Homily, 27 January 2019
Third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Nehemiah 8:2-4a,5-6,8-10; Psalm 19:8,9,10,15; 1 Corinthians 12:12-30; Luke 1:1-4; 4:14-21

If a foot should say, "Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body," it does not for this reason belong any less to the body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I do not need you."

Nearly every morning, between breakfast and morning prayer, Janet and I listen to the "Saint of the Day" from Franciscan Media. Every so often, the speaker will say something like this about one of the Saints from a religious order:

"He was a terrible student, barely able to read or write, had no hope of success in seminary, and became a brother in the Order."

Then, inevitably, the next thing said about the Saint is:

"and so, for the next 40 years he served as the doorkeeper for the monastery."

It gives you the sense that the position of doorkeeper, or porter, is the lowliest job in the monastery.

Yet when Saint Benedict wrote his Rule for monastic life, he said about the porter:

A wise old man should be placed at the monastery gate, who will know how to take a message and give reply and whose age means that he will not be tempted to wander about.

At least the porter was expected to be wise, even if not well educated.

Today we heard Paul's description of the Church as the Body of Christ. He said that together, we are Christ's body, and individually parts of it. He warns us not to become conceited about our place in the Church:

"The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I do not need you.'"

He also warns us not to isolate ourselves if we feel unimportant or unappreciated:

"Nor can a foot say, 'Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body.'"
Nor can one who is just a doorkeeper, say "I do not matter to this community."

In a monastery or in a religious house, the porter is appointed to be the one who interacts with the public. Since the porter is the representative of the community to the outside world, it is considered an important office. That's why St. Benedict wanted the porter to be wise.

People who came to the monastery gate or the door of the community house did so for many reasons. They may have had appointments with a spiritual director, or a priest to make confession. It may have been a traveler seeking shelter from a storm, or a little child who had skinned his knee, or just needed a drink of milk.

Sometimes, a person would just want to talk to someone who seemed devout, or faithful, or holy. At those times the porter would just listen and try to give good counsel.

And so people would come to the monastery just to see the porter. But that's not surprising, given that some very beloved saints were doorkeepers.

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*A foot should not say "Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body."

The Porter, despite his modest position, was still a member of the community. Indeed, it was from his community life that he was strengthened by grace through the Holy Spirit. He participated in mass, received the Eucharist, received forgiveness and mercy through confession. With his brothers, he prayed, shared meals, and found friendship.

The Saints who were porters understood that it wasn't what they did, but what God did through the life that he created for them.

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Some people have very prominent roles in our parish. They may work here in the parish, or serve on committees, or take a leadership role in a parish group.

Most people in our parish, however, do not play a role in running the parish. That does not mean that they do not matter in parish life. The parish doesn't exist for its own sake. It exists to help you in your life as a follower of Christ.
It is in the parish that you receive grace upon grace: through the sacraments, in worship and prayer, in the word of God that is proclaimed and taught, and in community. Together, not alone, we are the Body of Christ.

Like the porter, you are a representative of the parish -- of the church -- to the secular world. But unlike the porter, you do not stay at the church door. It's why at the end of every mass I say: "Go!"

Listen to the Church's own words about why it is so important that you belong to the Body of Christ:

The laity, by their very vocation, seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God. They live in the world, that is, in each and in all of the secular professions and occupations. They live in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life, from which the very web of their existence is woven. They are called there by God that by exercising their proper function and led by the spirit of the Gospel they may work for the sanctification of the world from within as a leaven. In this way they may make Christ known to others, especially by the testimony of a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity.

You matter to the Church, to this parish in particular, because together we make up the body of Christ and it is Christ who we bring from here out into the world.

There is an old poem, sometimes attributed to St. Teresa of Avila, that emphasizes why everyone in the Church matters. It certainly fits with Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians, and, with the words I just read from Lumen Gentium.

So, let me close by reading it to you:

“Christ has no body now but yours. 
No hands, no feet on earth but yours. 
Yours are the eyes through which he looks compassion on this world. 
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good. 
Yours are the hands through which he blesses all the world. 
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are his body. 
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.”