

Remaining Catholic

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Six Good Reasons for Staying in an Imperfect Church

Martin Pable, OFM Cap.

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Six Good Reasons for Staying in an Imperfect Church
by Martin Pable, OFM Cap.

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I would like to dedicate this book to some very special people in my life:

- *to my parents, whose example of prayer and Christian living grounded me in my journey of faith;*
- *to my parochial school teachers, the Sisters of St. Agnes, who instilled in me a love for the Catholic religion;*
- *to my Capuchin brothers and seminary professors, who helped me make the transition to post-Vatican II theology;*
- *and finally, to the many people who have shared with me their doubts and struggles to find a meaningful faith in the complex world of our time.*

Preface

For better or for worse, the problems of the Catholic Church draw a great deal of scrutiny from the media. The scandals arising from clergy sexual misconduct are the most obvious example, but there are also the internal conflicts and divisions within the church, the downturn in Mass attendance, and the abuses of power that sometimes alienate church members.

In the face of these problems, some Catholics have decided they want nothing more to do with the church. They have affiliated themselves with some other denomination or religion or have simply dropped out of organized religion altogether. This book will probably not speak to them. But there are other Catholics who are pained by what they see happening in the church. Some have stopped participating, yet they still think of themselves as Catholics and may consider reconnecting if they believe some things have changed and they would be welcomed back. Some are not practicing themselves but want some religious formation for their children. Others are in a second or third marriage and are not sure what it would take for them to return. Still others have honest disagreements with the church about contraception, abortion, homosexuality, the authority of the pope, and so on, or have been offended or traumatized by the treatment they received at the hands of a priest, a sister, or some other church member, yet they still have an open mind.

My hope is that reading this book may open an inviting door for all of the above to take another look at the church.

Perhaps they will discover that the church today has a different face from the one they experienced earlier in life. For those who have been hurt, I would like to offer a sincere apology for whatever pain they may have experienced. I have always believed that people have a great sense of fairness and that giving someone or something “another look” or “another chance” appeals to that sense.

Surely one of the most captivating events of the past year has been the election of Pope Francis. He has given a whole new face to the Catholic Church during his first year in office. People are attracted by his simplicity and humility, his delightful sense of humor, his deep compassion for those who are poor and suffering. He combines a passion for holiness with a wonderful human-ness. He is not afraid to challenge the Church, as well as secular society, to change--especially to work for a more just society for everyone, including the poor and marginated of our world. Not surprisingly, Time magazine chose him for its "Person of the Year," after only nine months in office. More importantly, parishes are reporting an increase in people returning to the Church and participating in Mass and the sacraments.

There are two other groups for whom this book is intended. For one, there are people who are not Catholic but have a good bit of curiosity about the church. They have heard conflicting messages from different people about what the church teaches, and they are not ready to check out a Catholic encyclopedia or website to find clarity. I would hope that this small book may provide some insight and prompt them to continue their search. And finally, there is a fairly large group of practicing Catholics who are themselves somewhat confused about the church or have friends who ques-

tion them about their beliefs.

This book is not a substitute for *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* or other authoritative sources. It is a modest attempt to explain why, despite its many problems and failures, people continue to find strong reasons for staying, joining or returning to the Catholic Church. I will be happy to dialogue further with anyone who wishes to follow up on the matters covered in this book through my e-mail address: mpable@thecapuchins.org.

Fr. Martin Pable, OFM Cap.
mpable@thecapuchins.org

Reason #1

Community

Why Do We Need a Church Anyway?

One of the more frequently asked questions regarding religion nowadays is “Why do we need a church anyway?” It is not a frivolous question. We live in a postmodern society that questions the necessity and relevance of any institution. Moreover, the attitudes and behaviors of the churches have given added impetus to the cynicism about them. The sexual abuse scandals among the clergy, the heavy-handed use of authority, the pretentiousness of some church buildings, news stories of fiscal mismanagement—all have contributed to the feeling that churches may be a hindrance rather than a doorway to union with God.

It is because of feelings like this that we often hear people say things like: “I’m spiritual but not religious.” “I have a relationship with God (or Jesus), but I don’t go to church.” “I pray to God by myself. I don’t need those boring, repetitious prayers and songs you hear in church.” “I just read the Bible and try to live a good life—I can do that without the church, thank you.” “I find God when I’m walking in the woods or sitting at the lakeshore—that’s my church.”

Devout, church-going people are often at a loss as to how

to respond to these statements—especially when they come from good, sincere, and morally upright people. So let me try to suggest some answers or at least some directions for thinking them through. I will begin with a couple of substantive, theological reflections and then follow with a few pragmatic replies based on human experience.

First, we need to be clear on a key point: What is the goal of religion or spirituality? I think we can agree that it is not simply good feelings or even right living. These may be important, but they are not the ultimate goal. “Begin with the end in mind” is one of Stephen Covey’s *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (Free Press, 2004).

God’s plan is for people to find blessedness, happiness and union with God not merely as individuals but as part of a community.

The “end” of all religion is *union with God and with the human family*. If that is the case, then we need to follow God’s way or plan for spiritual living, not our own. It is clear from the Bible that God’s plan is for people to find blessedness, happiness and union with God not merely as individuals but as part of a community. One of the key concepts in Scripture is that of *covenant*:

“I will be your God, and you will be my people.” The covenant was with the entire community of Israel. God promised to love them and care for them and to be willing to forgive them and take them back even when they proved fickle and unfaithful. It was this unfailing, consistent, unconditional love of God that kept the Israelite community together even when they were besieged by enemies and dragged off into captivity.

Moreover, God gave Moses directives on how the people were to pray and worship God. They were to pray as individuals. But even more, they were expected to join in the worship of the entire community. In that sense, they were truly a church. As far as I know, no one in Old Testament times ever challenged this arrangement. The Israelites would not think of separating themselves from the covenant community. That would be tantamount to spiritual death. Indeed, to be excluded (excommunicated) from the community was the severest form of punishment, short of physical death.



Jesus and Community

The New Testament portrays Jesus as a devout, practicing member of the Jewish community. An early indication of this is found in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus has just returned from his temptations in the desert and is beginning his public ministry. He came to his home town of Nazareth and “went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, *as was his custom*” (Luke 4:16; emphasis mine). From this we can deduce that Jesus was not a spiritual loner or a maverick striking out on an individualistic spiritual quest. No, he was a faithful, practicing member of his Jewish community, deeply inserted into the religious traditions and prayer forms of his people. The words “as was his custom” indicate that Jesus had formed the habit of regular synagogue worship, very likely through the example and training of his devout parents. True, the Gospels often show him praying individually, but they are equally clear about his connection with regular synagogue worship and observance of the traditional Jewish religious feasts. (As I sometimes tell

people, if going to church was important for Jesus, it's good enough for me!)

As Jesus began to collect his disciples, he worked hard to form them into a community. Being human, they each had their petty agendas and ambitions that threatened their cohesiveness. So he continually had to challenge their jockeying for favoritism and privilege (Mark 9:33-37; Matthew 20:20-28). He asked them to renounce all forms of domination and to think of themselves as servants of others (Luke 22:24-27; John 13:12-17). The night before he died, Jesus begged his Father to bring all believers into unity and to end the divisions in the human family (John 17:20-23). Then he instituted the great sacrament of unity, the Holy Eucharist, to be both the sign and the cause of unity among the members of the church. He called it "the new covenant." But it is the same wonderful promise: "I am your God, and you are my beloved people."

After his death and resurrection, Jesus continued to instruct his disciples and help them understand their mission: to continue what he had begun. Just before his ascension, he "commissioned" them to go out and bring his message into the whole world (Matthew 28:16-20). On Pentecost Sunday, after Peter told the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the people said, "If all this is true, what should we do?" Peter did not say, "Well, just accept Jesus as your personal savior and have a nice day." He said, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ, so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). Note the elements here:

- "Repent"—acknowledge that you are a sinner, that you need conversion and change of heart.

There are some disorders in your life that need reordering. This is a far cry from the “cheap grace” we often hear of today: “I’m OK—you’re OK.” Becoming a disciple of Jesus means we have some interior work to do.

- “And be baptized”—this powerful ritual signifies that the new follower of Christ is willing to let go of past ways of thinking and acting and to begin a new life patterned on the life of Jesus. Moreover, it includes the intention to become a member of this Christian community, where everyone is expected to care for one another, not just for themselves (Acts 2:44-45; 4:34-35).
- “You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit”—you will be empowered to use your gifts and talents to help build up the human family into a community of love and care. And you will be given courage to act with confidence even in the face of opposition.

This was the lived experience of those first Christians. There was no individualist spirituality here, no sense of “I don’t need any connection with a church in order to connect with God.” The emphasis was clearly on being bonded with the community, praying together, and caring for one another: “They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

As we read the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Peter, Paul and John, we see this basic pattern of communal spirituality unfolding and becoming ever clearer. Whenever

the apostles succeeded in bringing people to faith in Christ, they would form them into communities. These began to be called “churches,” from the Greek word *ekklesia*, meaning “called out” or “called apart.” The communities saw themselves as separated both from the pagan temples and from the Jewish synagogues. They had a structure. They were presided over by persons variously called elders, presbyters or bishops. Other members exercised diverse ministries such as teacher, evangelist, prophet, healer and caregiver to the poor (Romans 12:4-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-11). A favorite image used by Saint Paul was that of the church as “the body of Christ.” Each and every member of the body was important, even though they had different functions or roles. Together they formed an organic unity with Christ as the head. In such a view, there was no room for jealousy, for arrogance, for competitiveness,

The church is so significant that Jesus died on the cross for it.

or for sniping at one another. All these create divisions in the body (1 Corinthians 1:10-13; Philippians 2:1-4).

I recently read *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Zondervan, 2002), the fine book by Protestant pastor Rick Warren. In it he devotes the whole of chapter seventeen to the importance of Christians belonging to a church community. The chapter begins, “You are called to belong, not just believe.” This is in sharp contrast with the contemporary phenomenon of “believing without belonging” noted by researcher George Gallup. Warren draws heavily upon the Scriptures to demonstrate that God’s plan for our salvation includes belonging to a church. “Membership in the family of God is neither inconsequential nor something to be casually

ignored,” he writes. “The church is God’s agenda for the world. Jesus said, ‘I will build my church, and all the powers of hell will not conquer it’ (Matthew 16:18). The church is so significant that Jesus died on the cross for it: ‘Christ loved the church and gave his life for it’ (Ephesians 5:25). The Bible calls the church ‘the bride of Christ’ and ‘the body of Christ.’ I can’t imagine saying to Jesus, ‘I love you, but I dislike your wife.’ Or ‘I accept you, but I reject your body.’”

Warren then goes on to offer some biblically-based “compelling reasons” for being committed and active in a local church community: A church family moves us out of self-centered isolation. The body of Christ needs us and our gifts. We will share in Christ’s mission in the world. A church family will keep us from backsliding. He concludes: “Why is it important to join a local church family? Because it proves you are committed to your spiritual brothers and sisters in reality, not just in theory. God wants you to love *real* people, not *ideal* people. You can spend a lifetime searching for the perfect church, but you will never find it. You are called to love imperfect sinners, just as God does.”



Church and Human Experience

So why do we need a church? Primarily because that is God’s design for spiritual living. And we, being human creatures, are called to follow God’s design, not create our own. Of course, if one does not accept the authority of the Bible or of Christian history, that logic will not be persuasive. So let’s look at the question from another perspective: human experience. That may enable us to reply to some of the objections

to church affiliation that we raised at the beginning of this book.

For example, “I’m spiritual but not religious” has become a slogan for many today. I think I understand what they are trying to say: “I believe there is a God, and I pray and try to live a good life. But I don’t believe you have to go to church, practice religious rituals, or obey a bunch of rules in order to be a spiritual person.” That is surely not an unreasonable attitude, especially when the speaker is leading a morally upright life. At the same time, I believe the distinction between “spiritual” and “religious” creates a needless dichotomy. The Latin root of the word religion literally means “to bind together.” Religion at its best has the power to forge bonds between the individual and God and between the individual and other persons. It can bind the human community together in worship of the Supreme Being, and it can link them together in mutual love, respect and care. That is a powerful force for good.

My concern for people who hold this view is that they are missing out on much that can help them to live spiritually. They have no sense of tradition, no historical memory of a community that has lived through generations of struggle and victory, of sin and repentance, of cowardice and heroism, and of joy and sorrow. George Gallup describes them as “spiritual loners.” They have no shared vision of meaning and purpose for living or for dealing with the tragedies and absurdities of life. And apart from their circle of friends, they have no community of faith and prayer to support them through their times of loss and pain.

Another objection to church affiliation is “I just read the Bible and try to live a good life. I can do that without the

church.” True enough, at least in theory. But people like this will be missing the same spiritual supports as were noted above. Have you ever tried to embark on a regular physical exercise program by yourself? Or a weight loss program? Or a daily practice of yoga or meditation? After a good start, most of us find ourselves slipping away—unless we have a companion or two who will pull us along and remotivate us when our own resolve starts to lag.

It is much the same in the spiritual life. When we want to deepen our relationship with God, come to know the Bible better, or commit ourselves to a work of mercy, it is far easier to stick with it if we have the support of other like-minded people. That is the gift of a church community. Each week we gather to hear the Word of God proclaimed and its message applied to our own concerns and struggles. We offer prayers and sing hymns that remind us of timeless truths that can so easily be forgotten in the bustle of daily life. We receive spiritual strength and nourishment from the living body and blood of Christ in the Holy Eucharist, because we know we cannot rely on our own resources alone. We find out how our fellow Christians are doing, and we know we can ask their prayers if we are going through a tough time. And during the week, in most parish communities, there are opportunities for study, for shared prayer and fellowship, and for service to others.

All these are, I believe, weighty reasons for wanting to be part of a church community, which is why Jesus, in his great wisdom, founded a church to continue his work of redeeming and sanctifying our world. It strikes me that movements such as Alcoholics Anonymous and their derivatives have recognized the healing and sustaining power of group member-

ship. Interestingly, psychologist Martin Seligman links the rise of depression in our time to the rise of individualism and the erosion of community support systems in the culture. In our contemporary world where so many people are suffering from loneliness and isolation, a caring, vibrant church community can truly be a light in the darkness.



Problems with Church

I have tried to address an important question that thoughtful people today are raising: “Why do we need a church in order to live spiritually? Why can’t I do it on my own?” I began by pointing out the priority of viewing the question from God’s side rather than from our own. That is: What is God’s plan or design for our spiritual well-being? And I replied with the biblical testimony: God desires to be sought-found-worshipped-served in the context of community. I made the further point that this arrangement corresponds remarkably well with our human nature. We are “hardwired” for connection with one another. We are born into a human community (the family) and nurtured there. We seek friendships and even intimate relationships with one another. One of our deepest sufferings arises from the feeling of being alone and abandoned. It would be strange indeed if our spiritual life—that which is most human about us—would follow some other dynamic: individualism. No, our quest for God is intimately bound up with our human relationships, which is why Jesus founded a church. It is there that we are to pursue our own spiritual development and at the same time contribute to the strengthening of the human family according to God’s purposes.

It is, however, no secret that a large number of people have walked away from the church or have no desire to connect with it. Part of the problem is that the church often falls far short of what Christ intended it to be. History is strewn with the church's failures. Popes and bishops have too often acted more like secular princes than as servants of Jesus Christ. A host of evils can be paraded before our eyes: the persecution of Jews, the forced conversion of native peoples during colonial times, the abuses and excesses of the Inquisition, and the violent reaction to Martin Luther and the other Protestant reformers. In our own time, we have seen the terrible scandals and cover-ups discovered by the recent revelations of clergy sexual abuse, the censorship of theologians and biblical scholars, and the refusal of bishops and pastors to dialogue with laypeople about pastoral concerns.

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It is not an unfair question to ask: "Why should anyone want to join the Catholic Church—or remain in it?" It is not my intention in this book to "recruit" people for the church. As I stated in the Preface, I simply want to lift up some of the aspects of Catholic life that people may not understand very well or may have forgotten. First, let me remind readers that they already belong to or are part of many institutions that are flawed. As a psychologist, for example, I am acutely aware of the violations of ethical standards by some practitioners. Also, there are major divisions within the profession over various theories of human behavior, the effectiveness of psy-

chotherapy, the use of mind-altering drugs, and so on. 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 unions or corporations are well aware of the inequities, the infighting, the clash of egos, and other unsavory aspects of the organization. But they stay with it because, overall, they find

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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.

Why should it be any different with the church? Perhaps 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 the 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 is Pope John Paul II'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 in the church: "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 has 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 of the church, including its 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 memorable moments, proclaimed the church to be “holy yet always in need of reform.” The church is neither totally perfect nor wholly corrupt. To use a popular expression, it is “a mixed bag.” Some Catholics have great difficulty accepting this truth. If they could accept the tension between these two poles, they would be more at peace with the church.

The other day 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 disillusion 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 com-

forting. From the very beginning, Jesus knew his church would be entrusted into fragile hands.

Didn't things change after Pentecost, however, when the Holy Spirit's gifts were poured out on the community? Yes—but not in the sense of creating a perfect church. The human element remained. That is why we find statements like “the Hellenists [Greek-speaking Christians] complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food” (Acts 6:1). In other words, there was favoritism going on, and people were complaining. But instead of letting the situation deteriorate, the apostles used the occasion to create a new ministry in the community. They chose and ordained seven deacons to take charge of distributing food to the needy. Later on we read that some church leaders began demanding that the new Gentile converts be circumcised. But “Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them” (Acts 15:1-2). Once again, instead of allowing the dispute to fester and cause division, the community agreed to meet together to discuss the issue in the spirit of prayer and invocation of the Holy Spirit. Together they found a pastoral solution that everyone could agree on. Even Peter and Paul had arguments with each other (Galatians 2:11-14), but they worked it out. Neither one ever walked away from the community.

As time went on, the Christian church had to deal with disputes and disagreements in every period of history. For the first three centuries of its existence, there was not even agreement on which writings belonged in the Bible. That finally got settled at the Council of Rome in 392. Indeed, nearly all the statements in the creed we profess at Mass each Sunday are the fruit of ecumenical councils that were called to settle

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.



Why Do We Stay?

With this history of disagreement, we should not be surprised to find factions, disputes and scandals in today’s Catholic Church. My Protestant friends have assured me that the situation is similar in their churches.

They remain committed, however, because they find so much that is good in their communities. Sometimes I ask my Catholic lay friends, “What keeps *you* in this messy church?” Their answers have been very instructive.

Some speak of the high quality of the Sunday liturgy at their parish. People are greeted warmly at the

door. The priest goes out of his way to extend a welcome to everyone, including visitors. He truly prays the great texts of the Mass in a way that draws the people into prayer. 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 life experience. After Mass, people don’t rush out

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and practically run each other down in the parking lot. They stay to mingle with each other and talk about how their lives are going. Not every Sunday liturgy is such a spiritual rush,

Generally people leave [Mass] with a sense that Christ is truly present to them in the everyday aspects of their lives.

but, generally, people leave with a sense that Christ is truly present to them in the everyday aspects of their lives.

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 on difficult issues, such as abortion, capital punishment, and unjust warfare. They may not agree with everything he says, but they respect him as a prophetic voice in a world obsessed with consumption and exploitation of the powerless.

Still others are attracted by the educational and charitable missions of the church. Whatever theological or pastoral differences they may have, many admire the church for its 2000 years of 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. Going beyond admiration, an increasing number of Catholics are willing to become personally involved in continuing the church's mission. I am always in awe when I visit parishes and see how many people

are giving their time and energy as council and committee members, liturgical ministers, catechists, visitors to the sick and homebound, jail and prison ministers, youth ministers, and volunteers in food programs, shelters and missions to poor people in this country and abroad. 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.

I receive many other replies to my question, "What keeps you in the Catholic Church?" Some are inspired by the church's patronage of the arts. They are awed by the great Byzantine basilicas with their wonderful mosaics and icons depicting the mysteries of faith and the saints who embodied them, or the majestic cathedrals of Europe with their magnificent stained-glass windows that served for centuries as visual catechisms for people who could not read, or the enormous repertoire of music inspired by the Bible or the liturgy. Even as I am writing this, the radio in my room is playing Hector Berlioz's beautiful *Requiem*. And how many of the world's great paintings are based on scenes from the life of Jesus, Mary, Old Testament figures, and lives of the saints?

Finally, people tell me things like: "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 naive. They know very well that the

Catholic Church is a body with many 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.”