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An Open Letter to those who don't go to Church

Dear Fellow Pilgrim:

I greet you as someone who is looking for meaning and happiness, as we all are. I know you're sincere or you wouldn't be reading this letter. Know this first of all: We miss you at church. There's not a Sunday goes by when your absence isn't felt. You're missed. Join us.

Yes, I know this isn't a simple thing. The heart has its reasons, Pascal said. Well the church too has its complexities. Perhaps it is precisely one of these complexities that make it difficult for you to walk regularly through a church door. So I won't try to sugarcoat the church. It is a far-from-perfect expression of God's love and mercy and it is a far-from-perfect expression of God's universal salvific will for everyone. Sometimes the church blocks God's love as much as it reveals it. It has been, and remains, a vehicle both of grace and sin. How do we get past its dark side?

Carlo Carretto, the renowned Italian spiritual writer, in his old age, wrote this Ode to the church:

How much I must criticize you, my church, and yet how much I love you!

You have made me suffer more than anyone and yet I owe more to you than to anyone.

I should like to see you destroyed and yet I need your presence.

You have given me much scandal and yet you alone have made me understand holiness.

Never in this world have I seen anything more compromised, more false, and yet I have never touched anything more pure, more generous or more beautiful.

Countless times I have felt like slamming the door of my soul in your face-and yet, every night, I have prayed that I might die in your sure arms!

No, I cannot be free of you, for I am one with you, even if not completely you.

Then too-where would I go?

To build another church?

But I could not build one without the same defects, for they are my defects. And again, if I were to build another church, it would be my church, not Christ's church.

No, I am old enough. I know better!

That's a mature description of the church, expressing both love and realism. It's an honest description too. The church has a long history, both of grace and of sin and we who make up the church on earth don't do God very well. Nobody does. We need to admit that.

I can only guess at your reasons for not coming to church regularly or for not coming to church at all: Perhaps you have been hurt by the church, by the institution itself or by one of its priests or ministers. Perhaps you have been one of those who have experienced it as callous, as insensitive, as denigrating you in some way. Or perhaps you are intellectually disenchanted with the church, unable to square its claims with your own sane grip on life and its mysteries. Or perhaps you have found what you are looking for elsewhere, outside the doors of the church you attended when you were little. Or perhaps you have just drifted away and don't think about church very much at all. Perhaps you don't feel a need for church in your life. Or, perhaps you are convinced that Jesus and his teachings are in fact tainted by the church, that Jesus never wanted to found a church, but wanted only that people take his teachings to heart and live in love and graciousness. There are many reasons why people don't go to church. I can only guess at yours.

But your reason for not going is not important for this letter. I don't want to defend the church here, make some kind of apologetics for it, or argue against any of the reasons that people give for not coming to church. And I don't want to try to show you reasons why, I think, it is important to go to church. This is not an apologetics, but a plea, an invitation:

Come back! Try us again! Or, if you have never belonged to the church, try us!

Maybe this time you will find life in the church and be able to drink in some of its graces. Maybe this time you will find it in you to forgive the church for its faults, see those faults are your own faults, and see why Jesus picked such an imperfect vehicle to carry on his presence. Maybe this time you will be able to see in the church what Jesus saw in it - an imperfect body made up of men and women like you and me, full of sin, full of ourselves, petty, small-hearted, less-than- sincere, miserly, and tainted, but also full of grace, full of Christ, big-hearted, sincere, generous, and pure, a group of men and women worth dying for - and belonging to. Come be with us!

A fellow pilgrim and a flawed church member.

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