

LIFE *after* SUNDAY

A Catechetical Tool for Parish Life

Touch Issue

The Most Satisfying Touch

BY MARY BETH NEWKUMET

For many years I have been involved with youth activities at my church. With fellow parishioners, I've run meetings, field trips and retreats. I've patted heads, bandaged knees, wiped away tears and put my arm around adolescent shoulders.

Frankly, I've never thought much about this touching. Until this year.

Several months ago, I was fingerprinted in the parish hall. At the request of the Archdiocese, I joined all the other adults who work with youth in our parish and voluntarily provided information for a background check by local police. Because of the alarm bells that now go off whenever adults are working with children, we were told that this procedure was for the kids' protection—and ours. Sigh!

INTERIOR DISQUIET

Many of us found "fingerprinting day" unsettling. On the one hand, it was a relief knowing that such extraordinary precautions were being taken to protect the young people in our parish. On the other hand, it was heartbreaking to consider that the danger of abuse might lurk in the tender touch that so many of us routinely give to the children in our care.

Looking back, I realize that our interior disquiet on "fingerprinting day" was a moment of encounter for our community. It *should* bother us to think that our children could be touched in a way that might do them harm. But it is good that we are



equally wary of becoming a sterile, hands-off people afraid to physically express our concern and care.

To me, our disquiet was a genuine encounter with the Presence of Christ. There in our midst, in the community of our parish, the Word-made-flesh was guiding our hearts toward his truth: *that every human person has a deep interior longing to touch and be touched in perfect love. And that there is far more of the human person to touch than just the surface of the body.*

Only a life with Christ in his Church can bring the full truth about touch into a world that seems to have forgotten how!

WORLDLY TOUCH

Outside of a life with Christ, touching another person can be reduced to mere manipulation. While the culture often expresses the longing for fully human touch, touching is usually presented

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Mary, the first Steward of Christ

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merely as a surface function of the body. With little consideration for the rest of the human person, the world's solution is either hands off (to the point of dismissal) or hands all over! Those who are not in relationships where intimate bodily touch is possible (either by choice or circumstances) are often made to feel that they are missing out on the most important aspect of human life, creating dissatisfaction and sometimes even, desperation. But when touch is only about the surface of the body, it can never fully satisfy.

Sadly, many people misunderstand this dissatisfaction with bodily touch. Although they long to touch in new ways, they can see no further than the body. As a result, some people just give up on touching, becoming resigned and distant in their relationships. Others respond to their deep longing for more touch and go out in search of other bodies. This reality is manifested in the sorrow of infidelity, pornography, sexual harassment and abuse. While it is good that society still recognizes the sinful disorder of these practices, the culture still does not offer a fully human touch that satisfies. And so, it is no wonder that worldly touch has become so confused and dangerous—where one person's pat on the arm is another's uninvited caress.

Who can show us the truth about this essential aspect of human life?

TOUCHING THE WHOLE PERSON

In his beautiful encyclical, *The Splendor of Truth*, Pope John Paul II reaffirms the Church's teaching that "*body and soul are inseparable*:"

in the person, in the willing agent and in the deliberate act, *they stand or fall together*" (*Veritatis Splendor*, #49). Indeed, "the soul is in the form of the body," teaches the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#365). This great truth about the human person changes everything about the worldly vision of touch—for believers and non-believers alike. If body and soul are inseparable, then *it is impossible to touch the body without affecting the soul; it is impossible to touch the soul without affecting the body!*



In Christ, this understanding of body and soul brings a new dignity and joy to human touch. Suddenly, the surface of the body is just one small aspect of touch available to the human person. Christ shows us so much more! In union with him, the possibilities for touching the rest—the infinite part—of the human person are boundless, satisfying that deepest longing of every human heart.

BOUNDLESS TOUCH

When we allow Christ to live in us, we can touch the people we encounter in the way he wants us to touch them—with a profound truth, a tender compassion and a perfect, unchanging love. This is the most satisfying touch of human life. In union with Christ, we can touch hearts, touch souls, touch wounds, touch bodies with *his touch*. We can touch the whole person without fear of manipulation because we will always be touching others in his truth, with his law living in us. Only this fully human vision of touch can bring

great joy and freedom back into this most natural of human responses.

"Lord," St. Augustine wrote, "you have touched me and I have been transformed into your peace." The world is desperately longing for a tender touch that brings neither sorrow nor harm, but contentment and delight. Only in Christ can we touch each other again in love. ❖

Life After Sunday

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The Touch of Christ

A life with Christ in his Church ensures that every aspect of the human person is deeply respected, honored and touched. Although we have seen how the world tries to diminish the life of the soul, we must not be tempted into a spirituality that reduces the importance of the body! (“Nothing can be more absurd,” observes essayist Wendell Berry, “than to despise the body and yet yearn for its resurrection.”) The Lord wants to touch the fullness of our humanity as he brings us into his divine life. The Mass is the event where this takes place.

At the beginning of the liturgy on Sunday, we are invited to open ourselves up to an encounter with his Presence. Together we recite the prayers and listen to the readings of the Word. Sometimes, a new insight or a deeper understanding will suddenly strike us. This is the interior touch of Jesus Christ. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we are drawn further into the infinite union of love between the Father and Son. And as we grow in this life, we begin to sense the boundlessness

of our own spirit and the spirits of the people who surround us. We realize how much more of the human person there is to care for and touch.

A GENUINE TOUCH

But the Lord does not leave us with a disembodied spirituality. At the same time that he reveals the endless depth and breadth of our infinite souls, he insists on touching our finite bodies as well. The Eucharist is how the Lord touches us physically—a genuine



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touch that is body to body, soul to soul. We eat his body and drink his blood, ensuring our remembrance that the infinite God took on the fullness of our frail humanity. This is a touch of passionate love. “It seems to me that nothing better expresses the love in God’s Heart than the Eucharist,” observed Blessed

Getting There...

In the life of the Church, the sacraments are always administered by human touch. We are anointed and washed. Hands are laid upon us in prayer. This is how the Lord loved and healed the people he encountered during his earthly life. This is the same way he loves and heals us today. Christ is the only one who can touch us everywhere—especially in the most painful places. The wounds of the heart—the festering sins and isolating guilt—these are the places he touches as we grow in relationship with him. “Often Jesus asks the sick to believe,” says the Catechism of the Catholic Church. “He makes use of signs to heal: spittle and the laying on of hands, mud and washing. The sick try to touch him, ‘for power came forth from him and healed them all.’ And so in the sacraments Christ continues to ‘touch’ us in order to heal us” (CCC#1504). The Sacrament of Reconciliation is especially effective in healing our wounded hearts. Do not be afraid to allow him to touch you in the places that hurt the most! ❖

Elizabeth of the Trinity. “It is union, consummation, He in us, we in Him, and isn’t that Heaven on earth?”

“Without touch,” says writer Andre Dubus, “God is a monologue, an idea, a philosophy.” Through the sacramental life of the Church, we allow the Lord to touch and unite himself with every part of us: body, soul, heart and mind. Once we have allowed him to live in us in this way, we can bring his fully divine and human touch out into the world. ❖

Balm on our Wounds

Only-begotten Son of the sovereign Father, look upon us with a benign countenance. It is You who called the penitent heart of the Magdalene to the pinnacle of glory. The lost penny is again restored to the royal treasury; and the gem wiped clean from mire surpasses the stars in brilliance. O Jesus, balm on our wounds and sole hope of the penitent, through the tears of the Magdalene wash away our sins. —St. Odo of Cluny ❖

The Moment of a Loving Touch

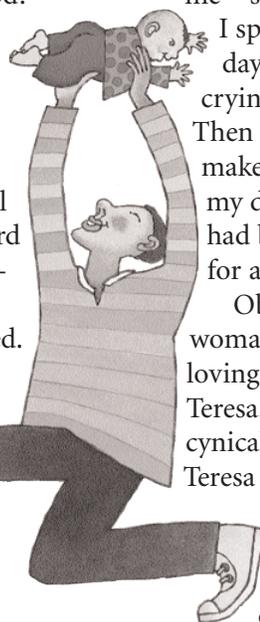
BY JOHN M. CAPOBIANCO

Have you ever had the experience of saying something to a friend or doing something for a family member that really changed their lives and moved them toward God? I don't mean those simple acts of kindness that you think through, plan every detail and then accomplish. I mean a spontaneous encounter—where a spiritual shift occurs—a growth toward God, a moment when something beyond your power happens, and a life is changed. Sometimes you don't even know what you said or did. You may be oblivious to the interior movement of another. You may have never known about it unless that someone stepped forward and revealed that you touched them in an important way.

MOMENT OF ENCOUNTER

People describe this kind of moment with saintly people all the time. In *A Simple Path*, Lucinda Vardey describes this encounter with Mother Teresa: "A woman once went to help the Missionaries of Charity in Calcutta and was pondering her own path when she met Mother Teresa by chance on the balcony outside her room at the Mother House. She was meeting a few people—there was an Indian couple before me and she suddenly turned round and looked at me and said, 'When will you

make up your mind?' I was dumbstruck, and this was without me saying anything at all. She somehow knew who I was at a very deep level. It really moved me—she touched me and I spent the rest of the day in the chapel, crying and recovering. Then I knew I had to make the decision about my direction which I had been putting off for a very long time."



Obviously this woman experienced the loving touch of Mother Teresa. Now, being cynical, I suppose Mother Teresa could have had a staple of mysterious greetings that she tried out on different visitors

just to get some dramatic religious reaction. Maybe this one just hit the mark. More common with saintly people, however, is another possibility: living such an intimate life with Christ gave her a momentary insight into the heart of this woman; Christ transformed this expression into his loving personal touch. That's why people were attracted to her! I am convinced that this is the moment when Christ reaches out, loves and touches others through those who intimately know him. He can do it because people like the saints have chosen to draw passionately close to him. They spend real time with him everyday, and then they bring him with them—in almost imperceptible ways—back into

An Interior Touch

“Jesus has no need of books or doctors to instruct souls. He who is himself the Doctor of Doctors teaches without the noise of words. Never have I heard him speak, but I feel he is within me at each moment; he is guiding and inspiring me with what I must say and do.”

—St. Therese of Lisieux, *The Story of a Soul* ❖

every encounter of their lives. This is the moment that creates saints. When this moment occurs—especially in the rough and tumble of family life—it is one of the most tender and precious gifts a family can be given.

TOUCHING MANY LIVES

A family with just one member—and it always starts with one member—who brings this touch of Christ into their lives can transform the destiny of a family. People often wonder how my mother with five children and 27 grandchildren—all of whom have remained in the Church and attend Mass at least every Sunday—retained such a close-knit family. My answer always circles around my mother's unrelenting prayer life. While she is not shy about telling us when we have strayed off-track from a life with Christ, she also knows that the love that holds our family together is far beyond her power. Sometimes her words cut to the heart. Other times they make us wince! Yet her consistent acts of love for us back up her continual

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Persistent Touch

Many families have members who have isolated themselves from the life of the Church. This is always a great sorrow to those who are living in



companionship with Jesus Christ. Often we feel helpless about how to bring the richness of our life with him to those who live unhappily without it. What can we say or do to touch their hearts?

REACHING OUT

The great news is that we are not in charge of the Lord's plan! It is Jesus, himself, who will seek out our loved ones. Every day of their lives—through persons, events and circumstances—he will try to touch them! The Lord does not care how much these estranged ones have sinned or how long they have been away from his life. *He will persist.* “The unbeliever cannot grasp the fact that the Lord seeks contact with sin,” says 20th century mystic Adrienne von Speyr, “that he has actually come looking for sin, that he loves to be with sinners because he loves men, who are sinners, and wants to redeem them.”

How can we serve the Lord in this great work? Our mission is to persevere in love and keep in touch with family members and friends who live in isolation. “Do not worry about what you are to speak” (Matt 10:19) or how long it will take. He will give you the right approach at the right time. Stay close to Christ and one of the paths he may use to reach out to an estranged loved one is *you!* ❖

Getting There...

My husband was from a Catholic background, or culture, really. There was no belief articulated or devotion practiced. All the children were baptized, but aside from that, were given no idea of what that meant, no follow-up, confirmation or religious education.

We had been through a very trying period. Within two years, both of us had suffered life-threatening conditions, and our only living child, our grown daughter, Ruthie, had succumbed to a life-long illness. She had lived a life of illness bravely, actively and cheerfully. That she lived that long, and so successfully was in itself a miracle and a victory. Her doctor said there was no medical reason that she should have survived even the first year.

Shortly before she died, my husband was being admitted to the hospital for a traumatic and unusual operation. Usually when asked what religion he was he would reply “nothing” but this time I spoke up and said “he is Catholic.” When we got to his room, he said, “why did you say that?” and I replied, “you can't be nothing, and anyway you are Catholic. Your parents did that for you.”

I was Methodist. Ruthie was Methodist, raised in that church. She and I taught Sunday school, were in the choir and had many friends. I still respect the Methodist church and her institutions and my many friends still there. But God inspired me to know his will and guided me to come into his holy Catholic and apostolic Church. The miracle of my husband's timely conversion validates the authenticity of that inspiration.

I had noticed that my husband was becoming more receptive to Catholic clergy and the idea of Church. We had been married almost 53 years, and as I had done many times before, I was praying with all diligence and fervor for the Lord to let me know what I should do to bring my husband to Himself. Unexpectedly, I intuitively understood that I would have to change. I knew immediately that what that meant was that I would have to become Catholic, so I told my husband. He said, “Oh, okay.” Then I said, “I don't think I can do it by myself. One must get one's marriage straightened out.” After grimacing and scowling a bit, he said, “Oh, alright.”

Well, we went through the RCIA program and were taken into the Church on April 19, 1992. We attended Mass every Sunday. He seemed very glad of it. I think he was proud of it. We married August 14, 1992 at Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church on the 53rd anniversary of our original marriage in 1939. My husband died on October 16, 1992. What a timely conversion! What a miracle! What a consolation to me!

—by Antonina “Nita” Natoli ❖



Touching Every Person

In our parish, we are fortunate to have three priests and a small convent of nuns living on our grounds. This is a true gift to our community. Indeed their very existence in our midst says something very dramatic about human touch. With their whole lives, consecrated persons proclaim that there is so much more of the human person to touch than just the surface of the body!

TOUCHING WITH FREEDOM

The lives of our priests and nuns are a sign of the boundless touch of heart and soul necessary for true human union. They are a sign of the call of every person to pursue the touch of Christ with freedom and love. “The consecrated person attests that what many have believed impossible becomes, with the Lord’s grace, possible and truly liberating,” says Pope John Paul II. “Yes, in Christ it is possible to love God with all one’s heart, putting him above every other love, and thus to love every creature with the freedom of God!” (*Vita Consecrata*, #88).

Through the life of the consecrated person, the Lord shows how each one of us is called to love and touch without fear. When someone in our parish has a tragedy or crisis, our priests and nuns can go to intimate places in the heart and soul that the rest of us may be too wary or timid to enter. The consecrated person is the most radical sign of our capacity to pursue union in this way. Living without spouse or children, the consecrated person does not touch the Lord primarily through a small few, but through every person he or she encounters. “Here are my mother and my brothers,” said Christ as he stretched out his hand toward his disciples, “For whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Matt 12:49-50).

A NEW TOUCH

People out in the world who do not appreciate the nature of



consecrated life are missing more about human life than perhaps they realize. For so many, the mystery of consecrated life is seen as a hopeless, historical quirk that needs to be changed. Although the Pope has declared

that the Church has no right to alter a state of life instituted (and lived!) by Christ, there are some who still seek its alteration. The suggestion of a married priesthood, for example, seems to imply that intimate bodily touch is still the ultimate human experience, the ultimate human touch. This suggestion greatly reduces the Lord’s fully divine and human vision of touch. And sadly, the insistent worldly call for change distracts many from the fullness of life in the Church, his Body.

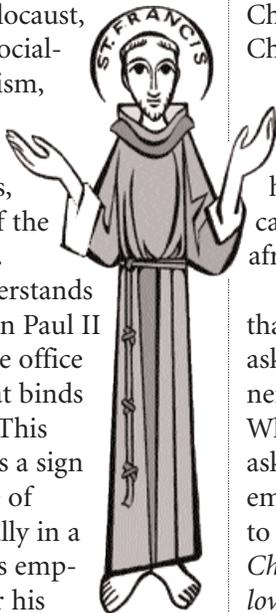
In the same way that we must touch to experience the fullness of bodily union, our interior union, too, requires the boundless, joyful touch of Jesus Christ. When the Body recoils because of division and dissent, it is much more difficult to reach out to each other in love. Let us ask the Lord and his Virgin Mother to bring every member of his Body to a deeper understanding of the gift of the consecrated persons in our midst. Let us learn to cherish this great sign of the human capacity to love. —MBN ❖

Capable of Risk

“There is need for your faithful and transparent chastity that ‘proclaims’ in the silence its daily gift, the mercy and tenderness of the Father, and cries to the world that there is a ‘greater love’ that fills the heart and life, because it makes room for our brother....Do not be afraid of bearing witness to this great gift of God. Young people observe you. May they be able to learn from you that there is a love different from that which the world proclaims, a faithful, total love, capable of risk. Virginity, lived for love of Jesus, is more prophetic today than ever before!” —Pope John Paul II, in a May 2001 Message to the International Union of Superiors General ❖

Touch His Wounds

During his entire papacy, Pope John Paul II has shown that when you are linked to Christ, when you are united to his truth, you are not afraid to go anywhere! And so the pope has traveled all over the world in an attempt to touch, heal and bind up deep, festering wounds: the schism, the Holocaust, communism, socialism, consumerism, dissention, abortion, war, famine, and yes, even the sins of the Church herself.



No one understands better than John Paul II that it is not the office of the pope that binds these wounds. This healing touch is a sign of the Presence of Christ living fully in a person who has emptied himself for his Redeemer. “Like the Apostle Thomas,” the Pope said recently, “the Church is constantly invited by Christ to touch His wounds—to recognize, that is, the fullness of His humanity” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*).

PERSONAL TOUCH

With this witness, the Pope follows countless other lovers of Christ who have brought his loving touch to a wounded humanity. St. Frances of Rome brought food to starving people; St. Philip Neri brought laughter and insightful preaching. St. Teresa of Avila founded a reform; St. Vincent de Paul founded orphanages.

The saints touched humanity in the places determined by their Lord, but ultimately, this touch was always one-on-one. One person at a time. Once on the road with his fellows, St. Francis embraced and kissed a leper. Just as “St. Francis did not love humanity but men,” wrote G.K. Chesterton, “so he did not love Christianity but Christ.” For Francis, the leper was not a “social problem,” but a sick and isolated man—Christ himself—looking for love and care. Therefore, Francis was not afraid to touch.

In our own lives, it is essential that we discern how the Lord is asking us to touch our friends, neighbors and co-workers. Whose wounds is the Lord asking you to bind up? Whose empty heart is he asking you to embrace? *If you know them, Christ is asking you to let him love them through you!* Do not be afraid to let the Lord lead you. “If there is a need God will guide you, as he guided us to serve

GETTING THERE...

As the Body of Christ, it is the Church’s privileged mission to touch all of humanity, to heal with the power of God and to restore the world to its original unity. Illuminated by the passion of her interior life, the Church has strong external arms for this work. This is why it is essential that we offer our prayers and resources to sustain the work of Catholic Relief Services, Catholic Charities, and other hands-on ministries that bring Christ’s loving touch to hundreds of thousands of people around the world. ❖

those with AIDS,” Mother Teresa of Calcutta once remarked. “We don’t ask what happened to them and how they got sick. We just see the need and care for them.”

For the believer, touching others in this way is not an option, it is a way of life! When those who are united with Christ begin to reach out to every person they encounter with the Lord’s fully divine and human touch, we can build a true civilization of love. ❖

From Killer to Healer

The life of St. Camillus de Lellis shows how the Lord teaches us how to care for each other with his touch. St. Camillus (1550-1614) was a professional soldier with his father. Together, they hired themselves out to wound and kill. “Fighting to them was fighting,” wrote Alban Goodier, S.J., “the cause was no affair of theirs. So long as they were paid their hire, and enjoyed the wild life they desired, the rest mattered little to them.” When his father died, Camillus gave up fighting. Afflicted with a festering wound on his leg, he bartered with a hospital, offering himself as a servant if they would treat him. As he grew in his relationship with Christ, he began to see Jesus in the suffering patients at the hospital. He became a priest and gathered other men to help. Together, they answered the Lord’s call to care for destitute and dying people. St. Camillus called his order the Brothers of a Happy Death. Their “uniform” was a cassock emblazoned with a bold red cross, a symbol that is still internationally recognized as a sign of humane, loving care. ❖

FROM THE MYSTICAL MONSIGNOR

Restoring Touch

Many people consider touching a stage to grow out of—in the same way that babies stop touching everything in their path as they grow older. For some, controlling this most basic human desire, to move away from touch, is a sign that we are becoming “mature.”

In the same way, the greatest temptation in religion is to move toward an untouchable God, a God who is only concerned with the spirit. After all, many people will ask: What kind of God allows you to touch him?

Only Christianity makes God more and more touchable. For the one who knows Christ, touching is not a stage. God desires to be touched and this touch must be experienced through the body. To touch his glory, we must use the body. Today, the Risen Christ still invites us to taste and see.

We must restore touch. It prevents us from denying that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. God, says Romano Guardini, has a “need for the flesh.” He dwells among us as Incarnate Love. Do not be afraid to touch Him. —*Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete, U.S. Ecclesiastical Advisor for Communion and Liberation, an international movement in the Church* ❖

The Moment of a Loving Touch

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prayer that God touches each one of us personally and reveals to us ever more deeply the beauty of his love.

“When you know how much God is in love with you then you can only live your life radiating that love,” says Mother Teresa in *A Simple Path*. “I always say that love starts at home: family first, and then your own town or city. It is easy to love people who are far away but it is not always so easy to love those who live with us or right next to us. I do not agree with the big way of doing things—love needs to start with an individual. To get

Ponder In Your Heart

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Why are we both attracted to—and repelled by—our ability to touch?

(p. 1 and 2)

- Give some examples of how this reality is manifested in the culture.
- What happens to our touch when we appreciate the fullness of the human person?

Do you experience the power of the Lord’s presence at Mass? (p. 3)

- How does the life of the Church manifest the Lord’s power?
- How does this power become misunderstood by the culture and many Christians?

Read the story of Christ’s moment of encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4:4-42). (p. 4)

- Have you ever experienced a moment of Christ’s loving touch?
- How has Christ touched the other members of your family?

Have you been called to touch the heart of someone in your family or circle of friends? (p. 5)

- Give examples of how the Lord persists in trying to touch us with his love.
- Have you ever trusted in the work of the Spirit in a situation when you didn’t know what to say?

Why are consecrated persons called to touch every person? (p.6)

- Give examples of how priests, nuns and other men and women in consecrated life are able to go to the heart of human life.
- How does the life of a consecrated person proclaim the existence of a touch that is not of this world?

How does the Church touch the wounds of humanity? (p.7)

- Discuss the meaning of the G. K. Chesterton quote in paragraph 4: “St. Francis did not love humanity but men, so he did not love Christianity but Christ.”
- Who in your life is Christ asking you to touch? How do you feel about this request?

to love a person, you must contact that person, become close.” It all starts with the moment of a loving touch. ❖