



Fill These Hearts: God, Sex, and the Universal Longing

Christopher West

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The bestselling author, speaker, and teacher of John Paul II's Theology of the Body explores the yearning we all have for God and each other.

Fill These Hearts is a book about *desire*. Not trivial wants or superficial cravings, but the most vital powers of body and soul, sexuality and spirituality, that haunt us and compel us on our search for *something*.

Weaving life-altering lessons together from classical and contemporary art, pop music, movies, and the Christian mystical tradition, popular theologian Christopher West explores the ancient but largely forgotten idea that the restless, erotic yearnings we feel in both our bodies and our spirits reveal the cry of our hearts for God. Along the way, West blows the lid off the idea of Christianity as a repressive, anti-sex religion by demonstrating that Christ came to stretch and inflame our desire for love and union to the point of infinity.

Fill These Hearts: God, Sex, and the Universal Longing Details

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Fred says

My favorite Theology of the Body Book to date

This is by far the most joyful, beautiful and positive writing on human sexuality I have read to date. Christopher West has a gift for distilling very heady theological concepts into everyday language replete with pop cultural references that I can both enjoy relate to. This will be my top gift to friends, family and newlyweds from here forward! It brought me so much joy I simply cannot help but share it.

Jean says

I have read nearly all of Christopher West's books, and, in my opinion, Fill These Hearts: God, Sex, and the Universal Longing is his best book to date. In Fill These Hearts, West has done a masterful job in weaving together lessons from classical and contemporary art, literature, music, movies, and the Christian mystical tradition to explain the deep yearnings within our bodies and spirits as revealing the cry of our hearts for God.

West believes that most people view the Christian life as a life of stoic repression and he methodically sets out to demolish the idea that God wants us to block the deepest desires of our hearts. According to West, God does not want us to repress our desires nor does He want us to seek immediate gratification by indulging our desires. Instead, God wants us to sublimate the world's pleasures and to ready our hearts for the banquet He has prepared for each of us. In Fill These Hearts, West seeks to help us aim our desire according to God's design and to safely obtain our destiny – eternal bliss and ecstasy in union with God.

The message West conveys is profound and will cause us to reflect deeply, analyzing our own lives and our western culture. Using Scripture, saint quotes, the Catechism, and images from pop culture, West dazzles the reader with his analogies and interpretations, while explaining his concepts in very clear, comprehensible terms. Though his overall message about the Theology of the Body remains basically the same, he writes in an even more timely and powerful way, targeting a wider audience. This book will not only appeal to Christians, but will attract even secularists and atheists.

My favorite part of Fill These Hearts is West's use of movie scenes to illuminate deep truths about the human heart. Some of the films he uses to highlight these truths include: Toy Story, Shawshank Redemption, Babette's Feast, Spider Man, and my personal favorite, Les Miserables. Like the movie Les Miserables, this book gives us hope, because it helps us to realize that our hope lies not in this world, but in the next.

In summary, Christopher West's Fill These Hearts: God, Sex, and the Universal Longing is a beautifully written book, which explains the truth behind our deepest desires. It helps us understand them and how to deal with them according to God's design to find our true destiny—the banquet of eternal life. Fill These Hearts has the potential to change hearts as well as minds. I highly recommend it.

Angela says

Too many religious texts skirt around the topic of sexuality. But West goes full-force. He doesn't tiptoe around "sensitive" topics, but goes in the complete opposite direction: He shows how not only is sex and desire *good*, but how it's a part of God's design.

It's funny to think about God's love in this way, if you've been raised with abstinence-only education. Sex isn't something to be *avoided*. It's a bodily metaphor for a spiritual love, the kind of love God wants to share with His creation.

This fairly quick read is an obvious "starter" for a larger topic, and certainly this author has bigger (and more complex) books that delve into it more. But this is a good place to start, especially if the whole topic feels a little squeamish at first.

Ana Rodriguez says

Fill These Hearts: God, Sex, and the Universal Longing was a very religious book more than any thing. Christopher West explains his thoughts on the deepest longings of the human soul the yearnings we feel in our bodies and longings we have.

Christopher West explains questions of love and sexuality from a Catholics point of view.

Many theories on the biblical meaning of love.

This novel is a great tool for a teen in understanding of human sexuality.

Writer speaks of filling that need sexually and body cravings.

Christopher West explains every single issue with General Audiences, John Paul II's Theology of the Body .

Matthew says

This book has been on my 'to-read' shelf for quite some time. I believe the book was an answer to my prayer to be more chaste in my life. At first, I had difficulty figuring out what West meant by the three gospels defined in this book but by the end of it, I was able to see what he was getting. I appreciated his references to pop music and film scenes in relating to chastity. I was able to connect his points better with these examples and it made this book a quick read.

I will want to read this book again because of West's approach to sexuality and our deep desires. Instead of trying to shut off our sexual wants, West approaches our divine desire as a good one that we need to work on not falling into the temptation of Satan and distorting these desires. This approach will take me years (God willing) to really grasp and put into practice this approach. I am one to typically tackle the sexual desire through a 'starvation gospel' diet where I reject and try to deny or put down my desire. Understanding that this desire, in all its goodness, is to be in perfect communion with God in heaven.

That is a healthy approach. That seems like what a loving God would want for us. Thank you, Christopher West.

Er-er Abringe says

This is good news! True to his message on Theology of the Body, this book offers clear, well-explained, and well-broken down truth. Christopher West creatively uses songs, movies, and stories to properly explain the beauty of Theology of the Body. He rightly repeats points in every chapter so the reader can understand and absorb the message well. I think the message of this book is this generation needs to know. This is good news indeed.

Pat Gohn says

I've read most of what Christopher West has written, and while this book does not add anything new to what I've heard him teach about the main ideas and themes surrounding the Theology of Body, I'm very impressed by the synthesis and delivery of this volume. Every chapter makes succinct points, uses careful analogy, and offers thoughtful and straight talk from a man who is totally immersed and personally transformed by this subject matter. While I've heard this message before, from a craft perspective I think this is West's finest writing to date.

I highly recommend this book as both an introduction to theology of the body to new readers, as well as a great executive summary for those familiar with it, especially for those looking for accessible language and a popular and foundational text through which to share it.

Stuart says

I must admit that this is my first time reading not only the author, but also the subject, so I wasn't exactly sure what to expect from Fill These Hearts. The first thing I noticed, though, was the precise organization of this book. Broken into three parts, "Desire, Design, and Destiny," Mr. West displayed a clear thought pattern of where he wanted to take you in this book. I appreciated the alliterative sections as it made the message of this book easier to remember. What exactly is our ultimate desire, design, and destiny? Union with God, of course.

Whether every person realizes it or not, we are all designed for Union with God and will not feel complete unless we are reunited with Him. We also desire love, from God and other people. As a Christian, I was taught about love a lot growing up. I was told that there are different types of love, including love of friends (philia), romantic love (eros), and unconditional love (agape). Agape is the one we are always told to aim for, but this book does a fine job defending and explaining eros, which when rightly directed is a good thing. Yes, we can distort it and turn it into lust, but eros can also be an on-fire, longing type of love, which we should have about our eternal destiny of Heaven.

I also appreciated the personal stories that Mr. West shared in this book. When one becomes an expert on a subject, it is easy to depersonalize the subject and write a book in textbook format. However, the author's stories made me relate to him better and feel connected to him. He didn't paint himself as a saint, but showed

us his self-portrait, warts and all.

I did have one big gripe with the book though, and that was that every chapter had a quote from a popular song underneath the chapter title. Did I recognize all these songs? Yes, but with the song choices, movie references, and other pop culture sprinklings, it felt that this book was tailored to a very specific audience and would be dated quickly, as songs and movies can quickly fall out of fashion with the next big song or movie. This means the book might not stand the test of time and could fade with this generation, which is a shame.

Overall though, this is a very well-written and informative book. It is easy to read, and made the subject matter less intimidating for someone who had no prior knowledge of it. I wish all the pop culture references would have been left out though. I don't think anything would have been lost from the book if they were omitted, and the message would have still been just as clear. So for all the pop culture references, I am giving the book 4 out of 5 stars. I understood them and appreciated them, but an older reader or younger reader probably would not have.

I received this book for free from WaterBrook Multnomah Publishing Group for this review.

Stephen Case says

What do a bunch of celibate men have to tell the world about marriage, love, and sex? Apparently quite a bit if those celibates are men like Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Christopher West's slender text, *Fill These Hearts: God, Sex, and the Universal Longing* is an attempt to unpack the Catholic Church's richly developed and under-appreciated theology of the body, though his desire to make this theology accessible to the widest audience possible at times makes it feel an exposition writ in crayon.

Plus, he starts off very much on the wrong foot from an astronomical point of view. So, pardon a astronomer's annoyance, but first a short rant:

The opening sentence in West's book states that "In 1977 NASA launched Voyager 1 and Voyager 2 to explore the galaxy."

Ack.

There's so much wrong here. Granted, this isn't a book about science and West only makes this comment in passing to talk about how the music samples carried by these spacecraft testify to humanity's universal longing. But it is the opening line of his book . . .

The Voyager missions were launched to explore the outer planets of our own solar system, not the galaxy. But more than that, that there's a staggering problem of scale here. Imagine tossing an Oreo cookie into the center of a football field. That cookie is roughly the radius of our solar system. (The Sun would be a candy sprinkle at Oreo's center, and Neptune would be a microscopic dot skimming around the cookie's edge.) On this scale, the nearest planetary system is another cookie two football fields away. The galaxy is about 200 billion of these cookies spread over an area about the size of North America. And where are the Voyagers on this scale? In the decades they've been in space, they've drifted less than a yard away from our own cookie--er, solar system.

Saying that we sent them out to explore the galaxy is a bit like imagining sending a paramecium to explore New York City.

End rant.

Okay, so it's not a book about science. It's a book about theology. West's major point is that we as humans are built with certain longings and desires and that this isn't a bad thing. We have these desires for a reason, but we have three possible responses to this reality, two bad and one good. We can either ignore and suppress those desires (what he calls the "starvation diet") or we can indulge them (what he calls the "fast food diet"). Though Christianity is often portrayed as leaning toward the first option, West says this is as wrong as the improper indulgence of desires. (And to be clear, throughout the book he's mainly talking about romantic and sexual desires.)

The proper response, West says, is to recognize these desires as pointing toward something beyond themselves, as indicative of an eternal banquet to come, to realize the things of this world cannot satisfy our desires, and to see romantic and sexual desires as a way of stretching our hearts so God can satisfy us. There's weirdness here and mysticism and even some discomfort. But there's also quite a bit of solid theology and biblical exposition. Song of Solomon, for instance, is in the Bible for a reason.

West's alliterative thesis is that our *desires*-- when understood correctly-- point toward God, our *design* shows we're meant to exist in relationship, and our *destiny* is that God wants to expand our desires and longings toward infinity where they can be filled with His love.

Along the way we're treated to passages from Scripture and Catholic theology interspersed with painful analogies from *Spider-Man 2* and lyrics from U2 (see the comment above about being writ in crayon). The most compelling portions for me were the final chapters where West provides an outline of the Catholic view of chastity and sexual ethics. In West's interpretation, chastity is a promise of immortality. It's a way of rightly ordering desire here on Earth, of keeping human nature free of the addictive aspects of sexual desire and oriented toward eternity. (If it seems like a futile and desperate hope, it kind of is.)

There are lots of issues here, primarily related to the point that West seems to think humans all have more or less the same sort of desires and takes this as the starting point for his exposition. This is in keeping with what I understand of Catholic theology often beginning from a "natural laws" treatment of the world, something that I'm not sure remains tenable.

If nothing else though, besides bringing a taste of some of the deeper aspects of Catholic theology, West does call attention to the undeniable fact that many of the central themes and symbols in the Bible have to do with sex and marriage-- and wine. Sex and alcohol, often shunned in puritanical circles, are central to a Biblical view of desire and satisfaction. Christ's first miracle, as West points out, was at a wedding feast, and it was to provide that feast with a fine vintage. This is West's central claim: that God isn't interested in starving us or in seeing us waste ourselves seeking after pleasures that can't satisfy. Rather, he wants to provide a real, eternal banquet and (though the analogy becomes strained, at least to me) a real, eternal marriage relationship.

Sister Anne says

A healthy antidote to the twin maladies in Western culture (the full-throttle pursuit of pleasure on the one hand; the puritanical/jansenistic suspicion of it on the other), "Fill These Hearts" takes desire seriously as a vitally important aspect of the spiritual life. Ignore or repress it, and life, prayer, morality and religion itself are reduced to dry and unappetizing duty. Gorge yourself with short-term satisfactions and you become a hamster on a wheel, turning every relationship, opportunity or experience into a means to the same end, the never-ending pursuit of a "more" that will always fail to satisfy the soul. There is a third way, West promises: desire rightly ordered keeps fire in the soul, even as it keeps the soul turned toward the ultimate good of communion with God.

This is a book about that rightly ordered desire. How do we recognize our deep desires? How do we respond to them in an enlightened and even passionate way without being driven blindly by them into destructive choices? How do we live "temperately, justly and devoutly" (Tit. 2:12) in this present age, when even a walk down a city street means encountering soft porn on billboards and bus shelters? Is it possible to live sexual purity passionately? (Yes! West says: "A properly disciplined eros is even more wild than its 'frat house counterfeit'.") What does all this mean in the relationship of man and woman?

West illustrates this highly readable book not simply with references to Scripture or to the writings of Popes and saints, but with abundant pop culture references to the insatiable (if often misinterpreted) hunger for God, the ultimate goal of desire. Thankfully, West also disproves the common contemporary suspicion (nurtured, no doubt, by the reduction of "devotion"--a word of passion--to "duty") that Heaven might be boring!

Sara Boghdan says

Such a beautiful, understandable book. It explains marital intimacy within ultimate longing for God.

Everyone should read this.

Marianne says

this is the kind of book that only a certain type of person in a certain moment in their life will read . . .

christopher west is not the most brilliant writer, but he does have the gift of conveying profound christian concepts in very simple, navigable ways. this can prove to be a gem of a talent when attempting to share the Gospel with the wavering Christian. or, in my case, the Christian who needs a little bit of a wake-me-up.

however, i'm not sure i could simply hand this to a lukewarm Christian friend of mine and expect him or her to read it. the title in and of itself may be a turn-off.

the reader must already be open and curious to God's work in his or her life. that, and through God's grace and divine providence, would someone be interested in this sort of read.

i read this when i needed to. it spoke to me. it fired me up. i will probably read it again at some point - but at present, i am more or less turned off by its utter simplicity.

George says

First of all, this is only a new book of sorts. Essentially reiterating previous writings, it is the first being published after the voluntary hiatus from public view. As such, Christopher West repeats his disdain for what he describes as stoic Christianity (although I assume he means Catholicism, he applies the broader term to incorporate Protestantism as well - maybe intentionally?) in relation to sexual morality. First of all however he neglects the Christian/Catholic tradition - the Greek philosophy of Stoicism plays an essential role in the teachings of the Church fathers and thus in shaping Christianity and second he misinterprets the term by using it in the modern sense. I expected better. More importantly however he contradicts himself (as he did before) in condemning Puritanism but yet essentially advocates Puritanism by asking to redirect sexual desire into a proper channel - from the horizontal into the vertical- something his critics pointed out a while ago prior to his hiatus. To avoid conflict inserts a chapter of the desire of prayer and it is here that the strength of the book is.

Personally I am feeling uneasy with mysticism in general and Christopher West identifies as himself as such citing Catherine of Siena, John Paul II, Mother Theresa of Calcutta and Benedict XVI extensively. As always he is also outing the Song of Songs extensively, clearly his favorite book of the Old Testament, but traditionally neglected precisely because of the contents which was/is viewed as corrupting by many. Again this might be a strength of this book since it demystifies the contents and offers an alternative explanation. To see the sexual pleasure between the male and female as a foreshadowing of heaven is a stretch though - after all we do not know what heaven will be like, all we have are analogies which -by definition are attempts to describe something which can not be described. Also Christopher West projects his own struggles onto others - most adult people do not have immediate lustful thoughts when they see a naked body. By this standard, we should ban art of being on public display.

In general, I would recommend this book only for those who already have an inkling for his teachings and for those who want to understand the mindset of those who regularly cite him.

Ryan says

Great book on a tough subject that people generally don't discuss. The book really clears up some things and cuts through society's take that sex is fine with anyone, anytime. Sometimes a bit repetitive but mostly just for effect. Would recommend to anyone curious about the subject.

J.T. Therrien says

This is one of my favorite Christopher West/Theology of the Body (TOB) texts. In Fill These Hearts the complex theological doctrine of the TOB is simplified and rendered readily accessible. The theme of the book is how the ideas of the Theology of the Body pervade our popular culture, including lyrics in popular pop songs. West begins each chapter by quoting from such pop groups as U2 and Steve Winwood (among many others) and then discusses in a very informal way central points in the TOB doctrine that can be found in movies, songs and art - namely, in all facets of contemporary culture.

The informal way that the TOB is presented leads me to believe that this book grew out of a series of

presentations. The book also contains some of West's personal experiences (humbly presented as lessons from real life). These are some of the book's best assets.

For the reader familiar with basic TOB doctrines, West's book shows how down-to-earth and realistic a role this theology is meant to play in a devout Catholic's life.

Fill These Hearts should be read by anyone interested in how Saint John Paul II's Theory of the Body is an attainable theological way of life. For those unfamiliar with the TOB, I would recommend reading some of West's more academic books on the subject before reading this one, but Fill These Hearts is a must-have addition to any serious Catholic's bookshelf.
