Ceremony Presentation

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Your Eminence, President, and all dignitaries and participants: thank you for your presence here, a presence that testifies to the importance of promoting a proper understanding of human reason.

I am honored to be awarded for my book *Body and Identity*, which appeared in August from the University of Notre Dame Press. In that book, I attempted an open yet critical reception of insights from sociology, biology, psychology, history, neuroscience, and literature, as well as recent continental philosophy and cultural studies, to create an interdisciplinary treatment of the question of embodied identity. I attempt to show that the deepest questions we ask, even in the secular developed world, are poorly answered by secular theories themselves.

Such questions demand the careful elucidations provided by an open reasonand theological truth. *Body and Identity* is the first one-volume comprehensive history of identity, drawing from a wide variety of disciplines, including biology, sociology, psychology, history, and literature, with philosophy and theology functioning as the lens through which these disciplines’ results are assessed.

Previous secondary works have tended to be closed to the significance of theological developments for identity. While dedicating considerable space to ancient voices, *Body and Identity* insists on the importance of Christianity for modern identity, both in advancing important questions concerning *hypostasis*, person, and nature, as well as making of penultimate importance the role of social, familial, and political structures for forming identity. For Christianity, seen most clearly in Paul, such structures remain good and important but subordinate to God’s call to the individual.

This “liquifying” reality of the God-given mission to the person and the relativization of social structures is an inheritance that modernity receives in a complicated way. Modernity accelerates and absolutizes the liquification of structures, even philosophical ones such as Aristotelian substance and human nature, in the name of freedom. (The modern thinkers examined in depth on this question are Locke, Rousseau, Kant, and Hegel.) But modernity also promotes a secularism that dogmatically closes off the world from the transcendent and seeks all that it needs in the immanent domain. This secularism jettisons the identity-content contained in God’s call to the person, while simultaneously liquidating the philosophical and social structures that had provided identity-content in antiquity. Further, identity comes to be a matter of self-creation—a process that is not guaranteed of success. Identity is now an anxiety-producing aporia.

This volume points to a theological solution to the identity question, a solution I will develop more in a future book. I argue, using Hans Urs von Balthasar, that our identity is rooted in the individual, divine idea God has of each person, which is lived out in time as a mission. He writes, “For each Christian, God has an idea which fixes his or her place within the membership of the Church, and this idea is unique and personal, embodying for each his or her appropriate sanctity. … The Christian’s supreme aim is to transform his life into this Idea of himself secreted in God, this ‘individual law’ freely promulgated for him by the pure grace of God.” By making a case for the lacunae in contemporary understandings of identity, this book prepares the way for a fuller appreciation of the mystery of the human person as grasped in Christian philosophy and theology.

In this Christian understanding, we are not passing epiphenomena, mere neural firings, or spirits trapped in bodies. Neither are we the empty selves praised by the post-moderns, in which we are not the foundation of our speaking and acting but rather their end-result. A truly open reason sees the human person’s simultaneous interiority and transcendence of self out into the world and toward other persons, and such a reason judges these realities to be revelatory of a deeper purpose. This purpose is expressed eternally and divinely in God’s idea of each of one of us, an idea to which we are called to grow ever closer. This asymptotic approach to the idea of God for each person is the drama of human identity lived out in history within the communion of the Church.

I am honored to be recognized for my work by the Joseph Ratzinger—Benedict XVI Foundation and by the Universidad Francisco de Vitoria. Ratzinger’s thought was instrumental to my own formation and my pursuit of these questions, and I am deeply grateful to be associated with his work. I hope that my book will assist readers in opening their reason to the full reality of the human person, and I ask for your prayers. Thank you.