



Homily of John Rate msc

Feast of The Body of Christ

June 2007

Today's feast is all about the human body. Our beautiful, God-fashioned human bodies. Today's feast, The Body of Christ, is all about loving, respecting and reverencing the Body of Jesus and the bodies of all human beings, beginning, of course, with our own. How can we truly say we love the body of Christ if we have not really befriended our own body? And how can we truly say we reverence the body of Christ, if we do not really honour and respect the bodies of our brothers and sisters in the human family?

It's only recently dawned on me just how comfortable Jesus was with his own body. He sat there and allowed Mary, former sex-worker, to kiss and anoint his feet. He sat and talked intimately with the woman at the well in Sychar, Samaria (remember she had at least five failed relationships), and she experienced his compassion and love as she poured out the tragic story of her life. The Gospels say Jesus loved Martha and Mary, and their brother Lazarus. The Gospels also speak of St John as "the disciple Jesus loved". Jesus was relaxed enough to listen deeply and form solid friendships with both sexes. His capacity for understanding and friendship was one of his most attractive characteristics. He attracted all sorts, but especially the poor, the outcast, the sinner. His body was touched, embraced and kissed by many, many people.

How comfortable are we within our own bodies? Our faith tells us they are temples of the Holy Spirit, but isn't it true that we often find it so hard to accept who we are? We can struggle with our height, our colour, our size, our defects, our arthritis, our ageing, our illness. We can struggle, too, to really accept and befriend our sexuality, and to know this incredible energy as God-given. Hard for the heterosexual, very hard for the homosexual or bisexual. Hard for someone from a healthy, loving home; harder for someone who has know sexual abuse. Hard for someone who's known a loving, trusting relationship; harder for someone who's slept around or who's been betrayed. It's also a real challenge to accept and befriend our attractions and our repulsions, our phobias and our obsessions, our loves and our hates. We are not angels; we always have feet of clay. We must befriend the clay in our make-up. We must befriend our bodies. As the psalmist says:

"It was you, Lord, who created my inmost self,
and put me together in my mother's womb;
for all these mysteries I thank you;
for the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works".

Jesus says: "This is my body, broken for you". Lord teach us to reverence always our own body.

As we grow more comfortable with our own body, we reach out more confidently to other people...It is profoundly Catholic to love and reverence other people as we love and reference Christ, and especially to see in the poor and the afflicted the suffering face of the Lord himself. Didn't He say to us: "In so far as you did this to the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it for me"?

Today's feast challenges us again to see Christ's body not just in the host, but in all our brothers and sisters, for together we are the body of Christ. This is who we truly are – Jesus is the head, and we are his body. It's no accident that Catholics have always built Maternity Hospitals to care for women giving birth; nor that we've moved into the Hospice area to care for people who are dying. It is no accident that Catholics know instinctively that abortion isn't right and euthanasia is not the answer.

We Catholics, with our sense of the body and our reverence for life, have an almost instinctive awareness that the Body of Christ at the altar is the same Body of Christ in every human being – and that every human being truly deserves our reverence and respect, no matter who they are or what they have done.

Fr Tony and I saw an extraordinary documentary during the week, a film I really wasn't looking forward to seeing at all because it was all about the horrific career of a pedophile priest, Fr Oliver O'Grady, and the incompetence, deceit and cover up of many of the diocesan authorities in central California over a 25 year period. In the film "Deliver us from evil" we hear the heart breaking story of 3 families who had befriended O'Grady and whose lives were shattered when they realized what had happened to their children. We listen to the victims, now well and truly adults, and how their lives have been so tortured and difficult as they try to come to terms with what has happened. Amazingly, we hear from O'Grady himself, now laicized and living back in Ireland – his lack of self awareness and remorse is chilling (a number of times when he spoke there were gasps of disbelief in the theatre). We see tapes of interviews with Cardinal Mahoney and other Church representatives (I'm afraid they come across as cautious, defenders of the Church's good name, grossly negligent, and unwilling to accept responsibility). And there was one other man in the film, who walked with the victims and spoke the truth, Fr Tom Doyle, an American priest who's been speaking out about clerical sexual abuse for 2 ½ decades. We see him listening to the abused families, we hear the empathy and love in his voice, we watch him apologize on behalf of the Church to the victims and their families, and we're incredibly moved by their tears of gratitude and recognition and the warmth of the hugs all shared around. Tony and I were deeply moved by this documentary. We want to let you know about this extraordinary movie on a topic which has so wounded our Church and damaged the lives of so many. And we wanted to apologize to you for all the Church's sins in this area – all the betrayals of our brother priests, all the self serving and irresponsible behavior of ecclesiastical authorities, and above all, we want to ask forgiveness of all the victims and their families whose lives have been damaged and destroyed by clerical sexual abuse or its cover-up. Jesus says that only the truth will set us free! Interestingly, poor Fr. O'Grady was himself abused – by his brother and later by a priest – and he coped by disassociating from his feelings. The truth is often complex, and judgment is often difficult, but face into the truth we must, especially when lives are broken. On this feast of the Body of Christ let's pray for all those whose bodies (minds and hearts) need healing, and especially for all those who are struggling because they have been abused.

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