

The Gospel according to St. Matthew notes the following about the members of the church, a haphazard collection of human beings who came to aspire for their inclusion into the Kingdom of Heaven: "Once again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous" (Mt 13:47-50). This is a scary description of the consequences for being a member of a group. Can you imagine being admitted into a club, where membership is not a guarantee for full participation into all activities and, at the last moment a judge will determine your exclusion and unceremonious discard? People accepted into a club want to stay in it regardless of performance. People like the anonymity of gray (neither black, nor white) and a last-minute rejection is hard to accept. Yet, we church members accept these terms unconditionally.

It is conceivable that such harsh terms of cost vs. rewards favor the acceptance of these unpredictable odds. One can trace some vague description of the rewards but the risk of being expelled is not sufficiently defined making the decision about becoming and staying as a member of the Church at best unclear. Yet if membership in the Church indeed does not present a clear, and rational case of risk vs reward solidly favoring church membership why do it?

As we try to tie membership to the Church to the maximizing of the membership benefits, the more complicated the considerations become. From contemporary standards for plans which require clarity of goals, formulations, and accuracy in execution any attempt to become part of the "good fish" before the selection process seems doomed. This is why. How can one plan to be "good" if one is by definition, or perhaps by description mingled with the "bad"? How can any effort to become good not result into a voluntary or involuntary adoption of a Pharisaic attitude with "good personal attributes" (such as philanthropic activities) being touted throughout the Church? If good deeds are not known then the why cannot be used as evidence of goodness. There is a problem with this point of view as we all know what Christ thought about the Pharisee in the tax collector and the Pharisee relevant parable. Such prioritization seems to generate the "bad fish" grouping.

In the Church we find all types of people: saints and sinners, people righteous and reverential to God and to their neighbors, people dedicated to askesis as well as thieves, immoral and dissolute people and criminals. The question is what should be uniting these disparate groups of people? Aim for personal perfection according to societal standards does not answer the question. Personal perfection might be a motivating factor for some at particular points in history. The disparity among church members is too great and too frequent to allow moral perfection a significant role. Most of the reasons I can think of where perfection is tied to motives for Church membership such as improvement of virtues or strict adherence to moral guidelines or even "correcting characters" can be dismissed as the motivating factors for Church membership in our small worlds. No matter how important these tasks might be they become secondary to the main point of being a church member which should be the thirst to have a chance for eternal survival of our person. This possibility justifies membership against unknown odds. It justifies the drive to remain in the Church for unclear reasons or motivations. It is so because the Church is the only gathering where the thirst for life free from corruption and death is announced and clearly articulated. In it all of us, virtuous people and sinners alike, are aware that we suffer from the same disease: we know that we are all subject to death (the great equalizer) and thus we come to terms with the most elemental and shared equality. Our personal struggle revolves around negating death and in the preservation of the mystery of our beings. We know that if we do not accept our chances within the

Church our persons will disappear one day in the ground and our failure will be the end of our existence. It is for that reason that we commune with the Body and Blood of the Lord. In the Church greatest and gravest activity, in the Eucharist we try to retain the chance for life eternal, which presupposes the remission of our sins. These matters of life and death have not much in common with perfection of morality!

We need to be members of the Church because we are driven by the thirst for the fullness of life. Once we identify this as the ultimate motivator, then we begin to feel our way towards the eternity of the repentant man (remember me, Lord, in Your kingdom!). And we seek out our perfection not in laws or mores but in the same weakness that the Lord announced as a constitutive element of God (2 Cor. 12.9). Then the respect for the weaknesses and the acceptance of the imperfection of the neighbor become the foundational conditions for freedom in Christ to bloom, freedom from rational prescriptions and from choices determined from temporary and ultimately irrelevant centers of power. Then and only then freedom becomes fully and totally personal as it originates voluntarily and becomes expansive towards everyone and everything.

In Christ

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