

Viewing “Body Worlds 3”: A Catholic Perspective for Parents and Teachers

‘Body Worlds 3’ is an anatomical display of real human bodies donated by fully informed human persons. The display is made possible by a new technology called “plastination,” which infuses the bodily tissues with a polymer plastic that preserves their color and shape. The working systems of the body and the body’s healthy or unhealthy functioning are vividly and tastefully shown.

The stated purpose of the exhibit is “for the medical enlightenment and appreciation of lay people.”

Carefully prepared for, “Body Worlds 3” has been found to have educative value by the Division of Education and Evangelization of the Diocese of Phoenix.

Recommendations:

1. Parents and educators, indeed anyone choosing to view the ‘Body Worlds 3’ exhibit at the Arizona Science Center, should if at all possible visit the exhibit before deciding that children should do so. Short of this, a minimal preparation would consist of viewing an online video regarding the exhibit, available online at www.azscience.org/bw3/index.php.
2. The exhibit is not an “introduction to anatomy,” but is actually an advanced study. It would not be well-used as a first experience with viewing the interior systems of the human body. This beginner knowledge should come from other sources.

Connecting to Church Teaching:

Since the body is understood by Catholics, other Christians, or Jews to be more than the “sum of its parts,” more than exhibit material, it is very important that Church teaching be included in preparations.

The exhibit’s creators have given explicit credit to Christianity with one of the “plastinates” (whole-body figures) at the beginning of the tour. This figure is “kneeling in prayer;” a nearby placard credits our 16th Century popes with first encouraging the study of anatomy to increase medical knowledge of the body. This is appropriate, then, to see the viewing of the exhibit as being an outgrowth of the Church’s perpetual concern to increase true knowledge in God’s creation.

The exhibit of the unborn, kept in a special passageway of the exhibit, mentions the “continuum of human life from conception,” reinforcing true science and Church teaching.

Scripture and the Body:

- Our bodies as human beings image God the Trinity in their masculinity, femininity and fertility (Genesis 1:27-29)
- God “knits us together in our mother’s womb” (Psalm 139: 13-14)
- The Christian’s body is “a temple of the Holy Spirit.” Made so by Baptism. (1 Cor. 6: 19-20)

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) and the Body:

Sections 2288-2301 of the 1994 Catechism promulgated by John Paul II refer to a Catholic understanding of (1) a proper concern for health (2) respect for the person and scientific research, including organ donation as well as (3) respect for the dead.

These sections of the Catechism should be included in Catholic educational efforts connected to the study of human anatomy.