

# Why Go To Church?

When the exercise of religious liberty is not thwarted, Christians construct buildings for divine worship. These visible churches are not simply gathering places but signify and make visible the Church living in this place, the dwelling of God with men reconciled and united in Christ.

-Catechism of the Catholic Church #1180

I am sometimes asked why we should go to church. After all, it is just another building and those preaching the word are just as human as we are. The deep answer is that to have Christianity without both the Ritual and the Philosophical is not Christianity. I will not go into a full explanation of this reality here, but I think the wisdom of this will be made quite clear before I am done.

The proper definition of a "Church" (with a capital "C") is a group of Christians, complete with leadership, assistants and the laity (common practitioners). This very definition, of course, means every denominational, independent and non-denominational group of Christians are members of different Churches.

As an organized group with leaders, assistants and lay persons, there must needs be a place to meet, and this meeting place need not be a building that is specifically made for worship. We see in the Acts of the Apostles, and even in some of the Letters, that early Christians often met in private residences for worship. This place of worship need not even be a building, as early Christians in Rome are famous for worshipping in the catacombs to escape persecution. But regardless of where such meetings take place, there still needs to be a place to worship.

All that being said, a Church is the people, not the building. This, however, does not mean that we can use this conclusion as a pretext to discredit organized religion. Nowhere will you see Jesus condemning the organized worship of His fellow Jews (it was the hypocrisy of the leaders, not the institutions, that Jesus criticized). We see in the Acts of the Apostles and in almost all the Letters how the Apostles were organizing worship. Saint Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus, for example, are instructions to the Bishops of two Churches that Saint Paul had established in his journeys.

But this is more than just a case of historical precedent. There is a very dangerous idea here that is present but left unsaid. This is the idea that a church (with lower case "c") is just another building. This is the mistake of assuming that, if several things have some similarities then they must be essentially the same. A building is a structure with a roof and walls that are designed to protect what is inside. In this sense, a church is no different than, say, a barn or a warehouse. Indeed, if one took out the pews and the altar, one could certainly use my church to store goods or animals (although I don't think it would be either an efficient or cost effective means of doing so).

But a church is not just any building any more than a barn or a warehouse. It is a particular building with particular aspects to it. I don't expect to find a man who dedicated his whole life to following the cross in a barn, warehouse, office building, grocery store, or anywhere else but a church. Perhaps I may find such a man in these other buildings, but it would be by happenstance, not by design. Likewise, I don't expect to find scripture often and freely quoted in any building other than a church. Jesus promised that whenever two or three met in His name, He would be there. I don't expect to find a group of people that got together specifically to find Jesus in any building other than a church. Again, perhaps I may find these things by coincidence, but not by design.

A Christian should go to a church because one can expect to find Jesus there. If one does not find Jesus in a church, one should ask oneself why not? Does the priest/minister/preacher not keep his promise to follow the cross? Is scripture being perverted? Are the songs and prayers failing to give proper glory to God? These are good reasons to find another church, but they certainly don't suggest giving up on organized worship. Does one need to change one's own opinions on what Christianity really is? If so, then not going to church is the worst thing one can do. In any case, it is the man that might profane the church, not the other way around.

And finally, one goes to church to learn faith. Faith is, after all, not something man can discover on his own, but must be taught. No one can believe in something one does not know about. Even after faith is taught, a healthy church life is essential to help the faith grow. As Saint Paul tells us: "If I speak in human and angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy and comprehend all mysteries and all knowledge; *if I have all faith so as to move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing.* If I give away everything I own, and if I hand my body over so that I may boast but do not have love, I gain nothing." (1 Corinthians 13:1-3, italics mine) The reason should be obvious. God is Love, and Love is a unifying force. One cannot grow in Love through separation. One cannot grow closer to God by avoiding His people. One cannot find God by avoiding where He is.

There are, of course, those who are, through no fault of their own, unable to go to church. But for one to think one does not need church to be a Christian is exhibiting a fatal form of pride. To be cut off from like-minded people is weakness, not strength. To avoid the one place Jesus promised to always be is not a means of finding Jesus. To reject the fellowship of others is not the way of Love, it is the way of Indifference.

Raymond Mulholland  
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