

The Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Nehemiah 8:2-4a, 5-6, 8-10
<i>Response</i>	[T]he words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 19:8, 9, 10, 15
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 12:12-30
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	[H]e has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21

The third Sunday in Ordinary Time for year C continues our journey through Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. And it brings us to one of Paul's most unique and memorable passages in all of his letters. It's his description of the Mystical Body of Christ, where he compares the Church to a body that has many members but one head.

So it's a very powerful image, and although it's one that's pretty common in our day — I think many people are familiar with the idea that the Church is the Body of Christ. What we tend to forget is that Paul is the only author in the New Testament who utilizes that image. This is a distinctively Pauline contribution to ecclesiology, the theology of the Church, and this is the *locus classicus*. This is the classic passage on the Mystical Body of Christ. So let's see what Paul has to say. It's a long second reading for today. I'm sure there's a short version you could do, but don't do that. Do the long one; it's always better. 1 Corinthians 12:12-30 — so let's hear what Paul has to say about the Mystical Body of Christ:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not

make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the organs in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single organ, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, the parts of the body which seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those parts of the body which we think less honorable we invest with the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior part, that there may be no discord in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?¹

And of course, the answer to all those questions is a great big rhetorical “no”, although that’s not in the text. The text kind of just abruptly ends right there for the reading for today.

So what are we going to make of this? There are just a few points that I really want to highlight about this beautiful, powerful passage. The first one is Paul’s emphasis on unity and diversity within the Church. This is a very important point to be made, that although the Church as the Body of Christ is one — like we say in the

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Creed, “I believe in *one* holy, catholic, and apostolic Church”. Although the Church is one, that does not mean it is uniform. It is not uniform, but unified. So there’s a diversity of members within this one body. Just like in the human body, not every part of the body looks the same, and not every part of the body does the same thing, has the same function... the same thing is true in the Church. There is a diversity of members but a unity of purpose, a unity within Christ.

And notice, Paul roots that unity in our Baptism. We were all baptized into one body when we became incorporated into the Body of Christ through Baptism, and we were all made to drink of the one Spirit. So whether you’re a Jew or Greek, slave or free, whether you’re man or woman, we all have a unity that flows from the Sacrament of Baptism, which has as one of its principal functions, our incorporation into the Mystical Body of Christ.

You can’t get into the Mystical Body of Christ by being a really good person, practicing human virtue. You can’t get into the Body of Christ through your own will or your own effort. Incorporation into the Body of Christ is a gift of the Holy Spirit that comes to us through Baptism. It’s a supernatural unity that is manifested in the one Church. Alright, that’s the first point.

The second point is that all of the different parts of the body, even though they have different functions and different apparent dignities, are all indispensable. Because no one of them could suffice to constitute the entire body so that it would be an operating, living organism. So Paul... I always find this humorous whenever I read this passage. He says:

If the whole body were an eye...

I imagine this gigantic eye. Right, or when he says:

If the whole body were an ear...

I imagine this gigantic ear, you know? These are hyperbolic, precisely in order to prove the point, that although an ear might be tempted to think, “Well, I’m not as important as the eye,” or the eye might be tempted to think, “I’m not as important

as the ear or the mouth or whatever”... the reality is all of the parts of the body are indispensable in the fact that they work together.

And by analogy, the same thing is true of the Church. You have the visible head of the Church, for example, in the Pope. You have visible heads of individual churches, both in dioceses, where you have the bishop, or in the parish, where you have the priest who is the spiritual father of that parish. But the head is not the only important part of the body. A head without a body is decapitated. It needs the body to live. So you have other members of the body — whether it be various members of lay people or consecrated religious, you have families, mothers, fathers, daughters, children. All these different parts of the body work together to both make visibly present that one Church, but also to serve within the building up of the Body of Christ, just like organs serve various functions within the body of the human being.

So in this case, it’s interesting here — Paul makes his analogy in order, I suspect, to help people understand that although you might have a small part in the body of Christ in the Church, that doesn’t mean you’re dispensable, and it doesn’t mean you’re not important. Each person has a role to play through the gift of the Holy Spirit that they received in Baptism.

So it’s no coincidence that this passage of the Mystical Body of Christ follows immediately on the heels of Paul’s description of the charismatic gifts in chapter 12, because he’s trying to teach the Corinthians to recognize that they have — each of them, every single person, if you’re baptized — you have a charismatic gift that was given to you by the Holy Spirit, for the service of the common good of the Church, that you need to exercise... that you need to realize that you need to ask the Holy Spirit to awaken in you so that you might serve. You don’t get to basically play no role in the body. All the members of the body have a function, and the same thing is true even of the most... even of the smallest and most apparently dispensable parts of the Church.

And in fact, there’s a beautiful passage — I love this passage here where he talks about how:

If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (1 Corinthians 12:26)

So here you see this kind of mutual building up that's part of the body. Because we're all connected in the Church, in other words, when one of us is suffering, it actually affects the others. And likewise, when one of us is honored, we all rejoice together. So this is a very important corrective to the overly individualistic view of Christianity that is particularly predominant in western European Christianity. So in some western forms of Christianity, especially since the Protestant Reformation, you'll have a very individualistic idea of Christianity as basically being about me and Jesus. It's me and Him. And of course, there is that intimate personal aspect that's at the very core of what it means to be a disciple. But that's not separated from the corporate dimension of our relationship to the body of the Church.

And so we tend to forget very easily, for example, that when I fail to grow in holiness, when I give in to sin, it doesn't just hurt me; it actually hurts the Church as a whole. It weakens the Church as a whole. It damages the strength of the entire body, just like if one of my organs begins to fail. If my liver starts to fail or if my kidneys are starting to malfunction, it isn't just the kidney that is hurt. It isn't just the liver that is hurt. The entire body suffers when one of the members suffers — so a very important testament to the value of each of the members of the Body of Christ.

And then finally, what Paul does is he draws out this analogy by actually giving a kind of hierarchy of certain roles within the Church that echo those charismatic gifts that he describes in chapter 12 and also illuminate the different roles that people have to play within the organizational form of the Church — not just the Mystical or invisible Body but the visible Body of the Church. And so this is his little hierarchy that he gives; so he says:

Now you are the body of Christ...

...so he's speaking to the Corinthians here.

...and individually members of it.

So there's unity and diversity, individuality and the corporate or communal aspect. And he says:

And God has appointed in the church...

..and here's the list:

....first apostles...

...Paul and the twelve...

...second prophets...

.. would be those who speak the Word of the God.

...third teachers...

It is interesting Paul considers teaching to be an essential aspect of building up the Body of Christ. Fourth:

...then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues.

So it's interesting here — a couple of things stand out to me. First, you'll notice that Paul isn't giving here the ordinary hierarchy that we would think of in terms of sacraments, like the Sacrament of Holy Orders. We have the bishops, the presbyters, and the deacons. He'll do that elsewhere when he's talking about ordained ministry, for example, in the pastoral epistles to Titus and to Timothy.

But here he's talking more about charismatic gifts and roles within the Church that echo what he said earlier in 1 Corinthians chapter 12. So he mentions apostles first, prophets second, and then third, teachers — this would be those who teach the faith. You'll eventually see this play out in the early Church in the role of the catechist. What the catechist was was a person who would teach the faith,

especially to beginners — those who were coming into the Church and who were going through the various rites of initiation that rose up in the early Church.

And I think for me, at least, one thing that stands out here is that while we might be tempted to think, “Whoa, man, miracle workers — they are the most powerful and visible and important people”. If you think of someone who can perform miracles, you tend to put them at the top of the chain. Paul actually puts prophets, apostles, and even teaching above the working of miracles. So it’s an interesting corrective, I would say, for us who might be inclined to think that the more extraordinary, supernatural, and visible gift of performing miracles would outweigh the somewhat more mundane, ordinary gift of teaching. That’s not how Paul sees it here in 1 Corinthians 12.

And then also, what’s interesting is that he puts helpers and administrators as among the various members of the Church. So “helpers” in Greek — this is an interesting word. It’s hard to define. It means someone who gives assistance, but it also has to deal with someone who can bear suffering, receive suffering. Because when you serve others, it can bring about suffering. So a helper is someone who serves others. And surely, you can think in your parish of certain members who have this gift of service, where they are constantly serving the Church, assisting the Church, assisting the pastor, assisting others, assisting those in need. It’s just a beautiful gift of self-gift and donation of self through being a helper. Again, not as glorious as being a miracle worker or a healer, but according to Paul, a very critical role in the Body of Christ.

And then, I also think it’s funny that he lists administrators here — *kybernēsis* is the Greek word. And the reason this one makes me chuckle a bit is because, at least friends of mine who are engaged in administration, tend to think of it not as a gift of the Holy Spirit but maybe as a burden of the evil spirit. Administration brings with it heavy duties and heavy burdens.

And in all seriousness, I think that’s one of the reasons why Paul lists it here as he’s going through this hierarchy of spiritual gifts. Because we need to recall that administration in the Church — exercising of governance over others, exercise of organization in Church, coordinating the various gifts and abilities of the members

of the Church in order to bear the most fruit in the Church — is not just a natural human virtue. It's not something done through purely human skill or purely human activity. It is a gift of the Holy Spirit.

So if someone has been appointed in an administrative role, 1 Corinthians 12, the reading for today, I would encourage them (and Paul would encourage us, based on his earlier statements in 12) to implore the Lord for an increase in that gift. If it's a supernatural gift, then it's something that's given by the Holy Spirit. So not just to lean on our human abilities and human actions... to ask God for the gift of administration if you've been placed in a role of leadership.

And then finally, Paul ends with the gift of tongues at the end — which, once again, is a little counterintuitive. When most people think about charismatic gifts, the one gift they think about is the gift of speaking in tongues. And some Christians might even tend to make it like the most definitive or the most decisive or to even treat it as if it's the highest of the charismatic gifts. But Paul here puts it at the bottom of the totem pole of charismatic gifts, probably because there was a temptation within the Church at Corinth already for some members of the Church to make speaking in tongues the most important or the most central of the gifts... and to exercise it in a way that was somewhat unordered or disordered within the liturgical assembly. But I can't prove that; I'm only speculating. But it is interesting that for him it's at the bottom, even though it is so extraordinary.

And then finally, he wraps up his discussion by pointing out that no one member of the Church is going to possess all these gifts. Not everyone is an apostle. Not everyone is a prophet. Not everyone has that gift of teaching. Not everyone has the gift of tongues. Not everyone has the gift of healing. So sometimes people will be a little dismayed and think, "Well, you know, I would like to do something extraordinary. I would like to perform the gift of healing. I would like to work miracles, but all I do is serve the Church. All I do is help. All I do is administrate."

That's not Paul's view. Whether a charismatic gift is ordinary or extraordinary... whether it's very visible to people like working miracles, or whether it's very hidden like service — according to Paul, they all flow from that one Spirit, and they work together to serve the Body of Christ.

Now, the lectionary did not include this verse, but I'm going to end with one last verse, because in the very next verse after Paul says:

Do all interpret?

The next thing he's going to say is:

But earnestly desire the higher gifts. (1 Corinthians 12:31)

And this is going to lead into his famous chapter, 1 Corinthians 13, where he's going to describe the higher spiritual gifts — the greatest of which is love, which is charity. So that's coming, but it's not the reading for today.

So in closing, I almost forgot — I want to draw on the living tradition here. Every time I read 1 Corinthians 12, this famous passage about the Mystical Body of Christ, it reminds me of a very famous text, a section of St. Thérèse's *Story of a Soul*.

Now many people are familiar with the fact that St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the Little Flower, described her own personal vocation as being a vocation to love. But what often gets overlooked is that Thérèse discovered that that was her vocation when she was meditating on 1 Corinthians 12 and 13 and St. Paul's teaching on the Mystical Body of Christ.

So if you've ever struggled with what exactly is my role in the Body of Christ, what are my spiritual gifts, what role do I have to play, what service do I have to offer? So did St. Thérèse, and listen to her account of what happened when she was meditating on the reading for today. She says this:

During my meditation, my desires caused me a veritable martyrdom, and I opened the Epistles of St. Paul to find some kind of answer. Chapters 12 and 13 of the First Epistle to the Corinthians fell under my eyes. I read there, in the first of these chapters, that *all* cannot be apostles, prophets, doctors, etc. that the Church is composed of different members, and that the eye cannot

be the hand at “one and the same time”... I finally had to rest. Considering the mystical body of the Church, *I had not recognized myself in any of the members described by St. Paul...*

So she’s looking at what St. Paul says. There’s the ear, there’s the eye. She’s looking at the different members described by Paul, and she doesn’t see herself in any of them. So she says...she continues:

Charity gave me the key to my vocation. I understand that if the Church had a body composed of different members, the most necessary and most noble of all could not be lacking to it, and so I understood that the Church had a Heart and that this Heart was BURNING WITH LOVE. I understood it was Love alone that made the Church’s members act, that if Love ever became extinct, apostles would not preach the Gospel and martyrs would not shed their blood. I understood that LOVE COMPRISED ALL VOCATIONS, THAT LOVE WAS EVERYTHING, THAT IT EMBRACED ALL TIMES AND PLACES, IN A WORD, THAT IT WAS ETERNAL! Then, in the excess of my delirious joy, I cried out: O Jesus, my Love.... my vocation, at last I have found it.... MY VOCATION IS LOVE! Yes, I have found my place in the Church and it is You, o my God, who have given me this place; in the heart of the Church, my Mother, I shall be Love. Thus I shall be everything, and thus my dream will be realized.²

That’s from the *Story of a Soul*, chapter 9. Truthful, powerful, wow.

Okay, so notice, what is St. Thérèse saying here? What she’s saying is, “I looked at all these members of the body that Paul is describing. I didn’t see myself in any of them, and yet, I wanted to be in all of them.” She said, “I want to be an ear. I want to be an eye. I want to be a hand. I want to be the feet. I want to be it all!” So as she ponders this, St. Paul’s analogy helps her realize, “Wait a second. If the Church is the Mystical Body of Christ, then that body must have a heart. So I want to be the heart.” And what is the heart of the Mystical Body of Christ? It’s charity. It’s love.

² St. Thérèse, *Story of a Soul*, Chapter IX

And in that moment, she discovers — through meditating on St. Paul, on the reading for today — that her vocation, her distinctive vocation, was to be charity... was to be love. And that all of the other vocations ultimately flow out of that one.

Now, physiologically, the reason that's so powerful is because, of course, the heart is the source of oxygen, of life. And from the heart flows blood to all of the members of the body. If any member of the body gets cut off from the heart, the blood stops flowing, then that member is going to die. It's going to wither up and die. So Thérèse's insight here is very powerful. There's a real sense in which she's right, that the vocation to love — inasmuch as it corresponds to the heart of the Mystical Body and the blood that flows through the veins — is the vocation of every member of the body, just as every member of the body is given life, given oxygen, given blood through the acting and the working of the heart.

So she discovered that her vocation is to love and that by focusing on love and making that the *charismata*, the spiritual gift that she most earnestly desires, that she can not only find her unique individual vocation, but she can do all the other vocations as well. Because it's the heart that animates the entire Body of Christ, and in that way as she says:

Thus I shall be everything, and thus my dream will be realized.

So... beautiful text that shows the power and the importance of meditation on Scripture. Would Thérèse have discovered that her particular vocation to the Little Way of Love *was* the vocation of charity if she wasn't reading St. Paul? If she wasn't meditating and pondering on 1 Corinthians 12? We can't answer that question. All we can do is be thankful in that Thérèse was open to allowing St. Paul and through St. Paul to allow the Holy Spirit to reveal to her that her particular vocation was to love... and that in a real sense, that all of us are called to whatever particular vocation we might have within the Mystical Body of Church — whether it's teaching or healing or administration or helping — but that ultimately, that vocation has to be rooted in charity and in the universal call to love as members of the one Mystical Body of Christ.