

Reflection 4: What if our bodies are also gifts? Oct 30, 2016

As a young child, I remember being aware that my body is a place where I encounter God. When running, my asthma would flare up, I found myself begging God to help me breathe. When I discovered the miracle of reading, I remember thinking what magic it was that letters could paint pictures in my mind. When puberty arrived and I felt the flood of hormones and longing to belong to someone, I knew almost instinctively that God must have a great gift in sex, even if He asked me to be patient in the midst of an emotional storm. I struggled with worrying that I wasn't tall enough, thin enough, or pretty enough to be loveable, like many others do, but I faced those challenges with a strong counter experience that my body was, in fact, good.

Our bodies are a gift from God, so that we can taste, see, smell, touch, and hear our way through the gift of life. They are the way we identify with ourselves, connect with each other, carry out our mission and purpose, effect change, and surrender. As humans, we are always body and soul, making our way through life and meeting God right here in our own lives and experiences.

As I arrived in early adulthood, I discovered that many people have not experienced the goodness that God intends for our bodies. They have been beaten, wounded, assaulted or nearly destroyed by words, actions, circumstances, and systems. It is a painful thing to know of a child raped by his father, who now carries a lifetime of wounds that go beyond the hours in the darkness. It takes years and back-breaking emotional labour to rebuild confidence and a sense of security when an eating disorder robs a woman of her sense of herself. When sexual identity and desire do not line up with what everyone else experiences as "normal", the isolation, shame and fear rob lives by depression, addiction, and suicide – every single day. Sin and evil carried out on and in our bodies causes profound spiritual pain as well.

It's a sensitive thing that our spirituality is so tied up with bodies and sexuality. Since we are created in God's image with bodies and souls, male and female, we cannot escape the reality that living and loving are deeply connected to our bodies and our sexuality. Our sexuality is so personal, so appropriately private, so deeply intimate, that anyone commenting on it almost always feels uncomfortable and invasive. Our culture has suggested that sex is at once both casual and very important, that our own instant gratification is the highest priority. The Church's reverence for the mystery and power of sexuality can feel restrictive, like an overwhelming no to something we instinctively long for and know is good.

God created us with bodies and they are good. In following Jesus, who came to us in a human body, we are invited to make authentic peace with our bodies and our sexuality, to say a deep and intimate yes to the way we have been created, to the goodness that God wrote into our unique bodies and our longing for love, belonging, and intimacy. As Paul asks the first Christians, we are also

asked: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, who was given to you by God?" (1 Corinthians 16:19)

In following Jesus, we get to say yes to the beauty of every body, in every shape and size, every colour and ability, every state of health and disease. We can never lose our dignity, because the human person, revealed to us in the body (regardless of its state) has the dignity of bearing the image of God. We say yes to caring for and loving people by the way that we care for their bodies, even in death. It is perhaps most difficult to do this with ourselves. Jesus says yes to your body exactly as it is. He invites us to make peace with our bodies, to refrain from damaging them. Making peace with our bodies, with their capacity and their limitation is a first step to allowing our bodies to be a gift for others, in service, in relationships, and in sexual expression.

We get the privilege, in following Jesus, of saying yes to chastity, which I define as the art of waiting on God's time. Chastity looks like my child learning to wait until someone is ready to share that toy with them rather than demanding it prematurely or worse, just going and taking it. Professionally, chastity is expressed when I work with my colleagues toward change at a pace that we can move together, rather than forcing change in a way that causes damage to relationships in the name of profit or efficiency.

In sexuality, chastity means not just saying no to sex outside of marriage but learning to be patient with our own longing and desire. It means saying yes to waiting, to holding tension, to experiencing unfulfilled longing, for now and sometimes forever, even when this longing is overwhelming. Within marriage, it is being patient with one another when there are differences in sexual desire, waiting on the right time for children, grappling with infertility, waiting for one another to grow and learn the lessons that God is teaching, even and especially when it would be more gratifying to force what you want.

Following Jesus is saying yes to wrestling through my issues with my body, myself, my sexual longings and hurts so that my interactions in all human relationships are peaceful, respectful, honest and authentic, made possible by his healing presence. It has been my experience, even with a fairly healthy experience of my embodiedness that these issues are painful to work through. And so we get to say yes to walking with God and with each other very gently and with much compassion when it comes to issues of body and sexuality. We have not always done this well, and we need to work together to say yes to knowing, reverencing, experiencing, and loving the gift of our bodies as well as those of others'.

- Where do you see your body and sexuality as a gift?
- What is difficult for you about your body and sexuality?
- Who else in your life is blessed by the gift of your body?
- How is God inviting you to wait on His time as you live with your longing and desire only some of which will be fulfilled in this lifetime?