



My body given
up for you

A REFLECTION ON MOTHERHOOD, THE CONCEPT OF *IMAGO DEI* AND FLEETING BEAUTY STANDARDS

For centuries, women have been held to exacting, and often extreme, standards of beauty that are ever-changing depending on what's in vogue. Over time, these expectations become quietly internalized, shaping not only how we present ourselves, but how we perceive our own worth.

Motherhood, specifically carrying and birthing a child, has required me to see my body in an entirely new light. Never before had Christ's words to His disciples been made more real: "This is my body, given up for you" (*Lk 22:19*).

As my body stretched and grew, as I wrestled with sickness and fatigue that made even simple movements feel challenging, as the number on the scale ticked upwards, something subtly began to shift.

And afterward, in the slower, quieter work of recovery — facing stretch marks, new jeans sizes, weight that fell off more

slowly than anticipated, learning to nourish my body so that I could nourish another, eventually a scar that stretched across my lower abdomen that made any notion of "bouncing" back feel distant at best and times where I would surrender to the couch after a day of chasing little children instead of white-knuckling my way through a workout — a healing of body image began to take place.

No longer was the body something to be perpetually disciplined, refined, improved and controlled. No longer was the body merely an abstract concept that, with enough

effort, could be conformed to the latest, fleeting beauty standard — the "ideal body" ever just out of reach.

It has become something far more real, far more important, something to be honored, a vessel for another life, something given, something lived in, love poured out. My body needs to be cared for, yes — it needs to be nourished and strengthened.

As St. Paul writes, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?" (*1 Cor 6:19*). But it is not meant to be reimagined, reinvented or worshipped.

Somehow, motherhood, and the steady confrontation of my own limitations, have opened the doorway to honoring my body, for perceiving within it the *Imago Dei* or image of God — we are all masterpieces of God's creation.

Perhaps, this shift has come, in part, from gazing upon the

faces of my two daughters, and now my son, and feeling an urgent desire for true freedom.

Freedom for them to be free of a regime that quietly strips away the beautiful thumbprint of their Creator.

Freedom from the lie that tells them to erase the marks of a well-lived life — the lines of laughter I pray will eventually find their way into the corners of their eyes, the creases in their forehead that are born of deep thought from their beautiful brains or the furrows shaped from worrying over a loved one because their hearts were stretched open.

Freedom from the noise that insists their worth is found in appearance, in perfection, in alterations and customizations.

This struggle is not merely personal; it is cultural. In a recent Vatican document, approved by Pope Leo XIV, the International Theological Commission reflects on Christian anthropology, human dignity and the meaning of the body in the face of contemporary cultural challenges.

It observes a "widespread 'cult of the body'" marked by a "frantic search for a perfect figure that is always fit, young and beautiful."

The Commission highlights a curious tension: "the ideal body is exalted, sought after and cultivated, while the real body is not truly loved, being a source of limitations, fatigue and ageing. One desires a perfect body, while

dreaming of escaping from one's own concrete body and its limitations."

Centuries ago, St. Catherine of Siena spoke directly to this impulse: "What is it you want to change? Your hair, your face, your body? Why? For God is in love with all those things and He might weep when they are gone."

In another letter, she writes, "We've been deceived by the thought that we would be more pleasing to God in our own way than in the way God has given us."

This great saint and doctor of the Church challenges the belief that we should endlessly improve upon what we have been given. The truth is, we are the clay in the potter's hands; we are not the sculptor.

Seen in this light, the fixation on beauty standards begins to feel remarkably thin. The saints are not remembered for their physical appearance, what size they wore or how they presented themselves. They are remembered for something far deeper: their courage, their mercy, their capacity to love and the way they suffered well.

We look to them centuries later because they became icons of the face of Christ to the world. That is the beauty that endures.

Recently, my 2-year-old pushed her hands into my stomach, "It's squishy," she exclaimed delightedly, as she crawled into my lap and fell asleep.

To her, my stomach was not an aesthetic problem to be solved. I was her place of rest. I was the embodiment of love. And through her eyes, I was able to see that softness was not necessarily a failure.

Christ's body was not marked by worldly beauty — "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him" (*Is 53:2*) — yet it became the instrument of salvation.

The body finds its deepest purpose not in how it appears, but in how it is given. When God created you, He created you in His image and declared you good.

May we learn to love our bodies for the gift they are and honor our Creator by living fully, offering ourselves in love and seeing in our own flesh His divine handiwork. ■



FOOD FOR THOUGHT OR JOURNALING

What marks, lines or changes in my body tell the story of my life, my love and my endurance?

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