

## **“YOU ARE THE BODY OF CHRIST”**

**by Hugh Bihl, SM**

The aim of this essay is to expound a most important dimension of church theology—that we (i.e., the church members) are the Body of Christ—and then to relate this Pauline principle to some important tenets of Marianist theology or spirituality. The main source of this Pauline teaching is 1 Cor 12:4-30. Further helpful thoughts appear in Eph 4:17-5:20. To expand things a bit more and perhaps round them off a little, we also will refer to “the Colossians Hymn” (Col 1:15-20, especially verse 18).

First Corinthians launches its Body treatise with these remarks: “There is a variety of gifts but always the same Spirit; there are all sorts of service to be done but always to the same Lord, working in all sorts of ways in different people. It is the same God who is working in all of them.” Then it shifts the attention to the underlying source of this great variety. “Just as a human body, though it is made up of many parts, is a single unit because all the parts, though many, make up one body, so it is with Christ.”

Then it expounds further on the proper relation of the Body Center to its individual parts/gifts. “Nor is the Body to be identified with any one of its many parts. If the foot were to say, ‘I am not a hand and so I do not belong to the Body,’ would that mean that it was not a part of the Body? If the ear were to say, ‘I am not an eye and so I do not belong to the Body,’ would that mean it was not a part of the Body? If your whole Body were just one eye, how would you hear anything?”

As Paul develops this line of thought a little, he is implying there are some challenges to a rich Body of Christ spirituality. “The eye cannot say to the hand,” he says, “I do not need you,” which it is sometimes very much tempted to do. Modern-day American culture tends to encourage a robust sense of self-sufficiency as there is a very strong tendency for the particular body members to assume that their particular gift(s) is (are) more important than all the rest. It is important, therefore, for a real Body of Christ spirituality to encourage respect for the gifts of the others and for at least for some Body members to learn the art of helping other members cultivate their own proper gifts. Otherwise the Body cannot grow into the rich fullness it is seeking to attain. As Paul sums this up, “God put all the separate parts into the Body on purpose. If all the parts were the same, how could it be a body?”

Then he moves on to a most amazing line of thought—in the Body of Christ, it is the weaker members who are the most important. As First Corinthians develops this, “It is precisely the parts of the Body that seem to be the weakest which are the indispensable ones, and it is the least honorable parts

of the body that we clothe with the greatest care. So our more improper parts get decorated in a way that our more proper parts do not need.”

Why is this so important? To many, it illustrates very well the concern that the members of the Body need to have for one another. The weaker members especially need more attention so that their proper gifts may be adequately built up. And it would not hurt if the leadership gave some consideration to why some of the members are considered “weaker.” A reason could be that their particular gifts do not easily mesh with current cultural expectations; even though when Gospel values are taken into account, they may be even more needed for this very reason. And so the Body needs to be constantly built up in love, with all the members caring for one another. This leads very naturally into the great paean of love which is 1 Cor 13:1-2. “If I have all the eloquence of men or of angels but speak without love, I am simply a gong booming or a symbol clashing. If I have the gift of prophecy, understanding all the mysteries there are and knowing everything and if I have faith in all its fullness, to move mountains, but without love, then I am nothing at all,” etc., etc.

First Corinthians 13:4 continues with this description: “Love is always patient and kind; it is never jealous. Love is never boastful or conceited. It is never rude or selfish. It does not take offense and is not resentful. Love takes no pleasure in other people’s sins but delights in the truth. It is always ready to excuse, to trust, to hope and to endure whatever comes.” Here you have a handy summary of what could be called Body of Christ spirituality, which, of course, is not to be taken lightly.

As we move into a selection from Eph 4:17-5:20, we are a little later in time and therefore face an accumulation of practical issues. We experience a growing sense of Christianity as a worldwide movement (and must therefore confront moral challenges arising from other movements). Though the letter is attributed to Paul, a good number of scholars believe that it was actually written by one or more of his disciples.

We meet the Pauline author exhorting the community not to live by the loose moral standards of the surrounding world. He exclaims that community members “are not to live the aimless kind of life that pagans live. Intellectually these are in the dark, and they are estranged from the life of God, without knowledge because they have shut their hearts to it.” He then details how they have let their consciences lapse and have fallen into various kinds of sexual immorality. “You must put aside your old self,” the Pauline author asserts, “which gets corrupted by following illusory desires. Your mind must be renewed by a spiritual revolution so that you can put on the new self that has been created in God’s way.” From now on, “You must speak the truth to one another, since we are all parts of one another.” And he then details the various forms of promiscuity that seem to have affected the community and

winds up telling them, “Try to discover what the Lord wants of you, having nothing to do with the futile works of darkness but exposing them by contrast.”

The value of these and other reflections from Ephesians is that they put before us a “later stage” than we had when we first “put on the Lord Jesus Christ,” a stage in which we have encountered new challenges which tend to wear us down and distract us from the more idealistic convictions of our first conversion. We are faced with a need to work out our Body of Christ spirituality in relation to the demands of a more complex world.

I think it is unlikely that most of us will wind up characterizing the world we presently inhabit as “pagan” or “in the dark” or “estranged from the life of God,” purely and simply. Such a characterization is far too simplistic. The many-sided reality of today’s world is far more challenging. It probably needs considerably more communal discernment if wisdom is to have the upper hand.

Now, let us move on to the far more fulsome “Colossians Hymn” (Col 1: 15-20). Here we meet up with the Cosmic Christ, who had and continues to have a pivotal role in the whole process of creation. The hymn is believed to be pre-Pauline and to have been inserted into the Letter to the Colossians either by Paul himself or by one of his disciples, who may have been the actual author of Colossians.

First, I will lay out the entire hymn and then attempt some commentary on it.

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation,  
For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, things visible and things invisible, whether  
thrones or dominations or principalities or powers.  
All things were created through him and for him.  
And he is head of the body, the church.  
He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, in order that in all things he might be preeminent,  
For in him God in all his fullness was pleased to dwell,  
And through him to reconcile all things to himself, making peace through the blood of his cross,  
whether things on earth or things in heaven.

This hymn uses “wisdom language,” which means it draws upon the Old Testament Wisdom tradition, even though it projects upon it the primacy of Christ, especially the Cosmic Christ. The Pauline author inserts this hymn into his reflections because it opens the door to seeing Christ as giving expression to the deepest meanings of creation and linking them somehow to the Church’s role as the

Body of Christ, especially as exemplified in the most important Christ mysteries—the cross and the resurrection. This certainly is a very large order.

This is a very complex hymn. It has been interpreted and reinterpreted many times. Not all biblical scholars agree on every interpretation that has been put forward for every line or phrase. The interpretations I will offer would, I think, receive a wide measure of acceptance but not absolute agreement from all.

- “He is the image of the invisible God, *the firstborn of all creation*” . . . the first *over* creation.
- “For in him were created all things” . . . Christ is the center of unity and harmony in which the universe was created—he is the fullest expression of the divine wisdom in creating the world.
- “All were created through him and for him” . . . the universe finds its goal and perfection in Christ.
- “He is before all things, in him all things hold together” . . . here Wisdom is seen as the cohesive power of the universe (see Wis 1:7), and Christ is the fullest expression of Wisdom.
- “And he is the head of the Body, the church” . . . this line harkens back to the mainline Body of Christ theology of First Corinthians except that it introduces the idea that Christ is the *head* of the Body and so in some sense *above* it.
- “He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, the Risen One, but the title “firstborn” suggests that others will follow after, meaning that they too will have a share in his resurrection.
- “For in him God in all his fullness was pleased to dwell” . . . meaning that there was no need for other intermediaries between God and the human world. The hymn at this point could serve as ammunition against the ancient Gnostics, many of whom taught that the world was full of such intermediaries, the very thing that the Letter to the Colossians is trying to refute.
- “And through him to reconcile all things to himself, making peace through the blood of his cross, whether things on earth or things in heaven” . . . Christ in his activity on creation has an important redemptive function.

Next we must extend the reflection on the Cosmic Christ into some important present-day concerns by drawing attention to the writings of theologian Sallie McFague on these matters. Much of McFague’s later work is centered on environmental issues. She seeks to extend the great teaching of Jesus that we must care for the less fortunate into caring for the whole universe. In fact, she refers to the universe as

the body of God and wishes to call special attention to those non-humans who have special need of our care.

These concerns lead McFague to develop an extensive theology of embodiment. As she says, “Most of us live with the strange illusion that we are other than our bodies, that we and those we love can and will exist apart from them, that our spirits will live on, here or ‘in heaven,’ after death. Centuries of Christian speculation about life after death have encouraged a diffidence toward the body at best, distrust and hatred of it at worst. That attitude is at the heart of one of the central crises of our time: the inability to love the ‘body’ of the earth.”<sup>1</sup>

McFague insists, in fact, we *are* bodies and that nature is the “new poor,” needing special attention from us. She does a fine job of setting forth a rich theology of embodiment that makes use of insights drawn from both Christian faith and theology and what she terms “postmodern science.” Her work is challenging in the fullest sense. But I feel that she makes some criticisms of the Christian tradition, especially of the early tradition, that are overdrawn. These criticisms arise largely from the Greek influence on the early church fathers, most especially from their engagement with Greek metaphysics.

To start out, the Greeks were much more interested in the world of spirits than they were concerned about bodies. But it is worth noting that if it is true that “we are bodies,” it is equally true that “we are spirits,” and in fact the principal environmental responsibilities that McFague details could not be realized without the powers that emanate from the spirit side. So it is really necessary to draw body and spirit together, I think.

Finally, I think McFague is off base when she criticizes so strongly Christian ascetical traditions for their debasement of the human body. While admitting there is some truth in what she says (I think especially of the Jansenists in seventeenth and eighteenth century France and at least some of the early Puritans in the New England colonies of America), I cannot imagine how it is possible to generate serious change of any kind without a great deal of asceticism—that goes for scientists and political leaders, as well as Christian saints. Ironically, I’m quite sure that Sallie McFague herself has undergone her own share of asceticism in bringing forth studies of such significance.

### **Marianist Spirituality Speaks**

Marianists have long gloried in at least the basics of Body of Christ theology—what is set forth in First Corinthians, chapters 12 and 13—which describes a whole community that lives and grows together in

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<sup>1</sup> Sallie McFague, *The Body of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 16.

Christ. It is this very community that attracts others and leads them, step by step, into the fullness of a Christian life and mission. In the very deepest sense, it is the community itself that *is* the mission in all of its fullness and intricacy.

Father Chaminade extolled this and sometimes expressed his vision of Body spirituality as “the Family of Mary”—showing forth Christ, attracting others, teaching them to grow up into the Christ Mystery and helping them to discern the needs of the contemporary world, as well as to develop effective ways of bearing missionary witness and of launching productive missionary works. For Marianists, this is how we grow into the fullness of the Body of Christ.

Such a spirituality begins with Mary’s raising of Jesus and with the young Jesus’ dependence on her. Yes, he has to learn the same sort of things that any little boy does because he is truly human and the mystery of the Incarnation demands that he follow a truly human way. It is Mary, with some assistance from Joseph, who is his primary teacher during his early years. She teaches him how to pray—and undoubtedly Jesus first learned to pray the psalms on his mother’s lap. She shows him how to relate well with others, especially with those of his own age. She helps him become a real figure in the town of Nazareth, where he grew up. And undoubtedly Joseph joined her in this, teaching him especially the basics of the carpenter’s trade.

Without a doubt, participating in the mystery of Jesus learning from his mother the ways of God has been an important part of living the Christ mystery for the Marianists of the United States because for a long time the brothers who first came here were teaching young boys in parishes across the country and would have found such an approach very attractive. And we did not have lay Marianists then or others to introduce more complications.

The remarks that follow will comment on different aspects of Marianist spirituality and will seek to relate them to the Body of Christ theology noted above. The first remarks refer to some of the consequences that flow from Mary’s becoming the Mother of God (“Theotokos,” or “the bearer of God,” as noted at the Council of Ephesus in 431). It has been said a great significance of this is that Mary brings forth her son Jesus through the mystery of the Incarnation and gives expression in human form to the Father’s generating the Divine Son/Word eternally as set forth in the mystery of the Trinity. In contemplating the process whereby she brings forth her son, we can gain insight into the very mystery of God himself.

As Father Chaminade conceives this bringing forth, all Christians are included because Jesus Christ (the Head) always is united to his whole Body; therefore, in reality Mary is truly the mother of the

Whole Christ, both Head and members. Mary cooperates in the birth of all the sons and daughters of God as real Christians, which means all of us who follow in the ways of Jesus Christ.

As Father Chaminade further comments, “the natural fruitfulness whereby God engenders his son is communicated in some way to Mary; her fecundity is the effect of his power.”<sup>2</sup> This suggests that when the Mary of the Magnificat proclaims that “The Almighty has done great things for me,” she surely has this in mind.

Another aspect of Marianist spirituality connected with the concept of the Body of Christ is the extensive discernment needed to discover the needs of the contemporary world so that the Family of Mary—i.e., the Body of Christ as seen from a Marianist point of view—can determine how the Marianist Family can best respond to its needs. Behind this is an important Chaminadean conviction about the Marianist religious life: Marianists do not have a single ministry that is at the heart of the charism (as many religious communities do); they must remain open to fulfill any kind of need as far as the capabilities of the present membership permits. Such a requirement demands an approach to discernment that is both wider and deeper than many other approaches to ministry as well as a need to attract a diverse membership—one that includes many gifts as well as an open-minded attitude.

Marianists also aim to cultivate certain Marian values, which they seek to pass on to others as well. Many of these relate to what Father Chaminade termed “the multiplication of Christians.” Whole Marianist communities often include members with considerable talent and well-developed expertise, which they are encouraged to use in effective works, but this fact alone does not tell the whole story. Among Marianist religious, certain brothers are encouraged to “stay out of the limelight”—i.e., not to become the obvious face of major apostolic works—so that they can draw in others and encourage them to take the initiative in meeting the complex needs of our contemporary world. These same brothers try to assist these others to develop serious faith attitudes as well as techniques for extending Christian influences into a wider environment. Often these Marian approaches are referred to as “apostolic humility.”

These Marian values are especially in evidence when we approach the Calvary events, at least from the perspective of the Gospel of John. Modern-day exegeses tell us that according to the Johannine writings the Church is coming to birth on Calvary in the persons of both Mary and the Beloved Disciple. From time to time, Father Chaminade reflects on the consequences of this. In such a reflection, he draws on the writings of Saint Alphonsus Liguori as follows: “Since it was on Calvary that Jesus Christ strictly speaking formed his church, it is clear that the Blessed Virgin cooperated in an excellent and

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<sup>2</sup> William Joseph Chaminade, *Marian Writings*, vol. 1 (Dayton, OH: Marianist Resources Commission, 1980), p. 52.

singular manner to be in a very special way the Mother of the whole Church.”<sup>3</sup> Such a reflection has some interest for us in light of the fact that Pope Paul VI, toward the end of the Second Vatican Council, proposed a new title for Mary, “Mother of the Church,” which really did not take off. It must be said also that Mary as Mother of the Church coming to the fore on Calvary did not occupy an important place in Father Chaminade’s own reflections on the mystery of Mary overall.

Finally, I would like to close with some parting Chaminadean reflections on the Marianist relationship with Mary.

We have chosen Mary, as we well know, and it has been our heart’s intention to choose her for our Mother; but are we just as sure that on her part the Blessed Virgin Mary has chosen us to have in us a very special family? This is in no way less certain. We would not have chosen Mary if she had not first chosen us. It is not through any power of our own that we have come this far. It is by a secret guidance of Providence, which has directed this movement and has done so most often without our being aware of it...it is Mary, therefore, who has chosen us—she it is who has called us.

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<sup>3</sup> See the quote from Saint Alphonsus at the bottom of page 258 in Chaminade, *Marian Writings*, vol. 2.