

Disabilities as a Gift and Grace in Family Life: Transforming The Parent–Child Relationship Through John Paul II's Theology of The Body

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Abstract

Families raising children with disabilities often experience profound relational, emotional, and existential challenges that reshape everyday life. Within these complex dynamics, the parent–child relationship becomes a privileged locus for encountering vulnerability, gift, and mutual transformation. This study aims to explore how the embodied experiences of parents and children with disabilities can be understood and renewed through John Paul II's Theology of the Body, particularly his insights on embodiment, gift, and relationality. Employing a qualitative phenomenological approach, this research gathers and analyses in-depth interviews with parents of children with disabilities to uncover the lived meanings embedded in their daily interactions. The analysis is guided by the theological framework of the Theology of the Body, complemented by Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of the Other and relational perspectives within contemporary pastoral theology. The findings reveal that parents experience their child's body not as a limitation but as an embodied gift that calls forth deeper empathy, self-giving love, and a renewed sense of human dignity. The child's vulnerability becomes a place of grace that transforms parental identity, spirituality, and the understanding of relational reciprocity. Moreover, the study highlights how embodied encounters foster resilience, reshape family practices, and open new horizons for pastoral accompaniment. In conclusion, the integration of phenomenological insights and theological anthropology demonstrates that disability, when viewed through the lens of the Theology of the Body, becomes a transformative pathway of grace that reconfigures the parent–child relationship and enriches the wider pastoral and theological discourse on embodiment.

Keywords: *Disability theology; Embodiment; John Paul II; human dignity; Theology of the Body; Parent-child relationships*

INTRODUCTION

The empirical condition of families raising children with disabilities experience difficult experiences such as social stigma, community isolation and continuous emotional burdens (Hur, 2017). On the one hand, there is low support from religious environments and social services (Annandale, 2015). The results of the study show the psychological, social, and spiritual unpreparedness of parents when faced with intensive changes in parental roles. This dimension is often marginalized in the formal pastoral discourse of the Church today (Sande, 2019). On the one hand, the study of pastoral theology is still not systematically structured to respond to the embodied dimension of the experience of disability, namely how the vulnerable body represents existential and relational meaning because the Church's pastoral work is often focused on charitable actions instead of the development of a transformative relational paradigm (Creamer, 2009). Therefore, there is a significant gap between the lived experiences of families with disabilities and the theological/pastoral reflections available, which demand conceptual and empirical interventions to bridge theory and practice.

Normatively, the proposed theological construction affirms that the body of a child with a disability must be understood as a gift a reality that opens up the possibility of a revelation of dignity and a relationship of giving to each other rather than just a deficiency that must be "corrected" (Yohanes Paulus II, 1997, 2006). This perspective affirms the parent child relationship as a sacramental and ethical locus in which love, grace, and respect for alterity are

concretely manifested (Masters, 2016); an ideal pastoral paradigm that prioritizes appreciation for the body, presence, and ethical response to the face of the Other (Alvi, 2020; Levinas, 1991). Body Theology, when read in terms of disability issues, provides an anthropological foundation for moving pastoral practices from passive empathy to relational practices that affirm the dignity and agency of persons with disabilities (Wall, 2017). Within this ideal framework, the church and theology should provide conceptual categories and pastoral programs that respond to the embodied experience of the family with an inclusive and transformative perspective (Zadeh & Souri, 2023), so that the stigma and normative constructions that perpetuate marginalization can be challenged.

This research integrates aspects of disability studies, John Paul II's theology of the body, and relational ethics so as to make significant theoretical and empirical contributions (Smith, 2011). Examining the aspect of disability studies, this study enriches the discourse by including the theological and phenomenological dimensions of the body that are often overlooked in socio-cultural analysis (Creamer, 2009, 2012). Meanwhile, from the side of Catholic theology, this research opens the path of expansion of Body Theology to the realm of family disabilities; an area that empirically and conceptually is still relatively limited in the official literature (Windley-Daoust, 2014, 2016). Methodologically, a phenomenological-qualitative approach that places parental narratives as a source of data introduces an interdisciplinary model that can be replicated in other pastoral studies (Grgic, 2024; Barfield, 2024). Finally, the practical implications include providing a conceptual basis for the development of more inclusive pastoral mentoring programs and ecclesiastical policies, so that the church's ministry moves from mere assistance to the building of relationships that respect the dignity, grace, and transformative potential of the body.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a phenomenological design (J. Cresswell, 2007, p. 10). The qualitative approach was chosen because this study aims to understand life experiences and relational meanings experienced by parents and children with disabilities in daily life. Qualitative research allows researchers to explore empirical reality in depth and contextual, especially related to the experience of parent-child relationships that cannot be reduced to statistical data.

The phenomenological approach is used to examine subjective experiences as experienced and interpreted by the research subjects. Phenomenology is understood as an attempt to describe relational phenomena from the perspective of parents and children with disabilities in the world of their daily lives (Ceswell, 1991). With this approach, the researcher seeks to understand how these relationships are lived embodied, affective, and existential, without diminishing or adding meaning beyond the experiences expressed by the informant. This phenomenological analysis is enriched by the paradigm of relational philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, especially the concept of face and ethical responsibility towards *the Other*, the relational thought of F. X. Armada Riyanto which places relations as the center of human existence (Riyanto, 2017).

Data collection was carried out through semi-structured in-depth interviews. This technique was chosen because it allows for an open and reflective dialogue between researchers and informants, while maintaining the focus of the discussion in accordance with the research objectives. The research informants numbered ten people, consisting of six Catholic parents who had children with disabilities and four children with disabilities. The selection of informants is carried out purposively by considering their ability to provide experiences, views, and meanings that are relevant to the focus of the research.

This research was carried out in Malang City. The selection of the research location was based on consideration of the affordability of the researcher and the existence of communities

and associations of parents of children with disabilities that support the data collection process in a contextual manner. The interview data was recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using qualitative coding techniques following the stages developed by Saldaña, starting from reading the data, giving initial labeling, grouping themes, to drawing meaning and thematic interpretation. In the entire research process, the researcher acts as the main instrument with direct and reflective involvement in data collection and analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section outlines the findings of the research and discusses them in the light of John Paul II's Body Theology. The main focus of the discussion was the transformation of the relationship between parents and children with disabilities, how Body Theology reframes the understanding of disability, and its implications for pastoral care, moral theology, and family ministry. The discussion is structured narratively by placing the family's empirical experience as the starting point for theological reflection. The conceptual framework of gift of self, *nuptial meaning* of the body, and human *dignity* is used as an interpretive lens to read interview data.

Table of research results based on phenomenological analysis

Main Themes	Subthemes (Coding Results)	Informant Experience Footage (Verbatim)	Phenomenological Meaning	Theological Interpretation (Theology of the Body)	Pastoral Implications
Transformation of parent-child relationships	Early acceptance crisis	"At first I couldn't accept my son's condition. I felt confused and asked why God allowed this." (Mother's name is Ningsih)	Disability is perceived as a disruption to the meaning of life and parental identity	The beginning of the relationship is still functional; the child's body is not yet understood as a <i>gift</i>	Pastoral needs to be present in the crisis phase with existential assistance
	Gradual acceptance process	"Slowly I learned to accept. I am aware that this child is entrusted by God." (Mrs. Hendra is a pseudonym)	Acceptance grows through everyday experience	The Emergence of the Gift of Self: Unconditional Self-Giving	Continuous pastoral assistance, not a single intervention
Relationships as a <i>gift of self</i>	Sacrifice and loyalty	"Tiredness is for sure, but I live it because this is my son." (Ibu Luluk is a pseudonym)	Relationships are interpreted as commitments, not social obligations	<i>The Gift of Self</i> as a praxis of life, not an abstract ideal	Relational moral theology: ethical values are born of loyalty

	Reciprocal relations	"I feel like I was formed by my son." (Mother Sulis is a pseudonym)	Children are the subjects that shape parental identity	<i>Gift of Self</i> is reciprocal	Family as a locus of faith formation
The meaning of the body of a child with a disability	The body as a source of injury	"Looking at his body, I was sad because he wasn't like any other child." (Mrs. Juniarti is a pseudonym)	The body is perceived through the standard of normality	The body has not yet been understood as a relational language	Pastoral needs to help reconstruct the meaning of the body
	The body as the language of love	"Through his weak body, I learned patience and love." (Ibu Luluk is a pseudonym)	The body becomes a medium of relationship and meaning	<i>Nuptial meaning of the body</i> : the body invites relationships	Catechesis of the body and relationships in the family
Experiences of children with disabilities	Awareness of differences	"I know I'm different, but I want to be accepted." (Bobby pseudonym)	The child is aware of his or her body identity	Dignity is not determined by similarity	Inclusive and disability-friendly pastoral
	The meaning of relationships with parents	"If my parents are there, I feel at ease." (Anto pseudonym)	Relationships provide a sense of security and identity	The meaning of spousal is extended to the parent-child relationship	Family ministry is relationship-based, not a program
Human dignity	Non-functional dignity	"This child is still valuable even though he can't do anything." (Ibu Sari is a pseudonym)	Dignity is understood as an intrinsic value	<i>Imago Dei</i> : ontological dignity	Correction of the charitable pastoral paradigm
	Recognition as a person	"I want to be treated the same as everyone else." (Anto pseudonym)	Children demand personal recognition	Dignity as the basis of ethical relations	The Church as a space of confession, not mercy
Relational synthesis	Relations as a <i>theological locus</i>	"Through this child, I know God better." (Mrs. Hendra)	Relationships become a space of revelation	Body–relationship–love as a unit	Families with children with disabilities as

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The transformation of the relationship between parents and children with disabilities as a result of the interview shows that the relationship between parents and children with disabilities undergoes a transformation process that is not simple and non-linear. In the early phase, most parents express experiences of shock, confusion, and even inner rejection when learning about their child's condition. Disability is often perceived as an event that undermines expectations and an ideal image of family. This experience is evident in the expressions of parents who question the meaning of their children's presence, the future of their family, and their relationship with God.

"At first I was really unprepared. It felt like all my life plans were falling apart. I wondered, what was wrong with me until God gave me a child like this" (Ibu Sulis is a pseudonym).

This experience shows that disability in the early stages is often interpreted in terms of loss and failure. The relationship between parents and children with disabilities is still framed by normative standards about a healthy, independent, and productive body. In this condition, the body of a child with a disability tends to be understood as a "problem" that must be fixed or overcome. The relationships that are built are also more functional and protective, not fully personal and reflective.

However, the data also show that over time, these relationships change in meaning. Through intense involvement in child care and mentoring, parents begin to develop a new perspective on their relationships. Daily practices such as feeding, bathing, accompanying therapy, and accompanying children in social situations become embodied experiences that slowly form a deeper relational awareness.

"I'm tired, yes. But from there I learned that love is not about results, but about loyal companionship" (Mrs. Juniarti is a pseudonym).

In the framework of John Paul II's Body Theology, the human body is understood as a theological reality that reveals the deepest meaning of human existence. The concept of *the Gift of Self* affirms that man achieves his fullness when he gives himself freely, consciously, and lovingly to others. Self-giving is not just a moral act, but an ontological expression that human beings are created for relationships, so that the body becomes a medium of personal communication and total self-giving. In the light of John Paul II's body theology, this transformation can be read as a shift from an expectation-based relationship to a *Gift of Self* based relationship (McTavish, FMVD & Lorenzo, 2014; Wanless, 2023). Parents no longer place their children as objects of hope or future projects, but rather as personal subjects who call them to give themselves freely and totally. The relationship between parents and children with disabilities becomes a space for the formation of the parents themselves, where love is manifested not through achievements, but through faithful presence.

Gift of Self in the relationship between parents and children with disabilities. Concept *Gift of Self* is an important key in reading the data of this research. John Paul II affirmed that man finds his fullness not in mastery or achievement, but in sincere giving of himself to others. The results of the interviews show that the relationship between parents and children with disabilities is concretely a space for the actualization of self-giving.

Many parents reveal that caring for a child with a disability requires a sacrifice of time, energy, emotions, and even personal life opportunities. But this sacrifice is not always interpreted as a loss. In more mature reflection, parents begin to see that through this self-giving, they actually experience a deepening of the meaning of life and faith.

"I feel like my life has changed. I used to think that life was about career and success. Now I am learning to give myself unconditionally" (Mrs. Ningsih is a pseudonym).

This self-giving is not heroic or spectacular, but manifests itself in small, repetitive actions. This is where *the Gift of Self* acquires its embodied dimension. The parent's body is fully involved in caring for the child's fragile body. This experience confirms that self-giving is not an abstract idea, but a concrete bodily praxis.

From a moral theology perspective, these findings challenge the ethical paradigm that places autonomy and independence as the highest values. The relationship between parents and children with disabilities actually shows that moral values are manifested in dependence, vulnerability, and loyalty. Self-giving becomes the ethical basis of relationships, not reciprocal contracts or utilitarian logic.

The meaning of spousal body and relationships that go beyond marriage The research findings also show that the relationship between parents and children with disabilities can be understood in light *Nuptial Meaning* of the body (Kupczak, 2014; Paul II, 2003, 2003). John Paul II affirmed that the human body has a spongy meaning, namely the capacity to express and receive love. Although this concept is often associated with marriage, the data of this study show that the spousal meaning of the body goes beyond the relationship between husband and wife and is present in the relationship between parents and children. Furthermore, *the nuptial meaning* of the body refers to the spousal meaning of the body, which is the body's innate capacity to express love that gives and receives each other. The human body is not neutral; It has a relational structure that directs man to communion (*communio*). This spousal meaning is not limited to husband-wife relationships, but is widely applicable in human relational dynamics, including parent-child relationships. Thus, the child's body, including a child with a disability, expresses a relational potential that calls others to an ethical response and receiving love.

The body of a child with a disability, with all its limitations, still has a strong relational capacity. Children's dependence on parents actually opens up an intense space for communion. The child's body "speaks" through needs, emotional expressions, and presences that demand responses. Parents who are sensitive to body language experience increasingly personal and deep relationships.

"My son may not be able to talk much, but from the way he looks, I know he needs me"
(*Ibu Sari is a pseudonym*).

In this perspective, the body is no longer understood as a performative instrument, but rather as a medium of interpersonal communication (Dong et al., 2017; Steward, 2018; Wanless, 2023). The relationship between parents and children becomes a spousal relationship in a broader sense: a relationship of giving and self-acceptance that is mutually binding in love. The spousal meaning of the body affirms that true human relations are always dialogical and open to others.

The experience of children with disabilities themselves reinforces these findings. Children with disabilities interviewed showed high relational sensitivity, especially in the context of social acceptance and rejection. They are aware of their body differences, but also affirm the importance of a receiving relationship.

"I'm glad that my parents aren't ashamed to have me" (*Bobby is a pseudonym*).

This expression shows that the spousal meaning of the body is closely related to recognition and acceptance. The body becomes a place where relationships are translated concretely. Human dignity as the ontological foundation of the third aspect that stands out in the results of this research is the understanding of human dignity (*human Dignity*). Interview data show that the experience of disability often exposes families to social stigma, condescending views, and discriminatory treatment. Children with disabilities are often seen as "lacking", "abnormal", or "burden".

However, in reflective family relationships, parents begin to develop a different understanding of dignity. The dignity of children is no longer measured based on ability or independence, but based on their existence as a person. This understanding is in line with the teachings of Body Theology which affirms human dignity as an ontological reality, not a

functional one.

"My son is still a whole human being, even though he is not like other children" (Ibu Luluk is a pseudonym).

This understanding has important theological and pastoral implications. By affirming the ontological dignity of the child, the family rejects utilitarian logic and a culture of body perfectionism. Disability does not diminish dignity, but rather expresses vulnerability as part of the human condition. From the perspective of disability theology, these findings confirm that human dignity must be read in the light of relationships, not performance. Dignity is embodied and recognized in an accepting and loving relationship, not in normative standards of the ideal body.

Gift of self, nuptial meaning, and dignity as relational anthropology

These three concepts are the gift of self, *Nuptial Meaning*, and *Dignity* do not stand alone, but are interrelated and form a complete relational anthropology. Research data show that the gift of self is only meaningful because the body has a relational structure (*Nuptial Meaning*), and the relationship has value because each person has ontological dignity (*Dignity*).

The relationship between parents and children with disabilities is the locus where these three concepts meet concretely. The self-giving of the parents is manifested in the loving actions of the body; the child's body becomes a medium of relational communication; and the dignity of the child is affirmed in unconditional acceptance. Thus, this relationship is not only a family relationship, but a theological relationship that reveals the face of God's love.

The concept of *dignity*, in the Catholic tradition, is based on the belief that every human being has unconditional dignity because he is created in the image and likeness of God (*Imago Dei*). This dignity is independent of functional ability, physical condition, or social perperitability. Thus, the experience of disability does not diminish human dignity, but invites a deeper theological reading of vulnerability, uniqueness, and relationality. These three concepts, namely the *gift of self*, *nuptial meaning*, and *dignity*, provide a solid theological basis for understanding the relationship between parents and children in the context of disability as a dynamic of self-giving, fellowship, and mutual respect for dignity.

The Theology of the Body (TOB) developed by John Paul II occupies a key position in contemporary Catholic theological anthropology by affirming that the body is not merely a biological entity, but a medium of personal-relational revelation that reveals the human existential call to self-giving and self-acceptance (Paul II, 2005; Paul, 2003; Paulus-II, 2006). The reading of the TOB by scholars confirms the legacy of Wojtyła's personalism which combines Thomistic and phenomenological elements, so that the body is understood ontologically as a communion-oriented form of personality (Hund & Hogan, 2006; Williams, 1982). In this framework, the three concepts of *gift of self*, *nuptial meaning*, and *dignity* function as conceptual pillars that build a relational anthropology. *Gift of Self* refers to the call to give oneself; *nuptial meaning* describes the sponsal structure of the body as a relational capacity; and *dignity* provides an ontological basis that affirms the unconditional dignity of each individual (Doyle, 1987; Meconi, 2006).

The concept of *Gift of Self* places the act of giving oneself as a personalistic norm that is fundamental to the understanding of human beings as relational individuals (Modras, 1982; Paul II, 2006). In classical and contemporary Catholic theological literature, giving is understood not simply as ethical behavior, but as an ontological expression. That is, the body functions as a medium that communicates a person's existential availability for total and mutually acceptable relationships (Colosi, 2006; Dulles, 2008, 2011). The subjective personal character of self-giving, which is often referred to as *a personalistic norm*, demands respect for the dignity of the subject so that the act of giving oneself should not instrumentalize others or reduce them to a means (Conner, 2005; Kass, 2009). In the context of families with children with disabilities, the literature shows that the reading of *the Gift of Self* offers an alternative paradigm to the narrative of

deviation from the norm, namely the vulnerable body is perceived as a relational call that calls for ethical responses and presence that respects personal dignity (Jo Iozzio, 2018; Kass, 2009).

The *nuptial meaning* in the TOB explains that the human body has a structure that leads to communion; a symbolic and existential capacity for self-giving and self-acceptance that was initially developed in the context of marriage theology, but expanded as a universal anthropological category (Paul II, 2006). The body must be seen in this context, in what John Paul II called the "hermeneutics of gifts" (TOB 13:2; 16:1) (Paul II, 2006, p. 18). Some analysts emphasize the hermeneutics of the body as a "sign" of interpersonal communication: bodily actions (*gestures, care, touch*) carry a spongy meaning that goes beyond verbal language and forms communitarian relationships (Dulles, 2011). The extension of the sponsal meaning to non-sponsal relationships such as parents and children allows the understanding that family relations are an arena in which sponsal meaning is manifested through everyday practices such as attention, care, and acceptance so that the child's body, including those with disabilities, serves as a sign that calls for relational and ethical answers (Windley-Daoust; Wall, 2017). Thus, the above literature places *nuptial meaning* not only as a theory of sexuality or marriage, but as an analytical tool to understand the dynamics of deep interpersonal relationships.

The Catholic tradition formulates human dignity based on the concept of *Imago Dei*, which is the dignity that is ontologically attached to each person without certain functional or capacity requirements (Doyle, 1987; John Paul II). This insistence is reaffirmed in theological and bioethical works that reject the reduction of dignity to utilitarian or performative criteria (Kass, 2009; Diamond, 2007). The contemporary theological literature of disability highlights that an understanding of ontological dignity must be translated into pastoral praxis and policies that value *embodied existence* including vulnerable or "non-normative" bodies as sources of ethical and communitarian revelation (Jo Iozzio, 2018; Wall, 2017). Researchers assert that without strengthening an inclusive understanding of dignity, churches and social institutions tend to reproduce stigma through paternalistic charitable practices instead of building relationships that empower and respect disability agencies (Annandale; Windley-Daoust).

These three concepts complement each other in building a relational anthropology: *Gift of Self* refers to the dynamics of conscious and ethical self-giving personal actions; *Nuptial meaning* describes the structure of the body as a spongy capacity that allows the self-giving to bear the fruit of communion; while *dignity* emphasizes the ontological foundation that makes actions and relational structures morally and theologically meaningful. When applied to the context of families with children with disabilities, this integrated framework offers a hermeneutic alternative: the vulnerable body is not merely an object of care, but a subject of relational revelation and grace that demands an ethical response that respects dignity and agency (Meconi, 2006; Jo Iozzio, 2018). This approach is not only conceptual but also guides transformative pastoral practices from purely charitable acts to communal-practices that integrate acceptance, fellowship, and self-giving into the daily life of the family.

Although TOB and the study of John Paul II's personalism have been substantively discussed in theological and philosophical literature, there are significant gaps when these ideas should be empirically linked to disability studies: (1) the limitations of dialogue between Body Theology and disability studies mean that the TOB literature is still focused on the spousal/marital aspect rather than the embodied experiences of families of people with disabilities; (2) the lack of systematic integration between the concept of *gift-nuptial-dignity* and the phenomenological study of bodily experience and vulnerability; (3) Lack of interdisciplinary empirical research that applies the TOB framework to formulate concrete pastoral models for families with children with disabilities. This gap signifies a methodological and theoretical need for research that combines TOB textual analysis, personalism, and phenomenological qualitative studies to produce relevant and responsive theological-pastoral discourse.

Implications for pastoral care, moral theology, and family ministry

The results of this study have significant implications for pastoral care. A pastoral approach that is only charitable in nature has proven inadequate. Families need mentoring that helps them interpret the disability experience as part of a call to faith. Pastoral care needs to be developed as relational assistance that affirms the dignity and embodied experience of the family. In the realm of moral theology, these findings challenge ethics that overemphasize autonomy and productivity. The relationship between parents and children with disabilities shows that moral values are manifested in loyalty and vulnerability. Moral theology must integrate these relational and embodied perspectives. Meanwhile, in the aspect of family service, this study confirms that families with children with disabilities are theological subjects. Their experience needs to be integrated into the Church's reflection as a source of learning of faith and pastoral praxis.

Affirmation of the discussion and the research gap

Overall, this study shows that John Paul II's theology of the body provides a rich theological framework for reframing disability. Nevertheless, there is still a gap between reflection on the theology of the body and the study of disability, particularly in the integration of phenomenological experiences of the family. This study seeks to fill this gap by placing family relational experience as a relevant theological locus.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that John Paul II's theology of the body provides a rich framework for reframing disability in relational and theological perspectives. The relationship between parents and children with disabilities reveals that the human body, in all its limitations, remains a place of revelation of human love and dignity. Thus, the experience of families with children with disabilities is not only a pastoral issue, but also an important contribution to the development of contemporary Catholic theology. Furthermore, this study highlights that disability should not be reduced to a merely pastoral concern, but recognized as a significant theological resource that challenges and enriches contemporary Catholic anthropology. By integrating phenomenological insights with theological reflection, the findings open new horizons for pastoral praxis, encouraging more inclusive, compassionate, and dialogical approaches. Ultimately, families with children with disabilities embody a transformative witness that contributes meaningfully to the renewal of theological discourse on embodiment, grace, and human flourishing.

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