

**Bound to Christ
In Exile
Ron Rolheiser, omi**

**We are the ongoing incarnation of
God**

Gabriel Marcel once said: “To love someone is to say, ‘you at least will never die.’” That might sound like romantic wishful thinking, but, in Christian faith, we believe that this is deep insight, an article of faith, a truth of the incarnation.

If we take the incarnation seriously, then to love someone is to say to him or her: “You will never die because, in this life and the next, you will never be separated from the community of life, God’s family, because in accepting my love you are touching the body of Christ just as really as did anyone who touched the historical Jesus. You will never die and you will never go to hell because you are bound to Christ.”

That is an astonishing belief! Few take it seriously.

Ten years ago, I wrote two rather modest articles on this. In these, I pointed out that the incarnation, the mystery of God taking on human flesh, is not a 33-year experiment, a one-shot incursion of God into human history that ended with the ascension of Jesus.

The truth is rather that, as the body of Christ on earth, we can continue to do all things that Jesus did and, as Jesus himself assures us in John’s Gospel (14:12), we can even do greater things.

Scripture tells us that we are the body of Christ on earth. It does not say that we are like his body, or that we replace his body, or even that we are his mystical body (which wouldn’t be so wrong, if we understood “mystical” in the deep sense of that word).

No. Our Christian faith informs us that we are the body of Christ – flesh, blood, tangible, visible, physical, available to be touched, and all of this definitely and clearly residing in nameable persons on this earth. We are the ongoing incarnation of God, the anointed ones of God, Christ.

This, as I pointed out in those articles, has some rather incredulous implications. Among them, the following: When Jesus walked around Palestine, people were healed and forgiven; not to mention given eternal life, by touching him, by being touched by him and simply by relating to him.

If we are the ongoing incarnation, and we are, then this is also true for us (and not just in the sense of it happening through the institutional churches, as important as that is).

The mystery of incarnation is incredibly extensive. It is not just the institutional churches that carry on, carry forth and carry the mystery of God in human flesh. All love that is in grace is the Word made flesh. To touch it is to be touched by Christ; to touch with it is to touch with Christ because it is the ongoing incarnation.

From Augustine through Pius XII, we are told that this is wild doctrine, something beyond our limited imaginations and measured hopes. Nobody dares hope for us as much as God has already given in the incarnation. What are we given there?

The power, literally, to block death and hell. If we love someone, she cannot go to hell because Christ is loving her. If we forgive someone, he is forgiven because Christ is forgiving him.

If children of ours, or anyone else we love, no longer go to church, our love for them and their love for us binds them solidly to the body of Christ. They

continue to touch the hem of Christ's garment as surely as did the woman in the Gospels who suffered with a hemorrhage. Their end result, unless they reject their bond to us, will be like hers, namely, healing.

Every time I have ever written about this, I have received a flood of letters, almost all of which suggest that what I am saying is dead wrong or, at the very least, horribly exaggerated. These letters generally have one of two difficulties with this:

Many people write saying simply: "How can you say this? Only Christ has the power to forgive sins, to heal, and to bind people to the community of grace." That objection is valid enough; except it is Christ who is doing this. We, as St. Paul so clearly assures us, are the body of Christ.

Almost as frequent in people's response to this statement: "I would like to believe this, but it would be too good to be true!"

Part of the difficulty in believing in the incarnation is precisely the fact that it is too good to be true. God is not hidden and hard to contact; forgiveness, grace, and salvation are not the prerogative of the lucky and the few; we don't have to save ourselves; we don't have to get our lives perfectly in order to be saved; we don't have to make amends for our sins; human flesh and this world are not obstacles, but part of the vehicle to heaven; we can help each other on the journey; love, indeed even human love, is stronger than death; and to love someone is indeed to say: "You at least will never die!"

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To cherish another is to give them permanence that death can't take away

Living in Exile

Ron Rolheiser, omi

Gabriel Marcel once said: "To love someone is to say to that person, you at least will not die!"

He's right. To cherish another person is to give him or her a meaning and permanence that accident and death cannot take away. But there's a deeper meaning too: To love someone is to hold a place in heaven for him or her. What's meant by that? It sounds fanciful.

This idea is present inside the Christian scriptures, but it's also something we intuit in our hearts. Like Job, without the benefit of a belief in life after death but still knowing in his gut that ultimately love triumphs, we too know in the recesses of our hearts that love's bonds are salvific. In the end, we won't be separated from our loved ones, even if we walk different paths in life, except if the other positively chooses to be separated. We make places for each other in heaven through love.

What does this mean?

Jesus said: "Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Too often we understand this simplistically, taking it to mean that Jesus placed special power inside Scripture, the sacraments and the institutional church. True. But there's more.

At another level, in saying that we can bind and loose, Jesus is saying what Gabriel Marcel is saying, namely, that to love another person is to assure him or her a place (if he or she wants it) in heaven. How does this work?

When Jesus walked the roads of Palestine for three years, a wondrous grace came to all who touched him. To touch Jesus, in love and sincerity, was to be healed, converted, made to walk upright, made to hear and made to praise God. It also gave that person a place inside the community of life. To touch Jesus or to be touched by him was salvation.

But Jesus didn't take his grace away when he ascended. He left it with community of believers, the community of the sincere, which is now his body on earth. In fact, he promised that we, his body, could do "even greater things" than he did.

And his body is not just the historical church in its scriptures, sacraments, church gatherings, institutional structures and hierarchy. Rather, all of us together, and each one of us individually, make up the Body of Christ on earth. Therefore when we touch someone or someone touches us in love and sincerity, if we are inside the community of faith and sincerity, that other person is touching the Body of Christ just as surely as people at the time of Jesus were able to touch him.

We are the Body of Christ on earth and, like Jesus, have the power to bind and loose. Among other things, this means that when our loved ones (spouses, colleagues) no longer walk the path of explicit faith and church with us, we can connect them to the faith, the church, the Body of Christ, and heaven itself simply by remaining bonded with them in love and community. By being connected with us, they are connected to the church (since we are the church). Moreover, when we forgive them anything, including their non-churchgoing, they are forgiven by the

church and forgiven too, Jesus assures us, in heaven.

One of the marvels of the incarnation is that, if we want, our heaven will include our loved ones. In 1995, when Quebec was holding a referendum to decide whether or not to remain part of Canada, a popular slogan across Canada read: "My Canada includes Quebec!" We can say the same thing about our loved ones, even when they don't go to church with us: "My heaven includes my children, my spouse, this particular friend!" Heaven will back that up. That's Jesus' promise.

Partly this is mystical, partly it's simply the dynamics of love and family. What binds us together as family is much deeper and wider than simply who is at table with us on a given Sunday.

That's one side of equation, the church side, but this also works the other way: Sometimes we, the churchgoers (with our own moral and spiritual blind spots), are held inside the Body of Christ, the community of the sincere, by those who love us (and don't go to church with us), but who are at God's table in some areas where we are not.

This idea is so wild and wonderful that it's hard to believe. It's always been this way. It's not easy to believe that heaven is as accessible as the nearest water tap, or the nearest friend. When Pope Pius XII was giving the instruction of his encyclical on the Body of Christ, *Mystici Corporis*, he told educators and preachers: "When you are teaching about the Body of Christ, don't be afraid to exaggerate, because it is impossible to exaggerate so great a mystery!" What an apt description of the incarnation!