

**RE-MEMBERING THE CHURCH:
Participation and Structure Then and Now
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What does re-membering have to do with “accountability now,” you might ask. Everything, I would answer. “Remembering” in its familiar meaning has to do with memory and knowledge, what we remember and what we forget, what we acknowledge and what we dismiss. This kind of remembering makes us who we are – body-selves who remember. Memory in this sense carries our identity and is a prerequisite for accountability. “Re-membering” in its hyphenated meaning has to do with bodies and members. It presupposes the first kind of memory and requires that we attend to the body, to the larger organism or organization. Re-membering in this sense is about minding the members, mending relationships, and keeping the body living, connected, and whole. This kind of re-membering is imperative for accountability.

Both senses of remembering are critical elements in the process of healing from sexual abuse. Victim-survivors can begin the long process of healing once they remember or are able to acknowledge the abuse. Through the conscious rejoining of memory and body, healing from sexual abuse becomes possible and real. The church, too, is a body and has a memory. The church, too, needs healing. Disregard or contempt for the memory and body of the church on the part of clerical perpetrators and episcopal enablers are the means by which the clergy sexual abuse crisis has deformed the church and is now compelling us to re-form it. Both kinds of remembering are essential for the church to be accountable to the victims of clergy sexual abuse. Both kinds of remembering are needed for the church to be accountable to all its members, including priests of integrity, and to begin healing itself.

To think about remembering in these ways allows us to see ourselves as church with greater clarity, and to keep the memory of victims and survivors always before us as we demand justice for them and justice in the church. The faithful call for “accountability now” is a call to keep memory and body, body and members together. Re-membering the church is about literally reconnecting the body to itself, to all its parts and members. It is about integrating its history and healing its memories. It is about making the body whole.

That is why I want to speak with you this morning on re-membering the church. This reflection has three parts:

1. The first part looks at Paul’s theology of the body and its members and his insistence that the Corinthians remember the body when they come together for the Lord’s supper.
2. The second part is about the historical body of the church and the conflicting

dynamics of participation and dis-membering in its history.

3. The final section suggests some ways forward, making connections from then to now for how we can re-member the church through participation, structure, and accountability.

I. Remembering Jesus, Re-membering the Body

Memory is a central way we experience God's revelation in history. We tell the stories of God's creative love from the beginnings of the world; we recall the promises by which God made Israel a people; we remember the mighty deeds of God that led them out of Egypt and brought them to a land of promise. Memory makes that love, those deeds and promises present again by telling the stories in scripture, preaching, and liturgy. Thus Christians remember Jesus' preaching of God's coming reign; we tell the stories of forgiveness and of healing love; we recall creation, flood, and Exodus as we go down into the waters of baptism. We remember the death of Jesus and celebrate his Passover from death to life whenever we give thanks over bread and wine in memory of him, confident that he is present again in the eucharistic assembly. All these memories are rooted in our bodies and make us who we are as persons in community, as a body, as church.

Paul never knew the historical Jesus. Yet he encountered the risen Lord, was called and sent by him as an apostle, and preached the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and risen. Paul's memory of Jesus was shaped by this encounter, of course, but it was shaped as well by the communities of believers that preceded him, communities called together by Jesus' preaching of God's reign, communities transformed by his death and resurrection. These communities remembered Jesus and shared their memories with Paul. He in turn guided and instructed other communities through his preaching, his presence, and his letters. His theology emerged from his ministry, a theology from and for these earliest churches.

Central to Paul's theology is the reality of the body. He thinks about the body when he writes about the death and resurrection of Jesus, about baptism, circumcision, or marriage. He thinks about the body when he considers the resurrection of our own bodies and when he writes about the eucharistic assembly, the body and its members. Precisely because the body is so real for Paul it serves as a powerful symbol in his theology, mediating the deep meaning of Christ's body in all its dimensions. It is that symbol that I invite you to contemplate more closely now.

Paul's advice and admonitions in his first letter to the Corinthians speak to our situation in the Catholic church today. In chapter 12, he reflects on the body and its members in relation to the variety of spiritual gifts and the necessity of each member's contribution to the body.

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and
there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there

are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (1 Cor 12:4-7)

This passage is so familiar that we tend simply to nod in agreement and quickly move on. But we should stop and listen again, because Paul is speaking about the source of all ministry and spiritual authority in the church. Ministry and spiritual authority come from the gifts of the Spirit, the power of God, and the self-offering of Jesus Christ, and are shared by all. Although the gifts are many (prophesy, wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, and miracles, to name only a few) the source is one. There is a single purpose to these gifts, the common good, to which all contribute. The community cannot flourish without recognizing and receiving all the gifts of all the members. What a striking contrast this is to recent comments from our new Pope and others who seem to welcome the prospect of a smaller and more disciplined Catholic church – a church that has shed its troublesome members.

Paul's consideration of the multiplicity of gifts leads him to a startling assertion that we are also in danger of overlooking because the words are so familiar: the community *is* Christ's body.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ (v. 12)...Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it (v. 27).

The implications of Paul's insight are immense. It is not the eucharistic elements by themselves that are the body of Christ. Rather, it is the gathered and gifted members, the eucharistic assembly, the local communities and the church as a whole that constitute the body of Christ in the world. We should also notice that Paul does not make a distinction between the head and the rest of the body. Nor does he envision one person or office that separately represents Christ the head. The *whole* body is Christ. Two points are of utmost importance here. *We* are the body of Christ. And there is *no body* without its members.

That is why it is so crucial to bring our practice of church into line with the reality it symbolizes and makes present. For if Christ really is an abusive cleric or an uncaring and uncomprehending ecclesiastical bureaucrat, we are in deep trouble. If Christ really is a judge sitting at a secret tribunal condemning the work and good faith of theologians, we are in deep trouble. If Christ really is a punitive parent turning hungry children away from his table, we are in deep trouble.

Just how much trouble becomes even clearer when we look at chapter 11 of First Corinthians. There he takes the Corinthians to task for the way in which they treat each other when they gather for the Lord's Supper.

When the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. (11:21)

Paul's criticism is pointed: the Corinthians show contempt for the church and humiliate the poor among them. This cannot be what it means to eat at the table of the Lord. This cannot be the body of Christ. Listen again:

Whoever therefore eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink *without discerning the body*, eat and drink judgment against themselves (11:27-29).

The Corinthians did not discern the body of Christ in their sisters and brothers at the Lord's Supper. They did not share their food with the poor among them, and they dishonored the assembly by turning the common meal into an occasion for drunkenness. By failing to discern the body in all its members, the Corinthians disfigured and dismembered the body of Christ. Paul warns and exhorts them to desist from such behavior and to re-member the body by being accountable to each other and to the community as a whole.

If today we cannot discern the body – and often we can't – we are in the same predicament as the Corinthians. How do we fail to discern the body? When the eucharistic assembly is unwelcoming to members different from themselves. When women's gifts for ministry are denied. When lay people working and ministering in the church don't receive a just wage, aren't covered by social security or unemployment, and have no rights of due process in job grievances. When sexual abuse is tolerated, even abetted. When parishes are arbitrarily closed and dioceses don't fund priests' pensions. In these and so many other ways we fail as church to discern the body and act with love and respect for all its members. Like the Corinthians, we eat and drink judgment against ourselves. We *will* be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord.

2. Discerning the Historical Body

There are many ways to fail to discern the body, in thought as well as in action. Perception and practice are one way, as we have seen in Corinth and can see in the church today. Historical memory is another way we can fail to discern the body. How the church remembers its past, how it tells the story of its beginnings and recounts its growth over time creates its identity in the present. We have a habit in the Roman Catholic church of reading our history backwards, assuming or asserting that the way things are now is the way they were then. We also have a habit of spiritualizing our

history, removing it from the realm of human experience – no politics, no power relations, no chance, change, or sin. The disembodied church in this kind of history cannot be the incarnate body of Christ. Because most Catholics still don't have enough knowledge about the church's history and theology, we often accept uncritically whatever we're told about it. Our lack of perspective allows this spiritualized, disembodied telling of the church's history to effectively obscure the reality of the ecclesial body and its members.

Like all history, the historical memory of the church is about identity, knowledge, and power. Like all history, it is partial and incomplete. Our knowledge of church history – and all history – is limited by the finiteness and fallibility of participants and observers – think of how differently people who've just observed a car accident will report what happened. The perspectives and agenda of those who do the remembering and who tell or record the story are another reason that historical knowledge is only partial. And it is further limited by what is forgotten, by the haphazard survival of sources due to the vagaries of war or nature, or even the deliberate destruction of conflicting evidence and viewpoints. For all these reasons, history resists the kind of absolutes that many people would like to impose on it. Finally, historical memory is incomplete because in a real sense history isn't finished. The influence and significance of far distant events is still being worked out, and we don't yet know where the present will lead us. For Christians, as for opera buffs, the story isn't over 'til the fat lady sings. Much more can happen in the meantime.

Keeping these limitations in mind, it is possible to look at what we can know of the church's history and find some clues for discerning the body in the past and in the present. As Paul's symbol of the body has already shown us, there's no body without the members. Participation is the norm. Exclusion is the problem. What was at stake in Corinth was the dis-membering of the body. That is also what is at stake today. When we read early church history, for instance, only from the perspective of the present and allow present realities to dictate what we can see in the past, we distort the historical body. We obscure the reality of participation and foreground exclusion, which only gradually took hold only over the course of many centuries. Doing this is like looking through the wrong end of a telescope. No wonder all we can see is clerical hierarchy and papal power when we look at the early church from this perspective. On this reversed view, the difference between then and now is only a matter of scale – the difference between looking at a doll house, say, and Vatican City. We need to turn the telescope around!

Looking through the right end of the telescope – the small end – brings the early church closer and enlarges its features so that we can see it on something more like its own terms. It reframes and resizes the picture. The "clergy/laity" frame of later centuries falls away, allowing us to focus on the reality of participation, the body present in and as its members. Then we can see that what we have come to call "the laity" was there all along, was in fact all there was in these earliest churches. Certainly there were apostles and teachers, itinerant evangelists and prophets, but the spiritual gifts

exercised by those leaders were nurtured in community and then they called into existence other communities, which in turn received and nurtured the same gifts of the same spirit. In its origins and in its development, the church, the *ekklesia*, the assembly of Christian believers, was a *lay movement*.

It was lay people who gathered around Jesus, himself a lay person and not of the priestly class; it was lay people who were apostles and teachers in the nascent Christian communities. It was lay people who handed on the faith in their local churches; it was lay people who shaped the early liturgies and professions of faith. Lay people were the body; they connected these early communities to the apostle and to Jesus. Later, in the doctrinal controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries, lay people played a crucial role in accepting or rejecting the decisions formulated by bishops at the first ecumenical councils. Most of the bishops at these councils were not learned theologians; all of them had to return to their dioceses and promote the councils' decisions among their people and persuade competing parties to accept them. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't, but it always took time, and lay people were crucial for the acceptance or rejection of a council's decisions. Today we are in the midst of the same kind of process as we work out how we as church will "receive" the teachings of Vatican II.

Without going into the details – or even the broad outlines – of the way in which structures of ministry, leadership, and governance developed in these centuries, I simply want to remind you that these processes remained highly participatory (especially by our standards) for centuries. They were not without conflict, of course, but the conflicts never proved fatal. Clerical offices only evolved gradually during the second and third centuries, and would not be recognizable to us today as the offices of bishops, priests, and deacons. As offices became more rigidly hierarchical in the fourth century, lay people continued to play essential roles in the selection of their bishops and pastors. They continued to engage in the church's ministries of mercy and evangelizing. They provided leadership and momentum for renewal and reform as the times required. They promoted asceticism, they founded and funded religious communities, and they evangelized the countryside. When the Roman empire later disintegrated in the West, it was lay people – monks and nuns, kings and queens, and other secular rulers – who carried out and supported missions to the so-called "barbarians," and later offered military and material support to the developing papacy in the western church. Lay participation continued in later centuries at the same time as opposing dynamics of exclusion were being formalized in church structures that rendered lay people increasingly invisible as members of the body.

Like all bodies, the church exists in a historical context and of necessity must relate to that context. In order to be itself, it has to maintain its identity in distinction from its context while at the same time making connections with the people and institutions in it. In every era the church has negotiated its relationship to its environment, sometimes more adroitly and admirably than others. It has critiqued culture and politics, but it has also borrowed extensively from them. The church has

changed with its changing historical context, and models of church governance have changed with it. From the time of Constantine the church took on the lineaments of the Roman empire – reproducing in its own life many features of imperial protocol, ritual, and administration. In the early middle ages the church in the West began to look like a feudal kingdom. By the time of the Reformation it resembled the early modern European monarchies. Its affinity with monarchy only increased after the American and French Revolutions, reaching a symbolic peak with the declaration of papal infallibility at Vatican I. Since the late-twentieth century it has looked and operated more and more like a huge multinational corporation, with no accountability to its workers, customers, or shareholders. How can we discern the body in these models?

Given the church's proclivity for borrowing from its environment, it is striking that the one form of organization and governance it has resolutely fended off is participatory democracy. This is odd, to say the least, especially since the church's name for itself, *ekklesia*, comes from the participatory assembly of Athenian democracy. If the church is not and cannot be a democracy, we are left to ask, *why?* And, even more urgently, to ask and to insist, *why not now?*

3. Re-membering the Church: The Way Forward

Taken without question or correction, the historical narrative of the church as a body that has always been the way it is now is a fiction – a dangerous fiction. It is not dangerous in the positive sense that political and liberation theologians give it when they speak of dangerous memory, of remembering Jesus in a suffering world and re-membering the wounded body of Christ and all people. Rather, this dangerous fiction is a *false* memory, a memory that separates the body from itself, alienating and discarding its members. It is a memory of exclusion and division, of church order that reproduces the disorder of society in its body. Just as truth-telling is necessary for an individual to heal from sexual abuse, so is truth-telling necessary for the church to heal its own body – not only from the damage it has inflicted on victim-survivors and on itself in the crisis of clergy sexual abuse, but from a much longer history of injury and dismemberment.

We do not have to live in the shadowy half-life of false memory and dismemberment. Nor do we have to remain forever contemplating our wounded body, whether the wounded body of victim-survivors or the wounded body of the church. The body remembers its wounds, certainly. But it also remembers its wholeness. This body memory of wholeness is truthful. It is true not only as memory but as intuition and promise of the future.

Re-membering the church means honoring the body, respecting its freedom, acknowledging its wounds but also its agency, welcoming its gift in all its members. It means that all the members must take responsibility for the healing and health of the body. It means creating new models and new structures of participation and accountability. Even on the Roman imperial model of church such structures existed, as we have seen. Local churches selected their clergy and bishops; regional councils

of bishops and churches made decisions together, often with the participation of lay people. The early ecumenical councils ultimately received their authority not simply from having said so, and not even from imperial enforcement (when that worked), but from being received and accepted by the whole ecclesial body and especially by its lay members. There is more historical precedent for this kind of participation and accountability in the church than there is for highly centralized monarchical governance. There is nothing contrary to the nature of the church in participation and accountability. In fact, they are constitutive elements of what it means to be church. What *is* contrary to the church's nature is failing to discern the body.

Similarly, structure in itself is not the problem. No organism, no body can exist without structure, without an ordering of its parts or members in a way consistent with the body's purpose and well-being. The same holds true for power. Power is simply the ability to act – to meet the body's essential needs, to make choices, to move and change, to live. Power flows naturally through all the parts of an organism. It is more easily shared and multiplied than hoarded. Structure and power are as necessary to the church's life as they are to the life of any body. They can be exercised and experienced as inclusive or exclusive, dominating or collaborating, conducive to freedom or to fear. In the church, however, if it truly *is* Christ's body, structure and power can only be at the service of the body discerned in its members. Structure and power, participation and accountability are for the body and for its mission.

Not to discern the body, yet continue to come to the table of the Lord, is to eat and drink judgment for ourselves. There is no body without its members. There are no members without participation. There is no participation without mutual recognition and accountability. Structural change is possible. Accountability is necessary. Re-membering the church is essential. ***Keep the faith. Change the church.***