

Homily for the Feast of Corpus Christi (C), June 6th, 2010, St. Ignatius Church
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At a time of great upset in the Catholic Church we should think about why we stay. Jesus once asked Peter if he too would join the crowd leaving him. Remember Peter's response: "Where would we go? For you have the words of eternal life." That doesn't mean that we have the only way to holiness and salvation. But we have immense spiritual riches in the Catholic tradition. We should review good reasons why we remain Catholic.

Not because it's the oldest Christian church. The Orthodox, Syriac, and the Coptic churches are equally apostolic. Not because it is an infallible guide that never makes mistakes. Pope John Paul led the Church in an official repentance of historic mistakes, notably the persecution of Jews and heretics.

Why do we stay? Not just because one is born Catholic, although a person seeking faith or sense to life should explore his or her own religious heritage before adopting another. For instance, the marvels of nature become a substitute for some, and although wonder at creation can indeed bring one close to God, the ocean waves will not wash your sins away, nor will a tree suddenly say, "With an everlasting love have I loved you".

We do not stay because of Matthew 16, Jesus to Peter the rock. Scholars now put this passage in a different context, and see it as a source of stability, not infallibility. We do not stay Catholic, or should not, for fear of hell if we do not follow every Church ruling. The Church needs to be loved, not feared. We are here right now, not from fear but because it is the right thing to do – to worship God.

And now, positive reasons to remain Catholic, or become one. The Church has a great sacramental tradition, and an enduring form of worship. The Mass is indeed everywhere, everyday, across the world. Jesus said, with the bread and wine in his hands, “Do this, to remember me”. No command was ever more fully carried out.

And the church communicates the Real Presence – we celebrate today that presence with the title, Corpus Christi, body of Christ. And give three meanings to that: holy communion, the Blessed Sacrament, and you. You, and me. We are the baptized members of his body.

The Catholic Church has a great mystical tradition, and many forms of prayer. The liturgy, what we are doing right now, is the best of all forms of prayer. But devotions are important and beloved, especially devotion to Mary and to the Blessed Sacrament.

The Church *does* allow doubt, and creative dissent. A stronger faith emerges. That may surprise you because Rome often makes it difficult for its progressive thinkers. The greatest of them, Karl Rahner, said, “We must rethink our doctrines in the context of the world we live in.” An obvious example is how we understand the story of Creation and the Fall. And the need to abandon teachings like limbo – which we did a few years ago. Karl Rahner was never silenced because he was too deep for many in Rome to understand. The same is true of my own teacher, Raimundo Panikkar. But they did silence theologians like Yves Congar and Teilhard de Chardin. And then, with Vatican II, made them heroes and recognized their pioneer work. Rahner has said that our great weakness as Catholics is not gaining an adult understanding of our religion.

The Church can bring you to know Jesus, the Christ, and urges us to be like St. Paul, who said “I live now, no, not I but Christ in me.” Listen to this comment by one of the theologians I just

mentioned, Yves Congar. When asked why he did not leave the Church when they treated him so badly, he said, “I would not know Him without her.”

The Catholic Church, which is everywhere, is not indifferent to great social problems. Indeed it is heroically involved in them. The Jesuits in the last half-century have had 43 martyrs in Latin America and the Near East. The New York Times columnist, Nicholas Kristof, wrote recently, “The Catholic Church I know and love are the nuns and priests who are working heroically in Africa.” My own favorite are the Maryknolls in Kenya, where they took over ministry, especially education, in the country’s largest slum of 100,000 people. Besides education, like Jesus today they feed the hungry. Many Catholics don’t even know that Catholic World Relief is the second largest relief organization in the world.

The Church has a great sacramental tradition, which invites you to participate in the great mysteries of God through signs like bread and wine. Bread that is broken, as his body was broken. Wine poured out, as his life was poured out. Bread that gives life. Wine, that toasts Christ’s victory.

The Church has a biblical tradition, joining at last the Protestants. It is right to warn that the Bible must be taught – it is not a simple narrative. The best definition I know came from a bishop: the Bible is the story of a people seeking to understand God. We have great scholars who help us in that understanding.

Stay Catholic to reform the Church. That’s going on right now. The days of heteronomy are over. We have an educated laity, and women quite capable of any position, including the priesthood. Vatican II said, the Church is really the people and its governance should be what is called collegiality.

Once again, stay Catholic – indeed, rejoice in being Catholic - because of the Eucharist. Now we pray the Mass together, offering the sacrifice in Christ and then receiving him. And what then? Look at the gospel today. He feeds the hungry. We who are, or become, Christ are called to do the same. Long before this gospel the prophet Jeremiah wrote words that foretell what we do right now, and even speak of the Real Presence, how to find God.

Did not your fathers eat and drink
and do justice and righteousness
and then it was well with them.
They judged the cause of the poor and the needy,
and then it was well with them.
Is not this to know me, says the Lord.