

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

The church of Christ, “constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in communion with him. While there are many elements of sanctification and of truth in other communities outside of the Catholic Church’s visible reality, these elements, as gifts belonging to the church of Christ, are forces impelling toward Catholic unity.”

What the Council is saying is that while good things and good people can be found everywhere, there is something unique about the Catholic Church and its relationship with Jesus Christ.

When we understand that a sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace, or, as it’s taught today, an outward sign of God’s love, instituted by Christ, we can see where the Church can be called the basic sacrament. It is the outward, visible sign of Christ’s presence, God’s love, on earth.

But, like any community of people, it has a human element, made up of people who are good and can be very, very good; and bad people who can be very, very bad, even downright evil.

What is holy in a sacrament is not what I bring to it, but what God brings to it.

When I confess my sins, it is God who reconciles me to Himself. Yet I am still capable of sin.

When I am strengthened by the Eucharist, it helps me in my spiritual weakness, yet I am still weak.

When I was confirmed in my baptismal faith by the power of the Holy Spirit, I did not cease to have doubts.

Our holiness does not determine whether the church is holy. Why? Because we didn’t make it holy in the first place. Jesus Christ did that and he continues to do it.

Considering all that has gone on in these scandals, I could well be asked how can I continue to be a priest, just as you may be asked, “Why do you continue to be a Catholic?”

I guess the best answer I can give is one that was provided to me by a friend who is a retired Philadelphia fireman. We were talking to each other on the anniversary of 911. He said to me, “Those firefighters who died in New York, they died running into the building. When there’s a fire and lives are at stake, somebody has to run into the building.”

I stay because the church, in all its glory and misery, is the building God has made our home on earth. I remain a Catholic; I remain a Catholic priest because somebody has to run into the building.

The Catholic Church in these scandals has shown herself to be “the whore of Babylon”, yet she is still the beautiful bride of Christ. It is She whom Christ is coming back to claim— His Beautiful Bride, prepared to meet Her Husband, pure, spotless, and without blemish.

I believe that is the work we are called to do, to prepare Her to be received by Christ as His Beautiful Bride. That’s what the Church is. That’s why, with shame and anger and disappointment and disillusion, we can still be proud to be Catholic. That’s why, with shame and anger and disappointment and disillusion, I am still proud to be a Catholic priest.