

Anatomy of the Church

In the name of him upon whom the Spirit of the Lord rested, dear friends in Christ: In the course of his mission travels around the Mediterranean world, the Apostle Paul founded many Christian congregations. Of all of them, by far the one that gave him the most headaches and sleepless nights was the one at Corinth, a city on the narrow isthmus between mainland Greece and the peninsula called Achaia. If a church can have a problem, they had it – in spades. They had misunderstandings and disputes about basic Christian doctrines. They had members engaged in various forms of sexual immorality and they weren't being called to account. They had other members fighting each other in courts over legal matters that should have been settled in house among fellow believers. Their practice of Holy Communion was a joke: the rich members stuffing the faces with food and getting drunk while poor members stood by watching them and going without. Doesn't sound very much like the Sacrament our Lord Jesus instituted, does it? That's because it wasn't.

The biggest problem, though, and the underlying cause of so many these others, was their overall lack of Christian maturity. Instead of seeing themselves as a community united in a common faith moving toward a common goal, they saw themselves as individual competitors in a spiritual game of king of the hill – each one trying to exalt and promote himself and tear down all the others. They were like children constantly arguing on a playground about which of them was the best ballplayer or had the smartest dog or whatever, except they were talking about their spiritual gifts and their religious wisdom and their relative holiness, each one claiming to be superior to the rest and demanding to be recognized by the others as such.

We heard about some of this in last week's Epistle reading. Paul was taking the Corinthians to task for their misguided attitudes. He explained how indeed the Lord distributes spiritual gifts to members of Christian congregations, some gifts which ceased after the apostolic period like prophecy, healing, and speaking in other tongues, and other gifts that continue today like the ability to teach, to administer and organize, to manage resources, and to serve in other capacities. Paul told them the Lord does not give these gifts to people so that they can boast about what they can do, but rather for the good of the whole church. Has God given you a spiritual gift? Wonderful. Use it not to exalt yourself but to serve the others in Christ-like humility. Of course, what Paul says to the Christians at Corinth, he says to us too.

This is where today's reading from Corinthians picks up. To really hammer home the point he's making, Paul uses the analogy of a human body – a body fearfully and wonderfully designed by God with all kinds of different parts performing different functions, but all equally necessary for the body's health and wellbeing.

It's really more than an analogy though. It's a profound description of our essential unity in Jesus. Together, having received the same rebirth in Baptism and the same Spirit of God, we *are* one body in him even though we are many individual members with a wide array of attributes and abilities. And if the Lord went out of his way to emphasize just how important each minute detail of the human body was to him by lingering on his masterpiece when he created our first parents, how much more can we be sure that with all the time he's taken to assemble *this* group of parts, that we are *exactly* the body he planned to be here in this time and place? Think about that: as marvelous a creation as the human body is, even more painstakingly crafted by the Lord is the body of believers that gathers here.

That means, as St. Paul tells us, that each and every one of us is an *essential* part of the whole. Everything is as God intends it to be. Not one of us is useless, or redundant, or expendable. No one here is just going along for the ride. You know, it wasn't too long ago that the appendix and tonsils were thought to be vestigial organs that served no purpose. That's been proven wrong. So just because we can't see or don't understand what a part does, doesn't mean we can do without it. In God's great design we all have a part to play in the body of Christ.

That also means that there is absolutely no room for jealousy or envy among us. Just as a human body has many different parts performing hundreds of vital functions all at once, so does the body of Christ. But unfortunately, just as we do with our bodies' functions, we tend to rank them on an imaginary scale, assigning various duties a "higher" or "lower" rating depending on how "appealing" they strike us. And when we find ourselves performing a job that we rank low on that scale, we tend to grumble against those who are doing something perceived as being higher on the scale. But even the most "unappealing" function is absolutely vital to the health of the body. To prove it, you might run this experiment: determine not to take any garbage out of your home for a month or two. You'll soon discover how noble a task removing the trash can be.

And to show us just how ridiculous rivalry within the body really is, St. Paul imagines a conversation between body parts. First it's the feet that complain. You can imagine what they'd be saying. "Hey! What's the deal here? We're down here carrying all the weight, always cramped inside these dark, tight shoes. Why is it that we're the ones who are down here where the rubber meets the road, getting dirty and sweaty all the time, and never getting any of the credit? You only think about us when we hurt. It's not fair! The hands, oh yes, the hands, they get all the interesting jobs. They get to hold things, and meet people, and scratch itches. And they get pampered: they get rings to wear, they get the manicures and soothing lotions—we're lucky to get a little foot powder down here once in a while."

Then the ears chime in: "Yeah, well, it's the eyes that get all of the glory. Have you ever heard someone say, 'My, what beautiful *ears* you have?' I doubt it. 'What big ears', yes. Then it's, 'Here comes ol' Wing-nut' or 'Heya, Dumbo'. The biggest humiliation is when we have to hook for someone's glasses. Then not only do we have to do our own job, we have to help out those pathetic weak eyes who *still* get all of the attention."

Yes, there's some humor there; but what's not so funny is that it probably doesn't take much imagination to translate these comments into something you've said or thought yourself. And it's a problem because it can be the cause of division when some part says, "Because I can't be what some other part is, or because I don't do what it does, or because I feel that my individual talents are being underutilized, or that I've already done my share, I'm not really part of the body. I'm taking my ball and going home." Paul's point is that such an attitude is entirely inappropriate, because a part cannot be independent. By definition and by God's design, it's always a part of the body.

Paul moves on then to attack this problem from its opposite side: and that is the tendency of those with the imagined "higher" functions to look down upon those with the less appealing duties. It should be clear that if there is no place for envy and jealousy, neither is there room for feelings of superiority or the denigration of others. The head cannot say to the rest of the body, "I don't need you". It's simply not true. A disembodied head can accomplish nothing; and I've already mentioned the absolute importance of even those tasks that are regarded as least.

What Paul is stressing in these passages is our total interdependence on one another. He would have us focus on our unity and common goals rather than bicker about our differences and waste effort struggling against each other. His main point is that our unity in Christ already exists; it's not something we have to create. God put us together the way he wanted us to be. He made you part of his Son when he gave you the gift of life in him—when by his Spirit he washed away your sin and put in your heart faith in Christ and the salvation he achieved for us. Now Paul is calling you back to that point, the point of entry, to turn away from thoughts of selfish independence to see yourself again as part of the body of Christ. And to think of all of your fellow Christians not as competitors, but as other components of the same body you are part of.

So instead of having feelings of jealousy, we rejoice with those whom God has given special abilities or responsibilities. And we respect and appreciate the vital service each part does, without getting irritated if while performing some “lower” task outward signs of this appreciation are small and few. In a similar way, we sympathize with and help each other in times of need. When you stub your toe or get something in your eye, your whole body responds. That's how Paul sees the body of Christ responding to a member who is hurting.

I guess the big question most people have is, “What's my part in the body?” True, there are some who deliberately avoid asking the question for fear that it might be answered. They really aren't interested in helping the body, they'd rather take it easy; but as has been observed already, God did not install any useless parts. If you're part of the body, you have a job; and if you're not doing it, you're letting everyone down. We all need to examine ourselves to see if we're not guilty of this; and if so, to repent and get to work.

Others don't ask what their part is because they already know the answer and they don't like it. I'm reminded of friend of mine who served a large church in a major metropolitan area. He told me he was constantly having families visit that were looking for a church with an active youth program for their children. They'd try this church for a while and then that one, never satisfied with what they found – but apparently they knew what they were looking for. He said, “Do you suppose that it ever occurred to them that maybe they were the ones who were supposed to *join* a church and *help build* a solid youth program?” It's always easier to criticize; but the truth is if you see something that needs to be done, there's a good chance that God is showing it to you for a reason; namely, that you should be acting upon it.

Beyond that, there are a number of duties we all share in common as members of the body of Christ. We get a list of them in today's Gospel lesson where the overall mission of Christ and his church is spelled out as plainly as it can be. These are functions that any one of us can perform: To preach the good news to the poor, bind up the broken hearted, proclaim freedom for the captives, release from darkness for the prisoners, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. We can do these things simply by sharing the story of salvation in Christ. There are more: to comfort all who mourn, to provide for those who grieve ... to rebuild what has been destroyed, to work the Lord's fields, and help to shepherd his flock. The task of Christ in the world is immense and has many facets. So as the old hymn goes, “*Let none hear you idly saying, “there is nothing I can do”, while the souls of men are dying and the Savior calls to you.*”

One more thought, and this is where the analogy breaks down a bit: in a human body the parts remain what they are. A head will always be a head; a hand always a hand. But in the body of Christ, as we mature and as the Lord grants his gifts and talents, your part may change. Students become teachers. Those who formerly followed become leaders. Those who formerly served others in need may find themselves in need of help and support. A few weeks back part of my message was about how we are by nature resistant to change. In regard

to our roles in the body of Christ we ought not be. Rather we should recognize and welcome these changes as the Lord in his perfect wisdom assigns them.

So, overall, repenting of our past mistakes and selfish feelings, and receiving again the forgiving Word of Jesus that makes us part of his holy body in this place, let's all resolve today to let Christ guide us by his Spirit, so that we can put to work the abilities he's given us to achieve for him the part he wants us to play in the service of each other. And so may we, each part gladly and thankfully doing what God desires, fulfill *this* Scripture to the glory of his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria