

Message for Day for Life 2012

'Use your body for the glory of God.' (1 Cor 6:20)

Day for Life 2012 celebrates an extraordinary gift: the human body. It recognises the marvellous achievements of the human body in events such as the Olympic and Paralympic games to be held in London this year, and the Commonwealth Games to be held in Scotland in 2014. It highlights the importance of good health, the care of our body and the importance of exercise and sporting activity. Christians have been encouraged by Pope Benedict XVI to participate in such activity as 'a training ground of healthy competition and physical improvement, a school of formation in the human and spiritual values, a privileged means for personal growth and contact with society'. Day for Life invites us therefore to show respect for the dignity of our body in every moment of its existence, from conception to natural death.

Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Participants in the World Swimming Championships, 1 August 2009

Our bodies are good

Our faith celebrates the goodness of the human body (Gen 1:31). It proclaims the marvellous truth that Jesus Christ, 'the Word' Himself, 'was made flesh' and lived among us (Jn 1:14).

Our Christian faith also believes that we are 'at once body and spirit', that our bodies are more than its physical parts. As Pope John Paul II explained, 'the body can never be reduced to mere matter: it is a spiritualised body, just as man's spirit is so closely united to the body that he can be described as an embodied spirit.'

It is through my body that I express myself. It is through my body that I experience the world and others know who I am. It is through my body that I express my love for others and I experience God's love and the love of others for me. Although I am more than my body, my body is an essential part of who I am.

Our bodies are worthy of respect

My body is therefore worthy of the utmost care and respect. We respect and care for our bodies not only because they are good in themselves but because they are made holy in our baptism as 'the temple of the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor. 6.19). From the first moment of conception, where the unique 'genetic plan' of my body is already present, to the moment of natural death, my body is part of God's eternal plan for me. I am made in the image and likeness of God and my body has an eternal future. This is what we mean as Christians when we say that we believe 'in the resurrection of the body and the life of the world to come'. God does not 'throw away' our bodies in death. As St. Paul reminds us, he who raised Jesus from the dead will transfigure these 'bodies of ours into copies of his glorious body. He will do that by the same power with which he can subdue the whole universe' (Phil 3:21).

The Relationship between Respect for the Person and Respect for the natural Environment

In a culture where we throw so many things away, consume more than we need and recklessly exploit our environment, it is easy to have a similar attitude towards the human person and the body.

This is why Pope Benedict XVI has urged us to promote what he calls a 'human ecology'. In recent years we have become aware of the importance of caring for the natural environment. Promoting a 'human ecology' means showing even greater care for the human person and the dignity of the body.

At the heart of this human ecology is the simple truth that the 'book of nature is indivisible': that the way we treat the human person and our body will influence the way we treat the natural environment, and vice versa.

We are called to a new 'life-style'

In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, 'this invites contemporary society to a serious review of its life-style, which, in many parts of the world, is prone to hedonism and consumerism, regardless of their harmful consequences.' This review of our 'life-style' challenges the tendency to reduce the person to his or her physical and biological components, to a commodity, an object to be bought and sold or plundered without reference to our spiritual and moral nature. It frees us from the temptation to judge ourselves against an unrealistic ideal of the 'perfect body' or 'body image' so often promoted by commercial interests.

Where there is a lack of respect for the right to life from conception to natural death, where human conception, gestation and birth are made artificial and human embryos are sacrificed to research, then the conscience of society loses its sensitivity to the ecology of the human person and, with it, to the gift and treasure of Creation itself.

Human ecology calls us to a 'shift in mentality'

What is needed, therefore, 'is an effective shift in mentality which can lead to the adoption of new life-styles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine [our] choices.'

What contributes to the genuine good of the human body contributes to the spiritual and moral good of the person and therefore of society. Inspired by the excellence of bodily achievement represented by the London Olympics and Paralympics, Christians and others are encouraged to take seriously the call to live a healthier, more balanced and environmentally sensitive life style.

The athletes in the Olympic and Paralympic games help us to celebrate the human body in all its wonder, especially when it faces the challenge of disability, physical limitation and pain. They testify that to achieve success in sport requires a harmony between the body, the spirit and the mind brought about through training and discipline. The same is also true of the moral and spiritual aspects of our development as a person. This is why fasting, abstinence and the discipline of regular prayer and participation in the sacraments, have such an honoured place in Christian faith and practice. They train our spirit, soul and body to act in harmony with one another against the tendency of our otherwise good passions and desires, to become self-destructive.

In the athletes of his own day, St Paul finds an example for Christians and their way of living: "All the runners at the stadium are trying to win, but only one of them gets the prize... All the fighters at the games go into strict training; they do this just to win a wreath that will wither away, but we do it for a wreath that will never wither" (1Cor. 9: 24-25).

The Eucharist: nourished and strengthened by the Body of Christ

As Christians therefore we strive forward on the journey of life with confidence that life has a purpose and is always worth living. And we never train or run alone, we always have the grace of Christ and the sacraments to help us: 'Not that I have become perfect yet: I have not yet won, but I am still running... I am racing for the finish, for the prize to which God calls us upwards to receive in Christ Jesus' (Phil 3:12, 13).

In striding towards the prize of eternal life we as Christians are strengthened on our way by the most precious food of the Eucharist – our viaticum – a word which means literally, food for the journey. In receiving the Eucharist we are united in the closest way possible to the sufferings of Jesus' body on the cross and to the wonderful transformation of his body in the glory of the Resurrection. In the Eucharist I am reminded that even when my body is weak or held back by infirmity, it is united to the mystery of Christ's suffering and can still give glory to God.

Inspired the 50th International Eucharistic Congress in Dublin, Day for Life 2012 encourages Catholics to deepen their appreciation of the Eucharist as a 'protection in mind and body and a healing remedy', a phrase from one of the prayers said by the priest before receiving communion.

Day for Life invites everyone to celebrate the incredible wonder and dignity of their body and 'to use your body for the glory of God' (1 Cor 6:19-20).