

Living in a handful of clay

Long ago, we learned that man is composed of body and soul. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: The human body shares in the dignity of “the image of God”: it is a human body precisely because it is animated by a spiritual soul, and it is the whole human person that is intended to become, in the body of Christ, a temple of the Spirit (# 364).

How much have you thought about what your physical body means to you? In Chapter 9 of *He Leadeth Me*, Fr. Walter states that while in the prison camps, he often reflected about the human body and its importance to the whole human person. He marvels about “how essential (the body’s) well-being is to his well-being, how prominent a part in every activity of human existence is played by that clay into which God first breathed the breath of life” (pg. 90). The physical bodies of those in the camps went through extremely harsh conditions. Minimal food, minimal protection from the extreme temperatures and unending hard labor were part of their daily life. After reading about the hardships these prisoners went through, one wonders how they physically finished their prison sentence and came out alive! Fr. Walter admits that prison camp survival “is a tribute to the stubbornness and power of the human will driving the body beyond what a man thought he could endure, and a tribute as well to the marvelous work of God’s creation that is the human body” (pg. 92). He appreciated his will and human spirit that helped him to endure the ordeal. However, he realized it was his human body which was able to do the work of the will and spirit; and he marveled at the body’s ability in these circumstances. Fr. Walter came to understand that the body gets ‘short changed’ as the will is often described as “willing” but the flesh is “weak”. He proclaims that “for whatever reason, it is always the poor old body that gets the worst of it, as if the mind and the will never had any sinful thoughts or inclinations, as if sin did not consist precisely in setting one’s will (not the body) against God’s will” (pg. 93).

Body and soul entwined together, work together to help us attain salvation. God showed us how important our bodies are through the incarnation. God took on the physical body of man. He experienced the same bodily experiences as all of us, except sin. It was through His

physical body that He achieved our redemption by dying for our sins and resurrecting to give us triumph and victory over death. And it is through our bodies that we work out our salvation. Fr. Walter emphasizes that when we are working to achieve our salvation by 'doing God's will', this is concretely done "by the poor old body" (pg. 96).

Fr. Walter beautifully summarizes the mystery of the relationship between body and soul:

The intimacy that exists between soul and body is a marvel of creation and a mystery of human existence. Yet we do wrong to think, because the soul will be judged after death while the body crumbles in the grave, that this mortal handful of dust is any less a gift of God, any less noble or beautiful than the immortal soul. It is in the body that we ourselves bear the marks of Christ's passion. The mysterious interplay of body and soul is an essential characteristic of our human nature. If the body is sick or sore, tired or hungry or otherwise distressed, it affects the spirit, affects our judgment, changes our personality. So slight a thing as a headache can affect our relations with those around us. It is through the body that we express and experience love and kindness and comfort. We excuse our snappish, petty, ill-mannered conduct to one another on the grounds that the body is having a bad day. We are constantly, day in and day out, hour after hour, under the influence of these mysterious workings of soul on body and body on soul (pg 94).

In this new year, Fr. Walter invites us to thank God for the gift of our beautiful body and all that it does for us. Day in and day out, it is the temple of the Spirit and works to do the will of God. I imagine Fr. Walter chuckled as he wrote in Chapter 9 that when the body dies, it "surely deserves whatever rest it can get before it rises to be glorified at the last judgment" (pg. 96).