

Ecclesial faith calls us to better our Church, not leave it

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JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS

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The curse of faith! A French theologian, name long forgotten, used this phrase repeatedly in a course on ecclesiology I once took at Fordham University. By faith he did not mean faith in God. He meant faith in the Catholic Church. A good Catholic, he said, always has one foot in and one foot out!

In our holiness journeys each of us Catholics has to come to terms with this Church of ours. This is the month when

we celebrate our saints, but we are very aware of scoundrels in our midst and in our Church history. And if not scoundrels, then leaders who are less than proficient, insightful, or humane and Church policies and practices that sometimes seem barriers to spiritual advancement rather than paths to it. We want to curse! We feel like the disciples who at one point say to Jesus, where else can we go? Is there another choice?

Many people do make other choices. Witnessing that is a great sadness for anyone who ministers in the Church and also for many of us who have children and siblings no longer “practicing” the faith.

Belonging to a Church means that somehow we are able to find in it the soul nourishment we need. And to do that, we need ecclesial faith. Ecclesial faith is a special kind of faith. It is a special grace that when accepted, helps us find God within the Church, despite everything. Ecclesial faith is more than private faith in God or afterlife. It

is a profound acceptance of the incarnation of Christ into the human condition and into human history. Ecclesial faith understands that the Trinity pours itself out through Christ into flawed and limited and fallible people and times. Ecclesial faith understands that this is God’s choice, and that God’s power to speak cannot be silenced by flaws and limits and errors.

And so a person with ecclesial faith does what Jesus himself did. Jesus had great respect for his own religion. He had Peter pay the temple tax. He said he did not come to overturn the Jewish law but to fulfill it. He had a deep and meaningful conversation with Nicodemus, a highly placed churchman. He kept the Passover. But Jesus was forthright in criticizing things that were not right with his religion. He did not leave it, he called it to do better, to become more holy.

There are times when I wish God had not given me the gift of ecclesial faith! It is a grace that has to be accepted again and again, I find. The door is always open, but the Lord is not outside it but inside, in the thick of things, where the messiness of the Church is. For Catholics our journey to holiness is one of walking with the Lord in the midst of this real Church, accepting it and loving it and finding joy in it even as, like Jesus did, we call it to continue grow in holiness.

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