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Ingrown toenails and the body of Christ

Adele Gonzalez | Dec. 6, 2011 Soul Seeing

A few years ago I hiked the White Mountains of New Hampshire with my family. What I had not shared with anyone was that for weeks I had been suffering from an ingrown toenail in my big toe. After a couple of hours my toe was throbbing. I could hardly walk and was slowing down the group. The children were getting frustrated. Finally, my brother stopped and said, ?Sit on that rock and give me your boot.?

In shock I watched him cut off the entire top part of my boot with his hunting knife. ?Here,? he said, ?the toe won?t bother you anymore. It has all the space it needs now to move freely without hurting.? I cannot describe my relief and that of the rest of the family. My brother didn?t heal my toe, but he gave it the space it needed to stop affecting the entire body.

This true story touched a truth in me that has lasted a long time: The suffering of one member of the body affects the entire body. In the words of St. Paul: ?If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it? (1 Corinthians 12:26). Because of a simple pain in my big toe, my whole being felt sick. The physical pain did not touch my family; however, the consequences of my discomfort were ruining their hiking trip.

That day I realized again the interconnectedness of all creation. My soul saw things that went beyond what my senses were revealing to me: What happened to the people that had to look for an alternate trail because we had obstructed ours for more than 20 minutes, not to mention the beauty we were missing because of the delay? Could there be a commonality between my toe, my family, humanity and even creation?

In times of intimacy with God, I often reflect on the ?ingrown toenails? that appear in my life in the most ordinary ways. There was a mentally challenged child who once spent the entire Sunday Mass making loud noises. I could hardly believe some of the parishioners? comments: ?They shouldn?t bring people in that condition to church. I?ve been distracted and angry for the whole Mass. Couldn?t that family sit in the crying room?? On another occasion a divorced lady who had recently remarried went with her husband to receive Communion. A group complained to the priest because he had allowed this mortal sin to be committed before his own eyes. Maybe they expected an announcement in the parish bulletin about the canonical status of the woman?s previous marriage.

The sense of hopelessness transmitted by the media makes me wonder if the grudge that I am holding against a

very good friend because of something that happened a long time ago has anything in common with the hatred among some tribes in the Middle East. The conflict between Israel and Palestine is acted out in many households today. Brother against brother, families against families, engaging in mean controversies over the right to inherit the land of their parents. We also continue to damage the Earth with the cars we drive, the pesticides we use to grow our produce, and the chemicals applied to preserve our meats, among other things.

Questions crowd my mind as I think again about my ingrown toenail. What do we do with those who cause pain to the body of Christ? Do we try to heal them and make them comfortable? Do we give them some space so they don?t hurt so much? Or do we complain, ignore and try to get rid of them?

It never occurred to any member of my family, regardless of their annoyance, to send me back to the hotel. In spite of their frustration, I did not feel rejected or unwanted. Nobody suggested that I should have taken care of my problem before our vacation. I was their sister, aunt, sister-in-law, friend whom they loved who just happened to have a problem.

In the body of Christ, which transcends buildings and denominations, we are often blind and fail to recognize the person, the beloved son or daughter of God, and Mother Earth, which we continue to dominate. With our narrow vision we see only a ?retarded child,? a ?sinful woman? or an opportunity to make more money no matter what. What does God expect of us?

Jesus spent his life revealing a God who tore down walls, who welcomed all and became vulnerable to all. Jesus revealed God?s unconditional hospitality to all. In a very concrete way, my ingrown toenail taught me to respect and have compassion for every member in the body of Christ.

?If one member of the body suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.?

[Adele Gonzalez is the founder and president of Get With It, an organization committed to human and spiritual growth. She is the author of *Life Is Hard But God Is Good: An Inquiry Into Suffering*.]

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