

**What Is Intimacy?**  
**Pentecost Sunday, Year C**  
**John 14: 15-16, 23-26**  
**23 May 2010**

On one of the back pages of the Sunday Star Times' colour supplement relationship expert Robyn Salisbury offers wise advice to those who are experiencing difficulties in their intimate relationships. As a keen reader of these letters I have become convinced that she makes some of them up. But that doesn't mean there isn't the occasional nugget of wisdom in the column, not to mention the odd laugh.

Agony Aunt columns used to be written by one of the reporters, who was given a non be plume, and a wide licence about the kind of advice they could dish out. But now they tend to be written by people with letters after their name, and published books under their belt. Apparently people are taking this kind of relationship advice rather more seriously, and there is an increasing appetite for it.

What's driving all this is people's rising expectations of one another in intimate relationships, and their frequent disappointing of each another in the search for relational happiness. So relational experts are in demand, and the approach they often take is to offer to teach people a set of skills that will equip them to tune in to their partner. I can go along with this up to a point, though I am becoming weary of all this talk of giving people a bigger toolbox or tool kit of relationship skills. It conjures up mechanistic images of couples going to work on each other like a plumber with monkey wrenches, clamps and screwdrivers. What puzzles me is how rarely these intense discussions of people's sexual, romantic and

emotional difficulties get around to asking what intimacy actually is. If people hunger for intimacy so much wouldn't they want to get clear about what these emotional goods are that they are so keen to add to their lives? Because if they can't answer the question as to what they think intimacy is how will they know that they have found it if it turns up?

When I listen closely to what people want from one another in this connection the kind of themes that come through are a sense of being met and held by your partner, a sense of being deeply understood and accepted – as one woman said in my hearing recently, “I want a man who gets me.” But the trouble with all this close attention to the meaning and content of intimacy is that the more you think about it, and agonise over it, the more it tends to slip through your fingers. Like happiness it can't be had for the asking, and it tends to happen to you when you are not expecting it.

I used to think about all this stuff a lot, and to have reasonably definite conclusions on the subject. But now I am far less certain about what closeness and bonding with another person actually consists of, and amounts to. In large measure that is because of gospel texts like the one we listened to this morning:

Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.

One of the most famous and popular paintings of the last century was Holman Hunt's “The Light of the World.” It shows Jesus holding up a lantern and knocking on a darkened door. That is supposed to be the door of our hearts of course. The question that painting puts to everyone who looks at it is, “Will you let me, and our loving heavenly Father in,

so we can make our home with you and in you?” If the answer is yes, then the most startling kind of intimacy is under way, and it will be of a kind that relativises whatever else I used to think of as being at the heart of human tenderness and trust.

At its most essential the Christian religion is about union with God. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit make room for us within their life. They invite us in to share in it. In this life they come to live in us, if we will let them in. In the life of the world to come we come to live in them - more about that later.

But hold on a minute, you may find yourself asking - the gospel text spoke of the Father and the Son coming to make their home in us - it didn't say anything about the Holy Spirit - and isn't Pentecost supposed to be all about the Holy Spirit?

Well, in its usual low-key way the Holy Spirit is in fact centre stage in all that we have been hearing about. He has a powerful role in the way God relates to the creation. He is a kind of anti-introversion element that propels God outwards to want to be involved with creatures other than him. He ensures that the Triune God doesn't just rest content with the beautiful internal relationships within the Trinity. He leads out that spirit of generosity, sharing and alert interest with which God is actively involved in the lives of creatures other than himself, and which leads God to want to know and be known by those creatures.

And the Holy Spirit is the medium through which we are drawn in to relationship with God. He is the access point to that Triune life, who is both interpreting the Father and the Son to one another, while at the same time opening up that relationship

to us. And of course he is a triune person in his own right, with his own particular role.

Here at the Eucharist the Holy Spirit is well and truly on the job. Just after the words of institution we request that the Holy Spirit will come down on the gifts on the table to make them the Body and Blood of Christ, and on us. In the first 1,000 years of the Christian Church the main effect of the Eucharist was perceived to be to generate the unity in Christ of the congregation. When the Holy Spirit was called down on that particular Eucharistic assembly it changed the relational patterns of all the people there so as to open up a deep sharing in the things of God. It was only in the next 1,000 years that the main emphasis came to be on individually communing with God; with an accompanying pre-occupation with what particular spiritual goods you took away from making your communion. We need to get our heads around what a major shift in emphasis that was, and not a very helpful one either. Before the emphasis was on the Eucharist making us one in Christ - then it came to be seen as each one of us taking away a little bit of Christ.

So the Holy Spirit is par excellence the spirit of intimate relating in the life of God. And as he makes us into the Body of Christ every time we celebrate the Eucharist, just so he will form us into the total Christ, the collective Christ, in the life of the world to come, the fully realised life of the Kingdom of God. There we will be configured to one another in such a way as to make up the members of that body of which Christ is the head. We will become him, while at the same time becoming more intensely ourselves as he makes us who we were always meant to be.

The problem with so many of the relationship quandaries we read about in newspapers is that they tend to be about very self absorbed situations which often seem like a case of egotism a deux. It is when we look outside ourselves, and bring God in as a full partner in the pattern of our intimate relating, that some life giving oxygen can make its way into these suffocating situations. Perhaps what we need in the parish magazine is a kind of spiritual version of an Agony Aunt column in which parishioners could raise issues about their intimacy patterns and problems in their relationship with God. I would have to answer letters that began:

Dear Fr Hugh,  
I am having the following problems in my relationship with God.