

Leaving Out The Church

Text: Ephesians 1:15-23

Franz Schubert wrote six Latin Masses and never mentioned the Church. Belief in the "Holy Catholic Church" is part of a Christian's creed, but it was not part of Schubert's creed or music. When he set the Credo to music, he left out the Church.

If his decision had been a purely aesthetic or musical one it would be easy to understand. It must be difficult for a composer to move from the sublime vision of the Sanctus or the drama of the Dies Irae to something as mundane as the Church. But Schubert's reason was less musical than personal. His brother and he had been brought up in a home so narrow and bigoted that he excluded the Church, not only from his music, but from his experience. Schubert and his brother learned to express whatever faith they had in ways less conventional and ecclesiastical. Schubert left the Church out of his masses because he had already left it out of his life.

We may feel some empathy with the man. There are times when the thought of leaving out the Church is an attractive, liberating one. What a relief it would be not to have to contend with it, and for reasons which are obvious to anyone with even the slightest experience of its structures, practices and people.

For one thing, this community of faith is alleged to be the community of the redeemed; yet one of the things that kept Paul Tillich away from the Church for years was that "the redeemed do not look redeemed," and often behave as those who are themselves in need of redemption. This is the New Humanity of New Beings whose calling is to show the world a community of faith and love. Yet when we look at it, what we see is suspiciously like the old humanity with a religious flavor and a sanctimonious air. Here is the same appetite for power with faith used as an extension of meanness and pettiness. The most disappointing thing for any minister of the gospel to discover is that some of the oldest members of his church are among his most difficult people. After a lifetime of the gospel of grace, they are still graceless; years of mercy have left them merciless; called to walk in the light, they are still in the dark. One young minister, bewildered and disillusioned, told me sorrowfully that his was a congregation that knew how to be cruel but had not yet learned to be kind.

But we are not only disappointed in others; we are disappointed in ourselves. We experience it, not only as we watch people gather for worship or meet them in committees and at ceremonies, but when we look at our own faces in a mirror as we shave or put on our make-up. There are dark places in our lives where the light does not shine, and we can be just as mean and petty as the rest. We, too, are often cold, hard and graceless. Our disappointment with the Church is an expression of our disappointment with ourselves.

And then, of course, denominations sometimes do very foolish and embarrassing things. It sometimes seems that the Church is fulfilling a kind of death wish, behaving perversely to the outrage of its members and the depletion of its strength and credibility. Sometimes it acts like a political party with which we have little sympathy and whose agenda we cannot support. When the Church focuses on some

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social or political issue or other, the members are often outraged and protest that the Church does not speak for them. They often feel that their leaders are out of touch with their members, and that their money is used for purposes which do not have their sympathy. Christians may love their Lord, but it is a test of devotion to belong to the Church which claims to be His body. Flannery O'Connor was right when she wrote to a friend who was thinking of joining the Church, warning him that we must sometimes suffer as much from the Church as for the Church. So why not do what Schubert did and simply leave it out?

Because there is something to be said on the other side. Before we decide to leave out the Church, we should be sure we know what it is we are leaving out. The criticisms we have made are true, but they are not the whole truth, and we must attempt to see things clearly and to see them whole.

For one thing, if we are to speak of the Church's failure we must first consider what the Church has tried to accomplish. Failure can be wisely assessed only when we know what was attempted. This is true of individuals. Some of us have never failed, but only because we have not attempted much. We have never been stretched. All our accomplishments have been well within our capability. Some of us would be better men and women if we had failed, had given our efforts to something beyond our easy reach, something so demanding it took all we had to give and asked for more. Success is easy if our limits are narrow enough.

That is why some kinds of success are shameful and unworthy of us. Muggeridge has been saying for years that we can succeed only in tenth-rate occupations like making money or getting power. In first-rate enterprises like learning to love or trying to understand the meaning of life, success is impossible and failure may be glorious. That is why the Christian ideal is unattainable. It is for ever within our grasp and for ever beyond our reach. If it were attainable it would cease to be interesting; it would be too small for us. To come very near to great success is a noble failure.

New Yorkers should know this better than most. Some of you came to this city from smaller places. While you were there, you were a big fish in a small pond. But you wanted to sing, or dance, or paint, and believed that New York was the place to do it. You haven't done as well as you had hoped, and it would be easy for you to go back to North Carolina, or Texas, or Kansas, feeling a failure. Yet you had the courage to test yourself against the best; and you know that the difference between success and failure often hangs on a thread; and you have raised yourself to new levels of achievement. Failure of such a sort as this may be glorious, for only the courageous and the daring can fail in this particular way.

I sometimes think of Scott of the Antarctic. Have we done justice to the man's sense of adventure and nobility when we call him a failure? I suppose in absolute terms he was, for he didn't accomplish what he set out to do. Yet I am deeply moved by his courage and the gallant words he wrote to his friend James M. Barrie, knowing that he was soon to perish on the ice: "I may not have proved a great explorer, but

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we have done the greatest march ever made and came very near to great success." To come very near to great success is a noble failure.

It is like that with the Church. Chesterton once had a debate with a well-known atheist who began by making a long list of the Church's failures. Chesterton sat silent, overflowing his chair as his thought overflowed his brain. And when his opponent had finished, Chesterton, now grown angry, told him that his list was too short; he himself could have made a longer and better one. He then went on to speak of what the Church had attempted: it was nothing less than to turn the world upside-down, to shape a new civilization, to define in a new way what it means to be human. Of course the Church failed, but it was a splendid failure. No such failure could be charged against atheism, for it had attempted nothing.

The same thing is true in our own experience of ourselves. What our faith attempts is to shape us to the likeness of Christ. It has not succeeded; yet for all its failure in my life, and for all my imperfection, I am nevertheless inexplicable without Him. It is no small thing to confront and seek to transform our distrust, conceit and inordinate self-love. If we know our own heart we know that it takes much grace to make one sinner even a little better. The question is not whether the Church has failed, but what we should be like without Christ.

That is the first thing to be said against our disappointment in the Church. Notice, next, that the Church's failure does not contradict the Church's message, but confirms and declares it. It is the Church that says clearly and consistently that our nature is fallen and that all our enterprises and institutions are imperfect. All things human are subject to vanity, including the Church. The doctrine of original sin, so often regarded with contempt, has about it a realism that can save us from pretension and the despair of expectations we are not good enough to achieve. It ends the mischievous doctrine of human perfectibility, whether expressed in a political agenda or in personal morality. All human institutions, governments, parties, businesses, churches, are sinful, for evil is universal, pervasive and intractable. The doctrine of original sin is the one doctrine whose truth is shouted by the events recorded in every daily newspaper in the world.

Notice how hard it is for the Church to win in these matters. We complain that she is imperfect, yet she herself is the first to admit it. Her failure is an essential part of her gospel. And besides, if the Church were perfect, we wouldn't be allowed in. The very failure of which we complain is what permits us to belong. Groucho Marx and Woody Allen, two of my favorite theologians, describe our predicament precisely when they tell us that they wouldn't wish to belong to any club that would let them in. If the Church must be perfect before it can please us, then the very perfection we approve will exclude us from membership.

Indeed, the failure of which we complain not only declares the Church's message but reveals the Church's nature. We sometimes think that the Church exists to be an exhibition of perfect character. The Church is not an exhibition of perfect character but a workshop for the making of character. The Church is not a parade-ground for the display of virtue, and membership is not an invitation to strut and display our

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medals. The Church is more like a M.A.S.H. unit than a parade-ground, a field-hospital bringing aid to the injured and the bleeding. As Thornton Wilder said once, "In love's army, only the wounded may serve."

That is why it is so distressing to find that when people get into moral difficulty of one sort or another, the Church is often the first place they stay away from. This is what happens in a community of faith that has lost its sense of the gospel of God's grace and has substituted for it petty moralizing and pretentious piety. We do not belong to the Church because we are perfect, but because we are loved. The Church does not exist for the sake of morality, but to declare forgiveness and grace to those who know they are not good. Living by the divine mercy ourselves, we have learned to be merciful. Having been forgiven so much, we have learned to forgive. Knowing that we are accepted, not for the sake of our goodness, but because we are loved, we have learned the grace of acceptance; the grace both of self-acceptance and the acceptance of others.

These are good considerations to keep in mind when we are tempted to leave out the Church. But all that is best in it, all the qualities and truths we should be missing if we were to leave it out, are contained in one great word. It is the word "Catholic." The Church in which Christians profess belief is "the Holy Catholic Church." What does the word mean, and how does it gather into itself the best of the Church's history, nature and gospel?

I. Catholic means *always*.

Those who would like to leave out the Church tell us that we do not need the Church to be Christians. It is enough that we have the New Testament. This sounds plausible, especially in those traditions of Christianity which, like our own, elevate the Word of God in scripture. Yet there is a very important sense in which the New Testament is the Church's gift to us. If there had been no community of faith to produce it, the New Testament would never have been written. The best proof of our Lord's resurrection, for example, is not merely that the Gospels tell the story of the empty tomb, but that there was a community of the resurrection to write the Gospels that tell it. They were written by faith, and for faith, which presumes a community of faith. There is no way of circumventing the Church to reach the scriptures, for the scriptures are the Church's work, the response of the first disciples to the life, death and resurrection of their Lord.

This is immediately apparent when we remember that the earliest parts of the New Testament are not the Gospels. The Gospels were written later. The earliest writings are the Epistles. And what are they? They are letters, often hastily written, sent off to churches whose needs, concerns and opportunities elicited them. It is not that the scriptures are somehow more primitive or more authentic because, as it were, they came to us direct from God. They came to us through the fellowship of Christians whose leaders wrote them as they were inspired by the Holy Spirit. They arose within the Church and were written by those who in following Christ found themselves part of the fellowship of believers.

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We are sometimes told that the Church is dispensable because we have the faith. We know the story of Jesus and His love, so what more is necessary? But again, belief does not suddenly come out of nowhere, it does not appear in a vacuum. If we are Christians it is because we have been taught and strengthened in the faith by parents, preachers and teachers. They too, were brought to faith and nurtured in it by people of faith in a succession that reaches from where we live to the shores of the Galilean lake.

Coming to faith is like the achievement of personality. Human personality is not an individual accomplishment, it is a social achievement. It is not something we can produce alone. Someone loved us into loving and smiled us into smiling and talked us into talking. And someone brought us to faith, and who but a member of the community of faith could do it?

The truth is that the New Testament knows nothing of a Christian who is not a member of the Church. If we were to say to St. Paul that we were Christian but wished to leave out the Church he would suppose we had lost our senses. He would want to know how one could belong to Christ without being a member of the Body of Christ; a member of the Body of Christ as legs and arms and hands and feet are members of a human body. Let a member of the body be missing and the body is dis-membered. Wesley was right that the New Testament knows nothing of a solitary religion. As an old parishioner of mine used to say, "Faith is always personal, but it is never individual." Leave out the Church? But if you do there is no faith, for there is no way to get behind it, or through it, or over it, or around it, to find something that existed before the Church. Always there is the community of faith. Always.

II. Catholic means *always*. It also means *everywhere*.

Maude Royden was a superb preacher in the early years of this century. She had a church in London, England, which attracted many visitors, from all parts of the world, who wished to hear her preach. One Sunday this comment was written in the visitors' book: "The Hippopotamus meets the Polar Bear." It was written by Albert Schweitzer who had noticed when he came to sign the book that Dr. Wilfred Grenfell had just signed it. Grenfell, medical missionary to Labrador, who with enormous courage and endurance sailed the coast of that country bringing his faith and his medicine with him. "The Hippopotamus meets the Polar Bear" was a winsome and dramatic way of declaring the universality of the Church. Labrador and Lambarene are one.

But there is an even more dramatic way in which to appreciate the world-embracing nature of the Church. We find it in a tiny little book by Henry Van Dusen who was President of Union Theological Seminary, New York, when he wrote it. It is called *They Found The Church There* and is made up entirely of letters by American servicemen and women who served overseas during the Second World War. The letters are of this sort: "Dear Mom and Dad, please send some money to the Missionary Society. Because of Missions, I was feasted, and not feasted upon, when I fell out of the sky into this village in the islands of the sea." Many of these men and women had not believed in the Church, and they had not believed in Missions. They

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discovered that the Church was everywhere, not because they were interested in it or had supported it, but because they encountered it when they weren't looking for it, and were in the most literal sense saved by its ministry. Tribes which a few years earlier had slaughtered the first missionaries to reach them now welcomed their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Don't miss the point, which is massively simple. It is that we ourselves are Christians because of this sort of missionary work. Christianity did not begin in North America. It did not begin even in Ireland, though some have thought that it did, and, of course, it got there early. It began in the Middle-East and from there stretched to the uttermost parts of the earth. Less than a century after the beginning of Christian faith, correspondents could write of "regions of Britain inaccessible to the Romans but subject to Christ."

A distinguished historian has told us that he can think of no country that received the faith from one of its own countrymen. Rome received it from a Palestinian Jew, France from an Italian, Scandinavia from a Frenchman, Scotland from an Irishman, Ireland from a Scotsman, and so on. This "and so on" finally reached all parts of the earth, including this part which is our own. Catholic means everywhere, which brings us nicely to the next meaning of the word.

III. Catholic means *everybody*.

When I baptize a baby I say the child's name and then, "child of the Covenant, I baptize thee in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. In the name of Jesus Christ, King and Head of the Church, I declare that this little child has now been received into the Holy Catholic Church." People will sometimes ask me why it is that I baptize children into the Catholic Church. They tell me that we are not Catholics, we are Protestants. Why, then, do I declare our children members of the Catholic Church?

I tell them that I already know what they have just told me. Don't they know I have been to theological college and am therefore an expert on such matters? Not only so, but I attended theological college in Northern Ireland where, if anywhere in the world, they know the difference between a Catholic and a Protestant. That's the first thing they teach you.

I do not baptize Protestant children into the Roman Catholic Church, but into the Holy Catholic Church, which includes all Christians, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. The word Catholic, as used in the baptismal service, simply means all-embracing, all-inclusive, the Church which is accessible to all. No child is baptized into the Methodist, or Episcopal, or Presbyterian, or Roman Catholic Church, but into the Holy Catholic Church which includes them all, and all others who know God in Christ and are seeking to serve Him in love by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The flavor of this all-inclusiveness is caught in the words we use to describe a person whose appreciation is wide and varied. We say he or she is a person of catholic taste. Catholic means everybody.

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Which means, of course, that there is a place for you. But there is a place for you as a member, not as a number. We often confuse numbers and members, but there is a difference. When we speak of membership in the Church we are not talking the language of mathematics; we are speaking of love and belonging.

If I have a hundred sheep and lose one, simple subtraction will tell me that ninety-nine remain. But if I have a sense of pastoral care, and lose one, the good Shepherd is desolate, and the flock depleted. The one must be sought and found and brought home rejoicing to the fold.

I knew a woman in Toronto who had four children. One of them became ill, and it soon became apparent that her little boy would die. The woman told me that the physician who broke the news to her did not do it very well. "He asked me how many children I had, and when I told him I had four, he seemed to think that because I had four I could afford to lose one;" she said.

She did not see it that way. Love never does. Numbers may tell us that one from four leaves three. But those who love know that one from four leaves a heart desolate and aching, and a life empty for ever. Catholic means everybody.

IV. Catholic means *transcendent and eternal*.

My friend Dr. John Gladstone of Toronto, one of Canada's greatest preachers, who is kind enough to preach for us from time to time in New York, tells of a young clergyman in England who preached to a small evening congregation. As the custom was in those parts, he then administered the Sacrament of The Lord's Supper to those who remained when the evening service was over. So few stayed for communion that for a moment the minister wondered if he should continue. He decided to go on with it, and a little later came to that part of the liturgy which says: "Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify Thy Glorious Name; evermore praising Thee and saying..." He read it again; "Therefore with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven..." Then he prayed, "God forgive me. I did not realize I was in such company."

The Church may be only two or three gathered together in His name; but by God's arithmetic they are an innumerable company as earth and Heaven are joined, and the Church, militant on earth, triumphant in Heaven, is one.

This means that at any service or worship it is easy to count our faces, but impossible to count our number. Think of that glorious Company of Heaven that joins us in our praise; not only angels and archangels, but the noble army of martyrs, the goodly fellowship of the prophets, and saints and heroes out of every nation and generation who fought the good fight, and kept the faith, and finished their course. The Church on earth is only the tiniest fragment of the whole Church which joins earth and Heaven.

Indeed, Christians believe not only in the Church militant on earth and triumphant in Heaven, but in the Communion of Saints. Even as we remember those dear to us who are now in glory, and hold them in our love as they are held in God's

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love, so they, too, remember us, and pray for us, and seek to encourage us on our pilgrim way. There is no such thing as a solitary Christian, not only in the sense that by his faith he is a member of the Church on earth, but because at every moment he is surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses who love him, but on another shore and in a greater light.

C. S. Lewis spoke of an uncle who used to say he was looking forward to Heaven so that he could sit down and have a good long chat with St. Paul. Austin Farrer thought that when he arrived in Heaven he would be greeted by all those who, like himself, had attempted a commentary on the Book of Revelation. Karl Barth used to say that the first person he wished to meet on the other side was Mozart. Not St. Augustine, not Luther, not Bach, but Mozart. He said that when angels are about their official business of praising God, they sing Bach, but when God gives them an afternoon off they go home whistling Mozart.

For many, the best hope and expectation is to be reunited with those dear to our own souls who have entered into rest. When my father died, my mother could hardly wait to join him, and that is what she did not long after. Some of us long to see little ones who died and carried our hearts with them in their going from us. All these are members of the Church, for the center of their faith in Heaven is the same Jesus who is the center of our faith on earth:

Inseparably joined in one
The friends of Jesus are.

There He is glorified, but still He bears the marks of His humanity:

And did'st Thou love the race that loved not Thee?
And did'st Thou take to Heaven a human brow?
Dost plead with man's voice by the marvelous sea?
Art Thou his Kinsman now?

Faith replies that He is, and that in His own Person He makes earth and Heaven one.

How am I to leave out that Church? If I were to do so, I should be leaving out all those who have loved me and made me. And I should be leaving out that Savior whose Presence makes Heaven heavenly, who is the center of its company and the heart of its joy. It is not that I am in the Church. The Church is in me. And how am I to leave out myself?