

**Why We Need to Have a Physical as Well as Spiritual Relationship With God,
and How That Happens**
By Jim Penrice

Think of someone you love dearly—a parent, spouse, child, relative or close friend. Imagine having no physical contact whatsoever with that person—you never experienced a hug, a kiss, a handshake, a pat on the back, an arm around a shoulder, or holding a hand. Imagine if that relationship consisted of words and spiritual presence alone, with no physical touch.

Would you be satisfied with that, or would you need something more?

Even with a strong spiritual presence, a relationship without physical touch falls short of all that it can be. (In fact, studies of infants who do not experience touch reveal many adverse effects, underscoring the basic, uncompromising need for physical contact in human relationships.)

The reason touch is so important is because we are not just spiritual beings—we are physical as well, and the body and spirit work in tandem. The spirit lives in and through the body; the body lives because of the spirit. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* goes so far as to say that “spirit and matter, in man, are not two natures united, but rather their union forms a single nature.” (#365) This is why we need to connect with our loved ones not only spiritually, but especially physically.

If human-to-human relationships require physical interaction, how much more so does a human relationship with God, the ultimate source and object of our love. We sometimes think of our relationship with God as strictly spiritual. But we cannot have a *complete* relationship with God on a purely spiritual level—because we are not purely spiritual. A relationship with God that exists only on the spiritual plane falls far short of all that it can and should be; we need to physically touch God in order to be whole.

God knows this, and in his infinite wisdom and love he provided ways for this physical interaction to happen.

In Jesus Christ, the eternal Word made flesh, God and humanity became physically and spiritually one. The Gospels are filled with stories of people longing to touch Jesus—and Jesus longing to touch people. (A few examples are Mark 3:10, Mark 8:22, Mark 10:13, Luke 6:19, Matthew 8:2-3,, Matthew 8:14-15, Matthew 9:28-30, Matthew 17:6-7, and Matthew 20:34.) As these passages indicate, we need Jesus—God in human flesh—not just for the sake of his touch in itself. We need the *healing* that only Jesus’ physical and spiritual touch can bring. What we ultimately need to be healed of is sin. Since sin infects both our bodies and our souls, we need to be touched by God both physically and spiritually to receive total healing and salvation.

This is why Jesus instructed the Apostles to not just verbally teach, but to physically heal (Matthew 10:8), to baptize (Matthew 28:19), to consume his Body and Blood (John 6:53-58) and to provide his Body and Blood for others to eat and drink under the appearance of bread and wine (1 Corinthians 11:23-25) so God’s people could be both physically and spiritually one with him, in answer to Jesus’ prayer the night before he died:

“Just as you sent me into the world, I, too, have sent them into the world.... I’m praying not only for them but also for those who believe in me through their word, so that all may be one, just as you, Father, are in me and I in you, so they, too, may be in us.” (John 17: 18, 20-21)

Jesus established the Church as *sacrament*, a visible sign of the invisible reality of God, through which he would dispense his grace through physical touch just as he had done throughout his public ministry. This touch would be given through the sacraments Jesus entrusted to the Church, through which the spirit would be touched as well.

Tertullian, a Christian writer from the late second and early third centuries, wrote about the spirit’s dependence upon the nourishment of the sacraments received through the body:

“No soul can ever obtain salvation unless while it is in the flesh it has become a believer. To such a degree is the flesh the pivot of salvation, that since by it the soul becomes linked with God, it is the flesh which makes possible the soul’s election by God. For example, the flesh is washed that the soul may be made

spotless; the flesh is anointed that the soul may be consecrated; the flesh is signed (with the cross) that the soul too may be protected; the flesh is overshadowed by the imposition of the hand that the soul may be illumined by the Spirit; the flesh feeds on the Body and Blood of Christ so that the soul also may be replete with God.”