

Our Bodies, Our Selves

Imagine what it was like for Adam and Eve to live in the Garden of Eden. The flowers were aromatic. The views were artistic. The fruits were delicious beyond anything we mere mortals can only imagine. All of their bodily senses were overwhelmed by the beauty of creation. Paradise was a feast for the body.

It was in their human bodies that Adam and Eve experienced God. They walked and talked with God in the garden. They heard God with their ears. All of these experiences are felt in their human bodies. The human body was created by God for an experience of the divine. Our bodies were created to be in communion with God. This was a totality of human experience: to be with God.

When a human person dies, they do not give up their bodies and are only just souls in heaven. Just as when Mary Magdalene saw Jesus after the resurrection, she thought He was the gardener, so obviously He had a body. When our Lord had Thomas place his hand in His side, He had a body. This body was different though, in that it could enter a room through locked doors, but a body nonetheless. This body shared human functions such as eating, which our Lord did with His apostles sharing a meal of fish. How does this happen to us? It is described by Saint John of Damascus who says, "God reaches down into the grave and pulls out a single cell and builds up a new body." A single cell from our bodies, as science illustrates, contains our DNA, whether we are buried or cremated. It is from this single cell our glorified or heavenly body is created. We are not souls floating in heaven, but embodied beings.

Our Lord, in describing the heavenly Paradise, uses terms that show sensate bodily enjoyment. There are mansions, implying living in comfort. There are banquets, not just fast food, but food and company that is to be savored. We are not, as humans, only souls that go to heaven. We go to heaven as bodies and souls. As Jesus is in heaven with a glorified body so shall we be.

It is for this reason that the Byzantine liturgy is so sensual. When we walk into the Church, we can have the same experience as the emissaries sent by Prince Volodymyr to Constantinople to see the Byzantine liturgy. The *Chronicles of Nestor* note that they did not know whether they were in heaven or on earth. Like those representatives, our senses should be overwhelmed when we walk into the church. Our eyes take in the wonder of the icons as glimpses into the heavenly Paradise. Our ears are filled with the beauty of the chant, it is like hearing the choirs of angels. Our sense of smell brings in the aroma of heaven with the incense. And it is by participation in the Eucharist that we taste the sweetness and goodness of the Lord. Our bodies bring all of these experiences in contact with our soul and so as one

we experience a glimpse of heaven on earth.

We are a unity of body and soul. They are closely-related to and have impact upon each other. When we are happy, our physical pains are diminished. As a mother giving birth forgets the pain in the joy of seeing her child. Conversely, when we have a severe headache, our desire to do good or to do anything is reduced.

Logically, if we as persons go to heaven; we go to heaven as embodied beings, it is logical then that sins of the body can keep us from heaven. If our bodies are kept away from sin, they should be rewarded with heavenly and physical joys, like a good meal. Conversely, if our bodies are involved in sinful actions, they should feel the consequence of the sins. It is for this reason that hell is described by our Lord as a burning pit called Gehenna. It is for this reason that it is a Church practice to discipline our bodies to keep them from sin. We have regular practices of fasting and abstinence. These can show us that we decide as bodies and souls. If we are capable of giving up certain foods on designated days or seasons, we are capable of giving up other things that our bodies find pleasurable. We discipline our bodies, and in so doing, discipline ourselves.


One of the virtues is chastity. Chastity is using our bodies in moderation. Chastity allows us to use our bodies for sexual activities within the confines of marriage. Using our bodies outside of marriage is sinful. Sins of the flesh impact us as a whole being. There are two ways in which the Church helps us keep our sexual desires chaste. One: we can see in our monastic tradition where men and women separate themselves from members of the opposite sex and have the support of their religious community to be chaste. Another way of being chaste is in marriage. As St. Paul notes, it is better to be married than to burn. Some may ask why I did not mention the single vocation. It is because traditionally, in the Byzantine Church, singles were considered monastics, as in being hermits. People who became single, like widows, were to have as their support system their families. Possibly, it is time that our Church, on an official pastoral level, addresses this relatively new state of life. Our senses and the experience of them needs to be moderated.

Persons who attend the Divine liturgy should expect to have this sensual experience. Here too there are limits. When the incense negatively impacts our sense of smell, our participation in the liturgy is diminished. Just as when the singing is not pleasant, our participation is lessened. When the wine used in the Eucharist tastes like vinegar, we do not taste the goodness of the Lord. It is for this reason that the quality of the liturgy is essential to our spiritual well-being because it motivates our full participation. Our singing, our physical movements, like the sign of the cross, our taking in the heavenly environment moves us deeper into the liturgical experience and our glimpse of heaven on earth.

Icons that are not pleasing to the eyes offend our spirituality. We are deeply offended when people desecrate icons and other

*We
are a unity
of body and
soul.*





religious images. There is in our society a denigration of the human body, which too is an icon, as it is created in the image and likeness of God. This denigration is called pornography. Forty-seven percent of families in the United States say that pornography is a problem. The porn industry's annual income is more than the MLB, NBA and NFL combined, and the combined income of ABC, CBS, and NBC. Pornography increases infidelity rates by more than 300%. The average age that a child is first exposed to porn is eleven, and most can remember the first image they saw for the rest of their lives. Fifty-six percent of American divorces involve one party having an "obsessive interest" in pornographic websites of which there are 42 million. This is not just a male problem. Women today are also active on pornographic websites. Observing pornography can, and more than likely does, corrupt our God-given sexual identity. We see the human body not as a

beautiful masterpiece of God's creation but rather as an object for gratification. You open yourself up to the possibilities of even greater sins. People are surprised when priests give them a penance for viewing pornography because it doesn't involve them with other people. But it leads to sins of self-gratification, which can impact on future or present marital relations. The reason that one sin leads to another is that the first sin is no longer able to provide the "satisfaction" of the original sin, so more is needed. Everyone says they can stop. But they do not want to stop.

They fail to realize that they can lose their eternal life with Christ. A person may say that they committed adultery because their spouse was no longer able to satisfy them. Their expectations of the relationship are created by fantasies created

and supplied by pornography, which is not realistic. Abstinence is a normal part of a sexual relationship. There are many reasons for abstinence, such as pregnancy. Spouses have a reasonable expectation of continued relations even in advanced years. Love should be the motivation.

Pornography is a slippery slope that can lead to greater sins and finally, to eternal damnation. Our bodies are a gift from God for the divine expectation is that we will enjoy eternal life with God as embodied beings. We can lose our eternal Paradise by thinking that the sins of the flesh do not impact our spiritual lives. When we fail to realize that our bodies are part of who we are, then who we are can lose eternal life. Our bodies are not our selves. Our selves are embodied souls.

*Our bodies
are not our
selves.
Our selves are
embodied
souls.*