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At Home in the Body: Lutheran Identity

Peter J. Scaer

The days of Lake Wobegon are long gone. Dartball can be found here and there, though church bowling alleys are largely a thing of the past. We still like our coffee, potlucks, and sitting in the back pew. Though some of these customs are more fabrication than fact, we should be hesitant to make too much or too little of them. LWML mite boxes enhanced the church's mission and created a sisterhood. The Walther League encouraged two to become one and then multiply and fill our pews. In our own day, we have seen bobbleheads of the blessed reformer and are known to one another by T-shirts that tell us to "Live Generously." For good reason, the Lord gave Israel certain Levitical laws, that they might be a people set apart. Lutherans, too, are a peculiar people.

But while such customs can serve as identity markers, they also mask what has been lost. The ELCA offers a prime example of a husk hiding the absence of the corn. The fast-growing Lutheran Church of Tanzania has a set of customs all its own, reminding us that we can't judge a book by its cover, and that the proof is in the pudding.

What then holds American Lutheranism together and provides our identity? Perhaps a better answer would center on Luther's Small Catechism, *The Lutheran Study Bible*, and *Lutheran Service Book*. All the better that they sport the same maroon color. The Bible, the hymnal, and the catechism: these are three that testify, and these three agree. Such resources provide a firm foundation. But will even these be enough? While old hymns and confessions keep us rooted, our present age presents us with new and bewildering challenges that call on us to branch out and to bring out of our treasure what is old and what is new.

A New Paganism?

Not long ago, many of us imagined that we would be entering an invigorating post-Constantinian era. No longer taking sacred things for granted, we would embark on a bold enterprise, occupying our place in the Athenian Agora, and competing with philosophers on a level playing field of ideas. Such hopes have not materialized.

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A half dozen years ago, as part of a newly formed ecumenical group Shepherds United, a number of us held a rally for natural marriage at the Allen County Courthouse. An enthusiastic crowd gathered. That now seems a lifetime ago. The arguments for marriage received little national attention, even from those who call themselves conservative Christians. Warnings went unheeded. White flags were raised before shots were fired. Our own children and grandchildren now assume that gay marriage has always been. We have since moved on to polyamory and the very denial of male and female. Young men are victorious in women's sports, and soccer moms do not blink an eye. Surgeons drug and mutilate confused youth, and no one says a word. Talk of tolerance has turned to conformity, and the other side has claimed victory. As Mark Tushnet of Harvard Law puts it, "The culture wars are over." Referencing the defeat of Nazi Germany, Tushnet rejects calls for accommodation. "You lost, live with it."¹

But who are our foes? Those claiming to be victors? And why are they so vindictive? Charles Taylor argues that we are living in a secular age in which there is no heaven.² Imagine. But a rational secularism would be open to new ideas. Christians are not threatened by flat-earthers or scientologists. In a rational world, Christians would be called odd, not evil.

In response, Steven Smith claims we are entering into an era of modern paganism. There is no need for a glorious incarnation, as the divine is present everywhere. For the environmentalists, god is in nature, recycling our sacrifice. For cosmologists, the universe is god, Neil deGrasse Tyson its high priest. Oprah Winfrey and Marianne Williamson serve as spiritual guides for those who would find the god within. Such a conception of the divine leaves the ethical life open to various interpretations. Consciences are sometimes accommodated, but only as a matter of individual choice. As Steven Smith observes, a community that declines to recognize "transcendent authority is nonetheless open to and respectful of immanently sacred values."³ But speaking about conscience without religion is like speaking about faith without God. In a world in which the divine is everywhere and in everything, personal opinions may be allowed, but an ultimate truth claim, based on the God who judges all things, cannot be tolerated.

So also imperial Rome was home to many gods and many philosophies. It was required only that one burn incense to Caesar. The stakes were high. As Bruce Winter notes, those who did not acknowledge the genius of Caesar "would not have been able to secure provisions for their daily needs, as all goods could only be bought

¹ Mark Tushnet, "Abandoning Defensive Crouch Liberal Constitutionalism," <https://balkin.blogspot.com/2016/05/abandoning-defensive-crouch-liberal.html>.

² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 1.

³ Steven Smith, *Pagans and Christians in the City* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 333.

and sold through the authorized markets in a first-century city.”⁴ Livelihoods, and then lives, were on the line. Though Christians pledged allegiance to Caesar’s earthly rule, they claimed a still higher allegiance, declaring that if push came to shove, they would obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29), asserting one “Lord of heaven and earth” (Acts 17:24).⁵ Such thinking could not help but be subversive to a social order in which the emperor’s word was final.

An Existential Threat

So also today, Christians, though politically weak, pose an existential threat to the status quo. If it is true that children have a God-given right to life, then the whole societal enterprise based on free love and self-autonomy comes tumbling down. How else to explain the world’s interests in confronting bakers, florists, photographers, counselors, pharmacists, professors, clerks, teachers, businessmen, doctors, nurses, and media personalities? Why are these people under fire? Is it really about access to available goods and services? Something deeper lies beneath.

Accordingly, the free exercise of religion has been squeezed into freedom of worship, and even that is not guaranteed. Recently, a candidate for president vowed to take away the tax-exempt status of any church that does not follow the state-approved gender ideology. California’s Proposition 8 prohibited same-sex marriage. In what is known as a “finding of fact,” Judge Vaughn Walker struck down the amendment, claiming that “religious beliefs that gay and lesbian relationships are sinful or inferior to heterosexual relationships harm gays and lesbians.”⁶ Two plus two equals five, and it is a crime to say, or even think, otherwise.

Whether our culture is secular or pagan makes for good academic debate. But our enemies fight with a religious fervor. Perhaps, it is as simple as Richard Neuhaus’s dictum, “Where orthodoxy is optional, orthodoxy will sooner or later be proscribed.”⁷ Or to put it another way, the lie cannot abide the truth, any more than the darkness can tolerate the light.

When the time comes, will we be up to the challenge, Lutheran identity intact? Will we say with the blessed reformer, “Here I stand”?

⁴ Bruce Winter, *Divine Honours for the Caesars: The First Christians’ Responses* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 286.

⁵ Scripture translations are my own.

⁶ *Perry vs. Schwarzenegger*, 704 F. Supp. 2d 921, 985 (N.D. Cal. 2010) (factual finding #77).

⁷ Richard John Neuhaus, “The Unhappy Fate of Optional Orthodoxy,” *First Things*, March 2009, <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2009/03/the-unhappy-fate-of-optional-orthodoxy> (accessed November 13, 2019).

The Lutheran Crisis Is the Christian Crisis

Ours is no parochial interest. Lutheran identity must be understood in, with, and under Christian identity. The present crisis has hit Christians of all stripes. We have been inspired by Coptic martyrs on Libyan shores. We have witnessed the courage of evangelical bakers, florists, and photographers, as well as Catholic nuns fighting off federal mandates. In such times, we do well to foster a healthy ecumenism. Together, we may gather around Polycarp, who was told to swear by the genius of Caesar or be burned at the stake. To which Polycarp replied, “I am a Christian” (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* X.1).⁸

Our lives are not yet on the line, but our livelihoods are, or may soon be, as well as our pension plans and careers. And these temptations, not quite as stark, may be more insidious. There are also real social costs to maintaining the truth of marriage, male and female. We would prefer not to be numbered among the “deplorables.” Writing to the Thessalonians, Paul encourages the flock “not to be shaken by these distresses” (1 Thess 3:3). As Larry Hurtado notes, there is no indication that the Thessalonians were being dragged before magistrates, but they were experiencing the real pain of social opposition, “which may have included everything from expressions of disdain and disapproval to haranguing, ostracism, and even outright physical abuse from relatives and others in the social network of believers.”⁹ Once more, Christians must be willing to be ridiculed and scorned, to be called haters and bigots. Those who think such things to be easy have typically not experienced it.

We should not discount social pressure’s effect on church attendance. In the last decade alone, there has been a 10 percent decline in those who self-identify as Christians, while self-identified “nones” have swelled to 26 percent. But we do not need a Pew research poll to tell us that many pews are empty. We have fewer children, and those we do have are turning away. This should come as no surprise. The culture’s propaganda is powerful and pervasive, and it has affected our churches and our families. We are reaping the weeds we have sown, and the seeds we have not.

The Christian Identity Crisis and the Crisis of Human Identity

As Lutheran identity overlaps with Christian identity, so also our Christian identity must be understood in, with, and under our identity as people created in

⁸ *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* as found in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings*, Third Edition, ed. and trans. J. B. Lightfoot and J. R. Harmer, ed. and rev. Michael W. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2007), 317.

⁹ Larry Hurtado, *Why on Earth Did Anyone Become a Christian in the First Three Centuries?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2016), 62.

God's image. At stake is the very heart of the human enterprise. The first chapters of Genesis loom large. How will we be saved if we do not even know who we are?

In Imperial Rome, the Christian view of sex proved revolutionary. Pagans routinely exposed unwanted children and used pharmacology in service of abortion. Christians, as evidenced in the *Didache* (2.2), prohibited abortion and infanticide. Early Christians held marriage sacred and asserted the full humanity of little children, "complete human beings from time of birth," and even before, as the incarnation made clear.¹⁰ No longer could sex outside of marriage be seen as the mere satisfaction of an appetite or a rite of passage. As Kyle Harper notes, the Christian notion of *porneia* "would recast the harmless sexual novitiate that was an unobjectionable part of sexual life in antiquity as an unambiguous sin, a transgression against the will of God, echoing in eternity."¹¹ Christianity's teaching on sexuality blew up the pagan death star. Now, via the sexual revolution, the empire has struck back. According to Jennifer Roback Morse, the ideology of the sexual revolution is encompassed by the ideas that society should "1. separate sex from childbearing: the Contraceptive Ideology; 2. Separate both sex and childbearing from marriage: the Divorce Ideology; 3. Eliminate all distinctions between men and women, except those that individuals explicitly embrace: the Gender Ideology."¹² God created us male and female, telling us to be fruitful and multiply (Gen 1:27–28). That is gone.

The Sexual Revolution: Allure and Wreckage

The sexual revolution's success is not hard to explain. It heralded an age of pleasure and wild abandonment. But such abandonment has led to a generation that feels abandoned, vulnerable, and lonely. The taste of faux freedom turned sour. Free love came at a hefty price. What looked like chains were actually the ties that bind us together, a man to his wife, a mother and a father to their children.

Long before the advent of gay marriage, marriage had been redefined. Daniel Patrick Moynihan sounded the alarm in 1965, observing that 25 percent of African American children had no father at home; the consequences, he predicted, would be dire. Such a world now looks like Eden. In generations past, marriage was understood to be the lifelong and exclusive union of one man and one woman. This

¹⁰ See O. M. Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 284.

¹¹ Kyle Harper, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 92.

¹² Jennifer Roback Morse, *The Sexual State: How Elite Ideologies Are Destroying Lives and Why the Church Was Right All Along* (Charlotte, N.C.: TAN Books, 2018), 22.

union was ordered toward children and was thought to be comprehensive, including body, soul, and mind. This conjugal understanding of marriage was replaced by a revisionist view, described thusly: “It is a view of marriage as, in essence, a loving emotional bond, one distinguished by its intensity—a bond that needn’t point beyond the partners, in which fidelity is ultimately subject to one’s own desires. In marriage, so understood, partners seek emotional fulfillment, and remain as long as they find it.”¹³ Marriage now lasts as long as they both shall love. Marriage may still be what you make of it, but has no intrinsic meaning. The wedding certificate is a contract with no teeth. And as Maggie Gallagher notes, we have undermined “the only institution ever shown to be capable of raising children well.”¹⁴

As a result of the collapse of marriage, we are living through what Mary Eberstadt has called “The Great Scattering.” She notes that up until the present time, “human expectations remained largely the same throughout the ages.”¹⁵ A child could reasonably expect to grow up in a home with a mom and dad, and usually in a family that included brothers and sisters. A child was connected to the past by grandparents and great-grandparents. Aunts, uncles, and cousins widened one’s social network as well as one’s sense of belonging. In such a world, children grew up knowing how they fit into the world. They could claim identity as the son or daughter, brother or sister, nephew or niece, grandchild and cousin.

What have we lost in “The Great Scattering”? Father no longer lives at home. Mothers are more likely to be at work than at home with their infant children. The elderly more frequently die alone. But it gets worse. In marriage, mother and father are better able to create a common culture, a united front, so that their children feel secure and grounded. Children of divorce, on the other hand, are three times more likely to agree with the statement, “I feel like a different person with each of my parents.” Having lost their innocence, they are twice as likely strongly to agree with the statement, “I always felt like an adult, even when I was a kid.”¹⁶ And so, for the divorced mom, a child often becomes “my little man.”

Adding to our children’s chaos, divorce often leaves grandparents divided against each other. Roles such as aunt and uncle have become temporary, with honorary titles awarded to a boyfriend’s brother, later to be taken away. Given the small size of families, children are less likely to have siblings, and with that the opportunity to learn to understand and respect the opposite sex. The blending of

¹³ Sherif Girgis, Ryan T. Anderson, and Robert George, *What Is Marriage? Man and Woman: A Defense* (New York: Encounter Books, 2012), 1–2.

¹⁴ Maggie Gallagher, *The Abolition of Marriage: How We Destroy Lasting Love* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Publishing, 1996), 141.

¹⁵ Mary Eberstadt, *Primal Screams: How the Sexual Revolution Created Identity Politics* (West Conshohocken, Pa.: Templeton Press, 2019), 38.

¹⁶ Eberstadt, *Primal Screams*, 43.

families merely adds to the confusion. Add to this mix sperm donation and surrogacy pregnancy, and we have a whole new generation of people who will, by design, not know one or both of their biological parents. The result is loneliness, isolation, and a lack of identity.

Identity confusion now manifests itself in matters of gender, something once taken for granted. Increasingly, young people do not feel at home in their own body. This is akin to anorexia nervosa, in which one's self-perception does not match reality. As Ryan Anderson explains, "Likewise, some people with gender dysphoria *feel* as if they were the opposite sex but *know* are not, so they struggle with their feelings until their feelings overwhelm them and they come to identify with the opposite sex, and act accordingly."¹⁷ This may be a good explanation but gender dysphoria has resulted in wider dysphoria, regardless of why it has into existence.

Androgyny has become a kind of survival strategy. As Mary Eberstadt notes, girls want to be like boys, and vice versa.¹⁸ What advantage is there in claiming manhood, when masculinity is declared toxic? As Christina Hoff Sommers notes in her work *The War against Boys*, our educational system does not value the natural energy, competitiveness, and corporal daring that characterize a boy's ascent into manhood.¹⁹ Boys are frequently raised by single women who are resentful of men who have done them wrong. Man buns and the Peter Pan Syndrome should alert us to a problem. Conversely, what advantage is there in claiming to be a woman, when they are told that they must imitate men to succeed? Women are pushed into the military or competitive sports. In the Neverland between male and female, many find a safe space, a kind of new identity. As Mary Eberstadt notes, "Like feminism, androgyny appears to offer competitive advantages in a world ruled by the Great Scattering."²⁰ And like abortion and homosexuality, androgyny does nothing for the advancement of the human race, nor does it give a better or healthier answer to the question, "Who am I?"

The Family and the Bible

So, what can we do about all of this? It can seem overwhelming. Admittedly, my own thinking on the matter has changed. After graduate school, I served a church that put out pamphlets from Focus on the Family. Congregational members were

¹⁷ Ryan Anderson, *When Harry Became Sally: Responding to the Transgender Moment* (New York: Encounter Books, 2018), 96. Emphasis original.

¹⁸ Eberstadt, *Primal Screams*, 78.

¹⁹ Christina Hoff Sommers, *The War against Boys: How Misguided Feminism Is Harming Our Young Men* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 3.

²⁰ Eberstadt, *Primal Screams*, 78.

interested in such groups as Promise Keepers, a men's group that emphasizes fidelity in marriage. A local congregation hired what they called a "Family Life Minister." I was dubious.

Our Lord says, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me" (Matt 10:37). And again, "Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother, sister, and mother" (Mark 3:35). That seems to settle it. The earthly family is temporary, the heavenly family eternal. Genealogy must give way to our birth into the family of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19).

But of course, the earthly family does matter. Children need to be fed, clothed, housed, and brought to the font. For emotional well-being, boys and girls need both mom and dad. And even as Christ divides families, so does he bring them together.

Tellingly, the second table of the law begins with the command to honor father and mother. In that one command, we see not only mom and dad, but also the sanctity of marriage and a child's well-being. Notably, the fourth commandment comes with a hopeful purpose. When a child is at harmony with God-fearing parents, he may live long in the land that the Lord gives. For the people of the exodus, that land was Israel, the temple, the place of God's dwelling. And for us, it is the church, the new and everlasting place of promise.

Our incarnate Lord himself reaffirms the sanctity of life by taking residence in Mary's womb. He reaffirms male and female and defines marriage as a lifelong union (Mark 10:9). He blesses marriage at Cana (John 2:1-12) and comes to be our bridegroom (John 3:29). Not surprisingly, at the church's foundation we find not only the apostles, but also Mary and our Lord's brothers (Acts 1:14). Family matters. The early church was built on the household conversions of Cornelius, Lydia, the Roman jailer, and Crispus.²¹ From the Scriptures and our own experience, we know that faith and family are more easily distinguished than divided.

Is it then possible for the church to thrive while the family collapses? In Tanzania, the family prospers along with the church. I came to my own congregation questioning the focus on family, but since leaving that small town congregation, I have seen divorce ravage the flock, resulting in a sharp drop in attendance. So, what shall we say?

The River Runs Both Ways

The dominant view has been that the Enlightenment and secularism have taken a toll. As technology advanced, we no longer needed God as provider and protector.

²¹ See David L. Crispus, *Household Conversions in Acts: Patterns and Interpretation* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

As we became prosperous, so also did we become spiritually fat and happy. As we moved from the countryside to the city, there were fewer positive social pressures for church attendance. According to this rendering, the church's collapse results in the collapse of the family.

In *How the West Really Lost God*, Mary Eberstadt offers a counter argument.²² The family's collapse results in the church's collapse. We know the demographic challenge. It is hard to bring young people into the church when church members themselves are having so few children. The same goes for seminary recruitment. And again, a congregation revives when even a few families are fruitful and multiply.

Ireland offers a stark example. In the 1970s, the Irish were having babies at double the replacement rate, four children per couple. By 2000, that number plummeted to 1.89. And along with this decline, weekly mass attendance dropped from 91 percent in 1973 to just 34 percent in 2005. Abortion, then unthinkable on the Emerald Isle, is the law of the land, not only an option, but increasingly for physicians a professional obligation.

How does family life affect life in the church? It is difficult to speak about the fatherhood of God when children have never lived with a father at home. This is especially problematic in Christian homes where our actions contradict our words. The same goes for what we say of Christ as groom and earthly marriage. Likewise, if we say children are a blessing, but put money and pleasure first, people get the message. The story of Madonna and child loses its appeal when motherhood is denigrated. There are also more practical considerations. Apart from children, we are tempted to sleep in, to tend other gardens. Children remind us of tomorrow, as well as the eternal tomorrow, and are a catalyst toward church attendance. The very idea of staging a Christmas pageant in an aging congregation becomes impossible.

The leading indicator of whether a child will remain faithful through high school is the presence of a father who attends church. Then there is the question of time spent apart from the family, beginning with college and into the years that follow. Those who live amidst family are more likely to go to church. Robert Wuthnow, Princeton sociologist, writes, "During the 1950's, the average time between confirmation class and the birth of first child for U.S. young people had only been seven years; by the end of the 1960's, in large measure because of the new contraceptive technologies, this period had more than doubled to fifteen years."²³ Our sons may not be prodigal, but away from home they do stray.

²² Mary Eberstadt, *How the West Really Lost God* (West Conshohocken, PA.: Templeton Press, 2013).

²³ Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 67.

Gnosticism and the Body

As we consider our identity, one more factor may be considered. Who exactly are we? Does our body play any role at all? Robert George claims that we live in an age of “Gnostic Liberalism.” According to this worldview, “You and I as persons, are identified entirely with the spirit or mind, or psyche, and not at all (or only in the most highly attenuated sense) with the body that we occupy (or are somehow ‘associated with’) and use.”²⁴ The soul, such as it is, is merely the ghost in the machine. The body is merely the vehicle or container for the inner-self.

When speaking of love, we talk about finding our soul mate. On popular television shows, the sexual union is described as coitus, so that we might think of it as a mechanical process, devoid of meaning or consequences. Perhaps some remember the movie *Pretty Woman*, where the Julia Roberts character would sell her body for sex, but saved her kisses for the man who would be her true love. Does the body matter? Yes, but only as something that functions well, hence diet and exercise. It is to be a well-oiled machine, with batteries fully charged.

In her book *Love Thy Body*, Nancy Pearcey shows how this new gnostic theology has played itself out in our culture.²⁵ The pro-life movement points to bodily DNA, a beating heart, and pictures in an ultrasound. Biology is on our side. And still Princeton Professor Peter Singer can claim, “The life of a newborn baby is of less value to it than the life of a pig, a dog, or a chimpanzee is to the nonhuman animal.”²⁶ A body is not enough to claim personhood. Higher cognitive functions, greater levels of self-awareness, self-reliance, or independence are said to be necessary. The same dynamic is at play in euthanasia, where the plug may be pulled on those who cannot help themselves.

Nancy Pearcey also points to the hookup culture, in which sex is merely a bodily function, separate from anything deeper. But with it comes depression and feelings of worthlessness. As Pearcey notes, “The hookup culture is unraveling the social fabric. It produces isolated, alienated adults.”²⁷ Likewise, consider the transgender phenomenon, according to which the body is trumped by the self-identifying mind. In Indiana, drivers can self-identify as male, female, or x. A child is said to be assigned sex at birth. A teacher is fired for not using the correct pronouns. A Lutheran pastor abdicates his role as husband and claims to transition into a woman. Not at home in their house or their body, is it any wonder our children are confused?

²⁴ Robert George, “Gnostic Liberalism,” *First Things* (December 2016).

²⁵ Nancy Pearcey, *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2018).

²⁶ Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 169.

²⁷ Pearcey, *Love Thy Body*, 126.

Gnosticism: Get Out of Jail Free

A healthy cynicism might lead us to conclude that Gnosticism is not only a religion, but also an excuse. As St. Paul notes, we all “show that the work of the law is written on their hearts. Our conscience bears witness, either accusing or excusing us” (Rom 2:15). Gnosticism, as such, provides us with a ready defense. Along with the Corinthians, we can say that food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food. If the body does not matter, sex is simply an appetite to be satisfied. We might then take our place at the rich fool’s table, where we can eat, drink, and be merry without a thought for the future (Luke 12:19). Interestingly, in such a way of thinking, the resurrection is no longer good news. St. Paul says, “The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body” (1 Cor 6:13). Paul then offers up the resurrection as a warning, saying, “And God raised the Lord and will also raise us by his power” (1 Cor 6:14). But if the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and the resurrection is real, then the desecration of the body will be dealt with in the age to come.

In some ways, I think, our people do understand what is at stake. Their funeral practices point away from bodily afterlife. Caskets and burials have been replaced by urns and cremation. The celebration of a life substitutes for any talk of the life to come. Strikingly, people no longer talk about death as falling asleep, for if they did, they would be reminded that we will one day wake up and see our Lord face-to-face. Underlying such practice seems to be a desire that there not be a resurrection. As a loved one said, I was nothing before I came into this world, and will be nothing after I die. This might seem depressing, but annihilation is the world’s great hope. For if the body is gone, then judgment day will never come, and the things that I do today are gloriously inconsequential.

Hope: At Home in the Body

This is not to say we should lose hope. As Kanye West reminds us, Jesus is King. Even as we fight, we must be about the business of seeking and saving the lost. Unlike those who have no hope, we have something to live for and something worth dying for. As the sexual revolution has taken its toll, there are many victims, bruised and battered, who desire something better, children of divorce who long for something more. The mutilated victims of transgender surgery, those who have found the gay lifestyle wanting, and those raised as children in same-sex marriages have come to see that the pot at the end of the rainbow flag was fool’s gold. Even now, there are many on the road to Damascus.

This is not about pointing fingers or chastising others for their mistakes. This is a bodily sickness that affects our entire society. And as the body of Christ, we are all in this together. With no need to justify ourselves, we might offer a year of jubilee, a chance for us all to start over.

What might the church have to offer? We have a message of affirmation. A way for our people to be at home once more in their physical body and in the body of Christ. Our message is not one of escape, but of cleansing and recovery, one of recreation, a new Genesis. We proclaim a truth that is truly natural and holistic, one that can make sense of the world we live in. We speak a message of a fallen nature meant for better things, a humanity created in God's image and redeemed by Christ's blood.

The life to come makes us courageous. Anchoring our hope in Christ's resurrection, we fear no one but God alone. And as we recover the sacredness of the body, we will no longer be nonchalant when a baker or florist is driven out of business. We cannot stand by idly as a Christian teacher is fired for not using the wrong pronouns. For they are with us fellow members of the body of Christ. As St. Paul says, "If one member suffers, all suffer together" (1 Cor 12:26). Their burdens are ours.

But for the sake of the world, we cannot leapfrog to the resurrection. We must speak first of the crucifixion, the body on the cross. As we look at that man, himself scarred and abandoned, we say, "Behold the Man." In that crucified body, we view the hope of the world, the one who invites us into the home of his father. This means a return to the crucifix, so that we can see that our wounds have been sanctified. This means a return to our Baptism into the body of Christ. This means a return to the altar, where we eat true body and true blood. For there is no spiritual worship apart from bodily worship, whether it is the body of Christ or ours.

In Christ, we may reclaim our identity as men and women, as husbands and wives, as members of God's family, so that we might feel at home in a body that serves as a temple of the Holy Spirit, at home in the body of Christ, his Church. We proclaim a message that heals the wounds that fill the gaps of our body and soul.

The body matters; it belongs to Christ. "You are not your own for you have been bought with a price" (1 Cor 6:19–20), Paul reminds us.

Now, in an age of autonomy, this might seem off-putting. But in the age of great scattering, it is a great cure. Blest be the ties that bind us to the Lord. The ties that bind husband and wife to each other and to their children and grandchildren. In the age of great scattering, we offer a homecoming, a seat at the family table, a place of belonging, a place where we matter to others and to God, a place where we know who we are, as Christians.

Theological Observer

COVID-19: Tricky Waters for the Good Ship

The COVID crisis has created some tricky waters for the good ship of the church. In Romans 13, Paul rightly urges us to obey those who govern, even as our Lord tells us to give Caesar what is his. Add to this the desire to do everything we can to protect the physical health of our neighbor. We pray for the wisdom of Solomon, that we might find the right balance, knowing that we may come to different conclusions as to how to go forward. One church goes entirely online, another requires masks, while another asks us simply to spread ourselves apart. When it comes to such things, one size does not fit all, and charity is a must.

But even so, Christians need to retain a certain vigor. We comply, but not as those who are unthinking, or without courage. Throughout our land, governors have issued edicts prohibiting the gathering of Christians, in churches and in homes. In some situations, the church has been unjustly targeted. Christians are allowed to enter big box stores but have been told they cannot go to church. This is especially troublesome when we remember that we are the body of Christ, commanded by our Lord to receive the body of Christ often.

While we owe basic obedience to governing authorities, so also must we take into account the spiritual toll that COVID-19 has taken on our people. Isolation from the physical church has left some in despair and depression, leading to both spiritual and physical harm. As a matter of wisdom, Christians are sure to have differing opinions as to where to draw the line. Christian brothers have already shown great courage in resisting government overreach, and this has met with some success. We live in a republic, where we have ample room, and even a duty, to push back. Due to the resistance of Christian leaders, edicts have been withdrawn and churches have been reopened. Great issues are at play. The longer government officials label church as “non-essential,” the more likely our own people will come to believe it. Continued absence from church soon becomes a habit. Nor is it good that we become comfortable with livestreaming when we need the real presence.

While we debate where to draw the line, lines must be drawn. Health emergencies matter, but one thing is needful. May the Lord give us charity, wisdom, and courage that we might care for others while remaining faithful, all the while knowing that the church is not much loved today, and that we must be vigilant in defense of her prerogatives.

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