

## Opening reflection for mass at Orlagh, Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> October 2026

In preparing to celebrate the sacred mysteries at Orlagh, it has been a custom to ease into our bodies, being guided to attend, for example, to how we sit, our support on the chair, the straightness of our back, the depth and ease of our breathing.

This might seem an extraneous add-on to the mass itself – perhaps an out-of-place import from some eastern forms of spirituality.

But it can be understood and defended as something necessary to members of modern western, so-called ‘advanced’ societies, products of a centuries-long process of ‘excarnation’, through which we’ve come to live in our heads, distanced from our bodies, our senses, our feelings, our natural inclinations.

Moreover, we can see it – this attending to and reclaiming our bodies – as having a specifically Christian inspiration, since the Incarnation of God among us, as one of us, is the central Christian mystery. The kind of mind/body and soul/body split that we inherit from much modern philosophy and from earlier Platonism was not part of Hebrew thought-patterns at the time of Jesus and it does not align with Paul’s distinction between spirit and flesh or Augustine’s distinction between charity and cupidity. Indeed we can see a strong emphasis on our embodiment as deeply eucharistic, since in each mass we re-enact Jesus’s saying ‘this is my body’ and inviting us to identify with him to the preposterous point of eating his body and drinking his blood.

What are we to make of this Christian bodyfulness? It wouldn’t be wrong to emphasise the body as healthy, happy, cherished, and at ease – as suggested by many stories in the gospels of Jesus’ healing sick people, eating and drinking with his friends, or enjoying his feet being massaged with precious oils by Mary’s hands and hair.

But in fact it is a wounded, broken body that we ultimately meet in the gospels, a body that will become glorious only because it has accepted and undergone suffering and death – just as, only by being milled, the wheat becomes bread and, only by being crushed, the grapes become wine.

The lesson for us is how to accept our wounded bodies, not just the ailments that we accumulate in aging but all the wounds – all ‘the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to’ – that come upon us inescapably along our whole life-journeys. Many of these wounds are emotional, some even spiritual, and since we don’t – or, perhaps at the time, can’t – integrate them, they lodge in our bodies, our bodies as mute, uncomprehending store-houses of unresolved memories.

A striking articulation of this message comes from Henri Nouwen:

‘As long as your wounded part remains foreign to your adult self, your pain will injure you as well as others. This pain is uniquely yours, because it is linked to some of your earliest life experiences. Your call is to bring it home. Yes, you have to incorporate your pain into your self and let it bear fruit in your heart and the hearts of others.

This is a big part of what Jesus means when he asks you to take up your cross. He encourages you to recognize and embrace your unique suffering and to trust that your way to salvation lies therein. Taking up your cross means, first of all, befriending your wounds and letting them reveal to you your own truth.

There is great pain and suffering in the world. But the pain hardest to bear is your own. Once you have taken up that cross, you will be able to see more clearly the crosses that others have to bear, and you will be better able to reveal to them their own ways to joy, peace, freedom and service....

This is a movement toward full incarnation. It leads you to become what you already are – a child of God; it lets you embody more and more the truth of your being; it makes you claim the God within you.’

May our participation in today’s eucharist strengthen us to go with this movement in our lives.

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