

# Body of Christ lasts forever

**By Father Joseph Breighner**

How do we know when we love ourselves? We were taught by Jesus to love our neighbors as ourselves. We were commanded to love ourselves as the measure of our love for others.

Yet, self-love has not always been valued in our Christian tradition. Great saints have inflicted great pain on themselves. It is said that St. Francis of Assisi actually apologized to his body near the end of his life for having inflicted such great pain on it. Much of my early religious formation in Catholic school and in high school and college seminary focused on similar penitential practices. Self-hatred, in the sense of penance and self-denial, was highly praised. The more we hated ourselves, it seemed, the closer to God we were. Needless to say, self-love has been a challenge in my life.

Often self-love has been confused with self-indulgence, or narcissism, a preoccupation with ourselves. True self-love is neither of those things. My favorite story of the narcissist speaking is: "But enough of me talking about myself. What do you think about me?"

So, how do we know when we really love ourselves? I think there are at least three stages.

The first stage is that we find ourselves more loving toward those we love. We find ourselves more easily loving our family and friends and loved ones in general. The love feels deeper.

The second stage of being aware that we really love ourselves is that we find it easier to love people who are more difficult for us to love. This may also include family members or neighbors or acquaintances. Suddenly we find that as we are able to love and accept ourselves with unconditional love, it's easier to accept the failings and foibles of others. Self-love expands our capacity to love.

The third stage of proof of self-love is that we find it possible to love those who don't love us, who may dislike us, who may even make life miserable for us. This is not masochism. It really is the highest stage of love. As Jesus said, "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' ... But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your heavenly Father, for he makes his sun rise on the bad and the good, and causes rain to fall on the just and the unjust" (Mt 5:38, 44-45).

When we really love ourselves, we find that we are loving everyone as our self. The world breaks us up into "little selves" - little mind-body entities. But from the point of view of God, we are all one self. To love myself is really to love the whole world.

No one is excluded from the love. I think this is what true self-love is all about - no longer seeing the separation, but recognizing ourselves as all one. We truly are all the Body of Christ.

So you can see how true self love is not about selfishness. It's about selflessness. It's letting go of the little ego, the wanting, "the mine, mine, mine" and identifying with all the rest of the world. When we love our enemies, we find that we have no enemies. We simply have other people identifying with their mind-body persons who don't know who they are. And that is always the challenge. We need to let go thinking as the world thinks, and to do what St. Paul said: "Put on the mind of Christ."

Thinking with the mind of the world will keep us in fear and worry and anxiety. We will see danger and enemies. Putting on the mind of Christ, we see only Christ coming to us - often in distressing disguises. As Jesus demonstrated, our minds and bodies can be destroyed, but who we really are - part of the Body of Christ - will last forever.

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