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Touching our Loved Ones inside the Body of Christ

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Twenty-eight years ago, when I first began writing this column, I wrote a piece that I entitled Binding and Loosing inside the Body of Christ. Among all the things I've ever written, I have probably received the most feedback on this.

What is the concept? How can we bind and loose each other inside the Body of Christ? Here are the essential lines:

Imagine you are a parent who has a child who no longer goes to church, no longer prays, no longer observes the church's moral commandments, no longer respects your faith, and is perhaps even openly agnostic or atheistic. What can you do?

You can continue to pray for them and you can live out your own faith convictions, hoping that the example of your life will have power where your words are ineffectual. You can do that, but you can do more:

You can continue to love and forgive them and insofar as they receive that love and forgiveness they are receiving love and forgiveness from God. Your touch is God's touch. Since you are part of the Body of Christ, when you touch them Christ is touching them. When you love them Christ is loving them. When you forgive them Christ is forgiving them because your touch is the church's touch.

Part of the wonder of the incarnation is the astonishing fact that we can do for each other what Jesus did for us. Jesus gives us that power: Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ... Whose sins you forgive they are forgiven.

If you are part of the Body of Christ, when you forgive someone, he or she is forgiven. If you love someone, he or she is being loved by Christ because the Body of Christ is not just the body of Jesus but is also the body of believers. To be touched, loved, and forgiven by a member of the body of believers is to be touched, loved, and forgiven by Christ. Hell is possible only when someone has put himself completely out of the range of love and forgiveness so as to render himself incapable of being loved and forgiven. And this is not so much a question of rejecting explicit religious or moral teaching as it is of rejecting love as it is offered among the community of the sincere. Put more simply:

If someone whom you love strays from the church in terms of faith practice and morality, as long as you continue to love that person and hold him or her in love and forgiveness, he or she is touching the "hem of Christ's garment", is being held to the Body of Christ, and is being forgiven by God, irrespective of his or her official external relationship to the church. How?

They are touching the Body of Christ because your touch is Christ's touch. When you touch someone, unless that person actively rejects your love and forgiveness, he or she is relating to the Body of Christ. And this is true even beyond death: If someone close to you dies in a state which, externally at least, has him or her at odds with the visible church, your love and forgiveness will continue to bind that person to the Body of Christ and will continue to offer forgiveness to that individual, even after death.

G.K. Chesterton once expressed this in a parable: "A man who was entirely careless of spiritual affairs died and went to hell. And he was much missed on earth by his old friends. His business agent went down to the gates of hell to see if there was any chance of bringing him back. But though he pleaded for the gates to be opened, the iron bars never yielded. His priest also went and argued: 'He was not really a bad fellow; given time he would have matured. Let him out, please!' The gate remained stubbornly shut against all their voices. Finally his mother came; she did not beg for his release. Quietly, and with a strange catch in her voice, she said to Satan: 'Let me in.' Immediately the great doors swung open upon their hinges. For love goes down through the gates of hell and there redeems the

dead."

In the incarnation, God takes on human flesh: in Jesus, in the Eucharist, and in all who are sincere in faith. The incredible power and mercy that came into our world in Jesus is still with us, at least if we choose to activate it. We are the Body of Christ. What Jesus did for us, we can do for each other. Our love and forgiveness are the cords that connect our loved ones to God, to salvation, and to the community of saints, even when they are no longer walking the path of explicit faith.

Too good to be true? Yes, surely. But how else to describe the mystery of the incarnation!

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