

The Meaning of Nakedness

Following are excerpts from the text of a recent general audience address by Pope John Paul II.

We have already spoken of the shame which arose in the heart of the first man, male and female, together with sin. The first sentence of the biblical narrative, in this connection, runs as follows: "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons." This passage, which speaks of the mutual shame of the man and the woman as a symptom of the fall, must be considered in its context. At that moment shame reaches its deepest level and seems to shake the very foundations of their existence. "And they heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden."

The necessity of hiding themselves indicates that in the depths of the shame they both feel before each other, as the immediate fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, there has matured a sense of fear before God: a fear previously unknown. The Lord God called to the man, and said to him: "Where are you?" And he said, "I heard the sound of thee in the garden, and I was afraid; because I was naked; and I hid myself."

A certain fear always belongs to the very essence of shame; nevertheless original shame reveals its character in a particular way: "I was afraid, because I was naked." We realize that something deeper than physical shame, bound up with a recent consciousness of his own nakedness, is in action here. Man tries to cover with the shame of his own nakedness the real origin of fear, indicating rather its effect, in order not to call its cause by name. It is then that God Yahweh says in his turn: "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten of the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?"

The precision of that dialogue is overwhelming, the precision of the whole narrative is overwhelming. It manifests the surface of man's emotions in living the events, in such a way as to reveal at the same time their depth. In all this, "nakedness" has not solely a literal meaning; it does not refer only to the body. Actually, through "nakedness" there is manifested man deprived of participation in the Gift, man alienated from that Love which had been the source of the original gift, the source of the fullness of the good intended for the creature.

This man, according to the formulas of the theological teaching of the Church, was deprived of the supernatural and preternatural gifts which were part of his "endowment" before sin. Furthermore, he suffered a loss in what belongs to his nature itself, to humanity in the original fullness "of the image of God." The three forms of lust do not correspond to the fullness of that image, but precisely to the loss, the

deficiencies, the limitations that appeared with sin.

Lust is explained as a lack, which, however, has its roots in the original depth of the human spirit. If we wish to study this phenomenon in its origins, that is at the threshold of the experiences of "historical" man, we must take into consideration all the words that God Yahweh addressed to the woman and to the man, and furthermore we must examine the state of their consciousness; and it is the Yahwist text that expressly enables us to do so. We have already called attention before to the literary specificity of the text in this connection.

What state of consciousness can be manifested in the words: "I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself"? To what interior truth do they correspond? To what meaning of the body do they testify? Certainly this new state differs a great deal from the original one. The words of the text bear witness directly to a radical change of the meaning of original nakedness. In the state of original innocence nakedness did not express a lack, but represented full acceptance of the body in all its human and therefore personal truth.

The body, as the expression of the person, was the first sign of man's presence in the visible world. In that world, man was able right from the beginning, to distinguish himself, almost to be individualized — that is, confirm himself as a person — also through his own body. In fact, it had been marked, so to speak, as a visible factor of the transcendence in virtue of which man, as a person, surpasses the visible world of living beings. In this sense, the human body was from the beginning a faithful witness and a tangible verification of man's original "solitude" in the world, becoming at the same time, by means of his masculinity and femininity, a limpid element of mutual donation in the communion of persons.

In this way, the human body bore in itself, in the mystery of creation, an unquestionable sign of the "image of God" and constituted also the specific source of the certainty of that image, present in the whole human being. Original acceptance of the body was, in a way, the basis of the acceptance of the whole visible world. And in its turn it was for man a guarantee of his dominion over the world, over the earth, which he was to subdue.

The words, "I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself," bear witness to a radical change in this relationship. Man loses, in a way, the original certainty of the "image of God," expressed in his body. He also loses to some extent the sense of his right to participate in the perception of the world, which he enjoyed in the mystery of creation. This right had its foundation in man's inner self, in the fact that he himself participated in the divine vision of the world and of his own humanity, which gave him deep peace and joy in living the truth and value of his own body, in all its simplicity, transmitted to him by the Creator: "God saw (that) it was very good."

The words of the text confirm the collapse of the original acceptance of the body as a sign of the person in the visible world. At the same time, the acceptance of the material

world in relation to man, also seems to be shaken. The words of God Yahweh are a forewarning in a way of the hostility of the world, the resistance of nature with regard to man and his tasks, they are a forewarning of the fatigue that the human body was to feel in contact with the earth subdued by him: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you; and you shall eat the plants of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken."

The end of this toil, of this struggle of man with the earth, is death: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return."

In this context, or rather in this perspective, Adam's words seem to express the awareness of being defenseless, and the sense of insecurity of his bodily structure before the processes of nature, operating with inevitable determinism. Perhaps in this overwhelming statement there is implicit a certain "cosmic shame," in which the being created in "the image of God" and called to subdue the earth and dominate it expresses himself precisely when, at the beginning of his historical experiences and in a manner so explicit he is subjected to the earth, particularly in the "part" of his transcendent constitution represented precisely by the body.

Cenacle Event

A weekend of Scriptural Prayer has been slated at the Cenacle Center for Spiritual Renewal June 20-22. The program, open to both men and women, will feature Bible reading, group instruction and individual guidance in prayer. Reservations for the weekend are required and are made by calling the Cenacle (716) 271-8755.

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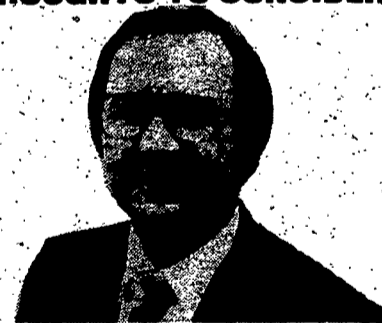
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All this attention sits very kindly on a father's heart, and says "thanks" in a special way. But let's not stop there. We should honor our fathers — and our mothers — every day. Time is very short, and we spend so little of it with each other. Whether we are near or far, we need to make the extra effort to recognize what our parents mean to us — and let them know our feelings now, while there is still the opportunity.

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Insights in Liturgy

How To Pray The Eucharistic Prayer

By Father Robert J. Kennedy

The General Introduction to the Sacramentary calls the Eucharistic Prayer "the center and high point of the entire celebration" (No. 54); but I suspect that, if a poll were taken, very few would concur with this assessment.

But why? The Eucharistic Prayer should be the center and high point. It is the Church's great act of thanksgiving for the wonderful works of God on our behalf, a profession of faith that acknowledges the central place of the mystery of Christ in our lives. It is also the great blessing prayer of the Church that consecrates the gifts offered in praise and thanksgiving, and through our sharing in those gifts, consecrates us. So, if this prayer is so important in the eucharistic worship of the Church, why doesn't it seem like it is when it is prayed?

The answer seems to be: "because of the way it is prayed."

Because it is prayed by

one person with seemingly minimal congregational participation, most members of the congregation tune out this part, turn to their own thoughts and prayers, or follow casually in a paperback missal. The presider often does not help this situation if he prays the prayer in a sing-song "church-voice," in a way that says to a congregation that this is his private prayer, or in a way that does not ring as true prayer for the congregation.

Now I am in no way questioning the faith and devotion of congregations or presiders. Such comes through despite the technique of prayer. However, in this communal act of thanksgiving and praise, all those present must, in a sense, "wear their faith on their sleeves." The eucharistic prayer professes before God and in the presence of one another our faith and gratitude, our prayerful worship. In it "the whole congregation joins Christ in acknowledging the works of God and in offering the sacrifice." (No. 54)

But How?

Paragraph 55 of the General Instruction states that "all should listen to the eucharistic prayer in silent reverence and share in it by making the acclamations."

Now I feel most people understand listening as a passive (and perhaps even negative) activity. But it is not, nor should it be, especially with regard to this great prayer. This kind of listening is active participation in the prayer; no one should tune out.

When the presider prays alone, his voice is the unified voice of the whole community making its sacrifice of praise to God. In the introductory dialogue of the eucharistic prayer "he unites (the congregation) with himself in the prayer he addresses in their name to the Father through Jesus Christ." (No. 54)

Therefore, when the presider prays something like "Father, we acknowledge your greatness, all your actions show your wisdom and love" (EP IV), the congregation listens to those words and in the silence of their hearts fills in the ways that the prayer is true in each of their lives. Those ways are as numerous and unique as the persons in the congregation, but they are joined in one unified act of grateful worship to God, which comes to verbal expression throughout the prayer in wholehearted singing of the acclamations. Thus the faithful affirm the words of the eucharistic prayer as their own words.

Central to drawing the congregation into this active praying of the eucharistic prayer is the style of the presider who prays in their name. By his style and manner, and above all his own prayerfulness, he invites the community into prayer and orchestrates it into one sacrifice of praise. This is not done by looking at the congregation as though the prayer were addressing them; nor is it done by being casual and informal (which often appears careless). The congregation is drawn into prayer when (1) the eucharistic prayer is the presider's own prayer from the bottom of his heart, (2) he prays it in a clear voice that is (3) at a reverent pace that allows for active listening by those who hear the words, and (4) he understands that he is identifying himself and must identify himself with the grateful prayers of the faithful community of which he is a member.

Finally, it takes a great deal of discipline, for both congregation and presider, to pray this prayer fully and well. But when this is done, the eucharistic prayer becomes what it should be: a prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification which is the center and high point of the entire celebration.

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