

# When the Church Disappoints

A Hopeful Perspective

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## INTRODUCTION

IT IS NO SECRET that a number of Catholics are disappointed, disheartened, even angry with the Church. The reasons are varied. Probably first on the list is the sexual abuse and misconduct on the part of trusted priests and religious. But there are other serious reasons:

- The exclusion of women from ordination and other positions of leadership;
- The way authority is sometimes exercised: decisions made without consultation; favoritism of clergy over laity; removal of priests, religious, and lay leaders for reasons that seem flimsy or spurious, and so on;
- Closing and merging of parishes without sensitivity to the feelings of parishioners or the history of the parish;
- Disagreement with the Church's position on divorce and remarriage;
- Lack of transparency or accountability in regard to finances and other aspects of parish/diocesan management (e.g., bishops attempting to conceal clergy abuse rather than admit and deal with it);

- In the face of a serious shortage of priests, insisting on celibacy as a requirement for ordination to priesthood;
- Insisting on liturgical regulations that appear to create separation, rather than communion, between clergy and laity.

Shall I go on? No need. You get the picture, and it's not a pretty one.

Some of these concerns must be your own, or you would not have picked up this pamphlet. For the same reason, you must still consider yourself a Catholic, despite your disappointment/anger/discouragement. Perhaps you no longer attend Sunday Mass, except on occasion. But something is still holding you in communion with the Church; you have not totally walked away. You are the kind of person I want to address.

The first thing I want to say: It is not wrong or sinful to have disagreements with Church policies and practices. The Old Testament prophets, even Jesus himself, sometimes challenged what had become the "accepted" ways of the People of God. The people had drifted or lost sight of the beautiful vision they had received from God, and it needed

to be reclaimed. The same thing has happened often in the history of the Catholic Church. That is what gave rise to ecumenical councils and reform movements in every age. Sometimes, honest questions and challenges have been the Holy Spirit's way of stirring up wholesome change in the Church.

That being said, the question remains: How can I deal with my disappointment with the Church? In the first place (and you probably know this already): it will do no good to simply grumble and complain, either to yourself or to your small group of like-minded friends. That will change nothing. A more constructive response would be to inquire about the reason(s) for some Church teaching or practice that seems unreasonable to you. Talking to a priest, deacon, teacher or catechist would be one way to find answers. Another would be to check out *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* or some of the good resources you can find on the Internet (e.g., The Catholic Encyclopedia online). Have you ever, for example, asked some knowledgeable source the reasons for the Church's teachings on human sexuality? You would find that it is remarkably holistic and consistent. You may still find yourself disagreeing with some aspects, but at least you did

**4**



the research. Then you can make the decision: Well, I still don't like or understand this, but I choose to remain in the Church because I find more that is good and life-giving than not. Or, another possible decision: The Church has had the benefit of 2000 years of prayer, reflection and theological debate about this issue. So even if I don't fully understand it, I will accept it in faith and live it out as best I can.

**5**

And that is not a dishonorable or cowardly move. Think, for example, of your own family. You would probably readily agree that it is not perfect. Some members are more than just quirky. They may be downright abrasive or irritating to the point of distraction. Do you disown or separate yourself from the family? In some rare cases, that may be the only sane option. But ordinarily we do not. We choose to maintain family relationships because, again, we find more good there than not.

It is good to recall that we belong to many other institutions that are flawed. As a psychologist, for example, I am acutely aware of the violations of the profession's ethical standards by some practitioners. Also, there are major divisions within the field. Still, I do not hesitate to identify myself as a psychologist, because I believe that the science of psychology has great potential to improve human life. Similarly, people who belong to labor unions or corporations are well aware of the inequities, infighting, clashes of egos and other unsavory aspects of their organizations. But they stay with it because, overall, they find more good than evil there. In fact, as Americans we are sometimes ashamed by or in

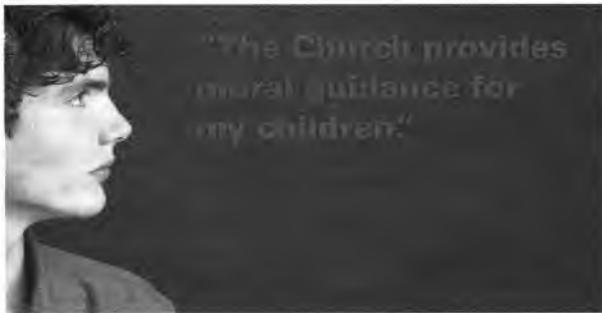
disagreement with some of our nation's policies and decisions. But we do not therefore renounce our citizenship.

Some people will say, "Yes, but the Church ought to be different. It should be a bright light shining in the darkness. It should not simply mirror the flaws of secular institutions."

It is hard to argue with that. I have often felt deep pain in my own heart when I see the Church acting more like a business corporation than "a communion of persons united in the love of Christ"—which was Pope John Paul's favorite image for the Church. But the sober truth is that Jesus did not found a perfect Church. He founded a Church with both divine and human faces. The divine element is his own abiding presence—"I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20)—and the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit that Jesus poured out upon the Church: "The Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you" (John 14:26).

## THE HUMAN FACE OF THE CHURCH

**THE HUMAN FACE** of the Church is not always pretty. The members, including the leaders, are flawed human beings. Some are remarkably mature and holy; others are petty, self-serving and ego-driven. All are “subject to weakness,” as the Letter to the Hebrews says (5:2). That is why the Church is never fully what it should be. The Second Vatican Council, in one of its most memorable moments, proclaimed the Church to be “holy yet always in need of reform.” The Church is neither totally perfect nor wholly corrupt. Some Catholics have



8

great difficulty dealing with this truth. If they could accept the tension between these two poles, they would be more at peace with the Church.

Recently I was reading the end of the Gospel of Mark where Jesus commissions the disciples: “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation” (16:15). But I was struck by the verse just preceding it: “He upbraided [scolded] them for their lack of faith and stubbornness,” because they had refused to believe the reports about his resurrection. Jesus could have said, “Since you guys are so stuck in your own disillusionment and cynicism, I’m going to select and train a whole new core of disciples. Be off with you!” Instead, in an amazing act of confidence in these flawed and fickle people, he goes ahead and commissions them to continue his mission until the end of time. I find that comforting. From the very beginning, Jesus knew his Church would be entrusted into fragile hands.

As time went on, the Christian community dealt with disputes and disagreements in every period of history. Indeed, nearly all the statements in the Creed we profess at Mass each Sunday are the fruit of councils of bishops that were called to settle

9

theological disputes, with good people on both sides of every question. This is a remarkable testimony to the power of the Holy Spirit to guide the Church “to all truth” as Jesus had promised.

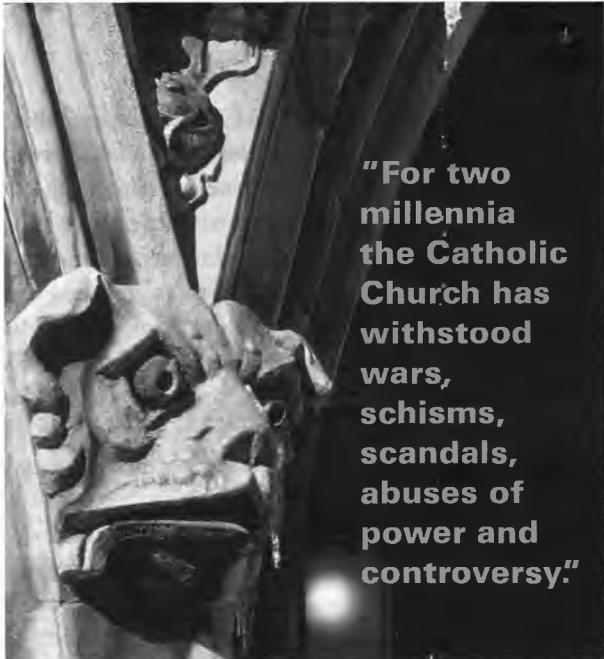
We should not be surprised to find factions, disputes, and scandals in today’s Catholic Church. Sometimes I ask my Catholic lay friends, “What keeps you in this messy Church?” Some speak of the high quality of the Sunday liturgy at their parish. The priest and parishioners go out of their way to extend a welcome to everyone, including visitors. The congregation joins in the singing and appears to enjoy doing so because the music expresses their faith and touches their hearts. The lectors don’t just read the Scriptures—they proclaim them with reverence and conviction. The homily draws people in and helps them see how the Scriptures speak to their own experience.

Others appreciate the fact that the pope is such a visible symbol of the Church’s unity and universality. They value his willingness to be physically present to people of different races and cultures across the world. They applaud his strong stand on the dignity and human rights of every person and his courage to publicly disagree with powerful world leaders.

Many Catholics admire the Church for its 2000-year history of trying to better the human condition through education, health care, strengthening of family life and efforts to win just treatment for victims of unfair social and economic arrangements. I am always in awe when I visit parishes and see how many people are giving their time and energy to volunteer in the parish and the larger communities. They have a strong sense that they are not doing anything heroic, but simply living out the call of their baptism: to make the love of Christ present and visible in the world.

Here are some other statements I have heard from people: “The Church provides moral guidance for my children.” “I have access to a whole world of spiritual writings that have come down to us through the centuries.” “When my life was out of control, it was a Catholic coworker who reminded me that I could find God’s forgiveness and strength for a new start by making a good confession.” “There have been times in my life when the only thing that kept me going was knowing that Jesus was there for me in Holy Communion.”

These people are not naïve. They know very well that the Catholic Church is a body with many



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warts, wounds and scars. They know there is often a disconnect between what it teaches and how it acts. They are not afraid to be critical of the Church when they perceive inconsistencies and injustices. But through it all, they continue to look beyond the human face to see the deeper reality: It is still the Church of Jesus Christ, his body extended in space and time "for us and for our salvation."

**12**

## **A WORD TO PARENTS (AND GRANDPARENTS)**

SOME OF YOU reading this pamphlet undoubtedly are parents or grandparents of children who have left the Catholic Church. From listening to many of you, I know this is a pain in your heart. You tried so hard to bring them up in the faith, and now they have walked away.

Yet, most of the time I hear you say, "They are such good kids!" Yes—and that is a wonderful tribute to you. The one thing you must not do is blame yourself for their leaving the Church. Once they become adults, their spiritual choices are their responsibility. And as you know, they are subject to so many other influences besides yours. All that is beyond your control.

But there are several positive things you can do. First, never stop loving them. Do not nag them about the Church. Continue to visit them, invite them to your home, show them your care and concern. Second, never stop praying for them, for their health and well-being, and also that they will return to the Church. God has all sorts of ways

**13**

of touching them and gently leading them back to their spiritual home. Even if they have joined another church and claim they have found spiritual nourishment there, do not argue or criticize the other church. That will only alienate them further. Often, just by your kindness and graciousness, they may come to realize that you have something they wish they had. Sometimes, what brings non-practicing Catholics back to the Church is their child's innocent question, "How come we don't go to church like my friends do?"

For two millennia the Catholic Church has withstood wars, schisms, scandals, abuses of power and controversy. At the same time it has given physical and spiritual healing to the sick, homes to the impoverished, courage to the frightened, understanding to the intolerant and love to the hard-hearted. The Church's history is much like that of the people, clergy and lay, in every parish in the world: an embodiment of good and evil, sin and holiness. Jesus once compared the kingdom of God to a field in which both wheat and weeds grow together. This does not mean that the Church is complacent about its defects.

The Church will never be perfect. And we do not belong to the Church because we are good or holy. We belong and participate precisely because we are sinners and needy and weak and imperfect. As someone once said, "The Church is not a mansion for saints, but a hospital for sinners." We know we cannot overcome our problems or grow spiritually merely by our own efforts. We need help—from hearing the word of God in Scripture and praying together as a fellowship of sinners striving to become saints. So, dear reader, if you are disappointed, angry or let down by the Church, please know that you are welcome. Forgive us if we have hurt you. If you have walked away, know that we miss you and will welcome you back with love. Above all, remember that behind the human face of the Church—be it pastor, bishop, pope or lay person—it is Jesus who is our "good shepherd," the one who desires the Church to be all that it should be, and the one who can lead all of us to our true home in heaven.

*May God bless you!*

**I**t is no secret that many Catholics are disappointed, disheartened, even angry with the Church. The reasons are as varied as our personal histories. Best-selling author Father Martin Pable does not deny or excuse the complaints Catholics have with their Church and its representatives. Instead, he asks us to look beyond the "human face" of the Church and find the face of Christ, always at our side though we are neither totally perfect nor wholly corrupt.

*Father Martin Pable is a Capuchin priest-psychologist currently residing in Milwaukee. He is a nationally known retreat director and the author of many books, including Remaining Catholic: Six Good Reasons for Staying in an Imperfect Church (ACTA Publications).*

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