

All Saints Parish  
Syracuse, NY  
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Rev. Fred Daley

"Blessed be Our Bodies"

I'd like to share a story: Some of us might remember back when we were teenagers, Parishes having a special mission or retreat for young people. At the parish in which I grew up, usually this would include a series of talks, spread over a couple of days. On the last evening, generally the topic addressed was "sex" and at the end there would be numbers of priests available for confession... (clearly some connection was being made here!).

When I was about 13 years-old, at one of these retreats, I decided that I would go to confession - and I would add something I had never said before. This was, of course, back in the time when confession involved entering the tiny, dark confessional and the priest sliding the panel open to hear your sins.

As I entered the confessional, I was scared - my knees quaked as I knelt down. The priest opened the panel and I said: "Bless me Father, for I have sinned" and I confessed my 'usual' sins: I had disobeyed my parents and fought with my brothers and sister. When the priest asked if that was all..., I whispered, "and I've had impure thoughts"! "What?!" the priest responded; so I had to say it again: "I've had impure thoughts." Well, the priest went on to tell me that if I continued to have such thoughts, I would end up in the fires of hell! (I felt as if I were there already!) Then he told that every time I had such thoughts, he wanted me to light a match and burn the tips of my fingers to remind myself of how hot the fires of hell are! (It's a wonder I have any fingers left... since I always did what the priest told me to!)

What a negative, sick view of the human body and human sexuality! What an amazing example of religion using fear to have power over people!

Where did this sick, unhealthy and certainly destructive view of the human body and human sexuality come from?

First of all: it *didn't* come from Jesus and the Gospels. Christian religion - including our Catholic Church - through the centuries has been obsessed with sexuality, while Jesus hardly alluded to it. In fact, where we find these allusions, we find very enlightened, pastoral teaching:

- ❖ Jesus showed “the woman caught in adultery” love and compassion and embarrassed the men stoning her; most likely because of their self-righteousness hypocrisy - in a culture where women were seen as property to be used, abused and discarded...
- ❖ similarly, Jesus' “condemnation” of divorce - understood in the context of his times - was a radical step forward to protect women, who had no rights and no protection under the law....

But we don't have to go far from the beginning of Christianity to find this unhealthy view of the human body and human sexuality seeping in. And we can start with today's second reading from St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, in which he manages to offend everybody - including me... As if to suggest that *my* life - childless and spouse-less - is free from worries! Single folks can be the all time best worriers! And there is ample evidence that celibacy and virginity guarantee neither single-minded service nor wholehearted devotion to God!

And imagine inferring that married people are too busy to have a relationship with God... or time to be involved in the things of God - as if marriage and family are not holy vocations!

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Now, there is a lot of spin - written throughout the ages - to get Paul off the hook; but if we look a little deeper, we see that Paul was deeply influenced by a philosophy (Pagan at its root) that has affected our outlook on the human body and human sexuality to this day.

Paul was Greek and was deeply influence by Plato and the Greek Pagan philosophers, who held that the soul was good and immortal and trapped in a weak, fallible, sinful body. Human persons are essentially a ‘soul,’ a ‘spirit,’ housed in a body with its sexual desires and hungers that are evil and the source of sin. Death, according to this view, is a welcome release from the *prison* of the body. This pagan philosophy has colored the Christian outlook on the human body and sexuality in many ways to this day.

But: all of this is not the teaching of Christ and is in no way the Semitic view that Jesus inherited.

Poor St. Paul's writing is a bit schizophrenic: in the reading we had two weeks ago from Corinthians, Paul states: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you? Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?" Paul didn't say: our heart, or only our soul are temples of the Spirit. OUR BODIES are temples, where the Spirit dwells! Poor Paul, torn between the Semitic view and Christ's teaching on one side and Platonic, dualistic Greek philosophy the other, has been used by those wishing to justify and legitimize patriarchy, clericalism, dualism and sexism!

Paradoxically, Christianity - which has been so anti-body and anti-sexuality in practice through the centuries - has a wonderful beautiful theology of affirmation of the body and sexuality, in theory. Let's take a look:

The first affirmation of the human body and sexuality is the Biblical account of Creation - in the Second Chapter of Genesis, God announces: *"It is not good that the man should be alone, I will make him a helpmate."*

The first human couple was thus united in a sexual bond. (My mother always taught that the first sin of Adam and Eve is not taking the apple, but adultery! To which I countered: "Mom, there were only the two of them... how could there be adultery?!) And, God looked at all God created and said: "It is good!" As Fr. Andy so often teaches us: "the Created Given" - including our bodies and sexuality are to be celebrated and enjoyed.

The same attitude is found in the Song of Songs - an entire book of the Bible given over to the grateful celebration of God's gift of erotic love.

The second affirmation of the body and human sexuality is the Incarnation. As the Gospel of John tells us: the word was made flesh and lived among us! Jesus was a human being, Jesus underwent circumcision, Jesus had sexual feelings, Jesus had sexual thoughts. If Jesus accepted and rejoiced in an embodied, sexual existence, than we should let our word become flesh - we should be able to accept and rejoice in our sexual bodies.

A third affirmation of the human body and human sexuality is the Eucharist as Christ's memorial. "This is my body." Christ could have said: "this is my spirit" only, but chose to be with us through *spirit* and *his human body as well*.

A fourth affirmation of the human body and sexuality is the Resurrection. As Christians, we don't share the pagan concept of eternal life as life only of the Spirit, with the body serving only as a temporary shell to be discarded. In some way our flesh will be part of our identity. This teaching underlies the profound respect our Church pays to the remains of the deceased, during the funeral liturgy and in laying those remains to rest in the cemetery.

So what does all of this have to say to us in 2012 - who have lived through the "sexual revolution," who live in an age when all things sexual are as close as turning on the T.V., or clicking the computer, or going to the movies, - or "picking-up" (or: "hooking-up with") a body? Are we all sexually liberated and freed from dualistic: 'good soul trapped in the bad body' syndrome of the last 2,000 years?

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My brothers and sisters, there's ample evidence to the contrary. We are still a people that are pretty alienated from our bodies... and that we have a long way to go to integrate our body, mind and spirit into the beautiful whole that God created - the "created given."

We may not be waiting in confession lines to confess our impure thoughts (although many of us still struggle with guilt and shame in regard to our bodies and our sexuality). But so many more of us experience our sexuality as totally alienated from love, affection, intimacy and commitment. Internet porn, casual sex, becoming sexually active as young adolescents, an epidemic of sexual addiction and impersonal sexual hedonism all indicates that the Platonic dualism between body and soul is alive and well!

The call of the Christian in 2012 is to integrate the beautiful gift of sexuality into sexual communion - with the help of God's grace - to integrate our sexuality into our capacity to love: ...to love ourselves; ...to love one another; and, ultimately, to love God with our whole being!

It's very hard to touch such a complex and specific topic as our human body and our human sexuality in a homily. I hope that in the near future we will offer a book-study, or some other sort of adult faith enrichment on this topic for those who might be interested in specific issues concerning the human body and sexuality. For now, drawing on a number of spiritual writers, I will conclude by identifying some values that are present if our sexuality is truly integrated and whole and holy:

Integrated sexuality involves faithfulness;

Integrated sexuality is honest;

Integrated sexuality has a genuine interest in the other;

Integrated sexuality is socially and morally responsible;

Integrated sexuality is self-liberating and fulfilling - not enslaving and shameful.

Integrated sexuality is life-serving;

Finally: integrated sexuality is joyous - giving witness to the deep mystery of love!

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Let us pray:

Almighty God, our Father and Mother in heaven,

thank you for the gift of our body and its sexuality.

Through the Resurrection of your son, Jesus, help us

to heal our fear of and alienation from our body, help

us to trust in the goodness of your creation. Help us

to to celebrate our sexual existence. Grant us the grace

to integrate our sexuality into our drive toward union with

you for all eternity in heaven. Amen.