

Vatican II and the Year of Faith:  
*The Afterlife: It May not Be What You Think*

"According to the Christian faith, what happens at the end of time?" I used to ask my students this question when I taught a college course on Christian history. Most of my students were Christians, but nearly all them got it wrong. They overlooked the next to last article in the Creed: "I believe . . . in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen."

I don't think my students were unusual. Many Christians believe, more or less, what my students said: "Your body rots; your soul goes to heaven or hell; end of story." But that's not the end of the story. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains: "God, in his almighty power, will definitively grant incorruptible life **to our bodies** by reuniting them with our souls, through the power of Jesus' resurrection." (CCC, 997)

Many religions have confessed the immortality of the soul. The Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) stand out for affirming the resurrection of the flesh. As St. Paul said, "We await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body. (Philippians 3:20-21) And again, "The dead will be raised imperishable . . . and this mortal nature must put on immortality." (1 Cor. 15:35-37, 52, 53)

This doctrine seems to go against reason. Why would God want to reconstitute our lowly bodies? Shouldn't we be freed from these 'jars of clay?' When St. Paul preached at Athens, it was this belief they ridiculed: "Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked; but others said, "We will hear you again about this." (Acts 17:32)

In fact, the doctrine is not contrary to reason, and it comes with profound implications. There are two paradoxical conclusions we should draw from it: The body does not matter at all, and the body matters a whole lot.

*The Body Does not Matter at All*

If God is going to reconstitute my physical body at the end of time, I don't need to worry too much about its present condition. Jesus said, "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." (Matt. 10:28a) And St. Paul said, " If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you." (Romans 8:11)

This is a truth that many religions have gotten close to. Reason can grasp that the soul, intrinsically immortal, is the seat of our spiritual nature, and of infinitely greater worth than whatever pertains merely to the body. Understanding this, and entrusting their bodies to God, great martyrs and ascetics have endured severe afflictions in pursuit of a higher goal. They understood that the body in its present condition is not our final end. In a culture obsessed with bodily appearance, this is especially important to remember.

*The Body Matters a Whole Lot*

The really surprising thing about the Christian faith is the way it affirms the sublime dignity of the body. God cares enough about the body to become incarnate, to rebuild our bodies after the image and likeness of Christ. This has profound consequences.

As the sphere of our redemption, the body has an integrity to be honored and respected. This is what makes both marriage and religious life such profound gifts. I renounce ownership of my own body and give it to another not because I hate my body, but because it is one of the most precious things I have. St. Paul teaches this beautifully when discussing both marriage and the life of celibacy. He writes, "The body . . . is meant for the Lord, and the Lord for the body." (1 Corinthians 6:13) This also runs contrary to our culture, which increasingly views the body as malleable, a mere tool to be exploited and reshaped according to my whim, and for my pleasure.

The Church, in her social teaching sees that resurrection also imposes a moral imperative. We must work to heal both body and society, since God thinks enough of them to redeem them. In the Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council Fathers wrote:

Therefore, while we are warned that it profits a man nothing if he gain the whole world and lose himself, the expectation of a new earth must not weaken but rather stimulate our concern for cultivating this one. For here grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age.

Catholicism is in many ways an earthy religion. It's all tied up with bodies, flesh, food, and drink. It was Lord who said, "My flesh is real food; My blood is real drink." (John 6:55) The life of the body is not something for us to escape, but something to redeem, as a pathway to eternity. In marriage, or in single life, we can give something precious back to God who gave us life and redeemed us. The ultimate pledge of that redemption is the most bodily component of our faith - what St. Ignatius of Antioch called "The medicine of immortality," the Holy Eucharist.