

Bodily blessings

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [May 31, 2011](#) issue



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Last winter I spent five weeks on a catheter. The enlarged prostate that required this device is a condition unique to males, but catheterization is something experienced by both males and females. The experience left a variety of lasting impressions on me. Mainly I felt older and more vulnerable, and with the vulnerability came humiliation and, I hope, some increased humility.

The first time I walked out of a clinic carrying a Foley catheter bag, I was extremely self-conscious, to say the least, though other patients, with their own worries, probably paid little attention. There I was toting a bag the size of a purse. Winding into it, up from my ankle, was the transparent, urine-filled plastic piping the diameter of my little finger. It might as well have been a blinking yellow tube of neon.

There were some complications on the road to recovery, but let's keep the story short and simply say that laser surgery eventually and successfully addressed the problem. How sweet was the moment when, the catheter removed, I was able to again urinate on my own. I heard myself whispering enthusiastically, with no hint of disrespect or irony, "Thank you, Jesus!"

What an earthy, elemental, taken-for-granted thing it is: to pee on your own. At the time it seemed perfectly meet and right to offer up praise for this activity. And on reflection, I've not changed my mind a bit. I'm not saying we should be obsessed

about our bathroom habits (as some Hollywood movies are). I am saying a fully Christian spirituality is bodily spirituality and makes a place for the occasional, quiet celebration of urination.

First, take to heart a fundamental Christian (and Jewish) conviction: that God created our bodies, and they are good. Consider beyond that the Christian belief that God in Christ took on our flesh—all of it, the indecorous as well as the decorous. Then take yet a third step to realize that God never gives up on our bodies, that they will finally be resurrected to glory.

These are bedrock orthodox affirmations. The Gnostic Valentinus, early in the church's history, could not completely take them to heart. "Jesus endured all things and was continent," Valentinus said. "He ate and drank in a manner peculiar to himself, and the food did not pass out of his body." Valentinus simply could not imagine that Jesus ever had to urinate or defecate.

Taking a more robust view of creation and incarnation, Tertullian spoke specifically against Valentinus's views. Rather than regarding urinary and excretory organs as despicable sacks and straws of corruption, he saw them as "outlets for the cleanly discharge of bodily fluids."

The problem with Valentinus's view is that he both undervalued the body and confused issues of purity with issues of morality. All civilized people have purity issues with bodily effluvia, but that does not mean bodily wastes are evil. The impure is not evil; it is that which is out of place and not handled rightly. So, for example, it is not evil to dirty your hands with gardening, but it is impure to fail to wash them after gardening and before sitting down to eat.

The Christian and Jewish ability to affirm entirely the earthiness of our bodies is evidenced not only in Christian theologians such as Tertullian but in a remarkable Jewish morning prayer for recitation after the use of the toilet, "The Blessing of Asher Yatzar":

Blessed are you, HaShem, our God, King of the universe Who formed man with intelligence, and created within him many openings and many hollow spaces; it is revealed and known before the Seat of Your Honor, that if one of these would be opened or one of these would be sealed it would be impossible to survive and stand before You (even for one hour). Blessed are you, HaShem, Who heals all flesh and does wonders.

This blessing is fascinating for what it limpidly recognizes and for what I came so keenly to appreciate: that when "hollow spaces" which should be open are "sealed," a man or a woman is miserable—and indeed is gradually being poisoned by his or her own fluids. The blessing is all the more remarkable for its bold juxtaposition of God's throne with the lowly toilet seat.

In the biblical view we are not only fearfully and wonderfully made, but we can affirm that wonder in all places, including the bathroom. Thank you, Jesus, indeed.