

THE CHURCH: LOVE IT, HATE IT AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

The Church is the people of God. The Latin word for "church," *ecclesia*, comes from the Greek *ek*, which means "out," and *haleo*, which means "to call." The Church is the people of God called out of slavery to freedom, sin to salvation, despair to hope, darkness to light, an existence centred on death to an existence focused on life. When we think of the Church we have to think of a body of people, travelling together. We have to envision women, men, and children of all ages, races, and societies supporting one another on their long and often tiresome journeys to their final home.

The Church, Spotless and Tainted

The Church is holy and sinful, spotless and tainted. The Church is the bride of Christ, who washed her in cleansing water and took her to himself "with no speck or wrinkle or anything like that, but holy and faultless" (*Ephesians 5.26*) The Church too is a group of sinful, anguished people constantly tempted by the powers of lust and greed and always entangled in rivalry and competition. When we say that the Church is a body, we refer not only to the holy and faultless body made Christ-like through baptism and Eucharist but also to the broken bodies of all the people who are its members. Only when we keep both these ways of thinking and speaking together can we live in the Church as true followers of Jesus.

Believing in the Church

The Church is an object of faith. In the Apostles' Creed we pray, "I believe in God, the Father, in Jesus Christ, his only Son, in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting." We must believe in the Church! The Apostles' Creed does not say that the Church is an organization that helps us to believe in God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. No, we are called to believe in the Church with the same faith we believe in God. Often it seems harder to believe in the Church than to believe in God. But whenever we separate our belief in God from our belief in the Church, we become unbelievers. God has given us the Church as the place where God becomes *God-with-us*.

The Two Sides of One Faith

Our faith in God who sent his Son to become *God-with-us* and who, with his Son, sent his Spirit to become *God-within-us* cannot be real without our faith in the Church. The Church is that unlikely body of people through whom God chooses to reveal God's love for us. Just as it seems unlikely to us that God chose to become human in a young girl living in a small, not very respected town in the Middle East nearly two thousand years ago, it seems unlikely that God chose to continue his work of salvation in a community of people constantly torn apart by arguments, prejudices, authority conflicts, and power games. Still, believing in Jesus and believing in the Church are two sides of one faith. It is unlikely but divine!

Superabundant Grace

Over the centuries the Church has done enough to make any critical person want to leave it. Its history of violent crusades, pogroms, power struggles, oppression, excommunications, executions, manipulation of people and ideas,

and constantly recurring divisions is there for everyone to see and be appalled by. Can we believe that this is the same Church that carries in its centre the Word of God and the sacraments of God's healing love? Can we trust that in the midst of all its human brokenness the Church presents the broken body of Christ to the world as food for eternal life? Can we acknowledge that where sin is abundant grace is superabundant, and that where promises are broken over and over again God's promise stands unshaken? To believe is to answer yes to these questions.

The Church, God's People

As Jesus was one human person among many, the Church is one organization among many. And just as there may have been people with more attractive appearances than Jesus, there may be many organizations that are a lot better run than the Church. But Jesus is the Christ appearing among us to reveal God's love, and the Church is his people called together to make his presence visible in today's world. Would we have recognized Jesus as the Christ if we had met him many years ago? Are we able to recognize him today in his body, the Church? We are asked to make a leap of faith. If we dare to do it our eyes will be opened and we will see the glory of God.

The Garden of the Saints

The Church is a very human organization but also the garden of God's grace. It is a place where great sanctity keeps blooming. Saints are people who make the living Christ visible to us in a special way. Some saints have given their lives in the service of Christ and his Church; others have spoken and written words that keep nurturing us; some have lived heroically in difficult situations; others have remained hidden in quiet lives of prayer and meditation; some were prophetic voices calling for renewal; others were spiritual strategists setting up large organizations or networks of people; some were healthy and strong; others were quite sick, and often anxious and insecure. But all of them in their own ways lived in the Church as in a garden where they heard the voice calling them the Beloved and where they found the courage to make Jesus the centre of their lives.

Being in the Church, Not of It

Often we hear the remark that we have to *live in the world without being of the world*. But it may be more difficult to be *in the Church without being of the Church*. Being of the Church means being so preoccupied by and involved in the many ecclesial affairs and clerical "ins and outs" that we are no longer focused on Jesus. The Church then blinds us to what we came to see and deafens us to what we came to hear. Still, it is in the Church that Christ dwells, invites us to his table, and speaks to us words of eternal love. Being in the Church without being of it is a great spiritual challenge.

Loving the Church

This often seems close to being impossible. Still, we must keep reminding ourselves that all people in the Church - whether powerful or powerless, conservative or progressive, tolerant or fanatic - belong to that long line of witnesses moving through this valley of tears, singing songs of praise and thanksgiving, listening to the voice of their Lord, and eating together from the bread that keeps multiplying as it is shared. When we remember that, we may be able to say, "I love the Church, and I am glad to belong to it." Loving the Church is our sacred duty. Without a true love for the Church, we cannot live in

it in joy and peace. And without a true love for the Church, we cannot call people to it.

Meeting Christ in the Church

Loving the Church does not require romantic emotions. It requires the will to see the living Christ among his people and to love them as we want to love Christ himself. This is true not only for the "little" people - the poor, the oppressed, the forgotten - but also for the "big" people who exercise authority in the Church.

To love the Church means to be willing to meet Jesus wherever we go in the Church. This love doesn't mean agreeing with or approving of everyone's ideas or behaviour. On the contrary, it can call us to confront those who hide Christ from us. But whether we confront or affirm, criticize or praise, we can only become fruitful when our words and actions come from hearts that love the Church.

The Authority of Compassion

The Church often wounds us deeply. People with authority in church often wound us by their words, attitudes, and demands. Precisely because our faith brings us in touch with the questions of life and death, our inner sensibilities can get hurt most easily. Pastors and priests seldom fully realize how a critical remark, a gesture of rejection, or an act of impatience can be remembered for life by those to whom it is directed as if God himself were the author of the comment which He is not. There is such an enormous hunger for meaning in life, for comfort and consolation, for forgiveness and reconciliation, for restoration and healing, that anyone who has any authority in the Church should constantly be reminded that the best word to characterize church authority is compassion. Let's keep looking at Jesus, whose authority was expressed in compassion.

Forgiving the Church

When we have been wounded by the Church, our temptation is to reject it. But when we reject the Church it becomes very hard for us to keep in touch with the living Christ. When we say, "I love Jesus, but I hate the Church," we end up losing not only the Church but Jesus too. The challenge is to forgive the Church. This challenge is especially great because the Church seldom asks us for forgiveness, at least not officially. But the Church as an often fallible human organization needs our forgiveness, while the Church as the living Christ among us continues to offer us forgiveness. It is important to think about the Church not as "over there" but as a community of struggling, weak people of whom we are part and in whom we meet our Lord and Redeemer.

Our Spiritual Leaders

The Church as the body of Christ has many faces. The Church prays and worships. It speaks words of instruction and healing, cleanses us from our sins, invites us to the table of the Lord, binds us together in a covenant of love, sends us out to minister, anoints us when we are sick or dying, and accompanies us in our search for meaning and our daily need for support. All these faces might not come to us from those we look up to as our leaders. But when we live our lives with a simple trust that Jesus comes to us in our Church, we will see the Church's ministry in places and in faces where we least expect it. If we truly love Jesus, Jesus will send us the people to give us what we most need. *And they are our spiritual leaders.*