ABSTRACT

This dissertation assesses the relevance and significance of Norris Clarke’s existential Thomism to critiques of John Paul II’s theology of the body. This work argues that using existential Thomism as a basis for Catholic metaphysics opens the door for an existential theology of the sexed body, a theology of the individual on a unique spiritual journey towards union with God which amends, expands, and nuances the existing theology of the body developed by John Paul II.

Chapter One situates my thesis within its historical context by tracing philosophical and theological developments which inform the current status of embodied sexual difference in theology, with special attention to the essentialism/existentialism dichotomy. I then delineate some problems with existing approaches to the sexed body and propose Zygmunt Bauman’s theory of “liquid modernity” as a way to parse these problematic approaches.

Chapter Two focuses on the work of John Paul II, whose theology of the body details the theological meaning of the sexed body. After describing its method and content, I draw out a major liability in his thought: psychological complementarity. This is balanced against the usefulness of his broader proposition of ecstatic Thomism as a framework for understanding the sexed body for theology.

Chapter Three shows how the balance between essence and existence must be grounded in the realism championed by Norris Clarke’s metaphysics. My discussion of existential Thomism argues that the soul is joined to the body in such a way that the self expressed in action is limited by the body with which God has commensurated it. In other words, there is no other self but the one revealed and communicated to oneself and others through the sexed body. I
conclude by demonstrating that John Paul II’s thinking on psychological complementarity is untenable in light of existential Thomism while his view of the body as ecstatic is enhanced by it.

In light of John Paul II's positive contributions, and existential Thomism’s ability to offer a necessary intervention to respond to his shortcomings, Chapter Four argues that living well in one's sexed body demands life-long discernment, contemplative practice and asceticism. The final movement in this project will propose a set of practices for embarking on a spiritual appropriation of one’s sexed body through lived experience in concert with God’s vocational call, ending with a case study of the way millennial Catholics link their sexed bodies with their prayer practices.