new being is accompanied by new goodness.

[xiii] Paul Vitz suggests how postmodern conceptions of the self, in attempting to 'construct' their own definitions assume the transcendence of the person despite remaining without ultimate coherence. "As human beings grow and change and become interpersonally and intellectually more mature, they recognize a process and a *trajectory of transcendence* in their own life. That is, they come to understand that they have over time transcended – moved beyond and above – their previous self-understanding...This experiences creates a deep longing of the human heart." See Paul Vitz, "The Embodied Self: Evidence from Cognitive Psychology and Neuropsychology," in *The Self: Beyond the Postmodern Crisis*, eds. Paul C. Vitz and Susan M. Felch (Wilmington, ISI Books, 2006), 127.

[xiv] John Paul II, *Gratissimam Sane* ("Letter to Families"), 9.

[xv] Karol Wojtyla, *Sign of Contradiction*, trans, Mary Smith (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1979), 16.

[xvi] I am thinking here especially of Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Towards a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981) and Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London: Duckworth, 1981).

[xvii] To live this way places the child under the sign of eschatological hope. As a *viator*, he or she is always on the way and thus is capable of living the Christian virtue of hope. For parents, of course, children in many respects embody some of their own hopes; the true story of hope, however, does not end with death as. See Gilbert C. Meilaender, *The Theory and Practice of Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 38ff.

[xviii] It could be argued, I would suggest, that encounter with authentic spirituality and religious culture is a human right denied to children by a specifically secular-humanist ideology that lives 'as if God did not exist'. Pope Benedict XVI (as Joseph Ratzinger) suggests that the rationalism characteristic of Enlightenment thought, of which secularism is a product, has no place for God and thus leads to the "mutilation of man" and "the self-destruction of freedom." See Joseph Ratzinger, *Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 40.

[xix] Karol Wojtyla, *Love and Responsibility* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 36.

[xx] *Ibid.*, 41.

[xxi] Elsewhere, John Paul II considers the importance of the "I-Thou" relationship to both subjectivity and human community. See, for example, Wojtyla, *The Person*, 240.

[xxii] This way of thinking very quickly leads to the assumption that the person is simply another animal without the qualification of the rational or the transcendent. Certain forms of neo-

Darwinism, for example, encourage this way of thinking about the person. If a person is just another animal, however, the justification for treating the person as one becomes obvious.

[[xxiii](#)] For example, unborn “babies react to stimuli in the same way as adults. If one presses a pin into the palm of an unborn child of only eight weeks’ gestation, the child will react by opening his or her mouth and moving the hand away.” See *A Way of Life: Affirming a Pro-life Culture in Northern Ireland*, a compendium of material about the unborn published by the Society for the Protection of Unborn Children in the UK: 5. Available at: <http://www.spuc.org.uk/ethics/wayoflife2.pdf> (accessed 29.11.08).

[[xxiv](#)] John Paul II, *Gratissimam Sane*, 7.

[[xxv](#)] See Pope Benedict XVI, “Truth and Freedom” in John F. Thornton, *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI*, 346. Originally published in *Communio* 23, no. 1 (Spring 1996).

[[xxvi](#)] St Augustine, *Letters*, No. 137. See John R. Willis, *The Teachings of the Church Fathers* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 360.

[[xxvii](#)] See for example <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jvanNDQhlyI> (accessed 7.5.09).

[[xxviii](#)] This kind of biologism has become commonplace in contemporary discourse about abortion, contraception and human sexuality. Yet in relation to the body and to the person it is at the root of the ‘contraceptive mentality’ that now aborts over 200,000 unborn children in a year. For a further analysis of the effects of biologism on an authentic anthropology of the person and in relation to the response to Paul VI’s *Humanae Vitae* see Walter F. Schu, *The Splendor of Love: John Paul II’s Vision for Marriage and Family* (New Hope Publications, 2003), 262 ff.

[[xxix](#)] Karol Wojtyla, *Sign*, 30.

[[xxx](#)] Pope Benedict XVI considers this logic more fully in his essay “The Problem of Threats to Human Life”. He finds two main reasons for this logic; first, the separation of “personal ethical convictions and the political sphere” and second the contemporary view of conscience wedded to and “individualistic view of freedom”. The first allows the law of force to be used against the most vulnerable in a society, the second to an absolutisation of a subjective view of good and evil, both of which tend to create a culture in which abuses of the human can flourish without impunity. See John F. Thornton, *The Essential Pope Benedict XVI*, 385-387.

[[xxxi](#)] John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 98. As *Gaudium et Spes* puts it “Man is more valuable for what he is than for what he had” (*GS*, 35).

[[xxxii](#)] As Wojtyla puts it elsewhere, “the experience of existing and acting is something that all human beings, both others and I, have in common; at the same time, all human beings, both others and I, are also the object of this experience.” See Karol Wojtyla, *The Person*, 221.

[[xxxiii](#)] John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 97.

[[xxxiv](#)] Latin for ‘child’.

[[xxxv](#)] Joseph Ratzinger, *God and the World: A Conversation with Peter Seewald*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002), 425.

[[xxxvi](#)] ‘Image’ simply because God ‘imaged’ – purposed, set forth – their development this way.

[[xxxvii](#)] See Ps. 139:16. This may be especially so if they have died through abortion and may be considered baptised, like the martyrs, by a baptism of blood.

[[xxxviii](#)] John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatis* (“On the Dignity and Vocation of Women”), 7.

[[xxxix](#)] John Paul II, *Gratissimam Sane*, 9.

[[xl](#)] *Gaudium et Spes*, 18. Cf. Eccl. 3:10.

[[xli](#)] I am referring here, especially, to the contemporary obsession with what is sometimes called

‘dark realism’ in new children’s fiction of whom Philip Pullman is one well-known representative.

[xlii] St Ambrose, quoted in John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 45.

[xliii] Christopher West, *Theology of the Body Explained: A Commentary on John Paul II's "Gospel of the Body"* (Leominster, Herts.: Gracewing, 2003), 21. As John Paul tells us “Sin and death have entered into man’s history *in some way through the very heart of that unity that had from the “beginning” been formed by man and woman*, created and called to become “one flesh” (Gen 2:24)” (*TOB*, 20:1).

[xliv] Plans to make abortion a “universal human right” for example, have been proposed by many radical pro-abortion groups such as The United Nations Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (1979; see <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/>) and Human Rights Watch (<http://www.hrw.org/>), (accessed 20.1.09).

[xlv] See <http://www.spuc.org.uk/ethics/abortion/>, (accessed 20.1.09).

[xlvi] Guardini comments on the consequences of man’s “claim to sovereignty by his own grace” at the Fall: “With this event, man’s fundamental relation to existence is destroyed. Now as before, he has power and is capable of ruling. But the order in which that sovereignty had meaning (as service answerable to him who is Sovereign by essence) is destroyed. Now dis-order reigns.” See Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*, (Wilmington: ISI Books, 1998), 138.

[xlvii] John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 228.