

Mike Tenney
Gender & Theology of the Body — 2024-02-01

Mike gave a thought-provoking talk on a sensitive and sometimes highly charged topic in this day and age. He emphasized the need to address this topic with love.

CHILDREN OF GOD — Mike shared that he has some personal experience with transgenderism, as his freshman college roommate later transitioned. Mike expressed the importance of looking beyond the inflammatory headlines of media personalities engaged with woke corporations to promote gender caricatures (think Bud Lite) and other media saying there are evil people out there trying to corrupt our children via drag queen story hour, for example. Beyond these provocative stories, most transgender individuals are truly struggling, and for them, their preferences are a huge cross. They are real people with real crosses. Cultural portraits of how we are supposed to be can confuse all of us, from super models to macho, buff men, we can all struggle with who we are, as opposed to who the culture tells us to be. We can all feel inadequate in our own bodies at times. Some women do not feel very feminine, some men do not feel particularly masculine, so in some way most of us struggle with a sense of not fitting in, of not conforming to the cultural norms. Who are we? First and foremost, we are children of God; our identity is rooted in being daughters (and sons) of God. He sees us, He knows us, He loves us, all of us.

ON SEX & GENDER — Watermelons have sex! There are male and female flowers, and both are needed to produce watermelons. There are some organisms like single cell amoebas that reproduce asexually, without the need for a complementary organism. God chose us to have different sexes. In order to reproduce, we need a man and a woman, one that fertilizes, and one that is fertilized. A male body cannot reproduce on its own, nor can a female body. Something is missing in each sex, so that it takes two of the species to reproduce. The word "sex" actually means "to cut," "to be cut in half;" it refers to an incomplete system.

The word gender originally, and for most of human history, was used to describe language. Although not in English, in many foreign languages (including Spanish, French, Italian, German), nouns are "assigned" a gender. So the Spanish word for day is masculine, the word for chair is feminine. In the 1950s and 60s, a study with some people born with ambiguous genitalia "assigned" them to one or the other sex, in the belief that male and female is basically social conditioning. Over time, the idea of gender has moved from language (which IS something that can just be assigned), and has been applied to human beings. This is an ideology, a philosophy that sees our bodies as detached from our souls. There is a long history and many philosophies that see the soul and the body as separate, that the soul simply inhabits a body. We are not our body, we are our souls. We are our spiritual selves and not our physical selves. Our physical selves are cages we inhabit, but they are not us. Christianity does not teach this idea. We are our body. In the beginning, Adam was fashioned by God out of clay; and He breathed the spirit into him so he is body and soul. We are a composite of body and soul, and they are uniquely connected in each one of us. The sacraments have both spiritual and physical aspects to them. When Jesus comes back from the dead, He is not a ghost, a spirit, but a body and soul. We say in the creed that our bodies will be resurrected, and reunited with our souls, as we are meant to be for eternity.

There is a secular ideology about gender that comes from the idea of body and soul as detached that is not all bad. Those who believe in this ideology are rejecting something that is untrue, namely they reject the cultural stereotypes of what it means to be a man or a woman, and the notion that when we do not conform to these stereotypes, we are somehow "bad" representatives of our sex. This idea is a truth that we as Catholics and Christians can agree with. Take for example Mike's roommate who did not want to be a male stereotype, and so "he" decided to be a woman. Our society often reinforces stereotypes. Think of gender non-conforming roles such as stay at home dads, working women as primary income source in a family. The Church rejects the notion of cultural stereotypes, and always has. Jesus broke the social taboos of His time about gender roles for men and women. For example, He revealed His resurrection to a woman. We need to be very careful not to see cultural stereotypes as if they were Church teaching. Modern gender ideology is right to reject "fake" stereotypes of male/female.

CATHOLIC GENDER IDEOLOGY — Catholic gender ideology is something called "Theology of the Body," a term coined by Pope St. John Paul II. Even prior to becoming Pope, he studied and wrote about marriage, family and sexuality. And he continued to discuss these topics in his Wednesday audiences as Pope. His Theology of the Body informed many of his encyclicals as well. Theology of the Body has taken Church teaching and made it talk to the ideas of the sexual revolution. The Theology of the Body, our Catholic

understanding of gender, focuses on the book of Genesis — the fact that we are sexual creatures reflects something of God. We are made in the image and likeness of God, and we are told to be fruitful and multiply. Interestingly, in the original Hebrew, God created "mankind" first. And it is not until woman is created, that we refer to "man" (vs. "mankind"). It is not as though man was created first, than woman. God created mankind, saw that it was not good for him to be alone and so created male and female from that mankind, and so He created sexuality.

IMAGE OF GOD — To say we are created in the image of God, is to say, that in some way we are similar to the Trinity — where God the Father and God the Son, through their eternal exchange of love manifest the Holy Spirit. Man and woman reflect this triune Love of God, and create a child. We call God the Creator, and we call God the Savior. We can create (procreative aspect of sexuality/marriage). Jesus communed with us. He became human and united the divine and the human in one person. What can we do through sex? We can unite, we can commune with one another in love. So sex allows us to do two things that God does — we can create and we can commune. We can bring new life and we can bring new love. It is written into our bodies through sexuality that we are made in the image of God. Our bodies are the way we experience the world through our five senses.

LIKENESS OF GOD — But we are not just made in the image of God. According to the Church Fathers, the likeness of God is more an emphasis on our spirit, our soul. Our soul is the part of us that is NOT physical. It is real, but cannot be perceived by the five senses. In his beautiful Suscipe Prayer, St. Ignatius refers to the various aspects of the soul, and gives them all back to God. These aspects are liberty, freedom, memory, understanding, intellect and imagination, will. But what is a masculine will versus a feminine will? What is man's freedom versus woman's freedom? It is not as clear cut as body differences. There is much more varied teaching on the soul, about differences of male/female. We tend to think, in general, of a man as initiating, and a woman as receiving. Yet we are called by Church teaching to be both masculine and feminine. Every baptized Christian is called to be a priest, prophet, and king. In a similar way, everyone is called to be feminine before God as the Church is the Bride of Christ. We are to be receptive towards God. It is healthy in both psychology and theology to be wrestling with feminine and masculine parts of our personality. God created it to be so. The soul has much greater freedom and variety than the body.

SECULAR IDEOLOGY VS CHURCH TEACHING — Secular ideology states that identity is "assigned" at birth, but we can later "discover" it to be something else. The Church would use different language to describe this process of maturing. Our identity is not assigned, and then we do not discover if it is right or not. The Church teaches that identity is a gift, our body is a gift, our sexuality and gender is a gift. It is a gift to be a woman. And then we "discern" how we are going to be a woman in the world. We can live out our feminine vocations, not according to stereotypes, but as something to discern in each one of us. This does not question our masculinity/femininity. Catholic teaching tells us we are NOT just a physical body, (think Joan of Arc, think Francis of Assisi, both not gender conforming saints). God has made us non-conforming in our souls, and there is great variation within our souls. Our vocation may not look like the stereotype, sometimes it breaks the mold, goes against the norm. God may be calling us to break these norms, to go against what people expect, and that can be the holiest thing God is calling us to do.

We are not just a spiritual soul; our body is a real part of us. We cannot just follow whatever we "feel" like. What we feel does not define who we are. We need to reconcile body and soul. We do not want to beat the tomboy out of a girl, or the sensitive out of a boy. We need to nurture who they are and who God is calling them to be. And we need to recognize how God is calling each of us to live out our masculine/feminine vocation.

RADICAL PROPHETIC MERCY — We need to love with radical, prophetic mercy. Think of the example of Jesus — He meets with love first, which then leads to conversion. Think of the Roman centurion, the woman by the well, the tax collector in the tree, the woman who washed Jesus' feet with her hair. Compassion is always first, then conversion can happen. We need to think of the people in our lives — who is in need of conversion in our lives? We need to draw closer, not to step away, though we may want to do so. Follow the example of Jesus. These are the people who need us most.

While drawing close to those who are on the outside may be seen as scandalous, we are in good company. Many saw Jesus' behavior as scandalous when He approached sinners. It is always about compassion and love and mercy. In Jesus we have our role model of how to be.