

# Is the human body really a blessing?

Father Robert L. Kinast/CNS

Recently my mail included a catalogue listing resources for an alternative spirituality that emphasizes body posture and exercises to enhance meditation. The same week I received a letter from the Catholic Theological Society of America announcing that the "Resurrection of the Body" is the theme of next year's convention.

In our culture today, the nutritional information printed on packaged foods, popular nutritional programs such as the Atkins or South Beach diets, physical-fitness gyms and home workout equipment — as well as advertisements for all sorts of medicines and health aids — keep our attention focused on the human body.

Medical research continues to astound us with breakthroughs that combat bodily illness and disease. On the other hand, such alternatives as eating organic foods, vegetarian diets, herbal remedies and holistic health practices stress the primacy of the body from a different perspective.

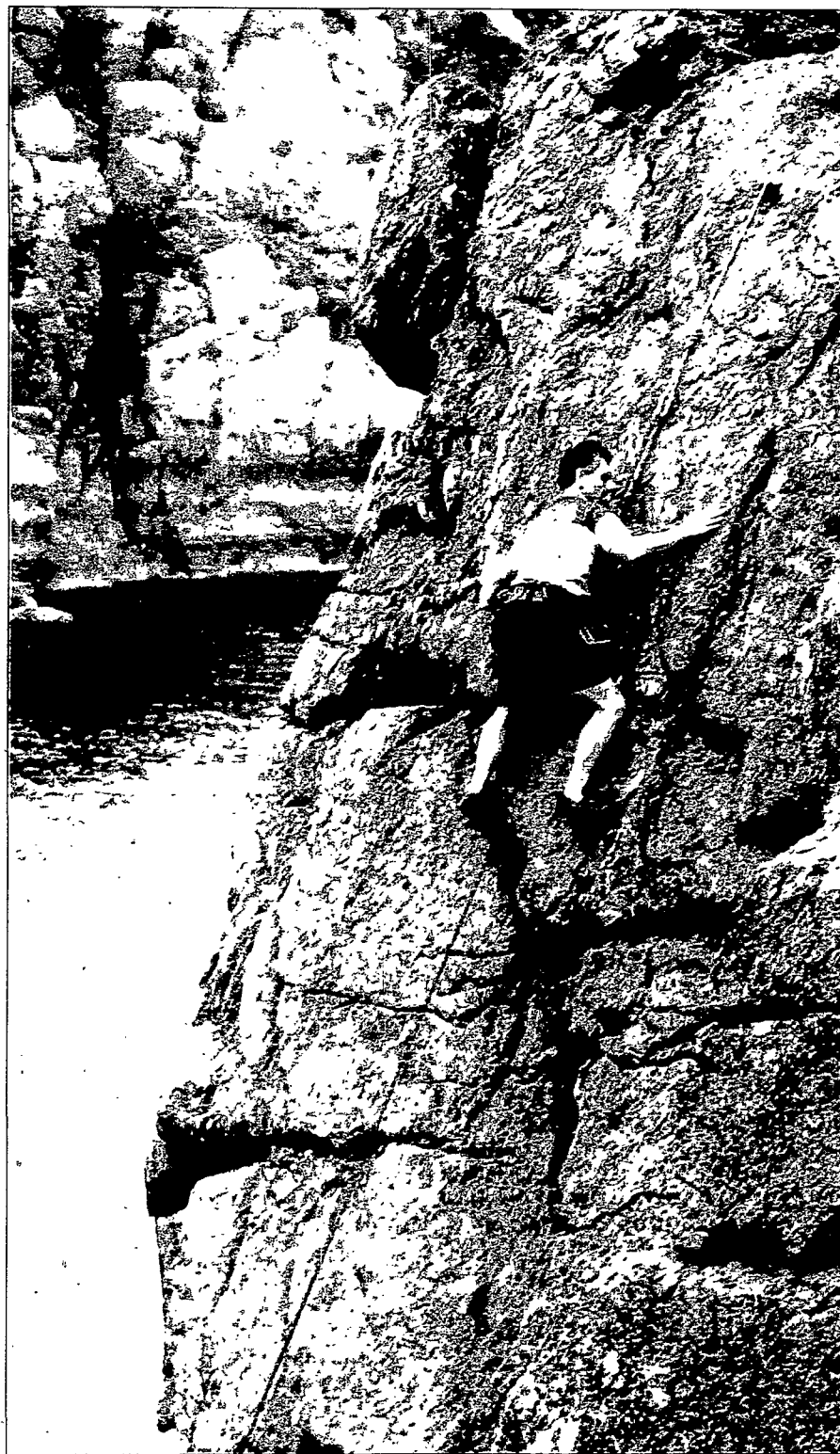
And the advertising, fashion and entertainment industries continually bombard us with their images of physical beauty and bodily experience.

While all this has been going on in culture, theologians and pastoral ministers have been striving to affirm the body as a blessing from God and to balance a cultural preoccupation with the physical body by presenting a more complete appreciation of human embodiment.

Vatican Council II extolled the beauty, value and dignity of the human body while dispelling negative and distorted attitudes about it (Church in the Modern World, No. 14). The focus for the council's view was marriage, highlighted by its discussion of the physical expression of marital love (Church in the Modern World, No. 49).

At the same time, the council's vision of the consecrated life portrayed the traditional vows of poverty and celibacy not as denials of bodily enjoyment but as a means for deepening bonds of love and service, and witnessing to the fullness of life to which bodily existence leads (Decree on Religious Life, Nos. 13-14).

This position of the council has been given practical expression through the church's commitment to health care and its defense of a person's dignity even when the body is disabled, limited or worn out. Advocacy on behalf of those with disabilities as well as protection of the unborn, the aged and the mentally



Nancy Wiechec/CNS

**A rock climber illustrates the human body's flexibility and endurance. The complex but harmonious interaction of the body's diverse parts serves as an analogy for understanding the church as a mystical body.**

restricted reaffirm that the body is a blessing — not because it is physically perfect, but because it embodies a human person.

As women in the church have articulated the experience of their own bodiliness, they have reminded us that they are uniquely embodied and express their humanness in forms of grace and action different from those expressed by men.

And it isn't incidental that the impact of women's experience in the

church has helped to turn theological attention to a new appreciation and concern for the natural world in which we live. Protecting the environment's life-giving and life-sustaining resources is not solely a woman's issue, but women have taken the lead in heightening our awareness of the physical world's value, nurture and irreplaceable beauty.

The blessing of the human body is not limited to its physical nature. It also stimulates the theological imag-

## In a Nutshell

The blessing of the body is not just in its physical properties. It also reminds us what embodied human life truly is.

The body offers us the possibility of coming into communion with God and other human beings.

Jesus' resurrected body is continuous with his earthly body, yet different. Similarly, our physical bodies will continue in a new form in the next life.

ination by serving as an analogy for other important truths. For example, the diversity of the body's parts and the complexity of bodily interactions, resulting in a harmonious, well-functioning whole, serve as an analogy for understanding the church as a mystical body.

The human body also serves as an analogy for the well-functioning society. The church's strong social teaching for the last century and a half envisions society as analogous to a body whose diverse parts and systems interact in beneficial ways — ways that, coordinated as a whole, serve the common good.

This vision also translates into concrete concern for the actual bodily lives of citizens. Thus, the need for employment, housing, nourishment, education, health care and security parallels the needs of the human body to survive and flourish.

From St. Paul's initial image in 1 Corinthians, Chapter 12, to the formal doctrine of the mystical body, the church has described itself as patterned analogously on the interworkings of a body's parts. This vision has been expressed through the expansion of diverse ministries, the development of consultative structures in the church and, in a special way, in the awareness of bodily presence, posture and functioning in the liturgy.

It is in the liturgy that the church most fully expresses its communal nature. From such ritual gestures as extended hands in prayer and embrace at the greeting of peace, to the physical gathering of worshipers or even the use of liturgical processions, the body is seen today as an important component of the liturgy.

The blessing of the body is not just in its physical properties. It is also a blessing as a reminder of what embodied human life truly is.

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