

“The body is... for the Lord and the Lord is for the body... Glorify God in your body.”

(1 Cor 6:13.20)

There are no less than nine gyms in Salem alone, for a population of just under 30,000. That testifies to how keen people here are about their bodies, working out or swimming.

Now, there is an urban myth that somehow, the Judeo-Christian revelation doesn't have much interest in the body, especially compared to the warrior or beauty-driven cultures of ancient times. Well, I'd like to dispel this urban myth. I think that our faith has a lot of great and wise things to tell us about the body, and a lot of it is packed into Saint Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, which is our second reading from today till Lent. That letter is filled with beautiful reflections on the body. I'd like to unpack some of that reflection for you today, taking stock of these beautiful words of Paul: “The body is... for the Lord and the Lord is for the body... Glorify God in your body.”

What is a body? Let's start with the obvious. We all know what a physical body is: we have one. It's this organized physical substance which is both very simple (we just have one body) and very complex (even the best scientists don't understand everything about it). It is through our body that we breathe, eat, work, live and die, and relate to other people and things. It is through our body that we worship God in spirit; it is through the good our body does to others that we glorify God in love. That is literally what our body does.

But the word “body” can also be used metaphorically. A body, for instance, is a group of individuals organized for a purpose. For instance, the Church. We might be so used to hearing the Church called “the body of Christ” that we take it for granted. Now, St Paul is the first person to have called the Church a body, right in this First Letter to the Corinthians. Why?

Paul is writing to the Corinthians because he's mad at them. Around 50 AD, Paul founded a church in Corinth. That wasn't just any old city: Corinth was a bustling Greek seaport, with a lot going on, both good and evil. Paul had high hopes that Christians could do a lot of good in such a wicked place. But what happened? A few years later, Paul learns that they're gravely misbehaving. And that all of their problems have to do with the body. First of all, many so-called Christians engage in the promiscuity typical of a seaport and heightened by the pagan temples. That's what today's reading euphemistically translates as “immorality”. Paul is angry that some Christians have reverted to their licentious, heathen ways.

But other evils tear through the body of the community in Corinth: wealthy Christians are now refusing to eat with poor Christians. That means two things: not only will the rich not give the poor any food, they won't share the same Eucharist either. Now, what kind of a church can't get together under a single roof because some members refuse to be with others?

This scorn is tearing at the very body of the Church and that makes Paul very mad. The contempt that the well-fed somebodies have for the poor broken nobodies divides the one body of the Church and disgraces yet another body, the Eucharistic body of Christ.

See? Paul sees the body operating on many different levels here: the physical bodies of individual Christians; the social body of the Church community; and the Eucharistic body of Christ to be offered and shared. These three kinds of bodies must come together to glorify God. If they don't, but are instead a constant occasion of sin and disintegrations, then Paul is very legitimately sad and mad. Jesus came to teach us how to unite our body and soul, as individuals and as a community, for God's greater glory. And He taught us to do that through the Blessed Eucharist. By contrast, sin is something that tears apart the body from the soul, that gnaws away at our wholeness, at our wholesomeness, at our holiness.

Back to us, here and now. I'd like to leave you a few questions to ponder on and pray about this coming week. First question you might ask yourself: Do I love my own physical body? Do I give thanks to God for my body, both beautiful and broken, warts and all? Do I believe that my body is the temple of the Spirit, given to me by a loving God? Second question: Do I love my Church as body? Do I care for the body of the Church, working for its unity, at the local level, between St Joseph and Mary Queen of Peace, in the diocese, in communion with the Church in Rome? Third question: Do I love the Eucharistic Body of Christ which builds us into one church body? Do I tell others about the beauty of Christ's sacramental Body and try and bring them back to full communion with the Church?

One final note. In the Eucharistic prayer, we pray to God that two different bodies may come into being. That the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ. And that we, who are nourished by them and filled with the Holy Spirit, may become one body, one spirit in Christ. The first one seems easier to me... May God have mercy on us and grant us both!

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