

## Home for the Holidays: Life in the Body

*'When I talk about her, I cannot stop!' St. Augustine*

**'How lovely is Your dwelling place, O Lord Almighty!  
My soul yearns, even faints for the courts of the Lord;  
My heart and flesh cry out for the living God.  
Even the sparrow has found a home, and the swallow a nest for herself,  
where she may have her young—a place near Your altar,  
O Lord God Almighty, my King and my God.  
Blessed are those who dwell in Your house;  
they are ever praising You.'** (PS 84: 1-4)



I have a confession to make: I love the church of Jesus Christ! Through all my wanderings, in a variety of gatherings, I have discovered the antidote to alienation, provocation to my passivity, the quieting of a restless heart. I have found Jesus in His Body. There is nowhere else I would rather be than among the faithful, focused on the Lover of our souls.

Let's start at the church's beginning: Christmas. Here we are, yet again. Inevitably, the holidays stir up questions of home and family. As one ages, both change: families-of-origin scatter then ones own members leave and cleave. Today, Annette and I face the fun challenge my parents did decades ago: who is where and when? Often the stretch between Thanksgiving and New Year's is a series of little gatherings designed to accommodate the changing face and place of family.

Families change; the nature of 'home' evolves as we do. Christmas provokes a range of emotion, from the ache of a deceased loved one to anger and regret at estranged ones to delight in new

members; holidays unfurl a backdrop of memories against which we assess this year's leanness and riches.

### **Head and Body**

How blessed we are as believers to belong to a family that may well include but that always transcends our 'house church': we belong to a holy communion of saints who draw their life from Jesus Himself! Through birth and death, the taking up and letting go of family members, we are united in an actual yet deeply mystical Body of which Christ Jesus is our head.

How blessed are we who know our home away from home! Those who claim the church as 'home' forsake the false notion that personal devotion to Jesus is enough. How can the Head, which is Christ, exist without His Body? We know Him through them, 'the saints who are in the land, the glorious ones in whom is all [our] delight.' (PS 16: 3)

### **The Body and Wholeness**

I discovered my need for the Body early on. My life was disintegrated. I had come out of a community founded on the deception that same-gender members could create whole units. The truth: if two members share the same set of 'gifts', then trying to exchange those gifts is going to frustrate the gift-giving. Nature and good theology concur. A community of one gender cannot create new life; that requires 'otherness'.

The foundation for my wholeness lay not in dating women but rather in the dethroning of self that occurred in the 'otherness' of Christ's Body. By His grace, I submitted to a God I could not see with a group of people which a proud man like me would not have chosen to gather with. Yippee!

Pope Benedict describes far better than I the healing power of subordination to Christ through His Body. 'The Church of Jesus Christ is never my Church but always His Church. Indeed the essence of conversion lies precisely in the fact that I cease to pursue a party of my own that safeguards my interests and conforms to my tastes but that I put myself in His hands, a member of His Body, the Church.' (*Called to Communion*)

### **Merciful Body**

The Vineyard Christian Fellowship was the ground on which Annette and I fell in love. Within that holy family, we as a couple started our own. What a great foundation. The Vineyard possessed the special grace of Mercy: the mercy Jesus gave us for our sins that resulted in worship—simple love songs—that we sang to Jesus in gratitude for His kindness to us.

Jesus' mercy also expressed itself in healing. We as His Body believed that our Head wanted to heal people if we would pray. He was merciful. We trusted Him and prayed for people. Mercy healed us. Such healing was always accompanied by musical worship. Both flowed from Mercy, the foundation of the Vineyard and our own spirituality.

### **Praying the Truth**

We moved east to Kansas City to join with IHOP (International House of Prayer). We came to give our gift of healing to the sexually broken there but what we received was much greater. IHOP is founded on intercessory prayer and biblical prophecy: God's word spoken in season to rouse His people to do His will. IHOP prepared us for the battle ahead; it granted us the discipline of corporate intercession and the Word that awakens sleepy Christians, a combination through which we combat the deadly blend of perversion and unbelief in today's culture.

IHOP and the Vineyard: two powerful expressions of Christ's Body that 'married' in us Mercy and Truth. In our transition out of IHOP, we served at a local church, New Day, which afforded us a loving pastor and a solid context for Living Waters.

### **Body Aches**

Yet an ache for home remained in us. Our hearts were fixed on Christ our Head, we worked hard in His Body, yet we grew weary of the ever changing dimensions of local church life. Perhaps that is the gift of Protestant churches (we can change!), as well as its liability (the ever fracturing Body).

Regardless, our hearts longed for a home in the Body where we could lay our heads on His.

Annette and I diverged here; she made her home in a turned-on Anglican Church where our son Nick became a pastor. It is a privilege to accompany my family to worship there and to witness the knitting in of both Nick and Annette.

I proceeded to explore the Roman Catholic Church and eventually became a confirmed Catholic. That has been hard for Annette and me, and at times we struggle against the divide. He who holds all things together holds us together too. (Col. 1: 17)

My new parish home has deepened my understanding of the Body as 'home.' I could write for days on the marvel of her mysteries, particularly the Eucharist. Through daily Mass, I partake heartily of the Word and of the wounded God whose brokenness is always my healing.

Yet such mystical union could become self-serving, an essentially vertical act. My hunger for God is only satisfied if we the Body are broken for one another, known in our weaknesses, submitting to each other out of reverence for Him (Eph. 5: 21) and thus being healed. (James 5:16)

Home is where we heal; I need honest exchange of weakness for holy strength where I worship. How grateful I am for truthful priests who facilitate confession. Yet we need more than that. To overcome life-dominating sins and wounds, we need each other. It is not optimal (though understandable) to separate one's spiritual home from the healing we can access from one another in this one Body.

The healing authority of the laity is a truth that is alien to most Catholics. And my becoming Catholic has alienated me from many of my evangelical comrades. So I take heart that this year

Pope Benedict initiated a Year of Faith. Its purpose is to raise up afresh the foundations of our faith for all to see; I trust this shall include a renewed mobilization of lay persons like me to manifest Jesus, one to another, in the one Body.

My prayer of faith: 'Jesus, make each church a healing home for the sexually broken!' Toward that end, I draw strength and courage from the Christmas mysteries.

### **Mary: A Type of Church**

Who better exemplifies faithful surrender than Mary, Jesus' mother? All she could offer to God was herself. She had no other pedigree: only faith. We are called to be like her. After all, the church itself is an essentially feminine vessel composed of men and women yielded to God for the purpose of bearing fruit through Him.

When I was Protestant, I always loved Mary and instinctively knew that we neglected her honor. She is an exemplary disciple for two reasons: her radical obedience in saying yes to bearing Christ, and her unparalleled communion with Jesus from conception to His tomb. There lies her greatness: intimate communion combined with humble deference towards her Son.

Just like the church itself. The beauty of the Body is in vain if we do not lift up Jesus so He can draw all to Himself. Mary leads the way here, and thus becomes a type of the church, 'its exemplary realization' (CCC 967) and 'the mirror in which the whole church is reflected.' (deLubac)

To be clear, Christ is her Head too. How silly ones are who confuse her greatness with deity. The Catholic Church shoots straight here: 'Mary's function in no way obscures or diminishes the authority of Christ but rather shows its power.' (CCC 970) Under His headship, Mary bears witness to the whole church as to what we can be as yielded vessels to the Father: bearers of Christ, who like her commit to manifesting Him always.

Blessed is she among women, and blessed are we who concur. Through her witness, I take heart in my efforts to become a home for others in this One body.

### **'Salient' Joseph**

Mary's greatness was realized by the faithful love of husband Joseph. You could also say that Jesus' birth depended upon Joseph's faithfulness. I define him as salient, which means equal parts authority and nurture, strength and benevolence. How else can you describe this man who employed his power to shield his bride and holy child from destruction?

Consider the forces against the young family. Joseph had not fathered Mary's child, leaving both him and Mary in the darkness of a social shame inconceivable in our day. Joseph did all within his power to protect her from such cruelties. He denied his own shame (not yet knowing the child's parentage) for her honor.

On the strength of a mere dream, some prophecies, and a star, he mobilized all he had to guide mother into granting Christ secure entry into this world. Then quietly, carpenter Joseph mentored Jesus in the work of his hands.

We know of Joseph's salience mainly by inference: how his son wept over the lost and purged corrupt temples, lingered with children yet forged resolutely toward Jerusalem. We witness Joseph's salience most clearly in the beauty of his wife and the virtue of his son.

Tender and powerful, nearly hidden from view yet leaving a legacy that saved the world: not a bad role model for any Christian seeking to build up the Body. I look to Joseph with renewed intention this Christmas. How well do I use my power to empower the weak and grant them place in this one Body?

### **Manifesting Christ in this One Body**

God entrusted Mary and Joseph to manifest Christ. Through His mercy, we have now become His Body. My challenge and yours is how our presence in that Body best manifests His headship. Are we making the Body a better place—purer, truer, more merciful through our membership? Are we helping make Christ's house a home for others?

We each must answer that question with concrete, Spirit-led decisions. I offered my gift--the way I manifest Jesus—to my parish. At first, the pastor resisted a group for the sexually broken. Then I suggested a teaching/prayer group focused on the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church. He agreed. Over the course of our weeks together, God knit together a small band committed to a healing Body.

We continue to meet and now include prayer for other sexual issues. Outside the group, I delight in meeting members of that 'band' as we await the Eucharist. We the broken are being built together to become something beautiful for God.

Similarly, Annette and I are running a pilot group in order to revise Living Waters. We have been working through the new material with a group composed of Protestant and Catholic members.

Jesus unites us with our common desire to be good gifts to one another as men and women. Several members are church leaders who want to see Living Waters flow into their churches. God is healing us so that we might bring more healing to His house.

Home. Christmas reminds us that family should include Christ's Body. May we gather to adore Him and bless the new life growing among us. We are His very Body: living, growing, healing to become a refuge for the broken and a resting place for His glory.