

Some Thoughts for the Week: Church — Spotless but Tainted

A Reflection on the Nature of the Church

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Ephesians 5:26-27 (quoted)

An oxymoronic statement, I must say. Yet when we examine the present-day church, we will be surprised to find that it is true. The church is holy but sinful, spotless but tainted. As the Bride of Christ, He has washed her in His cleansing water, and taken her to Himself, "that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:26-27, King James Version).

At the same time, the church is also a company of sinful, confused, anguished people, constantly tempted by the love of money, by the love of position, by lust, and forever 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 Christlike through baptism and the Eucharist, but also to the broken bodies of all the people who are its members.

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 body of Christ. The Creed does not say that the Church is an organisation that helps us to believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. No — we are called to have faith in the Church, the body of Christ, at the same level as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

When we look at the church as an organisation run administratively, with fixed assets, current assets, liabilities, and officers to run it, it becomes harder for us to believe in the church. Spirituality is outsourced in such cases. The composition of the church then becomes worldly wealth, which our Lord wants us to renounce; officialdom filled with people whose traits are not in tune with the teachings of Jesus; a priesthood made up of many who have not been examples worth following. That is the tainted part of the church. When we set that aside, what is left is holiness, purity, spirituality — in other words, it becomes a place where God becomes God-with-us. It is the inner soul of the church that we believe in, where we can worship, experiencing the presence of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

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