

Homilies for the Third Sunday in Ordinary Time:

- [I Have No Need of You? - Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)
 - [What We Don't Have Is Time - Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)
 - [Who Are We? What Are We To Do? - Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)
 - [Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle C - Don L. Fischer](#)
-

I Have No Need of You?

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

You know, St. Paul never ceases to amaze me. This bald, bearded, bowlegged little fellow¹ with nine lives, this anti-Christian terrorist turned lover of Christ, this explosive missionary to the nations in darkness, this earliest theologian of Christian freedom—Paul is constantly confronting us with fresh insights that challenge our smallness, dare us to be bigger than we are.

So it is again this Sunday. If you want to know what it means to be a Christian, to be baptized, if you would grasp what all of us have in common besides neuroses and the common cold, take to heart this 12th chapter of Paul's first letter to the community in Corinth. It is a startling wedding of theology and life, of theory and practice; it flings the first century into the twentieth. To suggest how contemporary that chapter is, let me treat you to a supersaver round trip: back in time to Paul's Corinth, then a return journey to Georgetown.

I

First, a quick shuttle to Corinth. When Paul wrote to this community he had himself founded, his pen was quivering. The community of his birthing, the church he loved so dearly, was torn within. Four factions were at odds, four Christian cliques, each with its special hero, its idol. Some were mesmerized by Apollos, eloquent expert on the Hebrew Bible. Others were pledged to Peter, "top dog" in their religion. The poor and the slaves clung pretty much to good old Paul. A proud elite fixed on Christ, but claimed an inside track to Christ not open to the "great unwashed." Bad enough, such unchristian catfights; but there was more: schism and incest, lawsuits and food from pagan sacrifices, disorderly conduct in church and abuses in the Lord's Supper. Some even denied the resurrection of the body.

It is in this context—doctrinal division, moral misconduct, personality problems—that you must read chapter 12 of Paul's letter. In this atmosphere Paul propounds a theology basic to Christian believing, essential to Christian living. It is a theology of church—what the community of Christ is basically about. It has for springboard a living, breathing, pulsing reality: our own bodies. This body of ours, Paul argues, this incredible invention of an infinitely imaginative God, casts light on a body still more unbelievable: the body of Christ. Not his bone and blood; we, we Christians, we are the body of Christ.

How does Paul work out the analogy, move from physical to spiritual? Four fascinating facets. First, the one and the many. As with this structured body I inhabit, so with the Christian community: It is a single reality, but shaped of many members. "We were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free..." (1 Cor 12:13). In the language of Vatican II, "all those justified by faith through baptism are incorporated into Christ."² One body yes, but not a monolith, a monster: all head or hands, all liver or lungs, all heart. On this, Paul is pointed. Not only do Christians not look the same; our "gifts" are different, our "service" varies, our "activities" move in many directions (vv. 4—6). "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues?" (vv. 29—30). No indeed! The Christian community, like the human body, is a work of art precisely because it is a mosaic; it is a thing of beauty when the varicolored fragments fit together, play their interlocking roles. Each body, my own and Christ's, is God's creation at its best when it is at once one and many.

Second facet: Who is responsible for the one and the many? Again Paul is pellucid, limpid, crystal-clear. My own body? "God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as He chose" (v. 18). The body of Christ? "Varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; varieties of service, but the same Lord; varieties of activities, but the same God who inspires them all in every one...All these are inspired by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as He wills" (vv. 4—6, 11). Each body is God's handiwork.

Third facet: Why this wondrous variety, in the body of Christ as in my own body? Paul's response: "for the common good" (v. 7), for the welfare of the whole. At this very moment, I stay alive, I look out at you, I can mouth syllables that make some sense to you, only because hundreds of God's gifts inside of me are working as one, are engaged in a silent conspiracy that makes each moment a new creation. And so it is for the body of Christ. At any given moment, the community called Christian is alive and reasonably well only because uncounted believers of all ages and conditions activate an awesome array of God-given gifts, great and small, to the glory of God and the health of His people.

Which summons up Paul's fourth facet: In the Church, as in the human body, no single part is insignificant, without worth or value. Now Paul is not playing professional physician; he is not suggesting that each organ in your body is as important as any other, that without your appendix or spleen, without your big toe or little finger, you would be dead. He is simply saying that in a well-ordered body different parts perform different functions; each has its own contribution to make. The head is not the whole of the body; you may indeed "walk on your head," but the head is not made for walking; for that the head needs feet. Your baby-blue eyes may be more beautiful than your jug ears, but they will never hear Haydn's *Creation*. So too for Corinth's church. At a given moment, Paul may prove more necessary to the church he fathered than a fresh convert. Paul does not deny this, but it is not the point he is making. In his theology of the Church, God has so blended the people of His new covenant that each member of the body is linked in Christ to every other. No more sensitive a nervous system has ever been devised: "If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together" (v. 26).³

Live this theology, Paul implies, and a measure of peace will return to Christian Corinth. Live this theology, and joy will once more flood its founder's heart.

II

Enough of Corinth; let's fly back to Georgetown. Our local church, this Archdiocese of Washington, is the universal Church in miniature; and our little community, I suspect, is not terribly different from Paul's Corinth. Not the same details: I'm not accusing anyone of incest or eating Pizzas offered to idols. But we do compare with Corinth in our conflicts and our confusions, in our contrasting convictions on the way Catholics should think, should act, should worship. To some extent, at times frightening, we are torn by our differences—from papal authority to the rights of conscience, from intercommunion to Communion in the hand, from absolutes in moral theology to sacraments for the divorced-and-remarried, from contraception to female priests, from sterilization to that ultimate "Here I stand" in Catholic identity...the kiss of peace! The list is long but, at the risk of disappointing you, I shall reserve my infallible answers to a later date. With our conflicts no more than context, I shall stress for Georgetown in the winter of '86 what Paul preached to Corinth in the spring of 57.

You see, for all our differences, we form a single body. Not primarily because we are struggling together to reach a single goal—God from here to eternity. We are so intimately linked to the risen Christ that we can call ourselves his body. Not only were you and I plunged into it one glorious baptismal day; in Paul's words, "Because there is one bread, we, many as we are, are one body, for we all share the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17). Not that dogma and morality, how we think and what we do, are unimportant. Only that, even more importantly, God's water and God's bread transform our deepest selves, change us from isolated individuals on a hostile earth to a single body that our Lord Christ claims as his very own.

But within that wondrous oneness which is Christ, you and I are not simply the same; all of us have been graced in divinely different ways. Whatever your inferiority complex, however little you think of yourself, you are splendidly gifted. You need not envy the ordained. In this one body of Christ, the Holy Spirit has so artfully blended all of us that each of us is indispensable. In this body as God has crafted it, we need Pope John Paul II. But a miracle of Christ's body is that this head cannot say to us feet "I have no need of you." If you squander your gifts or let them lie fallow, the whole body suffers. For the Spirit has inspired these gifts in you—your faith and your love, your strengths and your very weaknesses—not simply for your personal salvation, so that you can clutch them in your hot little hands and return them unchanged to the Master like the servant in the Gospel parable: "Here I am, Lord. And here is what you gave me. You're a hard master, and I knew it. I was afraid; so I hid what you gave me in the ground. Here it is, unused, untouched, just as you gave it to me" (cf. Mt 25:24-25). No. Whoever you are—pope or peasant, wealthy or impoverished, healthy or ailing, brilliant or modestly endowed—whatever God has given you, He has given you "for the common good," for your sisters and brothers, for others.

Let me lay it frankly on the Christian line. All of you here before me have a tough task for which the oils of ordination do not qualify me. When Vatican II insisted that your mission is "to penetrate and perfect the temporal sphere with the spirit of the gospel,"⁴ the Council was not spouting abstractions into the Roman breeze. It was specifying your irreplaceable role in the body of Christ. Not some special, high-powered, privileged in-group among you; each and all of you baptized into Christ. Not temporary substitutes for a decimated clergy; now and always, by God-given right and duty. For, with rare exceptions, only you can carry Christ, can wing the Catholic vision, to an American culture some experts claim

is 19th-century rugged individualism reborn. It does not take a doleful Jeremiah to cry out in pain from the midst of a paradoxical nation—where we weep (rightfully) over hundreds of Marines massacred in Lebanon while millions of the unborn perish unmourned; where the marvels of technology conquer space and time, yet we cannot subdue our own cities; where the Dow Jones average skyrockets and business ethics plummets to a new low; where the powerful, like Luke's Dives, feast "sumptuously every day," while the homeless hungry beg for what they throw away (Lk 16:19—20); where we glory in being all born equal, yet nearly half our black children are being raised in stultifying poverty.

In many ways a frightening specter, but it should not paralyze you. Quite the opposite. It should summon you back to St. Paul, to recognize who you are and to what you are called: a single body, the body of Christ, variously gifted by the Spirit "for the common good," agonizingly aware that what the Lord Jesus proclaimed in the synagogue at Nazareth is true of each of you. The Spirit of the Lord is upon *you*. It is *you* the Holy Spirit has anointed. You are to "preach good news" to all who are in any way impoverished, open the eyes of so many who walk blind, "set at liberty" men and women dreadfully "oppressed" in flesh or spirit (Lk 4:18).

But to do this in more than piddling ways, to recapture this anointing as a full-time vocation, we Catholics have to raise our sights, lift our eyes from our own small navels. We can no longer waste our energy in guerilla warfare, slashing our own sisters and brothers without mercy, excommunicating the Right or the Left, refusing to be fed with the flesh of Christ because the liturgy bores us, offends us, clashes with our sacred memories. We cannot simply be swallowed whole by today's culture, from an amoral responsibility to myself alone, through the lust for megabucks, to a seduction by a new Madonna with a crucifix that spells sex. Above all, we have to love God not with half of our heart but with every fiber of our being, get to know and live intimately with this Jesus who lives inside of us.

Good friends in Christ: I trust that over the years you have come to sense my affection for you, my admiration for all you are and all you do. If I appear impatient this afternoon, dissatisfied, chalk it up to an intense realization that increasingly tears at my bowels: Christ is being crucified out there, and all too many Christians, all too many Catholics, are running away, or passing him by, or just looking on from a safe distance. We must—all of us—come closer to each cross that beckons us, stand with Mary right under it, look up... and meet the eyes of today's Christ.

From *Lovely in Eyes Not His* © 1988 Paulist Press.

What We Don't Have Is Time

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

Several weeks ago I experienced an exhilarating evening. By a fortunate coincidence, I was privileged to sit entranced at the Kennedy Center's Terrace Theater while a superb songstress thrilled us with her pure soprano timbre. So much that Barbara Cook sang moved me mightily, but nothing so profoundly as two lines in a song I believe was composed in part by a long-term AIDS victim:

Love is all we have for now,

what we don't have is time.¹

Such is my song today. It is not simply a plea from the darkening twilight of one preacher's existence. It is not a commercial for one-night love boats. What Barbara Cook sang with such soft anguish to a theater audience, St. Paul wrote with a passionate pen to the Christian community in Corinth. My three movements are three Cs: Corinth, Christianity, and Cook.

I

My first C: Corinth. You've just heard a reading "from the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians." I'll bet any of you dollars to doughnuts—or bourbon to bagels—that the word "Corinthians" said absolutely nothing to you. And yet St. Paul was not writing a term paper from a beach at Ephesus, not penning an episcopal pastoral with a peaceful plume to just anybody and everybody. He was writing to an explosive city called Corinth. Explosive indeed; for Corinth in Paul's time could be a showcase for D.C. and L.A., New York and Las Vegas, Paris and the Riviera all lumped into one.

What do I mean? Corinth was cosmopolitan—folks flocked there from all regions of Rome's empire. Corinth was Washington in miniature—a center of government, a primitive Pentagon. Corinth was commerce writ large, made for merchants. For sports, Corinth could compete with Seoul 1988; its Isthmian games rivaled the Olympics. For lust and license, Corinth would make today's Sin City look like a Trappist monastery. "To live like a Corinthian" came to mean "wallow in immorality." Corinth's patron saint? Aphrodite, goddess of love—her temple serviced by a thousand prostitutes. Wealth? In Corinth Donald Trump would have had a field day. Bud Light? In one small area diggers have discovered 33 taverns.²

This was the city to which Paul had carried Christianity back in 51. Within 18 months he had an exciting community of converts. Five years later he had to write them a vigorous letter—the letter that was announced in the short selection read to you. Why did he write? In large measure because he was upset. In large measure because Corinth's newborn Christians were torn by cliques, coteries, factions. Perhaps as many as four. A better educated minority was entranced by Apollos: He knew the Old Testament inside out, and he hypnotized his hearers. A second group boasted a particular empathy with Peter, prince of the apostles. A third crowd, the majority, poor freedmen and slaves, rocked and rolled for Paul, apostle of dear old Corinth. A fourth faction seemed to think they were closer to Christ than anyone outside their graced little group.³

II

That situation summons up my second C: Christianity. How does Paul react to Corinth's cliques? In two ways. First, he lets them "have it," right from his Christian spleen. Factions founded on favorite ministers of Christ? "I belong to Paul," "I belong to Apollos," "I belong to Peter"? And some Christians "belong to Christ"? "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (1 Cor 1:12–13).

Less angrily, Paul tells the Corinthians what he told you today. You "were all baptized into one body" (1 Cor 12:13). And that one body is the body of the one Christ. All of you together are like the human body—the body of a man or a woman—like your own body.

Take a look at yourself. Recognize it or not, that body is a work of art. And it's a work of art precisely because it is many-splendored, precisely because you're shaped of so many different parts. Picture yourself as all hands or feet, all heart or liver, all bone or blood, all rib or rump. Not only would you look funny; it just wouldn't work.

What Paul is saying in non-medical language is that each of you is a single body because all your members, whatever they are, have a role to play in that body. Your blood system, if laid end to end, would circle the equator four times;⁴ but even your pinkie, if fractured, would play havoc with your jump shot. Three million sweat glands cool your body; but even the mucus that lines your stomach keeps you from eating yourself alive.⁵

So, Paul tells his Corinthian converts, so is it with the body of Christ, with the Church. No one of you can say to any other, "I have no need of you" (1 Cor 12:21). Of course there are different roles: "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?" (vv. 29—30). Obviously not; but, my cherished Corinthians, each of you is an important part of this one body, this one Christ—"no discord," only "the same care for one another" (v. 25). It reminds me that a century ago some cynic asked Cardinal Newman what good the laity were for. "Well," answered the Cardinal with devastating simplicity, "the Church would surely look strange without them."

But at this point—having listed the prominent positions, the center-stage functions, in the Church—Paul rocks Corinth with a master stroke, utterly unexpected: "I will show you a still more excellent way" (v. 31). More important than any of the offices, any of the gifts, he has just listed. More important than being Peter or Paul; more important for the Church than being pope; more important, believe it or not, than being a Jesuit! And what is that?

III

You're asking for my third C: Cook. Paul's "more excellent way" is the couplet that Barbara Cook winged into my heart that Friday evening:

Love is all we have for now,
what we don't have is time.

Two pithy, poignant expressions here. First, "love is all we have for now." Now, composers and chanteuse were quite aware that there is more to living than loving. All you need for proof is to lift your eyes to South Africa and Soviet Armenia,⁶ to the Middle East and the north of Ireland, to Wall Street and the Bowery. What I find in their song, perhaps read into their words, is a realization that the words are more profound than they sound. Whether it's AIDS or your career, whether it's cancer or Christianity, when the chips are down and you're talking about life-and-death, when it's a question of what it means to be human, then what makes the difference is love. St. Paul put it another way to the Corinthian Christians: "So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13:13).

It's "the greatest" for your world and for your Church. For your world. You see, love is the one gift that can make any area of this world more human than was Corinth. Other gifts can help: economics and education, health and housing, equal rights and Medicare. But without love—unless deep down we care; unless Wall Street is more than a counting house, Georgetown more than a springboard for success; unless love of law is subordinate

to the law of love, medicine less for profit than for people; unless competition is less compelling than compassion, technology not simply science but the art of aiding; unless money and power and fame serve not self but the other; and yes, unless we live Christ's command, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart...love your neighbor as [you love] yourself" (Mt 22:37, 39)—the most powerful nation on earth will be little more than a contemporary Corinth.

And love is "the greatest" for your Church, for the body of Christ. We have our differences, God knows—differences that threaten to tear one Church into more factions than Paul ever imagined. A pulpit is not the place to argue those differences—from contraception to the kiss of peace, from women's ordination to homosexual activity. But a pulpit is the place to proclaim this gospel: If our differences destroy our love, we are no longer Christians. I may indeed go to church, receive Christ in hand or on tongue, but without love the rest of it is a charade, play-acting. And when the final judgment is passed on me, it will rest on one four-letter word: Did you really love?

With that question goes the second line of the couplet: "what we don't have is time." That's true not only of the AIDS-afflicted; it harasses all of us. Not in an obvious sense. After all, I can move from hate to love in an hour, a moment; God's grace is not measured by a clock. And some folk for some reason are given decades to discover love. The point is, I cannot promise myself time. Neither could the 50,000-plus who perished in Soviet Armenia's earthquake. Neither can you—however young, however strong.

More positively, I lay before you the urgent plea in Psalm 95: "O that today you would hearken to [God's] voice!" (Ps 95:7). Today. Etch that word on your mind and heart. You can remember yesterday; you can imagine tomorrow; today alone can you live. It's the supreme importance of the present moment. We are tempted to tolerate the routine or rupture of the present, with an eye to the rapture of the future; to endure today's travail, in hope of tomorrow's ease. Never for a day have I forgotten a framed sign I read decades ago in a convent chapel: "Priest of God, say this Mass as if it were your first Mass, as if it were your last Mass, as if it were your only Mass." Something similar can be said to each of you each day: "Child of God, live this day as if it were your first day, as if it were your last day, as if it were your only day."

So too for your loving. Not a tension-packed day into which you crowd all your caring; that way madness lies. To be aware that "what we don't have is time" is rather to realize that each dawn ushers in a new creation; each moment is a fresh chance to be Christlike; each human you touch, an invitation to be better than you are. It makes so much more sense than two blood sisters refusing to speak to each other for half a century. It alone makes impossible another Auschwitz, another *Mississippi Burning*.⁷ It alone makes the difference between a jungle and a city, between people and educated animals, between marriage and an armistice, between a Catholic collegiate community and a campus clogged with six thousand intellectuals hell-bent on self-satisfaction.

Good friends: A well-known singer and bandleader, now 81, wrote in his autobiography: "Women, horses, cars, clothes. I did it all. And do you know what that's called, ladies and gentlemen? It's called living."⁸ Wouldn't it be more satisfying if someday you could say about yourself: "People—those I liked and those I didn't—all people, but especially the homeless and the hopeless, the naked and the hungry, the lonely and the unloved, the brown and the black, the drug-addicted and the AIDS-afflicted. I did *not* do it all, but I did what I could. And do you know what that's called, ladies and gentlemen? It's called...

loving."

Love is all we have for now,
what we don't have is time.

From Dare to Be Christ © 1991 Paulist Press.

Who Are We? What Are We To Do?

By [Rev. Walter J. Burghardt, SJ](#)

This evening we are blest. Why? Simply because the two New Testament passages just proclaimed to you fit into a neat package handmade for a homily. St. Paul tells us who we are, and Jesus tells us what we are to do. Christianity in a nutshell. So then, a word from Paul, a word from Jesus, and ... a word from me.

I

First, the passage from Paul. God's apostle to the nations reveals in lyrical language who we are. Go back a bit. When a God whose name is Love decided to share that love, our incredibly imaginative God had in mind not billions of isolated humans scattered around a globe, basically independent each of every other. God had in mind a people, a human family, a community of persons, a body genuinely one.

That divine dream the story of Eden reveals. Whether you see Adam and Eve as a real-life situation or as God-inspired fiction, you discover in the Garden of Eden God's plan for human unity. For a brief moment reminiscent of Camelot, four levels of unity prevailed.

(1) There was a remarkable oneness, an intimate harmony, between the first humans and God. (2) There was a striking unity within the first humans, an inner poise, a sanity and serenity inside each. (3) There was a unique oneness between man and woman, between person and person, no war between humans, no hate, no "mine and thing," on, "I and thou." (4) There was a breathtaking unity, a surprising peace, between the human and the rest of God's creation: Man and woman touched things, nature, with reverence, as a gift of God, lived in concord with the animal world.

Such was God's dream for humanity. You know what sin did to that divine dream. It devastated the human family on those four levels. (1) When love fled from Adam's soul and Eve's, the God of love fled with it. (2) When love fled, a schizophrenia took its place: Man and woman were divided each within, the one person at once image of God and image of Evil. (3) When love fled, humans were sundered from humans: "Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him." Cain asked God, "Am I my brother's keeper?" (Gen 4:8-9). (4) Sin shattered the oneness that linked the human to earth: "Cursed is the ground because of you" (3:17).

St. Paul tells us how God's shattered dream was restored in God's own Son. "For just as the [physical] body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, Jews or Greeks, slaves or free-and we were all made to drink of one Spirit" (I Cor 12:12-13). The four levels of God's dream are reshaped. (1) "God's love," Paul thunders, "has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). (2) No longer need we be torn within; from that schizophrenia, Paul cries, we have been rescued, "thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (7:25). (3) Because Christ died for each of us, we can live at peace with one another. In fact, we are commanded to do so: "A new commandment I give you: Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34). (4) We can, with good will and God's grace,

touch the earth and all its creatures with renewed reverence, conscious that the earth and its fulness are the Lord's, aware that we are not earth's despots but its stewards.

All this we can be because we are one body, all of us members of Christ. Different functions, but all of us precious. Of this body alone can we declare, must declare: No one can say to any other, "I have no need of you" (1 Cor 12:21). Not pope to peasant, not rich to poor, not priest to lay, not the bold and beautiful to the raped and ravaged. In fact, to credit St. Paul, "the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (v. 22). A mystery, yes; but the divine mystery of grace. In Christ, with Christ, the weaker I am, the stronger I am. Believe it! But stronger because we are a single body.

II

All of which takes me to point 2: If Paul tells us who we are, Jesus tells us what we are to do-what we are to do as the body of Christ.

Today's Gospel declares it. Here is Jesus proclaiming his program as God in our flesh, telling us why he came to earth: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for [the Lord] has anointed me; He has sent me to preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release for prisoners and sight for the blind, to send the downtrodden away relieved" (Lk 4:18). It is a summary way of stating a program we call biblical justice. Matthew had already grasped this, for he applied to Jesus the prophecy in Isaiah: "I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.... He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick until he brings justice to victory" (Mt 12:18-20; see Isa 42:1-4).

Not simply or primarily the justice we humans stress: Give each man, woman, and child what each deserves, because it can be proven from philosophy or has been written into law. God's justice includes that, but goes beyond it. God's justice is a wondrous word: fidelity. Fidelity to what? To relationships, to responsibilities. What relationships, what responsibilities? To God, to people, to the earth.

Biblical justice is not something we add on to our Christian religion. It focuses our essential Catholic living. What concrete demands does God's justice lay on us? (1) Love God above all else, with all your heart and soul, all your mind and strength. (2) Love each human being like another self, as an image of God, love each as Jesus loves me, especially those who are less fortunate, who share more of Jesus' crucifixion than of his resurrection. How will we be judged? "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Mt 25:35-36). (3) Touch every facet of God's creation, in sky, on earth, in the sea, with reverence, as a trace of God, as a gift of God, mindful that we are not despots but stewards of what belongs to someone else. As the Psalmist sings, "The earth is the Lord's, and all that is in it" (Ps 24:1).

Here is our basic spirituality; in fact, on this our salvation depends. Salvation as preached in Scripture takes place within a single, all-embracing community: God, people, earth.

III

From Paul, who we are: members of Christ's body. From Jesus, what we- are to do: live biblical justice. Now a word from your homilist. Let me bring Paul and Jesus down to everyday Catholic reality. As I crisscross our country, read our newspapers, listen to different Catholic voices, two impressions will not leave me.

Impression number 1: Paul would be worried about the body of Christ he described. You might recall what Paul wrote to the Christians of Corinth: "It has been reported to me, my brothers and sisters, that there are quarrels among you" (1 Cor 1:11). I realize that in a body composed of fallible humans there will always be disagreement; Catholic history confirms it. Where Paul would be unhappy is (1) where we hurl accusations at one another with little or no foundation in fact; (2) where our disagreement destroys love; (3) where internal, intramural warfare keeps the body of Christ from focusing on its mission

outward: "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Mt 28:19).

Believe me, I do not have Holy Trinity in mind; the last thing you need at this point is a Jesuit taking pot shots at you. My concern is more general, as wide as our nation.

Examples. An influential Catholic newspaper in Minnesota constantly levels unfounded charges against prominent Catholics who do not meet its ultraconservative criteria. (You may be interested to know that, for the Wanderer, my faith is like a weather vane, changing with each passing wind.) Before Cardinal Bernardin's Common Ground initiative got off the ground, it was publicly attacked by three cardinals. One of our most learned and faithful Scripture scholars, Raymond Brown, is picketed when he lectures, was accused by a Catholic columnist of harboring a death wish over the Christ Child. Our differences on burning doctrinal issues. give little evidence of the love that should pervade all Catholic disagreements; prochoice versus prolife is simply one example. And the lack of respect for John Paul 11's role in the body of Christ can only make the body less effective. And on it goes. I fear that the body of Christ does not yet resonate to Paul's declaration, "If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it" (1 Cor 12:26).

Impression number 2: All too many Catholics live, all too many priests preach, ethical justice alone: Give others simply what they deserve. Important, but not enough. The justice Jesus commanded is to love all others as Jesus has loved and loves us. Not an invitation; a command. Not easy. Many Catholics still see social justice as an option-take it or leave it. Others claim it has nothing to do with the faith. Still others see it as the tears of bleeding hearts for the lazy on welfare. Most Catholics leave it to the Office of Justice and Peace.

Few Catholics realize that it is our faith that is doing justice. Many fail to see that genuine Catholic living is a three-legged stool: believing, worshiping, and loving. Love in action. Take that leg away from the three-legged stool and your faith crashes. Such faith, says the Letter of James, is "lifeless" (Jas 2:17). There are two "great" commandments: Love God above all else, love each human like another self.

May I suggest, paradoxically, that these days are good days for the body of Christ to act like a healthy body? Like a body stimulated by the Holy Spirit? Perhaps once again a child will save us. A swift explanation.

Last year the United Nations Children's Fund issued its annual report, *The State of the World's Children 1997*.¹ It featured one harrowing issue: child labor. Across the world more than 250 million children are little more than slaves, many of them at physical, mental, and emotional risk from hazardous and exploitative labor. In Malaysia children work 17-hour days on rubber plantations, exposed to insect and snake bites. In Tanzania children pick coffee and inhale pesticides. In Portugal children as young as 12 work in heavy construction. In Morocco they hunch at looms for long hours and little pay. In India's Sivakasi, children in the matchstick-making industry, some barely five years old, inhale dust from chemical powders and strong vapors. In Brazil little boys scavenge perilously in garbage dumps, sell waste products for recycling. In Nepal children carry bricks on their heads from fields to trucks, 25 cents for every 100 trips. In the U.S. children are exploited in a garment-industry sweatshop.

In developing countries more than 12.5 million children under five die each year, nine million from causes we have learned to control. In the richest country on earth, our most vulnerable are our children; the younger you are, the poorer you are; 16 million children live below the poverty line; perhaps a million sleep on America's streets each night; 1.5 million unborn are forcibly prevented each year from ever gracing a crib.

Just this new year, can we not reveal to the world a body of Christ that suffers together for each and every child? Twenty-five years after *Roe v. Wade*, can this body of Christ not shout in unison that each child, born or unborn, is an image of the Christ Child? Might not

each Catholic family reach out in love to one child unloved, one child at risk? Just possibly, such caring may help to heal some wounds in this vulnerable body of Christ.

From Christ in Ten Thousand Places © 1999 by the New York Province of the Society of Jesus. Published by Paulist Press.

Third Sunday in Ordinary Time, cycle C

By [Don L. Fischer](#)

SCRIPTURE: Nehemiah 8:2-4a,5-6, 8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-30; Luke 1:1-4,4:14-21

Perhaps one of the most misunderstood aspects of the spiritual life involves where we think the real power resides. I believe it's common for most of us who grow up in a Christian denomination to begin our understanding of what God wants from us by focusing on the area of self-discipline. Much like children are told by their parents to do things they don't really understand (they don't really know why they can or cannot do something) many people do the things they are told to do because of the authority of the person speaking and often because they know there is some punishment coming if they don't do the things they are told to do. In those kinds of situations, people are using their own strength, their own self-discipline, their own ability to control their feelings and emotions and basically tailoring their life after what is demanded, after what is asked - and hoping for some kind of reward. It's the beginning for most of us in the spiritual journey. Hopefully, all of us will grow out of that oversimplification of what God is asking us to do.

One of the ways we grow out of this is through experience. The more we understand the things God is asking us to do- and we try to do these things out of our own power and strength - the more we find ourselves coming up short. We fail. We continue to experience our inability to do it on our own. We can see very clearly this is the way that the Israelite people went. They struggled to follow the law. And they couldn't do it. In this first reading, where the law is the focus of this passage from Nehemiah, we see an entire gathering of people where there is a tremendous amount of love and respect for the law of God. People understood for the first time that they were being given a great piece of wisdom: This is the way God invites us to live. And if we can live this way, we are going to find the fullness and the goodness we are all seeking. God invites the Israelite people to live a certain way of life. What I love about the story is that these people were prostrate, a symbol of great reverence and honoring this piece of wisdom God is giving them called the law. They are listening to it explained; they are listening to what they are supposed to do. I can't imagine what this would be like if you were the one proclaiming the law, and all of a sudden, you heard a sound in the room. The sound was the gentle sound of everyone - children and adults - weeping. Everyone crying. The prophet wants to say very clearly, "Wait a minute. This is wrong. You're not supposed to be sad. You're not supposed to be crying. You are supposed to rejoice. The real power that you have is that you rejoice in this gift of God telling you what to do. Don't weep." I was thinking, "What would make them weep?" And, I related this to some of my own experiences in pastoral ministry. In my office, there is a box of Kleenex. In my reconciliation chapel, there is also a box of Kleenex.

It's not unusual to be talking to someone about their spiritual life and to have them cry. To have them break down. After doing this for so many years, I will tell you that one of the most common sources of those tears, it seems to me, is people who recognize that they haven't been able to do it. That there is some level of shame or guilt or even sometimes a great sadness over the simple fact that they feel there is a God who is asking them to do something - and they can't do it. It's not so much shame or guilt that they feel; rather, it's that this is just too hard. It's just too difficult. They feel, "I can't do it," and they weep. Into this sense of our inability to do the things we are called to do, there is the development in Scripture of a new image of what we are to work for. Instead of working to be a well-functioning, fine-tuned, lean machine that is able to accomplish all the things God asks, Jesus comes along with a completely different vision of what God is asking. The vision is this: "I want you to recognize your powerlessness, your inability to do this work. I want you to feel that without weeping, even though weeping may be the first response to it. But begin to rejoice in a simple truth, 'God needs us to be powerless in order to empower us.'" He will not trust his power to the powerful. The most interesting aspect of the message of Jesus is how it turned the world upside down. How Jesus kept saying that things were not what people expected.

One of the prominent elements throughout the whole of salvation history is that God always seemingly chose the people who were weak to do his work. Whenever Moses called his people, they were always looking to the oppressed. God did not call the Egyptians. He called the Israelites. He called the slaves. He called the downtrodden. He called the broken. We can see this throughout all of Scripture. The disciples were anything but the most sleek and strong spiritual leaders of their time. They were ordinary men who had a very difficult time adjusting to the teaching of Jesus. They failed pretty consistently throughout their training. It's obvious that the disciples were not that skilled at being able to do whatever they were told. They struggled. They failed. They lost it. They were caught up in the wrong things. They wanted the seats at the right hand and the left hand of God. They wanted Jesus to tailor his ministry to a different way because they didn't think his ministry was going in the right direction. They had a better idea than God had. So typically human! We sense that we have a God who slowly reveals the fullness of his message to his people. And the first part of the message which is, "Do what I say," is met with our weaknesses. We realize we can't do it. Then comes the next revelation of God. It is basically, "I will set up a new covenant with you."

This new covenant is different. The old covenant was based on the law; the new covenant is based on a work that God wants to do inside of us called transformation. The way he expresses this concept is so beautiful. In the reading from Nehemiah, the people are prostrate, listening and honoring the law, which is being proclaimed by someone else. God now says: "I would like to write that law on your hearts." What does this mean? It sounds to me like he is going to change our hearts. He is going to change our longings. He is going to fix something in us, do something within us, that no longer demands that we have to be told what to do. We are more in touch with an interior wisdom that knows what to do. That doesn't have to be told what to do. That doesn't have to be coerced to do it. That doesn't have to be promised something good if we do it, and promised some negative retribution if we don't do it. All of a sudden, we become the law. That's why the law is no longer necessary. It doesn't go away. It just goes away as an entity that lives out there. It enters into us. That process is called transformation.

There is a way in which the Scripture talks about this transformation in a very positive way. It speaks about transformation, using the word "anointed." When someone is

anointed, it means they have been given a gift. A Spirit. Anointings were very common in the early Church, and they are still common in our sacramental life. They convey an image of giving medicine, power, transformation to someone. It's like an anointing is a way of empowering people. The empowerment I am speaking of today is not power that we possess in ourselves. It is power that dwells in us. We are always conscious of our weakness, but we know that this power of Jesus resides in us. We look at Jesus entering fully into his ministry. The first words of the adult Jesus are found in the passage from Luke. He is doing his regular task of reading in the temple. All of a sudden, Jesus reads this passage from Isaiah that is all about transformation, about being anointed, about being given some kind of strength. Jesus simply says, "It's now going to happen." I think Jesus is saying that this is happening in his life, and he is going to stay and show us what it is like. He wants us to feel and understand it, because eventually it will happen to us. Jesus is the model of how we are to live. He stays powerless, he stays unable on his own to accomplish all that is before him. But he recognizes a power that dwells within him, an anointing that has been given to him, and out of that anointing he is able to do the work. What is so interesting is that in the process (and this is such a mystery), Jesus seems to fail.

How could we show that Jesus is a human being who is unable to accomplish all that he sets out to do, and yet, as a spiritual being, he is extraordinarily successful? When we look at the life of Christ, we say, "Okay, he worked with twelve people. He was a good teacher. Was he really a good teacher? Did he really convince these people of who he was? Was he able to move them?" No. Not he himself. Not in his experience. It seems that when Jesus' work was finished and the final exam came around, they all flunked - except for John. So what is that saying? That it was all their fault? It says something so interesting about the way we are to imagine our spiritual lives. We are not necessarily called to be successful on all levels. Certainly, that success would be very dangerous to people if they were to keep this humble attitude that was so clearly a part of Christ's life. In the reading from St. Paul, we learn that this body, what we call the Church, represents Christ. Christ is like the body of the Church. In this body, there are all kinds of different people with different tasks. What Paul says about these tasks is that each person is given his task. Comparison, wanting to be like someone else, is as insane as the eye wanting to be an ear. It's a great metaphor. Paul is trying to invite us to recognize that all of us have our small part to play. But our part is essential. When we believe in the work we are called to do, without having to be the whole body or the whole source, when we are in that disposition - then Christ is truly present. Then we have this extraordinary gift called the Church. The Church is the ministry of Christ continuing to work in this world. And its work is to invite people into a disposition of powerlessness, recognizing that they are filled with Spirit. The Spirit descends into each one of us, giving us the capacity to fulfill a task. Not all the tasks. A task. We remain in a place of humility. And a place of great gratitude. When Nehemiah said, "We are supposed to be rejoicing in this law," I believe that when we finally do see what the real law is, what the plan is, it does bring great joy. Then, there can be no more weeping. There is no more wailing. And no more sadness.

Printed by Liturgy.com™

© OCP 2003-2009, All Rights Reserved.