

Bodiliness and the Good News – II

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In the first part of this article, I described how a small group of Christian feminists, concerned with issues of sexual justice and the role of women in the creation of a just society, found themselves involved in the establishment of a new eucharistic community, where women had the opportunity to preach the good news of our calling – as we were beginning to understand it. I looked at some of the resistance that we encountered in ourselves as we moved into this new sphere, and at the nature of the ideology, which at psychological level, preserves the sexual status quo, and hinders women from taking their full part in Christian ministry, and their full responsibility for proclaiming the Christian gospel. Here I hope to continue reflection on the experience of our community, and show how it has contributed to my understanding of the sacramental body of Christ and its true ministry.

At the time that our community was in the thick of its problems with the organisation of itself and the Mass, I happened to read Schillebeeckx' essay on Ministry in the book *Minister? Pastor? Prophet?*¹ and felt that it threw a great deal of light on the problems that we were undergoing. The questions he was asking about the role and nature of priesthood were importantly related to questions which were on our own practical and theological agenda. In taking the Mass into the context of the women's community, it was rather as if we had removed the string from a set of rosary beads. The string in this case was the male hierarchical principle of authority; and since we were uncertain about what really replaced this string, the beads, which were the several offices and ministries of the eucharist – were in danger of rolling all over the floor. Schillebeeckx' affirmation of the pneumatological and ecclesiological basis of ministry from his examination of the practice and doctrine of the early church was a timely gift; it operated as a much needed confirmation of knowledge which at some level we already had.

In his essay, Schillebeeckx, like us, was starting with a practical problem – the shortage of priests in his case: and for this he comes up with a theological solution, i.e. that a shortage of priests is a theological impossibility which stems from causes outside the ministry. These are conditions of priesthood which are not based

on ecclesiological grounds but rest on an ontological and magical-sacerdotal concept of the priest. This notion, he says, has its origin in particular historical conditions, and not in the theological considerations which must be primary. It originated with the notion of sacred power which developed as a result of the separation of ecclesiastical and imperial powers in the Middle Ages, and a subsequent legalistic interpretation stemming from an absolutization of Roman law. In reviewing the church's practice in its history, Schillebeeckx asserts that it is theological criteria that are ultimately relevant; and he directs our attention to Canon 6 of the Council of Chalcedon, in which absolute ordinations were forbidden. This meant that those who are called to ministry must receive this vocation through their own community where leadership is first proven and tested, and then given recognition through the laying on of hands and epiclesis. Authority is indeed 'from above' but not the above of a clerical hierarchy, but from the Holy Spirit which manifests itself 'from below' i.e. in and through the life of the ecclesial community. This then in short, is what Schillebeeckx means by an ecclesial conception of ministry, and by this standard, he concludes, there cannot be such a thing as a shortage of priests because a vital Christian community will always produce the leadership that is necessary. "Even now", he says, "there are more than enough Christians, men and women, who in ecclesiological and ministerial terms possess this charisma, e.g. men and women pastoral workers in Europe and elsewhere. . . . According to the norms of the ancient church they meet every requirement". (p 77)

Our own ecclesial practice had already begun to reveal to us that the mystery of Christ is not a magical rite to be performed by those endowed by church and society with patriarchal power in sacral form. Schillebeeckx confirms that Christian ministry is something radically other than cult worship such as this. As he says, "In the New Testament, Christ and his church are priestly". A minister is only priestly because he or she is the servant of a priestly community.

In our eucharistic experience, we were making the practical discovery, with the aid of the Spirit, that the maleness of ecclesial authority is not a necessary requirement for celebrating the eucharist. However, we were required by Canon Law to have a properly ordained priest to say the eucharistic prayer if a valid Mass is to take place, and these are all male. Paradoxically, this limitation has had the practical effect of making it possible to perceive another fundamental aspect of the truth about eucharistic celebration. For the non-necessity of male hierarchical authority is quite different from the non-necessity of male participation in the eucharist. This latter is not our understanding and our experience has confirmed

the opposite – that the foundation of the eucharistic community is a co-operative and sharing partnership between women and men. As women we are aware that we could not celebrate a whole priesthood and exercise our full ministry without the complementary roles of men. It is unfortunate that the all-male community of the religious hierarchy have not yet understood this fact in its corresponding form – that any whole celebration of the community's priesthood requires the participation of women.

We also received confirmation from Schillebeeckx of our discovery that Christian ministry is not one but many – the solidarity of Christians equipped with different charismata of ministry, enabling them to make different forms of service to the community. The official ministries are those which involve a form of pastoral leadership, presiding over a team; and it is the responsibility of all believers to participate in choosing those who are to serve in such offices.

Eventually, our community began to get to grips with its organisational problems, and we were able to hold the first plenary session of Christian women's groups in Oxford, and to formally take stock of ourselves as a community. As such, we comprised groups of Anglicans, Quakers and Catholics, a twice weekly prayer group, a monthly women's Mass, an information and resource service, and a women's theological seminar. For this meeting, we had worked out a list of the various tasks and offices that the community needed to be filled at this stage of its development, and we gave everyone the opportunity to opt into the particular form of service that they felt to be appropriate to their gifts. To a large extent this procedure confirmed people in the roles they had already begun to perform for the community. But it also gave some people a chance to signal their desire to embark on new responsibilities and others to opt out of areas in which they no longer wanted to be responsible. The important thing was the community made explicit the ways in which it functioned and gave recognition to its members who were performing these functions. By so doing, it laid the foundation for an evolving structure and practice of ministry, and made provision for the future growth of a community capable of reflecting on its life and development.

At the time of the first plenary meeting, the Catholic Women's Group (as is our retrospective name) was in temporary abeyance. The struggles mentioned above had taken their toll of us, and the old euphoric unity was no longer possible. But out of this process of seeming attrition, there was also new growth – as members of the old group emerged with newly-found confidence to make a vigorous contribution to the life of the wider community that had grown up around us in the meanwhile. And soon after this, a new

chapter of our history led to further developments. The Pope's visit to Britain caused some media interest in the reactions of Catholic women to his stance on matters affecting them, and we found ourselves once more as a group with something definite to say on the subject of the church and its meaning. One of our members was invited to take part in a TV programme about the Pope, and reactions to him from various sections of the church. Representing us in a skilful and articulate manner on this occasion, she was thereafter much sought after for other media and speaking engagements on this issue. Other members of the group also were being invited to speak on women and the church, and on the peace issue, which has always been at the forefront of our concern, and an integral part of our message. So at last we were beginning to gain some sort of platform for our message, which we had not been able to deliver on the occasion of the National Pastoral Congress. These developments had the effect of bringing us together again in a new surge of identity and purpose.

Meanwhile, the new plenary body of the Christian Women's Group, was making its way forward with shaky steps. In the setting up of this new Christian community, Catholic feminists have had an important share. But it now includes not only Catholics, and not only women who are explicitly feminist. Women of different denominations preach at the Masses, and the monthly meetings for worship now include other denominational forms of liturgy. Men also participate in the women's liturgy, thus helping to affirm the meaning of Christ's body as a commitment to a just society – one that must include justice *for* women and justice *from* women. It is then, a community very similar to that envisaged by Schillebeeckx, a small grassroots community which is involved in "the building up of a life of solidarity which is of a pluralist kind". We are becoming "a community concerned with the cause of Jesus i.e. the coming of the Kingdom as it is bound up with the whole ministry of Jesus and its meaning for the future". (p 79)

The emphasis is on the story – to live in relation to Jesus is to live in relation to his story and to continue it. The work of the Spirit is the continuation of this story, taking form in the struggle and suffering of the ecclesial body. It is through this struggle, initiated by the Spirit, that we are baptised into the ecclesial community and receive the Spirit. To receive the Spirit means to be baptised into the struggle of a particular group of people, and their coming-into-being as an ecclesial community through the work of the Spirit. Our story, in common with all Christian stories, shows how the work of the Spirit is bodily. Our bodily experiences were the subject of our first coming together. They expressed and contained our subjection in the old body of sin. The Spirit works to

compel us to embark from the old body of sin into the new body of Christ. The old body of sin is the particular form of historical oppression that defines us. This, I think, is what Jesus meant by “the world” and Paul “the flesh”. For us, as women, the form of our oppression is patriarchal structures; and the Spirit’s work of liberation has been, and will be to bring us into conflict with these structures both in the world outside and in its powerful reflection in ourselves.

The sign of the Spirit’s work of liberation in us has been, as it must be in all Christian communities, the receiving of the Word that is the commission to preach – and to minister. This work has been bodily also in that it has compelled us towards the reform and renewal of the sacramental body and its structures of ministry and authority. The Word that we received is such that it cannot be contained in a hierarchical and exclusive society. The Word is a living word that undermines all such structures and demands that those who receive it deliver it authoritatively. It is a community-creating Word – its power is to bring into being the new community of the body of Christ. If our preaching fails to bring into being this community, then it is not Christ that is being preached.

And it is here, in the midst of this coming-to-being of the new community, that is the true context for doing theology. For “doing theology” I understand to mean tracing the work of the Spirit; and if this work is, as I suggest, a bodily work, then the forms we use to trace and apprehend that work must be appropriate to it. Thus it is no accident that the Good News in the New Testament reaches us in the form not of a set of propositions or abstract reasoning, but in a narrative; or rather in a set of narratives which are not the product of a single author but of several authors representing several communities.

The language forms of the New Testament – the gospel narratives and the letters – seem to me to indicate something very important about the nature of theological truth. They imply a critique of the commonly accepted approach in this society to “universal truth” and the related notion that Catholicity depends on the removal of particularity. As J. Christiaan Baker comments in his study *Paul the Apostle*:² “The letter form with its combination of particularity and authoritative claim suggests something about Paul’s way of doing theology. It suggests the historical concreteness of the gospel as a word on target in the midst of human contingent specificity.” The gospel isn’t the recitation of a set of universal truths – it speaks to particular people in particular situations. If we don’t accept what Baker calls “the historicalness of all theology” (and its therefore necessary particularity) our attempts to interpret the gospel are bound to be distorted. For, as he says,

how could the gospel be one and yet present in four different forms? And how could the apostolic witness be applicable to the universal church if Paul had simply written to specific churches about specific problems?

The story I've attempted to tell here is about a specific church or ecclesial community with its specific problems. The group of women it mainly concerns are not a "representative" group in any sense. They are British, Catholic, and middle class but don't represent any of those categories in the sense of being "typical". Within the church, we are a thoroughly unrepresentative minority of women who speak the language of 20th century feminism, and of women and men who have come to see that acquiescence in any form of national nuclear defence is incompatible with our faith. We are people whose sense of the world is that time is running out for us and our children. And it has been through the specificity of our historical and personal situation that the cohesion of the group was able to develop. It was through our very particularity that we have been able to find a way of apprehending the particularity of the gospel and its truth.

It is from this standpoint that I think we are in a position to provide a critique of the form of much traditional theology. As several feminist scholars have observed, in the matter of language — no less in the language of theology — man's characteristic theft from woman has been the appropriation of the power to represent the universal human — hence "MANkind". He represents the universal truth in a way that woman cannot. In the patriarchal scheme, it is the essence of woman to be located on the periphery and embody the particular and contingent aspect of human affairs. This is of course, another manifestation of that age-old habit of the powerful — commandeering the common good — which is currently exhibited by our rulers in their claim to represent the "interests of the nation". It appears in constantly up-dated forms — as when male radicals dismiss the women's movement by claiming it represents the interests of a particular minority while they, with the language of class struggle, are speaking on behalf of all humanity.

But I think that Christian feminists can go further than this feminist critique to observe that the whole question of universal truth, as it is normally understood in this culture, is a function of patriarchy. Women cannot reclaim it by participation in the discourses founded on this understanding of truth. That enterprise is ultimately doomed because they are discourses founded on patriarchy, which by its name and nature (fathers' rule) excludes the authority of women. It is only as Christians that women can be authoritative because the foundation of Christian truth is not patriarchy. It is truth that originates with neither man nor woman but

with God. As our experience with the bishops demonstrates, the ruling councils of the Catholic church are deeply imbued with this patriarchal premise in their notion of universal Catholic truth. What a group of women had to say on matters ecclesial must by definition be the expression of a “particular” interest and of only marginal relevance when truth is implicitly identified with the male centres of ecclesiastical power. But the fact is that the tiny body of Christians represented by the Oxford Catholic Women’s Group is not in essence more or less particular than the personnel of the English Catholic hierarchy. Both are drawn from a group that is largely homogeneous in terms of gender, class and nationality, both have their characteristic attitudes, language and mind-set. The difference between them lies not in their degrees of universality, but in the fact that the latter group are closer to the centres of political, ecclesiastical and patriarchal power – which is the power to arbitrate between the universal and the contingent, and to say whose concerns are central and whose are marginal. But this is the mode of patriarchy, the way in which “the world” determines truth. It can’t be the ultimate criteria of truth for Christians. Christian truth is linked to the possession of the Spirit through participation in the body of Christ. And the Spirit directs us to the Incarnation, the story of that body in its full historical context. And not until we have apprehended fully our own historical context and contingency can we be formed to receive the “universal” truth of that Incarnation in all its scandalous particularity.

Bodiliness then, is the key to discovering the specificity of our historical situation. For our group, it was the struggle to articulate what we had known in our bodies that led us to the conviction of the false values of patriarchal morality and its ignorance of justice. And thus we were prepared for a new and more profound relation with the Good News. For as we realised our historical community as women, we were placed to perceive that the first Christian community was one with a narrative of bodily humiliation. “This is my body which is given for you,” said Jesus celebrating the first eucharist with his little group. And as he went to his death straight afterwards, the life of that small body of people went with him, leaving them scattered, hopeless and defeated. The memory of the body he gave them to celebrate had become the memory of a man tortured to death. Yet by their largely uncomprehending participation in that body and its fate, they became a part with the Risen body of Christ and its liberation. In this context was the meaning of the eucharist given. And it seems to me that it is not the same meaning as is presented by the passive ahistorical life of many a congregation ritually celebrating a ‘universal’ Mass; such a gathering has not known itself as a historical community, has never iden-

tified its communal participation in the structures of the old body of sin, has embarked on no project of historical liberation, has undergone no historical defeat or bodily humiliation in the cause of Jesus, and has never experienced the reality of the authority of the gospel by having its ministry questioned by those who have appropriated truth through the universalising structures of their language and power.

The theological knowledge that comes to us through life in the sacramental body is not some deposit of universal truth distilled by alchemist theologians of several centuries ago. We cannot arrive at the knowledge of God by abstracting it from one historical time for all time. It is not a commodity to be preserved, calculated and jealously guarded like the gold reserves at Fort Knox. Each ecclesial body and its members must arrive at that knowledge (or rather that knowledge of unknowing that is the mystery of faith) through the processes of its own history, its own crucifixion with Christ. It is the gift of the Spirit – and unfortunately for some, the Spirit can't always be prevented from offering the riches of God's grace to some highly unsuitable people. . . . In our own case, we are now coming to understand what Paul was deeply aware of in all his writing – that all Christians are living in the End-time of history; but we have had to learn this through the structures and developments of our own history. Thus, the imminence of the holocaust makes us belatedly aware that we and our children are faced not simply with our personal and individual death but with the communal destruction that takes place in human history and is the outcome of the failure of justice in human society. For the majority of the world's body, its human population, this is a fact that they are living with now in their daily starvation and poverty. They know it in their bodies.

And if we are in Christ, we too must know it in our bodies, and know that the prevailing notion of spirituality in Western society is utterly opposed to the knowledge taught us by the Spirit. The Gospel we are commissioned to preach exposes the false gospel of bourgeois patriarchal society, which denies that the life of the Spirit is commensurate with material and historical existence. It is this kind of false spirituality, says Beker, that Paul is engaged in refuting in his letters to the Corinthians. They thought, as many people in his society think, that they could somehow achieve salvation by contracting out of the mess and corruption of society. But Paul is utterly emphatic that we are lost or saved by what we do in our bodies, which is to say what we do in our communities, since we relate to each other only through our bodies. Being saved, salvation, has got something to do with what happens to humanity as a whole; we can't individually opt out into a spiritual realm that ig-

nores the bodily fate of humankind. Beker says: "Because the relation of spirituality to materiality in a historical context is the Corinthian problem, its solution is conceivable to Paul only in the apocalyptic structure of the gospel; in this framework alone can the Resurrection of Christ be correctly perceived in terms of its consequences for the life of the body". (p 172) It is only the Resurrection of Jesus that gives humankind any alternative to the bodily perdition it is bringing on itself.

And for us, women who know their children probably have no future, women and men who are face to face with the prospect of death for all historical and material life, the holocaust is the overriding symbol of perdition in our times. Faced with the prospect of this ultimate terror, all other forms of "good news" that are announced in our society, such as material security, individual freedom, personal spiritual comfort, national security and international power all dwindle into hollowness and unreality. The gospel becomes the Good News because it is the only thing that could possibly be construed as good news when the real nature of our historical situation is perceived.

When this perception has occurred in any body of Christian people, the gospel of the Thatcherite state and all such states – can be seen for the blasphemous mockery they are. Only then can the salvation of the gospel of Christ, which Paul preached, become meaningful, and the body be liberated to receive the gifts of the Spirit. And when the body has received the Spirit, it bears fruit, it has an outcome, a visible issue. Members of the Body will have "the mind of Christ" as Paul says, and will manifest the judgement of his Spirit by bodily witness against destruction – a witness that will take its precise meaning and symbolism from the concrete historical and political circumstances in which we live. Only in this way shall we be "carrying in the body the dying of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our bodies". (2 Cor. 4–10)

- 1 E. Schillebeeckx, "A Creative Retrospect as Inspiration for the Ministry in the Future" in *Minister? Pastor? Prophet?* SCM Press 1980.
- 2 J. Christiaan Beker, *Paul the Apostle*, Fortress Press 1980.