

Catholic

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO 'BE CHURCH'?

As a Church, we have to be one person—one body—as well as an instrument to bring it about. *by Greg Friedman, OFM*



CNS PHOTO/MIKE CRUPI, CATHOLIC COURIER

The more I read and talk to people on weekend retreats or in parish adult-ed classes, the more conscious I am that we have an “identity crisis” on our hands when it comes to knowing what being Catholic or being a Church member is all about.

There have been so many changes in Catholicism in the last 50 years that lots of people feel confused. And whether the topic is sacraments or morality or dogma, somehow the confusion always seems to come back to a vague sense of rootlessness. Perhaps the example of growing up might help us explore this idea. As I grow to adulthood, I need to be in touch with my childhood, so that I don’t lose my roots, the helpful things I learned when I was little. And, at the same time, I need to understand my present, in order to make the right choices now and in the future. In the same way, clarifying our image of Church—from both our Catholic past and present—may help ease our “identity crisis” as Church.

THE CHURCH WE GREW UP IN

We all have lots of memories—good and bad—about the Church we grew up in. For many of us the “big C” Church is wedded in our memories to the *church building* where we spent a lot of Sunday mornings.

My childhood *feelings* about that church are important. It was big, often dark, and peopled by heroic, distant figures. Somehow, God was part of that distance as well. I can remember the fear, going to confession in the dark church on a Saturday night. That, too, was part of my image of Church.

But there were also feelings of reverence, awe, and mystery. I recall colorful celebrations like the annual Forty Hours. There would be incense, candles, and the procession with that curious umbrella over the Blessed Sacrament. As a server, I was assigned my hour before the tabernacle and felt proud to be there in the presence of the Lord.

The long, dark, high-ceilinged church of my youth represented the kind of church structure that I learned about in the *Baltimore Catechism*. The pope was the head, far away in Rome. With him were cardinals and other high officials. In my city lived the bishop, but I rarely saw him, except on one or two occasions, and that was usually from a great distance.

And finally my parish priest was also a figure at a distance—far up on the altar and with his back to me through a lot of the Mass. He lived in the house attached to the church and moved in and among those far-off scenes around the sanctuary. As I grew up, he became a friend, but I also came to see him as an authority, someone with all the answers.

Even now, more than 50 years after the reforms begun by the Second Vatican Council, many of us still envision ourselves as being on the bottom of a rather large pyramid of power, like the “people in the pews” of my childhood church.

THE PEOPLE OF GOD—A HISTORIC TURNAROUND

The Council took a dramatic step in changing the way we see ourselves as Church. The Council decided we should not conceive of the Church primarily in a way that sets us apart from pope, bishops, and clergy. The term *people of God* is the key to that change.

We get a clue to this from the Council’s decree on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. When the Council fathers met for their discussions, they had a first draft of that document before them. It set forth in traditional theology a definition of Church that spoke of the hierarchical structure of the Church—pope, bishops, priests—before going on to treat the people of God.

There was an important debate at the Council that resulted in a reversal of these two sections. It was decided that the chapter on the people of God should come *first*. The bishops were determining that the traditional view of the Church as a hierarchy was secondary to a wider view that encompasses *all of us* in the Church, not only pope, bishops, and priests. We all make up the one *people of God*.

This does make a difference in how we understand Church today. It means a new image of Church—one that sees all of the members of the Church together. Together we have one common call from Jesus: to be holy, to be his body here on earth. Even though the body has a variety of members, each with a



CNS PHOTO/LOSSERVATORE ROMANO

special function, we are still one body, as St. Paul puts it.

THE CHURCH IS A SACRAMENT

In *Lumen Gentium*, we read an important statement: “By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind. She is also an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity” (1). I single out this sentence because it contains a word we all know: *sacrament*. This familiar term conjures up the famous definition: “A sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.” But here, instead of talking about the seven sacraments, the Council document is calling the *Church* a sacrament. That’s a significant beginning.

Our catechism training helps us remember what sacraments are, but something far deeper in our human nature helps us appreciate what *they do for us*: we all need signs to help us *experience* the full significance of our faith. Understanding what *love* or *trust* or *hope* means is impossible unless we somehow get a *sign* to help us—a wedding ring, a handshake, a seed planted in the ground. As the Council teaches, the Church *itself* is a sign. The Church is people like you and me carrying out the mission of Jesus on earth: to proclaim the Gospel, the good news of the kingdom.

Since people make up the sign, the sacrament, that is the Church, there is a basic need for *all of us* there. We have to be *one* people, one body—and even *look like it*—if we are to be a sacrament or credible sign of the “unity of all mankind” as well as an “instrument” to bring it about!

STILL A HUMAN CHURCH

And yet, even with the changes of Vatican II, it is still a *human* Church, marked by human imperfection. We are not a flawless Church (either hierarchy or laity) but a bunch of sinners trying to make it together. We are one in our common humanity in need of redemption.

We can never lose the *human* quality of the Church. And we wouldn’t want to! The *Incarnation*—God becoming human in Jesus—means that humanity is the way God chose to communicate with us. I may look at myself and see sin, see a person who is unlovable, see what I consider ugly. God looks at me and sees something entirely different: a person who can be forgiven, who is lovable, who is beautiful. God looks to what I can *become* because of how I was created (good) and because of how I was redeemed (through Jesus).

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CNS PHOTO/J.D. LONG-GARCIA, THE CATHOLIC SUN

A CONTEMPORARY PORTRAIT

When I think of *Church* today, a completely different church *building* comes to mind than that of my childhood. To begin with, it is much smaller.

The interior is warm and friendly, and the altar is very close to the people’s seats, which are “fanned out” in something of a semicircle from the sanctuary. Compared to the long nave of my old parish church, the interior of this building is more rounded and gives one a feeling of being close together like one family.

And yet this new image of Church is not without its confusing aspects. Some people experience a real loss. The sense of stability and authority of the “old” Church sometimes seems gone altogether. We have witnessed many challenges to authority. And with the stability of the past seems to have gone many of the other qualities we cherished within the walls of the church of my childhood—the awe and reverence, the symbols that meant so much. It is no wonder that some do not feel at home in the second church building I described.

We need to be sensitive and tolerant of people who can’t easily “come totally aboard” on all aspects of the “new” Church.

DIG DEEPER

How do your childhood memories of Church affect your current view of the faith community?

How is the Church one, yet many?

What unique gifts do you contribute to the Church community?

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WHO WE ARE TELLS US WHAT WE DO

In his book *Catholicism*, contemporary Catholic theologian Father Richard McBrien identifies the mission of the Church with that of the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus, but warns that the Church itself is by no means the fully realized kingdom. He goes on to describe three models of Church: the *institution*, the *community*, and the *servant*.

The Church of our childhood certainly provided a lot of *institutional* structure, especially in helping our immigrant ancestors here in the United States take on a Catholic identity. The Church of today shapes its mission around some new structures: the parish council, the roles of religious educators and permanent deacons, the bishops' conference on a national level—to name a few. These are ways a renewed institution has tried to keep its unified focus and yet become more *collegial*, involving all of the members of the Church in its mission.

The institutional Church also calls us to the values we hold in common. Yes, there are times when I as a priest need to state “the Church’s position.” There *are* different functions, offices, and gifts within the one body. There is a special role of the teaching authority exercised by the pope and the bishops that deserves respect and obedience from us. But at the same time that office in the Church doesn’t mean the rest of us are “off the hook” in regard to our responsibilities. As a priest, I look to lay persons to exercise their baptismal role. So, for example, in the area of politics I may be less able to take an active role in office-seeking, where other members of the body of Christ can. I know very little about science or

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CNS PHOTO/ELIZABETH DODD, TENNESSEE REGISTER

medical ethics. I rely on a brother or sister Christian in that field to apply the Church’s teachings that deal with the sanctity of life.

Community has always been an important value to us as Church. Today we have strengthened the role of community in the Church by emphasizing it in more explicit ways, especially in liturgy, the central action of the Church. We have made community more visible in our worship through an emphasis on greater participation in prayer and song.

And finally, the role of the Church as *servant* can be traced in our recollections as well, although perhaps we have a richer notion of this responsibility today. What is particularly noteworthy about our contemporary

efforts to serve is a wider consciousness and greater involvement than ever before. Our image of Church now includes American lay missionaries working in the Third World, a grassroots interest in efforts on behalf of peace and human rights, solidarity with the poor, and a heartfelt response to the desperate needs of our brothers and sisters starving in Africa.

When the U.S. bishops drafted their pastoral letters on peace and on the economy, they didn’t work as if they were a Church apart. Hearings were held in all parts of the country, where interested people from all walks of life came to offer their ideas. There, in a graphic way, a new image of Church emerged.

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Greg Friedman, OFM, has worked extensively in video, radio, and television.

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