

One of the most common things that humans have dealt with over the years has been a mistreatment of the human body; and as such this has led to the victimization of so many people, but couple with that also so many people feeling like outsiders, much like the woman at the well in John's Gospel. However, what if we were to rediscover how important it is to treat the body with respect? To look at the body like Peter, James and John look at the glorified body of Jesus, which is reflective of our own glorified body in heaven? Perhaps what we might find is a much better world to live in.

Josephine Butler, who lived in Victorian England in the 19th century, decided to do just that and apply her faith to being a champion for the dignity of the human person. Specifically she fought hard against human trafficking of young women and children and children being abused for their bodies; something that tragically is a very serious problem today as well.

In one report of her, people remarked what a strange sight it was to see her. She was a well-dressed and respectable woman, who would be seen standing outside a brothel. She was beautiful, but her clothing marked her not as a woman who worked there, but as the middle-class

Victorian mother she was. In one story of her while she was in France, she had recently confronted the Paris police over their abusive treatment of women working in the so called oldest profession under their legal control. The chief officer wasn't convinced by her arguments but was charmed by the woman in front of him. This wasn't surprising as all who met her felt her impact. She left with written permission to view the many government-controlled brothels that were operated at the time, which she did, to make a statement that this was immoral and wrong and was victimizing people.

So Josephine Butler stood, poised to enter it, a place where no well-bred Victorian woman dared to go. With a glance toward her guide, she took the brave step forward. She knew what she saw. "Hell hath opened her mouth," she would write. "I stand in the near presence of the powers of evil. What I see and hear are the smoke of the pit," as she saw the horrible conditions women, many of them quite young, were in.

A well-educated and cultured woman with a husband and children, her decision to not only enter these places but to advocate for the women there was shocking to society. She viewed her war as a "consecrated rebellion."

Born in England in 1828, just in time for the Victorian era, Josephine Butler appalled the world by speaking about unspeakable topics. Victorians believed in separate spheres for men and women: Women were to care for the home and children, and men were for the public sphere. Yet she not only entered into public politics, but worse, she was speaking about uncomfortable realities such as what women who entered this trade of victimization endured, and the abuse of children because of this, and more.

It stemmed from her values. These principles led her to visit brothels and jails. They are the reason she would face down thugs, public ridicule, and slander—persevering even when mud was thrown at her in the streets. Her strength, fearlessness, and morals came from a deep Christian faith.

She grew up in a comfortable and deeply religious family. Her father, John Grey, was a public advocate for the abolition of slavery. Josephine married George Butler, a scholar and clergyman, who also treated her as an equal, fully supporting her campaigns. Her work forced her to speak against the mindset and actions common to men of her time. She would later say, “It seems strange that I should have been engaged in taking up the cudgel against men when my father, brothers, husband and sons have all been so

good.” Perhaps it was her knowledge that men could treat women with respect that spurred her desire for change.

More importantly, Butler based her actions on Jesus himself. In his tender and respectful attitudes toward women, she saw a different way to view womanhood and redemption. When confronting the idea that there were women “not worth saving,” she wrote that such an opinion was “heathenism,” and that “this judgment can only be seen in its true colors by setting it side by side with the example and character of Christ. ... Were any beings in human shape not worth saving in his estimation?” She was able to stand firm against a roar of opposition because her actions were rooted deeply in her faith in Christ and the redemptive worth he offered every person.

As a young wife, her husband worked at Oxford. Here she became aware of how deeply the double standards for men and women were ingrained. A respected Oxford teacher seduced and had an affair with a “very young girl.” Left destitute and in a desperate situation, the girl took the life of her newborn and was put in jail. Butler was enraged.

With insight far ahead of her time, she recognized that the professor, an older man with power, connections, and authority, had taken advantage of the girl in every way. The girl's crime was undeniable, but Butler understood that it was a crime of desperation. She was angered that the girl was punished while the man who created the situation retained public respect and faced no consequences. Once the girl had completed her jail time, the Butlers hired her as a servant, rescuing her from a dark future.

Josephine's life might have continued with occasional, though significant acts of kindness, but the course of her life was changed when her daughter tragically died after falling off of a banister while playing with her brothers. She wanted to help others more deeply. This path quickly brought her to women considered scum and subhuman. She soon understood how painful their lives were and how desperate many were for help. She responded with compassion and treated them with respect. She invited many to live with her—a surprising venture for a woman with teenage sons. She began opening up small hospitals for those who were seriously ill, and homes to house them while they learned skills to use in a new career. Later she would help rescue women who were tricked into using their bodies for money.

In entering their world, she was also forced to face laws that undermined the freedom and rights of women. Police, under the Contagious Diseases Acts (CD Acts), were rounding up women who worked in the trade and making them sign a register forever publicly linking them to that work. This made leaving that life almost impossible. Even worse, they were forced to endure regular painful examinations and treatments. Those found ill were jailed until they were deemed cured.

The women shared horrific stories. Butler recognized that the CD Acts violated the constitution of England and treated women unequally, since men who used prostitutes would never be treated in the same way. Her long campaign to repeal the CD Acts began and took many years, but was successful. She reminded reluctant politicians how Jesus had said that “publicans and harlots enter the kingdom of heaven before you,” and she pushed back on the idea that having physical relations with these women wouldn’t hurt future marriages of men who did this and that it should be legal. Her work even uncovered more horrible abuse, as consent at the time was just 13 years of age, and there were no laws to protect young women from being lured away to other countries under false pretenses,

only to find themselves enslaved. She called it “white slavery” and started calling for political change.

Again, some politicians’ opinions reflected common views at the time.

Butler boldly spoke against such attitudes, calling out politicians to face their hypocrisy. She once pithily called upon MPs opposing change to each “contribute a daughter” if this was acceptable to them; Her comment was met with “tremendous cheering” at the conference she was speaking at.

She persevered, because she knew if Jesus was on her side that was all she needed. She was a whirl of activity despite ongoing health issues. She would speak to crowds, meet with political leaders, church leaders, and society ladies. She wrote pamphlets, using emotional appeals through retelling horrible stories of injustice or using cool logic to refute arguments against her. She would spend hours every day writing letters to friends and supporters, as well as those who still needed to be convinced of the worth of the cause.

In the end, her influence was vast; the CD Acts were finally repealed, the age of consent was raised to 16, and laws were put into place to protect English girls from being kidnapped for their bodies. She was influential in advocating for women’s education and the right to the vote, and she

confronted harmful social norms of her time. Her fingerprints are to be found all over the social change that happened during her lifetime.

Josephine Butler was called “the most distinguished Englishwoman of the nineteenth century.” Her work put into motion change that was needed. And I’d contend this change is needed now more than ever.

During August, we have two major feasts: the Transfiguration and the Assumption which is August 15th. And in both of these feasts, there is a emphasis on the sacredness of the body. In the Transfiguration we see the divinity of Jesus manifested in the radiance of His body, not the escape from it, and the Assumption shows us that He came to save us completely and not just spiritually: Mary is assumed body and soul into heaven.

How then can we foster a sacredness of the body, both for ourselves and for others as we strive to evangelize, in particular children?

I think as a starting point, we must remember the dignity of the human person. C.S. Lewis gave a sermon, “Weight of Glory,” and at the end he said: ***“There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere***

mortal....Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbour is the holiest object presented to your senses. If he is your Christian neighbour he is holy in almost the same way, for in him also Christ the glorifier and the glorified, Glory Himself, is truly hidden.” We may

sense God in the Eucharist; or show respect if the pope were to walk in.

But it’s so important to remember that every person is created in the image and likeness of God; Saint John Paul II called this the “personalistic norm.”

When we think this way, we can begin to think about how we look at

someone on the computer or TV; how we look at the person working in

different industries; how we look at someone of a different race or culture or

who looks different from us. Because it’s so easy for body and soul to be

separated by us as humans; to rank people based on what they can do or

how they look; or to objectify. The response of the Christian must be a true

love of neighbor, and we need to challenge ourselves on this in how we live

it out.

Second, we need to be aware of what objectification of the body is doing in

our world today. There is human trafficking, which impacts millions of

children and women around the world; the film “Sound of Freedom,” which

I’ve heard good things about from priests and bishops has helped shine a

light on this horrible situation. But more common is what happens in homes. Certainly there is abuse that goes on; far more than what even happened in churches. When we are aware of anything abusive or even suspect it, we need to report it immediately to help the victim. If there is something in the past, it needs to be talked about too, not treated with silence. But so often in homes, kids are exposed to things parents aren't aware of. For instance, a recent analysis of 50 of the most popular internet videos found that most scenes had verbal and physical abuse. And experts estimate that in the US, the average age at which boys begin to have access to explicit internet material is 11. It's also easy for kids to stumble upon things doing an internet search. There's also the issue of use of phones and material kids shouldn't be sending; a recent study showed 1 in 7 teens sent texts and 1 in 4 received texts that had images objectifying the body. And what research shows is this changes the mind; girls report feeling physically inferior; it leads to higher risk behaviors; and it causes a person to look at another person more for their body than their soul. These are real problems, and of course they apply to adults too. The more a person abuses the body, the more they are going to objectify people. It changes the mind so a person becomes numb to it at best; or at worst treats people differently. It's not just a "private" sin; in reality the technology

has changed from Josephine Butler's era to our own, but the problem remains, and we can't put it out of sight, out of mind, or think that it's something minor.

So what then are we to do? The answer is to have hope and to be hope.

A good starting point here is mercy. With respect to ourselves, sins of the flesh are among the most common things people confess. And they sometimes can entail embarrassment or shame. But it's important to remember Jesus so often meets people who battle these things like the woman at the well, or the woman caught in adultery. David fell into the sin too, but was redeemed and still a great king. So rather than hiding these things, we turn to God for help. We confess them. As my moral theology professor reminded us, sins of the intellect are greater than sins of the flesh; for so often sins of the flesh entail stress or passion or one thing leading to another or a person making a bad choice because they are in a bad relationship or a low point in a marriage. People are human, and these sins are so common it's important not to wallow in shame. In fact Dante, the great author of "The Divine Comedy" placed lust at the top of the mountain as the last thing to be overcome before a person went to heaven,

for he was aware of this in himself too. But we have to be honest with ourselves of what we are battling. We also have to remember that you can notice beauty; you will have temptations that come and go; this is normal. But putting those urges into actively acting out is where sin enters the picture. We confess and seek mercy but we also have an action plan when we have temptation and try to deal with it in a healthy way. So we confront it with God's mercy by bringing it out into the light and out of the darkness of shame.

We also give people hope. These topics are so often taboo. But hopefully when someone battles sins of the flesh or any sin for that matter, we can look to someone to talk to who may have good advice; or who will listen to us and not judge us. This also goes for kids too; every parent knows about "the talk" but it's important for parents to know whats on the computer, whats on the cell phone, who their kids talk to, whats going on in their lives, and if they are battling something like this or under pressure as they start to date to know that their parents are there to guide them and help them. Be aware too of what's in your home and what your kids see, for they can learn things from parents or older siblings.

I think also it's so important to build up marriage by respecting one another. A person might look at something and think it's not a big deal; but it is cheating on one's spouse. A spouse looks to their partner and has a unique bond there; and remembering that by say looking at a wedding ring or photo of your spouse if there is temptation can help a person remember that.

Lastly, I think its so important to build up a respect for the body from womb to tomb. We talk a lot about protecting the unborn; and society may say hey don't tell someone what to do with their body, but there's a second body there, and if you don't believe me, look at the photos of the development of the unborn child. As kids grow, we can teach them modesty in dress, and of how they look at others. We can help people who are homeless or needy by volunteering. You can visit loved ones who maybe elderly or in assisted living homes, whose bodies have grown weak by giving them love and comfort. And we can visit a cemetery where we venerate the earthly remains of our loved ones.

At every funeral Mass I celebrate, I use incense and will venerate the body by bowing to the casket or urn. The incense is used to symbolize our

prayers for this person going to God, but also you use incense for what is sacred. And each one of us, created in God's image, is sacred to Him. Each one of us is loved by Him. May we take heart in that, knowing that God knows we have struggles but invites us to change for the better, to journey with Him up the mountain. But with Him, we also have a job to do; to go back down that mountain to confront evil as they will do. May we go back down that mountain with Jesus, and see holiness in everyone, body and soul, and strive to help ourselves and one another re-discover the sacredness of the body. It won't be easy, for the devil is working hard to convince the world that what is abnormal is normal and sin hurts no one. But we know better. It destroys us, it destroys lives, and it makes us miserable. Jesus invites us to look higher, so with Him, let us set ourselves and one another free.