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### **Christmas 2021**

(Letter n° 63)

“The Lord, your God, is in your midst,  
he will rejoice over you with gladness,  
he will renew you in his love.”  
(Zeph 3:17)

We propose for your meditation a text written by Cardinal Carlo-Maria Martini (1927-2012), Jesuit and archbishop of Milan.

#### **The body in the Bible**

According to Sacred Scripture, the human being is a whole and the human body is at once part of earth and of heaven. It is clay come alive by God's breath of life, "The Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being" (Gen. 2:7).

We usually refer to the human body as "flesh" - *basar* in Hebrew - flesh that lives for the "spirit," which is *ruah* in Hebrew.

The human being is fashioned of earth and of life-giving breath, and both come from God and were created by God's Word. While it is said that each living being was created "according to its species," there is no mention of the species to which human beings might belong. For they belong to the divine species, having been created "in his image and likeness" (see Gen. 1:26).

Clay and breath are thus bound together in a state of tension because the spirit needs the flesh to express itself, and the flesh, the body, cannot transcend itself without the breath of life.

#### **The body in Christianity**

We know that from the very beginning Christianity had to come to terms with the dominant Greek worldview. Although adopting some of the latter's elements, Christianity held fast to the Bible's positive vision of the body, even in the midst of many opposing currents.

Undoubtedly, the biblical approach was also subjected to the influence of negative conceptions such as those of Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Jerome, and Augustine; these conditioned to some extent Christianity's approach to the body in later centuries.

In any case, a pessimistic understanding of the body was always counterbalanced by an unquestionable truth: the revelation that the human being is beautiful indeed (see Gen. 1:31), that the body comes from God, that it is made in God's image and likeness, and that the Word became flesh. That flesh, in the words of Tertullian, is the cornerstone of salvation: *caro salutis cardo*.

## **The mystery of Incarnation**

The Word became flesh, and this event ushered in a totally new vision of the body. By taking on our mortal flesh, the Son of God wanted to share in our weakness, in our frailty, a frailty that no longer obscures the beauty of our body.

For just as the body of Jesus is a revelation of glory, the Invisible made visible, the narration of God among humankind, so our body, a totality comprised of flesh and spirit, is meant to be a mirror in which divine beauty is reflected.

Thus, we can say that because of the mystery of Incarnation that is completed in the mystery of Resurrection, the body and the state of corporality are central to Christianity.

The body of Christ, offered on our behalf, is at the heart of Christian life and thought. For this reason, St. Paul writes that our body becomes our "*reasonable* act of worship" (from the Greek *loghikos*, having to do with our innermost reason for being), "holy and pleasing to God" (see Rom. 12:1 NIV). No longer captive to systems of thought that devalue the body, we live it in the belief that we belong to Christ just as Christ belongs to us.

## **A Note**

Of course, flesh remains the weak, mortal aspect of the human being.

This unavoidable fact is at the core of our negative views of the term: in fact, to trust in the "flesh," to live according to the "flesh," means to withdraw into ourselves, inside our limitations, using them as tools of defense as well as attack.

We are reminded, in contrast, of the medieval wisdom that *homo habet animam, sed est corpus*: though we have a soul, we are a body – dust, earth.

Today we are fully aware that we have a body, but maybe we have forgotten that the body has a soul.

## **The body speaks**

What should we say then about the body?

I confess my embarrassment. I am surprised to realize that our body speaks, and that it listens because every other body speaks to it.

Our body is intimately marked by the word, which is its differentiating quality and which gives it its human dignity. Again, our body speaks not only with words but also with its very mode of being.

Now this is truly the problem: how to live one's body, for it can either lose itself or save itself, it can live to die or it can live to live.

What I would like to know about the body is the word that is not spoken, the word that is inscribed in it, that speaks its meaning and its destiny. Because unless we understand this word we destroy our body by making it into an absolute, an idol, a void to which we sacrifice our life.

We shall try to listen to what the body is saying, to the word that is the body. For we become the interpretation we give of our own body.

The ineffable dream of God who is given to us in Jesus before every human hope or expectation, who loves us and freely forgives us, is fulfilled through the responsible lives of men and women who live as sons and daughters of the Father and as brothers and sisters.

It is the dream that everything shall return to the Trinity, from which everything originates and to which everything tends.

It is the dream inscribed in creation: that nothing that is good and beautiful and desirable shall be

lost.

**Even for those who stubbornly refuse God, who is Love – but how can someone who has known love reject it? – the Resurrected One lets us hope against all hope that God's mercy shall conquer all resistance.**

**Like the Word, who at the beginning was with the Father, took on our human body and is now again with God, we dare to hope that one day we shall all with our bodies be with God in God's light and in God's life.**

**But all of this will come about through our presenting our bodies as gifts of love, as absolute, earnest gifts, without regrets or cheapening of our love.**

*On the Body (A Contemporary Theology of the Human Person)*, The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001, p. 37-41, 119.



✠ 9 July, Bro. Thierry went to Drumalis Retreat House, Larne, Co. Antrim, where he had been invited to preside and preach at the Opening Eucharist of the General Chapter of the Dominican Sisters of the Cabra Congregation.

✠ 16 July, Christy Quinn, a native of Cookstown, Co. Tyrone, began his novitiate as a secular oblate of our community.

✠ 20-27 July, Bro. Benoit was in France to visit his mother who had to undergo surgery.

✠ 7-14 August, Abbot Mark-Ephrem was at the Abbey of Bec in France.

✠ 8 August, Bro. Thierry represented our community at the installation of the Rev. Louis Donald, newly appointed minister of the Newry Circuit of the Methodist Church in Ireland.

✠ 16 August, Abbot Mark-Ephrem presided at the Funeral Liturgy of his cousin, Brian Austin, in Warrenpoint.

✠ 22-28 August Fr Simon Nolan, (no relation of the Abbot despite their shared family name), a Carmelite friar, Prior of the community at Whitefriar Street, Dublin, and Professor of Philosophy at the National University of Ireland, Maynooth, preached our community retreat.

✠ 7 September, Bro. Gregory learned the news of the death of his father, Dr John Foret (95 years of age). His death occurred at home in Kansas (USA). Our brother travelled to the USA to be present at the funeral. He returned home to Ireland on 18 September.

✠ In March 2020, John McDowell, was elected Archbishop of Armagh and Primate of the Church of Ireland. He had been bishop of Clogher hitherto. In February 2021, Rev. Shane Foster was named Dean of the cathedral church of St Patrick, Armagh. Due to the restrictions in place because of the pandemic there was a delay before the official installation of each. Dean Foster was installed on 12 September and Archbishop McDowell on 14 September. In his role as ecumenical canon of the cathedral Abbot Mark-Ephrem was among the small representative group present on both occasions.

✠ 23-27 September, Abbot Mark-Ephrem was on another visit to Bec (France).

✠ 30 September–2 October, Bro. Laurent was in Co. Wicklow visiting relatives there.

✠ 6 October, we learned the death of our dear friend Dr Tim Lynch, formerly a lecturer in the department of Scholastic Philosophy at Queens University Belfast. On 9 September, Abbot Mark-Ephrem and Bro. Thierry were present and led a prayer Service for the reception of Tim's body into the family home. On 11 September, they concelebrated and chanted at the funeral liturgy in St Brigid's church, Belfast.

✠ 14 October, Abbot Mark-Ephrem presided and preached at Eucharist in the Home of the Little Sisters of the Poor, Sacred Heart Residence, Raheny, Dublin. This celebration was to mark the visitation of Mother María del Monte Auxiliadora, Superior General of the Little Sisters of the Poor, to the community there.

⌘ Bro. Laurent's initial tourist visa arrived at its expiry date. Our brother returned to the USA on 19 October to renew a visa application for an initial three year stay in Northern Ireland. As soon as his application was duly processed, he returned to us. His absence extended from 19 October until 22 November.

⌘ Sunday 31 October, Fr Brian Mejlak (priest of the Diocese of Gozo, one of the islands part of the Republic of Malta) made his profession as a secular oblate of our community.

⌘ 2-7 November, Abbot Mark-Ephrem and Bro. Thierry were at the Abbey of Notre-Dame de Maylis (France).

⌘ 11 November, Abbot Mark-Ephrem presided and preached at the funeral liturgy of Eithne Carville, a friend of long date of our community. Bro. Eric accompanied the abbot and concelebrated the funeral Eucharist with him.

⌘ 28 November, we opened the Advent season in the Church of Ireland parish church of Kilbroney. This annual event brings together Christians from the local Churches for the opening of the liturgical year.



If Christians are to make a substantial contribution toward the unity of the human race, they must speak clearly about a single occurrence: an event that surpassed all others; an event that they believe gave new depth and meaning to the relationship between God and humanity; an event that is both the basic focal point for unity in the universe and the crucial factor in restoring the divine communion (koinonia) of love. This event, put succinctly, was when "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14). The incarnation of the Word of God is the critical impetus that was needed to move us toward a communion (koinonia) of every human person with all other human beings and with the entire natural world.

Humanity, which had once been alienated from its own true nature, could now return to communion (koinonia) with the Holy Trinity through Christ.

Archbishop Anastasios of Albania



*Happy Christmas and Blessed New Year 2022*