

Building Up the Body of Christ - Reflections on religious life in the third millennium

The second decade of the third millennium can look like both the best of times & the worst of times to be thinking about building up of the body of Christ. It looks like the worst of times because that body has perhaps never looked so battered, bruised and fragile. We are living with the results of devastating scandal from within the church, and widespread contempt or indifference towards it from outside. Our national media and large parts of contemporary society are hostile to any mention of faith or religion, except as a barely tolerated private eccentricity among consenting adults. At the same time, it is also the best of times. The proliferation of self-help industries, of new age spiritualities and of process-based theories of management and group dynamics shows that people are hungry for what helps them to connect to themselves, to one another, and to some higher purpose in life than a spiral of ever-increasing and pointless consumption. If many of our young people resist the attraction of organized religion, they are often passionate and generous in their commitment to causes for the betterment of the world. If they see little reason for regular attendance at liturgies they experience as lifeless and empty of meaning, they will spend hours in prayer and meditation once they understand their need and their innate capacity for it. If they are reluctant to sign up to the communities which we have formed in parish, religious life or national movements, they have a strong sense of belonging. They want to belong, even if they don't want to join.

Into this world we come, as women called long ago to the religious life, trying to live it faithfully and with positive energy. How do we build up the body of Christ within this context? First of all, we need to look at our own bodies, at the way in which we personally embody the 'hope that is ours'. It is part of the message of Catholic Christianity that matter matters, that there is and needs to be an embodied dimension to the faith we proclaim. The signs that we give, the signs we live need to be incarnated in our actual, physical lives and the lives of those around us. This is why Jesus himself took on human flesh, so that we could see and touch and know in our bodies the love that God has for us and the saving power that is at work in our lives.

My understanding of religious life is that it is the embodiment of a vocation built on an intimate, personal relationship of each one with God in Jesus Christ, incarnated within the vows. Jesus took on our human flesh in all its fullness. This means that we can experience and understand our 'ordinary' life: our work, our skills, our relationships, our capacity for playfulness & enjoyment as consecrated & a means to holiness. This understanding of the Incarnation sees a huge importance in what is apparently insignificant. Jesus didn't just save the world by dying on the cross & rising again. He saved it by living a human life. Tradition tells us that Jesus lived until he was 33. We hear about his birth, there's a fleeting appearance at the time of his Bar Mitzvah, then a period between 18 months & 3 years of his public life. Otherwise nothing. What was he doing all that time? He was saving the world by doing ordinary things well, and this is how we are called to share in his saving work.

We do not exist for ourselves as individuals or as a body - we exist in order to be sent. That is the meaning of belonging to a body of apostolic religious. The incarnation, & being part of the body of Christ, means that we embody that life, that presence of Christ, - we don't have a body, we are a body, so how we are in our bodies & in our human reality & context matters. In the grace of Christ and his Spirit it becomes possible for all things, including our wounded selves, to be reordered to become genuinely what they were created to be and in quiet ways, this is the heart of our religious and apostolic vision.

Saint Augustine might be called the patron saint of desire - after all, it was he who penned the prayer, 'Lord, give me chastity, but not yet'! In one of his sermons he wrote:

'The whole life of a good Christian is holy desire. What you desire you cannot see yet. But the desire gives you the capacity, so that when it does happen that you see, you may be fulfilled... This is our life, to be exercised by desire.' So our most heartfelt prayer should be to become people of deep desire. This is, of course, a prayer to be made uncomfortable. To have an unmet desire is not a comfortable place in which to find ourselves. We see this in the psalm that prays:

'O God, you are my God, for you I long,
for you my soul is thirsting.
My body pines for you
like a dry, weary land without water.'

This is not a comfortable metaphor, but it is one which speaks to us of a state of soul which would drive us from the dull, accepted mediocrity of routine prayer into a hunger which will not be satisfied with anything less than God. The Catholic tradition teaches that happiness does not lie in material security, but on relationships and the level of integration of the core values and dispositions in our lives. This is as true for religious as it is for lay people. So if we are concerned to build up the body of Christ within ourselves, within our communities and among the people to whom we are sent as apostles of Jesus, we must ask ourselves what our core values are and how our dispositions manifest them.

Our culture accepts the ideology of secularism, but it also has an intuition for life and hence an intuition against atheism and the denial of meaning. This intuition can be discerned in the search for 'spirituality' and ways of 'connecting' which try to overcome the dynamics of alienation and instrumentalisation within society. People are searching not only for the good life, but for a life that is good. Part of our task as a religious community is to attend to the search for life within ourselves so that we can attend to the signs of where it is already present in our culture, for that search, or longing, is implicitly a longing for the God who is life. The affirmation of life is something intrinsic to being human, hence Christians are implicitly the allies of every person who searches for life and affirms it, whether they are formally believers or not. The Gospel of Life is the gift which we, as apostles of the one who came that we might have life to the full, hold for all humanity. Essentially, this requires us to live sacramentally, to give signs in the way we do ordinary tasks and are in our ordinary lives of prayer, community and apostolic ministry, that life matters, that being human makes a difference. The life of the Kingdom introduces a transformational power into all aspects of our lives - personal, domestic and social. It has the vision to see every human person, whatever their race, age, gender or ability, as filled with life and called to life, and of supreme value.

Building up the body of Christ invites us first and foremost to hear the words 'This is my body' in the words of the Eucharist by which we are nourished in the faith, hope and love without which we cannot experience his life within our own. But I sometimes think we run the danger of turning the Eucharist into a holy fetish, an object of decontextualized adoration instead of a dynamic encounter with Christ who calls us always into a process of transformation. The life and death and teaching of Jesus point us towards a multiple understanding of those words which will empower us to be ourselves the body of Christ. The words refer primarily to the actual sacrifice of Christ, his identification with the One God, 'Whoever sees me has seen the Father, for the Father and I are one'. 'This is my body' points to the invitation, made at the prayer of the offertory, that we should share in the divine life of the one who humbled himself to share our humanity.

The building up of the body of Christ begins here, therefore, but extends to our ability to see our own bodies, our own lives as part of his body. When we look in the mirror at ourselves, when we live within the limitations of our own temperaments and physicality, we also hear the words 'This is my body'. How often do we do that, and experience the same sense of the sacred that we do at the Mass? If we don't, we have lost something of the sense of what it is to be sacramental signs, through baptism and through our vows, of the presence of Christ in the world. It is through this identification of Christ with our own lives that we become able to identify him in others. In the Eucharist God makes us radically one with all humanity in the incarnate Christ, and especially with humanity in distress. To deny that mutual solidarity by our silence, our apathy, is to deny the meaning and value of this sacrament, whose purpose is to enable us to live justly, love tenderly and walk humbly.

In the body of Christ we are called to live kin-dom values. This means seeing in the ones who are most 'other', most alien to ourselves, kinship in Christ. If our communities do not manifest this in any way, then they are little more than social arrangements without the power of the Spirit. We need to learn ourselves and to teach those to whom we minister, to 'greet Him the days we meet Him and bless when we understand', as the poet Hopkins says. It

can be hard to do this when we have become so over-familiar with each others' foibles in community life, but a community where there is no union, no solidarity in human frailty, has lost its sign value, and will not invite others to join it. 'The world', Hopkins tells us, 'is charged with the grandeur of God'. It is also charged with God's pain as the Christ who 'plays in ten thousand places, lovely in limbs and lovely in eyes not his' is crucified again each day within the misery and degradation that human beings inflict on one another. We begin building up the body of Christ through our life in community. It is from there, and the discipline learned there of attending to the needs of those whom we experience as most deeply 'other', that we can begin to build up the body of Christ effectively within our apostolic ministry.

The sacramental vision of reality means that if there are many opportunities for us to live Eucharistically, there are also repeated moments each day for us to live Reconciliation and Healing and to exercise the priesthood of all believers through our confirmation in the Holy Spirit received at our baptism. Within the freedom of our celibate chastity, there is also the invitation to live an intimate encounter in love with the God who frames our lives as sexual, gendered people called to choose life at every moment. But this is not a grace given for our personal satisfaction or fulfilment. It is given for the transformation of the world. In India there is a common greeting, 'Namaste', which means 'the God in me greets the God in you'. What a revolution there would be if we really believed and enacted this. Imagine if, across the world, we had Shia and Sunni Muslims, Communists and Fascists, Left and Right, gay and straight, black and white, men and women saying and believing that? To build up the body of Christ is to take steps towards creating a world where that becomes a reality, where the first step towards living justly is to do justice to ourselves as loved and freely forgiven sinners, called to be other Christs, to be Christ's enfleshed presence in the world.

The vows of religious life, the invitation to community and the enacting of the graces we receive through our apostolic ministry can become signs which effect what they signify if we live them with this understanding. I am conscious that for many, the days of heavy apostolic ministry and mobility may be over, but this is not the point. Our mission does not consist of our own projects and even less of our dreams, but rather of the work that is entrusted to us, even if this work seems little in comparison with what we were once able to do. Our work is the concrete way in which we participate in the mission of the Son sent by the Father for the salvation of the human race. Hopkins's sonnet about the lay brother St. Alphonsus Rodriguez expresses this powerfully, and I think is worth quoting here. He begins by speaking of how we normally honour those engaged in visible, heroic struggles and battles, but should the struggle be internal and unseen,

'Earth hears no hurtle then from fiercest fray,
Yet God (that hews mountain and continent,
Earth, all, out; who, with trickling increment,
Veins violets and tall trees makes more and more)
Could crowd career with conquest while there went
Those years and years by of world without event
That in Majorca Alfonso watched the door.'

Years and years may have gone by of a life which may seem uneventful and insignificant to others, but God knows the value and the heroism of a life lived in fidelity to the God of little things. In a poverty which leaves us free to know and savour the true value of life, a chastity which seeks no possession of the other but embodies God's longing to be present to those in greatest need and an obedience which has the willingness to be given to others as its primal source of energy, we build up the body of Christ in ourselves, our communities and our ministries.

'This is my body - the Word and Wisdom of God who chose to become flesh for our sake. 'This is my body' - my own me, the flesh from which I start. 'This is my body' - the Christ who is lovely or unlovely, beautiful or deformed but who is present in every human encounter. And finally 'this is my body' - this earth which we are in the process of wantonly destroying. The indigenous cultures of our world tend to appreciate far better than the West the radical closeness between human beings and the earth from which the Bible teaches us we are made. This is not just airy-fairy land, a green, bean-scene hippy survival representing

another escape from the realities of the world. It lies at the heart of the Eucharist itself, where we are united to the powerful dream of the Creator God and invited to become co-sustainers of that creation, living justly and sustainably, loving tenderly and with intention, walking humbly and with purpose.

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