

To Love the Church

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Sometimes it's difficult to love the Roman Catholic Church. With her seemingly never-ending sexual and financial scandals, we not only can become disheartened by and cynical about the Church's present state; we can also become angry at her apparent inability to reform. But there's a deeper reason for concern. **Many Catholics today give the impression that they do not love the Church, not because of her sinful members, but because they do not like the Church as she has traditionally been.**

They find her doctrines antiquated – dead dogmas from the past, whose suffocating presence stifles authentic renewal. Likewise, they find the Church's traditional moral teaching – especially concerning marriage and sexuality – rigid, merciless laws and inflexible canons that do not allow people to be “who they truly are.”

Such laws, they believe, shackle men's and women's freedom, and their inherent right to choose what is best for them. To them, the Church's moral tenets simply foster a guilt-ridden, unhappy life. Such a Church cannot be loved. To be loved, they believe, the Church must change at the deepest levels of her being. And those who are awake in the Spirit are called to use their political and financial might to ensure that such change is enacted.

When praying in the derelict church of San Damiano, St. Francis of Assisi heard the crucified Jesus speak to him: “Francis, go, repair my house which, as you see, is falling into ruins.” Francis, in his simple innocence, began to pick up stones and rebuild this church and others. Only later did he realize that it was the Church itself, the Body of Christ, that needed spiritual rebuilding.

So, what did Francis do? Did he set out to change the Church's doctrinal and moral teaching, culminating in the rejection of the Church herself? This is, after all, what some “renewal movements” within the Church of his day were proposing. No. **Francis, as a faithful son of the Church, knew that she could be repaired**

only if the life-giving truth of her doctrines once more became the stones upon which she is built. Thus, Francis, in word and deed, brought to life within the Church these mysteries of faith.

The Incarnation was the foundational doctrine of his preaching. The Son of God actually came to exist as man within the womb of Mary. He became poor in our humanity so that we might become rich in his divinity. And what better way to manifest this awesome truth than to enact it? And so he did. He re-enacted the manger scene in the hill-town of Greccio. Surrounded by sheep, cows, and donkeys, the Incarnation came alive. For the infant Jesus, the son of Mary and the eternal Son of the Father, is said to have appeared in Francis's arms.

Peoples' lives were transformed. They heeded the call to repentance of sin and to faith in their Savior. Once more they became living stones in Christ's Church.



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If the Incarnation was foundational to Francis's enterprise of rebuilding the Church, his love for Jesus crucified became the capstone. On the Cross, the poor Jesus offered up his holy and sinless life for the forgiveness of sin, and so merited his glorious resurrection. In this twofold act, Jesus, through the blood and water that poured forth from his pierced side, gave birth to his holy and pure bride – the Church.

Francis, for the sake of this same bride, the same Church, laid down his life, to make her holy once more. The stigmata, the physical marks of nails and spear, is not simply a sign that Francis was the living likeness of the crucified Jesus, but more so that he, in imitation of Jesus, completely offered up himself for the sake of the Church's renewal. As Christ is the everlasting, loving, crucified-spouse of his Church, so Francis was the loving crucified-spouse of the Church in his day.

While the false claimants of renewal despised the fleshly sacraments, Francis gloried in their materiality. For matter manifested the glory of God: Brother sun and sister moon, brother fire and sister water. **The Eucharist, the most material of all of the sacraments, was Francis's greatest joy.** The bread itself and the wine itself were changed into the risen-flesh and risen-blood of the bodily-risen-Jesus.

Thus, one came into living bodily communion with living bodily-Jesus himself. The poverty of our flesh is enriched by Jesus' risen-flesh – a mutual abiding unto eternal life. For Francis, the Eucharist was not an obsolete doctrine, but the source and summit of the Church's life.

Within the context of these truth-bearing and life-giving doctrines, **Francis would exhort the people of his day to repent of their sins and live holy lives. Francis did not see the Church's moral teaching as rigid decrees that were impossible to keep. Rather, as he experienced in his own life, Francis knew that believing in the Lord Jesus and keeping his commandments, as professed by the Church, leads to Spirit-filled freedom, holiness, and happiness.**

Francis recognized, **in the light of his youthful folly, that to argue that the Church's moral teaching must change is to**

offer the world death – a life of torment here on earth and everlasting agony in Hell. Francis, in his sacrificial love, desired to repair Jesus' Church, to make her a sanctuary of light and life in a world darkened by sin and death.

It's hard to love today's shabby Church. Nonetheless, the words that the crucified Jesus spoke to Francis echo in our ears: "Repair my Church, which, as you see, has fallen into ruins." Francis and all the saints are our examples. **We are not to build a "new church" founded upon the deceitful lies of Satan. Rather, we are to rebuild Jesus' ancient yet ever new Church, a temple built with the living stones of true apostolic doctrine, the mysteries of faith that foster holiness of life.**

To do so is to love the bride of Christ – Jesus' espoused Church.

**Image: Legend of St Francis: 4. Miracle of the Crucifix by Giotto (di Bondone), c. 1297-99 [Basilica of Saint Francis of Assisi, Assisi]. This is part of a cycle of 28 frescoes in the upper church of the basilica. The attribution to Giotto (and/or his workshop) is "presumed." The scene depicted is Francis receiving the Lord's call to "repair my house . . ."*

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