

Refreshing Our Faith 5: Church

Tonight's talk is about Church. Now some people identify "Church" as some institution over in Rome, in a similar way to how we see companies as some impersonal senior management team. We talk about The Phone Company as if it had a life of its own rather than it being a group of real live people making decisions and providing service. In the same way, we sometimes talk about the Church as some impersonal and distant thing, rather than realizing that all God's people make up the Church, not just a select hierarchical few. Certainly companies *are* composed of CEOs and Chairmen and Presidents, just like the Church is composed of the Pope, and Cardinals, and Bishops. But companies are *also* composed of those who do the real work, those who provide the service or who create the good. In the same way, the Church is also composed of those who live the Gospel message in their daily interactions. In today's business language, companies consistently say their core asset is their people. And Vatican II consistently identifies the Church as the laity – that's you and me. Tonight, I want to focus much more on who we are as the people who make up the Church, rather than seeing the Church as some impersonal institution.

I don't know if you've ever heard the story of the man in the Potomac, but it's one of those stories that's had a lasting effect on me because it speaks to a fundamental choice in life: do we choose to live as part of community or to live in isolation.

It was an unusually cold and sleety day in January of 1982, when Air Florida Flight 90 left the runway of Washington National Airport with a bit of undetected ice on its stabilizer. A few minutes later, it refused to climb and plunged into the icy cold of the Potomac River. Before long, a Park Police helicopter arrived at the disaster and found 6 people flailing in the water and clinging to the tail section of the plane. The helicopter lowered a lifeline and flotation ring, and one particular man reached up, let go of his precarious grip of the plane and passed the lifeline to another of the passengers, who was lifted up and ferried away to safety. Again the helicopter came back and the same scene played out. That unidentified man let go of the tail section, reached out from the frigid waters to grab the lifeline, and then passed it on to another person. This happened 5 times, each time he reached up, grabbed the lifeline and gave it to another. Finally, when the helicopter came back the last time, the man could not be found, he had succumbed to the cold and had drowned in the waters.

A *Time Magazine* essay reflected on the man, saying:

"He could never have imagined such a capacity in himself. Only minutes before his character was tested, he was sitting in the ordinary plane among the ordinary passengers, dutifully listening to the stewardess telling him to fasten his seat belt and saying something about the "no smoking sign." So our man relaxed with the others, some of whom would owe their lives to him. Perhaps he started to read, or to doze, or to regret some harsh remark made in the office that morning. Then suddenly he knew that the trip would not be ordinary. Like every other person on that flight, he was *desperate* to live, which makes his final act so stunning.

For at some moment in the water he *must* have realized that he would not live if he continued to hand over the rope and ring to others. He *had* to know it, no matter how gradual the effect of the cold. In his judgment *he had no choice*. When the helicopter took off with what was to be the last survivor, he watched everything in the world move away from him, and he deliberately let it happen.

The odd thing is that we do not even really believe that the man in the water lost his fight.

"Everything in Nature contains all the powers of Nature." said Emerson. Exactly. So the man in the water had his own natural powers. He could not make ice storms, or freeze the water until it froze the blood. But he could hand life over to a stranger, and that is a power of nature too. The man in the water pitted himself against an implacable, impersonal enemy, he fought it with charity, and he held it to a standoff. He was the best we can do."

Who are we as a people? What fundamental choices do we make about how we behave? Are we a mismatched collection of individuals, each trying to do our own thing in this world to achieve success, or are we something more? Does our life only have meaning in and through our relationship with others? Are we somehow greater than the sum of our parts?

Tonight's talk will explore Christianity's fervent and definite answer to these questions – we *are* all bound together here on earth and in the ever after. We are the People of God. We are community. We are Church. And when we achieve our potential, we *are* the Body of Christ.

I read an article in the magazine *New Scientist* on Quantum Computing in which the author had a great way of articulating how he was addressing the topic. He said he “would strain to grasp an idea with an imprecise metaphor, only to discard it for another with a tighter fit, closing in on an airy notion from several directions, triangulating on approximate truth.” That's what I'll do tonight. Another way of putting it is that I'll circle around this topic 4 times, slowly tightening the circle, but never closing it – because like most things of faith, the Church is ultimately a mystery. So, my 4 tightening circles will consist of exploring Church through the perspective of our existential situation, then briefly through Church history, then more deeply through what are called the Marks of the Church, and finally through different Models of Church.

So, first circling in from our existential situation. I worked on this talk in a college library where I could hunker down and plow through a slew of books and notes. As I was working, I was struck by the fact that everyone who walked past me, and everyone who was working near me, was wearing headphones – myself included. We all deliberately sought to block out any intrusion into our world.

Our modern world is increasingly tilting towards individualism, and with it, isolation. We “time shift” our TV experience with TiVo so that we can watch whatever we want to watch whenever we want to watch it. We create home theaters so that we don't have to travel to public movie theaters. We turn our cars into their own luxurious habitats, so that we can roll up the windows and separate ourselves from the bedlam outside. We do our gift shopping on the internet in order to save time, but also to save the hassle of lines at the store. The power of the individual has grown to a point where many of us have lost our sense of dependence upon and our sense of obligation to others. Humans today are more crowded and at the same time more isolated than ever.

We all also seek to control our world. Our world is exploding with technological advances that give us the impression that we are in control. We use caller ID to determine whether we pick up the phone or not. We control the climate in our homes and we determine when to shut off the lights, to call an end to our day. While technology can help us control more, it allows more to intrude upon us. There's increasingly little separation between work and home since we can work from home. The TV, radio and movies all allow the external world to force themselves into our world, whether we want it to or not. I've mentioned in a previous talk how the often prurient and violent nature of movies and TV has a real effect of desensitization upon all of us. Technology also allows us to drive deep into things, specializing but rarely synthesizing. Today we stand on the brink of man becoming the creator and designer of man, of the integration of computer chips into the human body, and of the blurring of the lines between what is human life and what is not. Humans are more controlling and at the same time are less in control than ever.

All this technology is accelerating the pace of change in our world. The world we were born into was different both technically and philosophically from the one we are in today. Increasing industrialization and urbanization are bringing about social issues that were only considered nuisances yesterday. Increasing globalization allows us to positively impact the world as never before, but it also leaves us vulnerable to fears never before imagined. The pace of change increases the gap between generations and between the rich and the poor, not only in our country, but in the

world. Our daily lives are filled with predictable regularity and at the same time they are changing faster than ever.

And at the middle of all this conflict, stands each of us. Caught between the unparalleled opportunities that today's world brings us and the unparalleled challenges it weighs down upon us. We feel ourselves divided: sometimes doing the very things we hate and at the same time, not doing the very things we want. All our advancements have brought us to face the same challenges that have always challenged humans: Who are we as a people? What is our purpose? With all that we have been given, how can we make a positive impact on this world? How do we hand our children a better world than the one we received?

And we suddenly find ourselves knocking on the door of tonight's topic: who are we as God's people, the Church?

I'd like you to think back on the image of the Trinity which I presented in the talk on God: where the central image of the Trinity is a God in relationship – a God who is Love – and as a result is not one person, but three: lover, beloved and the love between them. We have been created in the image of God, and as such are only complete when we are in relationship. Whether it's because of us letting God's Word into our lives or simply as part of our human nature, occasionally we look to shake off our individualism, our desire to control, and the overwhelming pace of change in the world, and we instead seek to enter into relationship with others. Into our world come the suppressed desires to be part of something larger, to live in relationship with a world that's bigger than just our individual selves, with the acknowledgement that by entering into relationship, our world gets a bit messier and less controllable, life gets more unpredictable because others are making decisions that affect us, and that unpredictability means life changes more often than we might like. Yet, despite all of this we realize that whether we like it or not, we are essentially relation-seeking people, we find our meaning in and through others, even if we try to limit exactly who those others are.

And once we let the true nature of who we are created to be break through, we need to acknowledge that we're not called to be in a relationship just with people we know and like, but that we're called to be in relationship with *all* people. We are called to be the community of God's people, His Church.

What is it that we are, when we call ourselves Church? Let's circle around the topic a second time by very briefly looking at how the Church has answered that question in history.

In my presentation on Tradition, I briefly mentioned the Council of Jerusalem in the year 49. At that first formal gathering of the leaders of the Church, Peter, Paul, and the other apostles debated and determined that the Church was for all people, not just Jews. This shattered the Biblical covenant of old, radically shifted the focus of the Church from just the Jewish people to the Gentiles and their thought systems, and recognized that Jesus brings forth a *new* covenant where *all* people are God's people. A huge shift in perspective and style ensued. The movement of the Church into the Western world brought about unforeseen emphases and insights. For almost 2000 years, the Church increasingly became defined by a Western mindset that valued the truth in philosophical packaging over the Middle Eastern love of parables and over the variety of literary styles found in the Scriptures. This mindset allowed great clarity of thought to be expressed and wonderful systems of belief to be beautifully articulated. Sometimes, the Church identified herself with these thought structures even more than she identified herself with God's people.

At the Second Vatican Council in 1965, a second huge shift in perspective and style occurred. For the first time in its 2000 year history, the Church was becoming a world Church, not a missionary European Church. Vatican II was the first ecumenical council to include a significant number of non-Westerners, with native-born cardinals from Asia, Africa and Latin America attending. At Vatican II, like at the Council of Jerusalem, the Church shifted from viewing itself as not just for a select few, but for all God's people, focusing not so much on doctrines that kept others out, but on pastoral concerns that brought others in, and seeing its mission to and relationship with the *entire* world and ultimately the salvation of *all* of humankind.

In the documents of Vatican II, we begin to see a shift in point of view, using down to earth language, with a loving concern for Christians and non-Christians alike. It uses encouraging language, not condemnations. Is this new mode of expression a sign that the Church is moving away from defining herself in terms of doctrines and formal membership, and the beginning of a new way of seeing herself as defined by how she relates to the pastoral issues of our day?

I don't mean to scare you with all this. I simply mean to show you that Tradition is indeed alive, dynamically so, in the Church. We are a people in process. The Church is like a living organism yet to be perfected: oriented toward God but not without failure. See, talking about Church is difficult because unlike any of the other topics which I've discussed, it is bound by who we are as humans rather than who God is as God. In other words, it is dynamic, it is growing, and in order to grow, it has to be imperfect. Once something is perfect, it cannot grow any more. And until we are all together in heaven after the Second Coming of Christ, the Church will seek perfection through imperfect people. People created in God's image, but people who are not God.

Let's circle around the topic a third time by focusing on what we call the Marks of the Church, namely, our proclamation each Sunday that "we believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church." The two words in there that might be unclear for you are "catholic" and "apostolic." By "catholic" we mean universal, the same the world round. By "apostolic" we mean tied to the apostles, whose good works enabled the Church to grow. And so most people define apostolic to refer to doing works of charity and love. We are fortunate that most mainline Churches in the East and the West adhere to that creed as well. So the concepts in it are a good grounding for our belief about the Church as a whole. Let's explore each of these characteristics, or what are called "the marks of the Church" in more detail.

The Church has always struggled to deal with the inconsistencies between this statement of belief and the observed reality around us. It doesn't take much effort to see the contradictions all around us – I mean, any of us can see examples where the Church is not one, it is not holy, it is not catholic, and it is not apostolic.

We as a Church are not always one.

Here's a joke I heard on an Evangelical Radio station that exemplifies this.

I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off.

I immediately ran over and said "Stop! Don't do it!"

"Why shouldn't I?" he said.

I said, "Well, there's so much to live for!"

"Like what?"

"Well ... are you religious or atheist?"

"Religious."

"Me too! Are you Christian or Jewish?"

"Christian."

"Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?"

"Protestant."

"Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?"

"Baptist."

"Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?"

"Baptist Church of God."

"Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?"

"Reformed Baptist Church of God."

"Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?"

"Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!"

To which I said, "Die, heretic scum!" and pushed him off.

That joke expresses well the sad fact that there are over 85 major Christian denominations, all separated in belief from one another. That hardly conveys a sense of the Church as one.

The Church is not always holy. The recent scandals in the Catholic Church are only one example of infidelities by people in the Church. There are questions about how aggressively the Church battled against the Nazis. Before that, there were questions about whether the Church supported the forceful conversion of native peoples in the new world. In past talks, I've mentioned examples of how the Church abused power in the Holy Roman Empire. And before that, we hear in Paul's letters about abuses and corruptions in the very churches that were dearest to him. These hardly convey a sense of the Church as holy.

The church is hardly catholic, or universal. There are many religions in this world. And increasingly, it seems, the ranks of the non-religious are growing. According to the Gallup Organization, only 41% of Americans attend Church services regularly. In fact, 47% of Americans don't attend church at all, or at best, rarely. These statistics hardly convey a sense of the Church as catholic.

And finally, the church is hardly apostolic. When I look at my life and the life of the majority of people I see at mass, and compare it to the number of people who actively volunteer in the programs and ministries, I see a gap. Again, Gallup says only 28% of church members as being involved in the ministries of their church. This hardly conveys a sense of the Church as apostolic, or mission-filled.

But maybe the challenge here is not so much the fact that there are discrepancies between what we proclaim and what we are, but rather the need to better understand exactly what it is that we proclaim in the Creed.

The Church is both divine and human. As a human institution, it is by very definition imperfect: it is growing each day toward God, but hasn't gotten there yet. One of the mysteries of the Church's ritual actions, its sacraments, is that in the repetition of an action we begin to *form* ourselves into that which we proclaim ourselves to be. So, if we can understand what it is that we *proclaim* in these 4 marks of the Church – one, holy, catholic, and apostolic – perhaps we can begin to *form* ourselves into them – to become that which we say we are.

How is the Church is One?

Where were you when the Challenger was lost? Where were you when the towers fell? I'd guess you know the answer to both of those questions and hundreds more like them. Why? I mean why do these moments etch themselves in our memories? Why do we care? I didn't know any of the Shuttle astronauts. I didn't know anyone in the towers, maybe you did. I didn't know the man in the waters of the Potomac and he didn't know any of the people he passed the lifeline to. I didn't know any of thousands of other people whose last moments are associated in a deep and abiding way in my heart.

Have you ever heard this story? It happened in Seattle at the Special Olympics. It was time for the finale of the day: The Hundred Yard Dash. There were nine contestants, all of them were physically or mentally disabled. The gun signaled the start of the race and they all started toward the ribbon hanging across the far end of the track.

But as that gun sounded, one of the racers stumbled, fell on the track, and started to cry. Some of the other racers turned their heads back to see him sprawled on the track. Some of them slowed down and stopped. One started back and some of the others followed, giving up on their goal of winning.

People often want to tell this story differently, but the reality is that some contestants continued the race and crossed the finish line, but the few that stopped, helped their fallen competitor to his feet, then they linked their arms and walked together to the finish line.

Let me ask you “Who won the race that day?” The gold medalist or those who stopped running? And which race did they win: the finals of the 100 Yard Dash or the race of life? They say everyone in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on, unstoppable, for ten minutes.

Why is that? Why do we care? What brings us together as a people and bonds us together? I suspect there’s more to us than we are aware of. There’s something about each person’s losses that diminishes me and something about each person’s victories that sustains me – regardless of who they are. With each passing second, I am both less and more than I was the second before.

When we claim that the Church is one, we call to mind that we are all created in God’s image, that we are bound together, somehow, as the People of God. We proclaim that we all hold insights into what it means to be God’s people based on our individual experiences. We proclaim that when we gather as a people due to those insights that our communities have insights into what it means to be God’s people. We proclaim that Christ lives to some extent in each of these communities, in each of the denominations which claim themselves as Christian. Vatican II was careful to clarify the Catholic Church’s view of herself. While the Church has always proclaimed that the *fullness* of God’s truth can be found in the Catholic Church, Vatican II also recognized that other Christian denominations also contain a good amount of Truth, and that the Catholic Church can learn from our separated brothers and sisters.

How is the Church is Holy?

I don’t know if this story will make much sense – it takes place in the realm of the heart, and that’s hard to describe in physical terms. As you go to mass, there’s an opportunity to invest yourself in the ritual actions and take them on as your own. For me, one of those opportunities takes place at the consecration – the point before which we gaze upon bread and wine, and after which we gaze upon body and blood. During that prayer, the priest extends his hand over the bread and wine and makes a sign of the cross, asking the Spirit to turn them into the Body and Blood of Christ. I used to bless myself as the priest blessed the gifts, seeing the priest’s action as calling God’s Spirit upon each of us to become Christ’s body and blood for the world – we are called to remember Christ’s role in our life and called to union with Him.

After a few years of doing this, I became aware of a *greater* union taking place. If God was calling *me* to union with Him in this sacred moment, then He was doing the same with the person sitting next to me, and the person next to them, and so on. In that moment, extending to its height in the reception of communion, we as community become one in the body and blood of Christ, we become one body with many parts. Every time we participate in the celebration of the Eucharist, we celebrate who we are and who we are called to be, brought together in one point of time, one mystical body of Christ. Take a moment during communion to gaze around the church and to realize how in that moment we are indeed a holy communion.

When we claim that the Church is holy, we call to mind the realization that Christ’s Spirit is present in *each* of us, and especially when we gather together as Church. And so, while the Church may be composed 100% of sinners, that Church as a whole is filled with a spirit of holiness which will consistently guide us towards greater and greater holiness.

How is the Church is Catholic?

As I've intimated in other talks, I've had the privileged opportunity to travel all around this awesome world of God's. At 10:30 on one dark Monday night, I arrived by plane in the south eastern Indian city of Madras, or Chennai, to do missionary work. I was supposed to be met by someone who would help me get to my destination – it was kind of like flying into O'Hare but being met by someone who would take me on to Indianapolis. Unfortunately, my hosts never met me and I found myself alone in a foreign country at 2am with nothing but a backpack. Through the extraordinary kindness of an Indian man, I found my way into town and to the door of the Catholic Cathedral of Madras. When Jesus said "knock and the door shall be opened," he must never have tried to wake a bishop at 2 in the morning. So I slept on a bench in the courtyard of the Cathedral that night – sacred cows wandering up to me to see what this oddity was. The next morning, a couple nice priests tried unsuccessfully to get in touch with someone in the Diocese where I was supposed to get to. The notorious Indian phone system lived up to its reputation, as we tried again and again to get a phone line that would work. Ultimately we gave up and it became obvious to me that I would not be able to get in touch with my hosts, and that Madras would be my home for the day. The next morning, I was awakened by one of the priests at the Cathedral, telling me that the Governor of the state had died and that the people were rioting. I guess this guy had been a great movie actor, kind of like Ronald Reagan, he moved on to a successful political career, and the people of Madras were showing their grief by rioting. The riots went on for 3 days, one of which was Christmas.

Alone in a distant land in which only 2% of the population is Christian, with a wildly different culture, stranded from my destination, with no family or friends to celebrate Christmas with, I dragged myself to mass. Even though the mass was in an indiscernible language for me, I found myself gradually brought to peace as I celebrated the moment of God's incarnation with a community that initially consisted of strangers, but soon became family. I gradually realized that we are all tied together as God's children, and no matter where I was, or where I was to be, I could always feel the comfort of God's incarnation in the community of believers around me. From that point on, I was no longer in a foreign land. Instead, it was in me.

When we claim that the Church is catholic, or universal, we call to mind the realization that according to the new covenant instituted by Christ, *all* people are God's people. Again, Vatican II recognized that all are called by God's grace to salvation: Christ redeemed *all* people. So there is a loose communion between everyone created by God, whether they believe in Him or not. There is a tighter communion between people of faith who share a belief that God. And there is an even tighter communion among those who believe in Christ. And finally, there's a tightest communion among those who share the totality of Sacred Tradition.

How is the Church is Apostolic?

People say that there's a rite of passage when a parent dies. For a man, that passage is most pronounced at the death of one's father. There's a realization that you are no longer the son, you are now the father. That feeling is odd and discomfiting. When my father died, there were a thousand little puzzle pieces that shifted inside of me and one by one they fell into new places, asking me to view the world with a responsibility and loneliness that were new and depressingly permanent. Into the midst of this confusion and pain, came a number of simple well wishes in the form of cards and comments from the people of my parish. I'd always been a part of community when I was strong, but finding myself weak and disoriented, there was a reassuring comfort in these simple gestures. See, death affects one's entire family. My family, who had always been support for each other, were all going through the same pain, and while they say misery loves company, misery also loves comfort. My church community provided me that comfort, like an anchor in rough seas. It touched a place deep down inside me that has rooted me into the fabric of community ever since.

When we claim that the Church is apostolic, we recall our ties to the mission of the Apostles. Not only do we have an uninterrupted lineage in leadership that leads back to the Apostles, but we are called to engage in their *mission* to all God's people: Catholics, Christians, monotheists, and atheists.

Some people say the goal of the Church needs to be “We all go together or we don’t go at all.” Namely, our mission is to save all God’s people, not just those we recognize as His. The mission of the Holy Spirit takes place in all aspects of our lives, not just those that are explicitly “churchy.” And thus, the Church’s apostolic mission is not just one for the parish staff, but for all her people in their families, their relationships, and the work that they do to make a living. Mission doesn’t make itself known in grandiose actions but in the simple actions of love that call us out of our own lives and cause us to invest in the life of another. All these things, when done in the spirit of Christ, help bring about God’s plan of salvation.

Finally, let’s circle around the topic of Church a fourth time and focus on different Models of Church, different ways of seeing the Church as a whole.

Pete is a good salesman. He knows that his odds of making a sale are increased if he creates a relationship with the person he’s selling to. He knows that if he can shift the conversation from the *product* he is selling to the *relationship* he is selling, that it is significantly harder for the customer to reject the sale. And so, occasionally he’ll take me out to lunch in order to solidify our relationship – although he’d be much more successful if he took me golfing instead.

And so, one day we headed off to lunch. Our conversation ranged around a number of topics, until it finally latched on to the topic: what do I think of the recent scandals in the Church? See, Pete knows I’m a “good” Catholic, and I know he’s Catholic too, but perhaps not as rigorous in his adherence as me. And I realized that the sales opportunity had shifted – I had become the salesman, and he had become the customer, for the real question was “why do I still stay Catholic, and why should he remain Catholic?”

And the answer is complex, isn’t it? It forces us to recognize the existential issues of individualism, control and change with which I began this talk. It forces us to realize that we are called to be part of a larger whole. But all too painfully it forces us to recognize a fact about that larger whole: that not only can we be sinful as individuals, but that even the most idealistic *collection* of us can be infused with sin as well. It forces us to ask whether anyone or anything can be trusted.

For some of us, we resolve that we can no longer trust anything but ourselves – even though we know we can’t trust ourselves all the time either. But for others of us, it forces us to recognize something much more profound: that we, as the body of Christ, are groaning toward our actualization, but are not yet there. The Church is a community of human beings who are broken until they are made whole in Christ. We are a collection of sinful souls, bonded together in greatness through Christ. We, as a Church are a mystery, good and bad, humble and haughty, all thrown together into one giant goulash. If we truly recognize that we are *all* God’s people, and that we are *all* imperfect, then we must acknowledge that we are all imperfect *even as a Church*, until we live in Christ.

I think the biggest challenge of the Church scandal is the realization of how very very far we are as a community of God’s people from living in Christ. We can all understand that individuals have flaws, but when the institution responsible for shepherding that flock of individuals shows flaws, it’s especially hard to accept.

And so we come to the first model of Church: Church as Institution.

It was once fashionable to think of the Church as a “perfect society” in the sense that it was subordinate to no other and that it lacked nothing required for its own institutional completeness. This model of church is called Church as Institution. The Church identified itself with its externals: its organization, its history, its celebratory styles, its rules. But rightly or wrongly, people in the latter half of the 1900s began to express an increasing disregard for this model of institution, in fact, for all models of institution. And the recent Church scandal only emphasizes that. Let us not forget the long string of imperfections in the history of the Church. These imperfections occur any time the Church looks to itself rather than to Christ for authority in dealing with the things of this world. But these imperfections are blessings, for they remind us that the Church is not its own, but rather it is God’s people. To paraphrase Paul, in our weakness we are made strong.

Now, I’ve been referring to the “Church” as if it were a thing of its own, not the sum of the people it contains, but somehow something *more* than the sum of these parts. This is true. This is a key mystery of the Church. The Church is like a living organism, consisting of many individual parts which come together for the sake of sustaining the larger whole. Paul says we are many parts, but we are all one body.

The model of Church as an institution focuses in on what is *visible* in the Church, what might be called the outer core of the Church. But this visible structure, this outer core, exists to promote and sustain *community*, the inner core of the Church, which brings us to our second model of Church: Church as mystical communion. This inner core, this community, is a *loose* organization based on relationships between people, rather than the tight outer core which focuses on structure. We are bound together by entering into relationship with each other, made one Body by Christ’s redemption of our sinfulness and the ongoing sanctification of the Holy Spirit.

As I intimated before, a couple summers ago, my dad was dying of a cancer of the blood called CLL. Since we knew that it would probably be my dad’s last summer, we kids set up a family vacation in Lake Geneva. One of my sisters was from out of town and while the others of us had grown accepting of my dad’s increasing frailty, she had not yet realized the extent of his weakness. The first full day of our vacation was a Sunday and we set off as a large family to go to Church. It was July and due to his weakened state, my dad had not gone to Church since March, instead I had been bringing him communion weekly. I expected the same today, except that my sister was so insistent and persuasive, that he got himself ready and came with us. Inside I was all excited. I knew the importance of this day: this would be the last day *ever* that we as a family would *ever* be at mass together. I couldn’t wait to get to Church, sit together and revel in the faith that bonds our family in unity. Consequently, I was exceedingly distraught and upset when we found the Church so crowded by the summer vacationers that we couldn’t sit together. We sat in little pods, here and there, scattered throughout the Church, out of eyesight with each other. I was heartbroken. But the grace of God gradually broke through upon me. The Gospel was about the seeds scattered in many different places, some growing and others not. I realized that our family was scattered among the fertile ground of the believing community, and that Church was not about “us” being together, but rather about us being part of a larger whole. We were like yeast in bread, helping a larger whole to grow to its fullness. My family bonds were translated into a sort of mystical bond with those in the Church around me. And not only those in *that* Church, but a realization that I was part of a community of *all* people in *all* Churches on that Sunday. And I realized that I was part of a community that reached across the centuries as well. My separation from my father on the day of his last ever Eucharistic celebration bonded me more closely to him than I could ever have imagined, now that he is gone from this earth. The waning of one life spurred me to a new life in the larger community.

This is an example of the model of Church as “mystical communion,” a bringing together into one body, the Body of Christ, of all God’s people.

Now, I'd guess that when you think of Church as "Mystical Communion" or as the "Body of Christ," that you might think about the sacrament of Eucharist. And you wouldn't be far off if you saw the *Church* as Sacrament, which is our third model. In fact, Vatican II often refers to the Church as the Sacrament of Christ. If you remember some of the aspects of Sacraments that I talked about last time, they use common elements of the world as the vehicles by which God communicates His grace. They are defined by form and matter. And most importantly, they make present that which they symbolize while remaining distinct from it. In the sacrament of Church, common elements (we humans) are used to communicate God's grace. We humans are the matter of the sacrament, people united to each other and to God through aspirations of holiness and mutual love. The form of the sacrament is when we visibly gather to confess our faith in Christ and to celebrate what God has done for us through Christ. When matter (people) takes on form (praise), it takes on meaning and purpose. As a result of this meaning and purpose, the Church makes present that which it symbolizes: Christ in this world. The sacrament of the Church forms us into what we celebrate.

Sacraments are efficacious, meaning they actually achieve that which they symbolize. If we were to see the model of "Church as Sacrament" bringing together the model of the Church as institution, in which God's order is conveyed upon the world, and the model of the Church as mystical communion, in which God's people commune with each other as one. If we were to see the model of Church as Sacrament bringing these two models together, then you might ask, to what purpose does it do so? What difference does it make? Is Church as Sacrament just some pretty gathering of people loving their God?

No. Sacraments are efficacious, in other words, they make a difference. The effect of the sacrament called Church is twofold, leading to two other models of Church

- it is the proclamation of the good, saving news of God in order to ensure that all people may come to know God, and (Church as Herald)
- it is the resultant serving of God's plan through conforming our actions as His people to His will for us. (Church as Servant)

Now that's a whole lot of words, so let me pick it apart a little. The first effect is that people gather to hear and be formed by the Word of God and to reflect on it. We proclaim the Word of God most clearly in our 7 sacraments, especially the Eucharist, but we also reflect it in our daily interactions and lives. We do it explicitly by proclaiming the Scriptures, and we do it implicitly, by giving our lives over as that proclamation of God's word.

This leads right into the second effect: *how* we give our lives over to that proclamation – namely how we serve God in the world. I spent a lot of time at the beginning of this talk discussing the existential dynamics of isolation, lack of control, and change. I talked about how science has catapulted us forward in terms of our understandings of many disciplines in our world. The Church needs to help those disciplines use their gifts for the best possible purposes. The Church needs to serve, to exist for the sake of others, to take out the basin and towel, and serve the world through apostolates like pursuing peace, alleviating poverty, eliminating racism, reconciling the Churches, and bringing Christ to the workplace. The effect of a Sacramental Church is that it becomes not an institution that stands alongside society, but becomes ingrained in that society, guiding it and assisting it in accomplishing good.

Ultimately, then, bringing all these models together, the Church *maintains* itself from age to age through itself as institution. It *lives* in every age as a mystical communion of believers. It brings God's grace into this world when it combines the commonality of us as people, with our celebration together of Christ's presence. As a result of being sacrament, we become formed into what we symbolize and call out boldly to others that which we have become: the Word of God. And by willingly becoming that which we symbolize, we actively engage the world as the hands of God, taking the basin and towel and becoming servants of God's master plan for the world.

Now that we've circled around the topic of Church 4 separate times, each time drawing the circle a little tighter but never closing it, let me conclude with a story that expresses how, when we realize who we are as Church, we add yeast to every activity of our lives, and as a result, help those activities rise to a higher level, to nourish our human condition, and to become the Bread of Life.

Closing Story: either Plane Story or India Story

Once, I was on a business trip and was about to board the plane. Like most people who travel too much, the routine has become a dreary effort. That day I was traveling home from Houston and inclement weather was causing significant delays at O'Hare. Undaunted, the flight attendant announced pre-boarding for United's "special people" – those of us bidden to fly too many miles too many times. You've seen the drill. Like a bunch of rats, we raced for the front of the line, hoping that we could jam our bags in the overhead bins before anyone else could. I was in my favorite spot: in an extra-legroom seat in United's "economy plus" section, next to the window, with a good book to read. We'd leave the gate on time, and then we'd probably sit for an hour or so waiting for the weather in Chicago to clear.

I sought my isolation from the rest of the human world. Isolation from all, that is, except my family. I took out the flip file that my loving wife populated with pictures of my loved ones. My heart yearned to be with them. I hate travel. I only wanted to be home. It's too lonely on the road. Too distant. I gazed at the pictures of my children and my wife. Home is where I wanted to be. Someplace where people loved me. Someplace where I didn't have to put on airs. Someplace where I didn't have to network with others and where the bottom line was not marked out in the red and black of the balance sheet but in the blue and brown of loving eyes. A presence began welling up inside of me. The pictures were becoming symbolic. They were making present that which they represented. The love of my children, the love of my wife, and my love for them were all alive in my heart. Love was living inside of me. They were with me. I could taste the sweet communion of that love. I feasted on their love. It would nourish and sustain me on the long ride home.

As the plane filled up, a young girl, probably 9 or 10, sat down next to me, in the middle seat, all alone. She was without parent or chaperone, probably going to meet someone in Chicago. Typically I would have said "hi" to her, smiled, and then ignored her returning to the quiet seclusion of my book and my thoughts for the rest of the flight. But God's grace was gnawing away at me, and somehow I was compelled to break out of my introverted isolation and realized that I have a relationship with her (I have a relationship with all God's people, and it's my choice as to whether I let them into my heart or not). I offered her my coveted seat on this full plane so that she could enjoy the view, and so that I could enjoy the center seat.

It's a tiny act that's hardly worth mentioning, except for one fact. The love I *felt* in my heart caused me to *act* in the world. It fundamentally changed my posture before God and before His people. It did not fade like a shooting star, it burned brighter with each encounter of His grace, like the swallowing of the host and the tingling of the wine. For this one tiny instant, God reoriented the compass inside of me. For this instant, I was no longer mine, I was His. For this moment, strangers were not strangers, they were my purpose in life. You might even say they were Christ.

And so on yet another work day, I commute home, rush hour and all. On a good day it's 40 minutes, on a bad day it's 60. With every merge of traffic I need to make a choice. Will I let them in or not?

And so we all are struck with staccato rain drops, falling from the sky, God's grace raining down on us. Each drop forces a decision: are we created in God's image or not? Are we God's people? What do we think of when we say we are Church? And who else is a member of that Church? And what difference does our answer make in our lives?

Fundamentally, our whole conversation on Church comes down to a single question: "Do we let them in or not?"

Will we accept that life is only lived when we live in relationship, in the tiny actions of ordinary days.

Where will we act, where will we act, where will we act...

OR

India is a startling country full of both hope and despair. When you travel through Europe or Singapore or Hong Kong, things are very modern, leveraging technology to improve infrastructure such as buildings, roads, and power grids. But India struggles with how to allocate its money. There are just so many people, and it's a country that's built upon rural ideals (its flag is centered around a spinning wheel for making cloth) and a history that divides people between haves and have-nots. The cities are crowded and dusty, and the countryside is poor and polluted. One day in India, I took a 300 km trip from Delhi to Agra to see the Taj Mahal. We drove about 200 kms through smoke, which blanketed the countryside in a thick smog. In February it gets chilly at night, and people burn leaves and wood and anything else they can find in order to keep warm. Electricity is rare in the countryside, as is running water. People live in very modest structures, and use donkeys, horses, water buffaloes, and even camels, to get things from one place to another. Next to busses and cars, caravans of camels, in groups of 3 or 4, pulled heavily laden wagons along the same highway on which we were traveling. You'd also see carts drawn by galloping horses, lumbering water buffaloes, and plodding donkeys in generous numbers along the way. Even more diverse, city roads are filled with additional sorts of vehicles – bicycles, carts pulled by bicycles, carts pulled by people, wheelbarrows pushed by people, scooters, motor cycles, auto rickshaws (3 wheeled golf-carts with a seat for the driver in front and room for a tightly packed group of 3 to 5 people in back), cars, pickups, busses, and trucks – all ignoring the lanes (so that a 2 lane road can sometimes be a 4 or 5 lane road), and all honking loudly at each other, communicating in some sort of alien language as they jostle for position. But the pandemonium is really enhanced when you take this variety of vehicles all trying to travel forward at the same time that people, cows, pigs, goats, sheep, monkeys, water buffaloes, and dogs (but no cats!) wander perpendicularly into and across that same street at a whim, causing traffic to suddenly swerve this way or that or even come to a complete stop. Yet in all this traffic, over hundreds of miles of travel, I did not see a single accident, or even an expression of anger by one person towards another.

Anyway, I thought I had seen it all until we came to a place on the trip to Agra where we crossed the border into Uttar Pradesh state, and the driver had to pull over, leave the car, and go to pay a state entry fee, along with all the other vehicles on the road – they stretched back and forward as far as the eye could see. At this point, people would wander by the car, asking us to buy some necklaces and other things – this State border crossing had become a rare opportunity for income for them. We would ignore them by looking straight forward, and after a few minutes they would move along down the line of cars to ask the next group of foreigners that they'd spy – much like gentler and more persistent rose-peddlers along the roads of Chicago. As we glanced around at the mix of vehicles and people around us, we saw, sitting in the center divider of the street, some men huddled around a fire, trying to keep warm in the smoke-laden, chilly morning air. Near them were Barbary monkeys running around freely, in much the same way we'd see squirrels scurrying about at home. One of the men with whom I was traveling asked, "What do you think that is?" We had just been talking about all the different kinds of animals we had seen wandering along the roads. He was pointing to something that looked like a massive Saint Bernard. I responded, "I think that's a bear!" We all chuckled thinking that now we'd seen it all – pigs, goats, sheep, cows, water buffaloes, camels, monkeys, and now maybe a bear! It had a muzzle around its mouth, and a leash, so identifying what it was, exactly, was a challenge. But the mystery was soon resolved once the men noticed that our car had 4 non-Indians in it. One man got up and walked over with the bear. He wanted us to take a picture of the bear and to pay them 200 rupees for the privilege of doing so. Anyway, I was joking with the guys in the car that I'd never been so close to a bear before. At that exact moment, as if anticipating what I was about to say, the man with the bear brought him right up onto the glass of the rolled up car window next to which I was sitting. I was about half an inch from the claws and mouth of the bear. Now before you get scared for me, this bear was a pitiful sight. It had been trained into submission, which may not be so bad, but it was still hard to get comfortable with –in the States, there are people who even protest about confining wild creatures, like bears, in a zoo, let alone muzzled and leashed. This bear was beaten down and visibly despondent, if such a thing can be said

for a bear. The muzzle, or leather strap that held its mouth closed seemed to be attached to its mouth by a piercing, like a bridle bit in its upper lips, holding it in place. Occasionally its owner would wave a stick over its head and it would reluctantly stand up on its back legs, raise its mouth to the sky and try to grab the stick – probably a training trick which would sometimes dangle treats from the stick, but there was no treat this time.. Then it would stand there, on its back legs, staring at us in the car, with its black, empty eyes, flapping its front left paw back and forth in a pitiful, nervous little tick.

My heart went out to that bear, in the same way it went out to the 700 million people in India who aren't privileged to live in the middle class lifestyle that outsourcing is providing for some of their fellow citizens. Many of the people in India are no better off than that bear, their lives muzzled by a government that binds them in poverty through lack of opportunity which is exacerbated by corrupt local officials, and by a culture that historically has led people to passively accept their lowly fate in life. Their empty, passive eyes reflect souls lost in a world that, to a large extent, simply does not care about them. Their "houses" are a single room, composed of discarded billboard walls and corrugated steel roofs, with several large rocks placed on the roof to keep it from blowing off in the monsoons. Their men hold jobs as mass laborers, who endeavor away as human machines, almost futilely chipping away with pick axes to carve away a flat surface for a road or foundation, doing in days and weeks what a backhoe would do in hours. But at least they are employed, and bring home a few rupees for the basics of life. Their women spend their day journeying into town to buy sticks to burn that night, walking miles back to home with faggots, 2 feet in diameter and 6 to 8 feet long, for the night fires balanced on their heads. Other times of the day they walk back into town for water, laboriously carrying it home in a similar fashion. Some are dressed in colorful garb, but from the road their expressions look colorless. For all their hard labor, they earn nothing more than the motherly satisfaction that they are enabling their children to survive into another day.

While I struggle with the globalization and "off-shoring" that brought me to India in the first place, I struggle more with a world in which there is such gross inequity, and I know that off-shoring is helping to lessen that. My trip to India was bracketed, immediately before and after, by the contrast of days spent amidst the abundant economies of Germany and Singapore – Mercedeses and BMWs purring down smooth, well-constructed highways. In my brief stay in India I was reminded of my earlier stay, almost 20 years earlier in the southern city of Chennai, and of my desire at the time to never again return to India. I shared that same perspective this time, happy as the airplanes wheels left the runway in departure. I heard several other people express the same comment – strangers except for our expression of a common sentiment. I don't know whether or not that desire will hold true, but I know it reveals a weakness within me that is uncomfortable with the gap between my luxurious and contented American lifestyle and that of my Indian brothers and sisters who engage in a simple struggle to eke out the day's necessities – day, after day, after day.

I can understand the despair of that bear. And I can now begin to understand the despair of the soul who realized that it was only by exploiting the bear that he could begin to extract the wealth of those who covet this planet's riches unproportionately. At the time, my shock and resentment at the treatment of the bear led me to haughtily scoff at the concept of paying someone for exploiting it.

But its image haunted me for the next couple days. Not only because of its pathetic look, but because it symbolizes for me what people must do to make a living. In retrospect, I am now embarrassed to realize how I have been the one exploiting my brothers and sisters in the same way, making them dance like puppets for the monetary stick we Westerners ficklely wave above them, forcing them to glance at the sky in hopes that the stick may one day hold a treat, but not today. No, on that day, my full wallet pretended it was empty. Maybe off-shoring is a start, but it's a corporate response, not a personal response, and it's motivated by profit, not love.

So what then must we do?

I struggle for an adequate answer. Near the end of his life, Leo Tolstoy looked at all his riches and asked a similar question while he wandered the squalid streets of Moscow, and he concluded “we must give with love to all whom God puts on our path.” In this case I failed that test. My love was expressed by pretending to keep my focus straight ahead until the bear charmers and the trinket sellers moved on to someone else. My love was expressed by isolating myself, by keeping the window rolled up to protect me from the outside world. My love knew limits of forbearance, of trust, of power to endure. My love failed.

What then must we do?

I’m not naïve enough to think that if I gave the bear charmer a couple hundred rupees that he would somehow let his dilapidated ursine friend go free, or that his life’s worries would forever end. I know that if I gave him money that would only encourage him to continue to ply his trade. I know this because 20 years ago an auto-rickshaw driver in Chennai told me not to give money to the crippled men and women and children who thronged the vehicle when they saw a Westerner in the back. He said it only encourages the cycle where parents purposefully maim their children in order to increase their begging income. I know this because 20 years ago, when I stepped out of that auto-rickshaw and, out of pity, gave 60 rupees to a beggar on the side of the road, that suddenly hundreds of people appeared as if from nowhere, pressing around me to give them, too, some of my money. It was clear that my limited resources could not solve what was a much larger problem. And I walked straight ahead through the clamoring crowd without coughing up another cent. And I’ve continued to use that concept to this day as a salve to keep my wallet in my pocket, and only give through third parties.

But don’t we have some duty to act locally while we think globally? Shouldn’t I have been able to leverage my encounter with the bear charmer and trinket sellers to, in some small way, begin to balance the lopsided scale of wealth? And this is where the definition of who we are as a Church comes into play.

I lean towards the perspective that it will probably be by helping out organizations like Catholic Relief Services (organizations who work at the local level to stamp out corruption and slowly build out basic infrastructures, who educate the “untouchables” and help them raise their place in the local and global economy which demands education and resources for advancement) that my fellow brothers and sisters may enjoy a glimpse of the privileges I have selfishly and egoistically come to take for granted. But, while absolutely critical, sharing my riches through a third party is only a beginning and an insufficient response all by itself. The adage says: “There but for the grace of God go I.” I have been graced – to see the plight of these poor men and women, and I pray that I might respond as God challenges us all to respond. I realize what graces I have been granted, and how those graces come with accountability and responsibility. I realize how we are all part of the same created family. I realize that we are all the People of God. I realize that we are all Church.

So why do I share this story? Perhaps so that in sharing it that you can journey with me in appreciating what blessings we have in our American life, and so that you can help me in my weakness to act on the accountability and responsibility that come with the blessings I’ve received, so that you can be Church to me. I have tried in my own way to do this for most of my life, yet still, my response has in no way been commensurate with what it should be. See, life is all about entering into relationship with each other, not isolation from each other. Life is all about being Church. This is the insight of God as Trinity, God as Community of Love. I need to enter into a relationship with the likenesses of God who wander this earth, whether they wander the streets of an Indian town or my own town. I need to open my heart to them, to look them in the eyes and see their souls, not to stare straight ahead as I am wont to do. I need to enter into a relationship with you. To expose my weaknesses and allow you to help me overcome them. I need you to enter into relationship with me, to build me up and encourage me to do more than I currently do. We need to become Church together.

What then must we do?

Yeah, Leo, you've got it right: we've got to enter into relationship with all God's people, and in this interconnected world of ours, we must give with love to all who God puts on our path. For it's only in relationship that we can claim to love another person. It's only in relationship that we can realize how we are all the Body of Christ. And if we let love dictate our actions, then regardless of what that action is, we can rest in knowing that we responded correctly to the challenge, and in believing that the dancing bear of India will somehow be better off for it.