

Why Do We Need the Church?

A frequent question we hear is "Why do we need the Church?" People want to know why they must go to a particular church, attend services they may not understand, obey rules that feel constricting to their lifestyle, and spend time with others they do not know or want to know. They say it is enough to talk to God in their own way, where and when they are in the mood to do so. They have lost the vision that our Lord's purpose for incarnating as a human being was not simply to establish places to gather for rituals and coffee hour. "Church" is far more than buildings, rites and rules.

Why do we need church? so that we can know, experience and live within God, here on earth as well as in eternity. How can we possibly make such an incredible claim? On the one hand this life with God is difficult to describe in words, in the same way it is difficult to explain failing in love. On the other hand, Scripture is very clear that knowing God is precisely what He has in mind and to know God is to live in Him. He created each and every one of us deliberately, on purpose, for the sole aim of living with us and in us throughout all of eternity.

This teaching is found throughout the entire Scripture. The Old Testament is one long story of God searching for His people because they were always running away from Him by falling back into idolatry. When He actually came to dwell among us in the flesh, knowing Christ was not a question for the Apostles. They were blessed to actually experience the Godman with their five senses. St. John describes this most clearly: "That which we have looked upon and touched with our hands... that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you" (1 Jn. 1:3).

However, the strongest language in Scripture about knowing Jesus as both God and man comes directly from our Lord Himself. He says such words as these: "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and My own know Me" (Jn. 10:9). "Abide in Me, and I in you" (Jn. 15:4). "And this is eternal life, that they know You the only true God, and Jesus Christ Whom You have sent" (Jn. 17:3).

How do we come to know Jesus? He Himself tells us that He will send His Holy Spirit to teach us all we need to know, including how to pray to Him. And the Spirit will not only reveal Jesus to us but will actually live within us: "the Spirit of Truth, Whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; you know Him, for He dwells with you, and will be in you" (Jn. 14:17). This teaching about knowing God is not just for early Christians, an opportunity somehow not fully available in our own time. St. Silouan, who reposed just seventy years ago, witnesses to this:

The Father so loves us that He gave us His Son: but such was the will of the Son, too, and He became incarnate and lived among us on earth. And the holy Apostles and a multitude of people beheld the Lord in the flesh, but not all knew Him as the Lord; yet it has been given to me, a poor sinner, through the Holy Spirit to know that Jesus Christ is Lord ... the soul suddenly sees the Lord, and knows that it is He ... The Lord in His boundless mercy accorded this grace to

me, a sinner, that others might come to know God and turn to Him... The Lord is my witness (*St. Silouan of Mount Athos*, SVS Press, 1999).

When our Lord chose to create us, He gave us everything to make us His own, worthy of eternal life with Him. He grafted us into His very Body, which on earth is manifested as the Church. Elder Porphyrios says, "With the worship of God you live in Paradise. If you know and love Christ, you live in Paradise ... The Church is paradise on earth, exactly the same as paradise in heaven" (*Wounded by Love*, D. Harvey Publisher, 2000, p.90).

When we look at the Church on earth we sometimes only see buildings, lots of rules that are not always comfortable, and some pretty high expectations in terms of our behavior and the choices we make in life. The Church seeks to get involved in our lives in all sorts of ways we are expected to go to services, fast, give alms, read Scripture, receive the sacraments, and pray regularly at home and in all places. The Church tells us how to behave, how to dress, how to relate to each other and the world around us. This can all start to feel pretty heavy and constricting. This sense of burden was not God's intention! Everything concerning the Church has one purpose and one purpose only: to bring us into closer communion with our Lord, to prepare us for eternity. This is where knowing God and living in His Church comes together. Fr. Zacharias, a priest-monk from England, describes it this way:

When man responds to [the] love [of Christ], he realizes that he is, above all, a worshipping being. The grace of God which has touched his heart enables him to perceive the image of God, Who is the true pattern of his life, Who ignites within him the desire to live once more according to the original purpose of his creation.

Grace initiates this change in him, but in order for this grace to bear fruit, he must live as a member of the worshipping Body that is the Church, the Church being the assembly of the saints through whom God speaks and in whom He is reflected. Our common membership unites us to our brethren who continuously stand before God, and this allows us to test ourselves safely, for the saints have themselves travelled the road to purification. And as members of the worshipping Body of the Church, we participate in the divine purity ... Our purification does not happen mechanically ... The human will must labor together with the grace of God (*The Hidden Man of the Heart*, Mt. Tabor Publishing, 2008, p. 125).

The Church is not just an earthly institution that seeks to control us by rules and limit our worship to stale rites. It is a living, breathing being literally the Body of Christ. This means that our life in Christ can only be lived within the life of the Church His Body. All aspects of this life nurture and form and protect our spirit. The boundaries set by the Church are not there to restrict us but to give us freedom. Within these walls, our spirits can soar. When we stay within the embrace of our mother the Church, we can know

that we are with our Lord. We can fully open ourselves to Christ's love, to the blossoming of our spiritual lives in limitless joy and peace.

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