

2nd Sunday of Ordinary Time – Homily by Fr. Dan Donovan (Jan. 18, 2015)

Today's reading from **Paul's first letter to the Corinthians** contains elements of what might be called a **theology of the body**.

Here, as so often in his letters, the apostle is responding to a situation that has developed in a church that he helped to found. Reports have come to him of conflicts and tensions that have arisen as well as of abuses of various kinds that are taking place. One of these has to do with the fact that some members of the community are **going to prostitutes**. They justify their actions by downplaying the significance of the body and its instincts. Paradoxically, they see their relation to God and to God's will for them as a purely spiritual matter with few or no implications for the body.

In the biblical tradition, **the body** is understood to be central to who and what we are as **human beings**. It is no exaggeration to say that for the Bible we are our bodies. The spiritual dimension of human life, a dimension we experience in our ability to know and to love, to be free and responsible, to have friends, to pursue the truth, to enjoy beauty, to be in relationship with God - this aspect of who we are is inseparable from the body. We are what might be called **embodied spirits**.

A **Christian theology of the body** is rooted in the **doctrine of creation**. The world and everything in it come ultimately from God and have been declared by him to be good. Human beings are unique among all other embodied beings because we have been made in **God's image and likeness**. As the book of Genesis puts it: "God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them."

One of our challenges as human beings is to **develop and care for, our bodies** and in doing so to develop and care for, ourselves. We interact with one and other and with the world by means of the body. All our knowledge comes to us through our senses, through bodily organs.

The **body and the spirit** can be and often are at odds with one another. The comment of Jesus about the disciples in the garden of Gethsemani could be made at different times of all of us. *“The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.”* The traditional understanding of original sin implied not just an alienation from God but also a tension and conflict within ourselves, a darkening of the mind, a weakening of the will, an unruliness of the passions. Becoming a mature, responsible and integrated human being does not come easily. It is something that we have to work at, something that can never be taken for granted.

The salvation that Christ brought is not a salvation out of the world but rather a salvation of the world, not of the soul alone but of the whole person, soul and body together. Paul refers to this in today’s reading when he evokes the resurrection both of Jesus and of our bodies. Although we cannot imagine what form the final fulfilment of our bodies will take, we know by faith that our ultimate destiny in God will involve **our whole person**, body and soul alike.

In order to bring out the dignity and value of the body, Paul introduces another theme. “Your body,” he says, “is **a temple of the Holy Spirit.**” Although the Spirit of God directly strengthens and inspires our spirit, it has an indirect effect on the body. And so it is that the body as well as the spirit can be described by Paul as **a temple of God’s Spirit**. Such language is intended to underline the importance of the body. It matters. It matters to God and his creative and

redemptive activity. It matters to us. **Both body and soul come from God** and are destined in some way to return to him.

An important dimension of life in the body is **sexuality**. Paul sees it as integral to what and who we are, as something that is meant ideally to be integrated into a mature and loving relationship with someone to whom we are committed in a serious and life-long way in **marriage**. That this is far from being the norm for many people today is obvious. And yet the church, following the teaching of the biblical tradition and much of the common wisdom of human history, continues to hold it up as an ideal.

The biblical understanding of the body has implications not just for sexuality but for a **whole range of areas and issues**. Drugs, excessive use of alcohol, unhealthy patterns of eating, lack of exercise, smoking – all these and more represent assaults on the body. They undermine and weaken it, they expose it to disease of various kinds and, in some cases, to fatal illness.

The body is a gift, an integral part of the gift of life, a gift that has been entrusted to each and every one of us. In abusing it, we **are insulting the giver** and doing harm, not just to the body but to ourselves. Life brings its inevitable difficulties and challenges. Let us not add to them unnecessarily by abusing ourselves whether in mind or body. As Paul puts it, **our bodies are members of Christ**; we are one spirit with him.

The challenge confronting us as human beings and as Christians is to **recognize and develop the gifts of mind and body** that have been given to us. In doing so, we will be in a better position to contribute to the well-being of one another and to the flourishing of life in all its forms.