

## **To be Christian Means to Belong to the Church**

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By St. Hilarion Troitsky

According to the words of Saint Cyprian, to be a Christian means to belong to the visible Church and to submit to the hierarchy which God has placed in it. The Church is the realization of Christ's love and any separation from the Church is a violation of this love, in which both heretics and schismatics sin equally. This is the basic thought of his treatise "On the Unity of the Catholic Church."

This same idea is constantly repeated in the letters of the same holy father. "Christ granted us peace; He commanded us to be in harmony and unanimity; He commanded that we preserve, inviolably and firmly, the bond of affection and love. Whoever violates the love of Christ by faithless dissent will no longer belong to Christ: he who does not possess this love does not possess God either. Those who do not desire to be unanimous, in God's Church cannot abide with God.

Heretics and schismatics do not have this love, i.e., the basic Christian virtue and, thus, they are Christian in name only. "Heretics and schismatics preserve neither the unity of the Church nor brotherly love." "They act against the love of Christ." "Marcian who joined with Novatian, became an enemy of charity and love." "It is well known that the heretics have deviated from the love and unity of the universal Church." "What unity is observed, what love is preserved or what love is dreamt about by one who, having given himself up to fits of dissension, cleaves the Church, destroys faith, troubles the peace, eradicates love and profanes the sacraments?"

Saint Cyprian even expressed the decisive thought that, not only can there be no Christian life outside the Church, but there can be no Christian teaching either. The pure faith exists only in the Church. Saint Cyprian also calls the Church by the name "Truth," and teaches that the unity of the faith cannot be separated from the unity of the Church, for truth is one even as the Church is one.

He who does not adhere to the unity of the Church cannot think that he is preserving the Faith. Any separation from the Church is, without fail, connected with the distortion of the Faith. "The enemy has contrived heresies and schisms in order to overthrow the faith,

distort the truth, and dissolve unity. His servants proclaim the treachery under the pretense of faith, herald the antichrist in the name of Christ and, concealing the lie by means of imitation righteousness, subtly and guilefully destroy the truth."

"Just as Satan is not Christ although he deceives in His name, so one cannot be a Christian if he does not abide in the truth of His gospel and faith." "A heretic cleaves the Church and destroys faith . . . he arms himself against the Church. In relation to the faith, he is a traitor; in relation to piety, he is a defiler, a recalcitrant servant, a lawless son, a hostile brother."

If one examines the faith of those who believe outside the Church, it would be found that all heretics have a completely different faith; as a matter of fact they have only a wild fanaticism, blasphemy, and a decay which is fighting against holiness and truth." According to Saint Cyprian, to be outside the Church and yet remain a Christian is impossible, for to be outside the Church is to be outside Christ's camp.

Those who separate themselves from the Church and those who act against the Church are antichrists and heathens. Here, for example, is what Saint Cyprian writes to Antonius concerning Novatian: "You have desired, most beloved brother, that I write you concerning Novatian, what heresy he has introduced. Know that, first of all, we must not be curious about what he teaches when he is teaching outside the Church." "No matter who or what he is, he is not a Christian as soon as he is not in the Church of Christ." "How can anyone be with Christ if he does not dwell within the Bride of Christ, if he is not found in His Church?"

Finally, in the treatise, "On the Unity of the Catholic Church," we read the famous words, "He who does not have the Church as his mother cannot have God as his Father." Saint Cyprian completely refuses the name "Christian" to all those who stand outside the Church, as if repeating the decisive exclamation of his teacher Tertullian: "haeretici christiani esse non possunt!" - heretics cannot be Christians!

Thus we can understand Saint Cyprian's demand that even Novatians, who were only schismatics, should be re-baptized when being received into the Church. For Saint Cyprian, the baptism of schismatics upon being received into the Church was not re-baptism at all, but precisely baptism. "We maintain," he wrote to Quintus, "that we do not rebaptize

those who come from there, but we baptize; for they have received nothing there where there is nothing."He adds that baptism outside the Church is only "an empty and impure immersing." "There, people are not washed, but are only profaned more; sins are not cleansed, but are only redoubled. Such a birth promotes children to the devil and not to God."

Saint Cyprian's conviction about the invalidity of any baptism outside the Church, and about the necessity of once again baptizing converts to the Church, was confirmed by a local council of the Church which met at Carthage in 256 A.D. with Cyprian himself presiding. In his closing address, summing up the council's decisions, the Saint says: "Heretics must be baptized by a baptism solely of the Church so that they can change from enemies to friends and from antichrists to Christians."

The above-stated views of Saint Cyprian which, evidently, the entire Carthaginian Council shared, clearly and profoundly witness how totally fused the Church was with Christianity and vice versa, in the third century.

Not all the views of Saint Cyprian were completely accepted by the Church. In particular, his teaching about the necessity to re-baptize even schismatics upon their conversion to the Church was modified. On this point, the views of Blessed Augustine differ somewhat, although his view of the relationship of Christianity to the Church remains exactly the same.

Blessed Augustine held that the Christian teaching, understood theoretically, can be preserved outside the Church. Truth remains truth even though an evil person might express it. For even the demons confessed Christ just as did the Apostle Peter. Gold is doubtlessly good and it remains gold even when taken by a thief, even though it serves different aims for him. Christ once said to his disciples, "he that is not against us is for us"(Luke 9:50). From this it is concluded that one who stands outside the Church on some things is not against the Church and has something of the Church's wealth. Athenians, however, "honored the Unknown God"(Acts 17:23) and the Apostle James testified that even the demons believe (James 2:19), and they, of course, are outside of the Church. In his works against the Donatists, Blessed Augustine argues in detail for the validity of schismatic baptism. If, however, it is possible to preserve true

teaching outside the Church and if even the sacraments performed in schism from the Church are valid, then is the Church really necessary? Is salvation not possible outside the Church? Does not Blessed Augustine make a distinction between Christianity and the Church? To all these questions a negative reply is given in the system of Blessed Augustine. He ascribes Christian life, which leads to salvation, only to the Church. Outside the Church this life cannot exist.

All the wealth of the Church which is possessed by those who have separated themselves from the Church brings them absolutely no benefit, but only harm. Why is this so? Because, answers Blessed Augustine, all those who have separated from the Church do not possess love. Christ gave a sign by which it is possible to recognize His disciples. This sign is not Christian teaching, not even the sacraments, but only love. Thus, He told His followers, "By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another"(John 13:35). The Mysteries will not save if the one receiving them has no love. The Apostle says: "If I know all the mysteries (sacraments) and do not possess love, I am nothing." Even Caiaphas prophesied, but he was condemned. The act of separation from the Church is itself the greatest sin, which proves that schismatics do not have love. One who is reborn in baptism, but does not unite with the Church receives no benefit from baptism because he possesses no love; baptism can be beneficial for him only when he unites with the Church. The Grace of baptism cannot cleanse from sin one who does not belong to the Church; its actions are as if paralyzed by the obstinacy of a schismatic heart in the evil of schism. Since one who is baptized outside the Church displays his sinfulness and the absence of love in him immediately after baptism by entering into the darkness of schism, the sins quickly return upon him. The fact that forgiven sins return if there is no brotherly love is clearly pointed out by the Lord when He spoke of the servant whom the master forgave ten thousand talents. When this same servant did not take pity upon his fellow who owed him only one hundred dinars, the master demanded the payment of all that was owed him. Just as this servant had received forgiveness of the debt for a time, so one who is baptized outside the Church is also freed from his sins for a time. Since, however, he remains outside the Church even after baptism, all the sins which he committed before being baptized are again imposed upon him. His sins are forgiven only when he, through love, unites with the Church.

Schismatics are deprived of the hope of salvation not only because

their baptism is invalid, but also because they are outside the Church and in enmity with it. The grace of the Holy Spirit can be received and preserved only by one who is united in love with the Church. He who has separated from the Church does not have love. He who does not love the unity of the Church does not have God's love, it is in vain that he declares that he has the love of Christ. Love can be preserved only in the presence of unity with the Church, because the Holy Spirit revives only the body of the Church. There can be no lawful and sufficient reason to separate from the Church; he who separates from the Church does not possess the Holy Spirit, just as a severed member of the body does not possess the spirit of life, even though it preserves its former identity for some time. Thus, while all those who have separated from the Church oppose it, they cannot be good; although their behavior might appear to be praiseworthy - the very fact of their separation from the Church makes them evil.

Thus, according to the teaching of Blessed Augustine, the Church is a concept narrower than Christianity which is understood only in the sense of abstract theses. It is possible to be in accord with these abstract theses while still remaining outside the Church; but for unity with the Church, the accord of will is indispensable (*consensio voluntatum*). It is evident that without this latter, abstract accord with Christian teaching alone is completely useless and that there is no salvation outside the Church.

The points of view of Saint Cyprian and Blessed Augustine can be seen to differ somewhat, but they both arrive at exactly the same conclusion: outside the Church there is no salvation! People are saved by their love which is the grace of the New Testament. Outside the Church it is impossible to preserve love, because it is impossible to receive the Holy Spirit.

What have we discovered in these representative examples of Church thought from the third to the fifth centuries? We have found that they coincide with the conclusions we reached earlier while examining the New Testament teaching about the Church, and the facts of early Christianity. Christianity and the Church are the same thing only when we do not regard Christianity as the sum of a sort of abstract thesis, not obliging anyone to anything. Such an understanding of Christianity can only be called demonic.

It would follow that such Christians also acknowledge in the way of

demons who also believe and tremble. Does to know the system really mean to be a true Christian? A servant who knows the will of the master and who does not fulfill it, will be dismissed and rejected and, of course, justly so.

"Christianity is not in the silent conviction, but in the grandeur of the deed," says Saint Ignatius.

No, Christ is not only a great teacher; He is the Savior of the world, Who gave mankind new strength, Who renewed mankind. It is not a teaching only that we have received from our Christ the Savior, but life. If one is to understand Christianity as a new life, not according to the elements of the world which knows only the principles of egoism and self-love, but according to Christ with His teaching and model of self-denial and love, then Christianity will necessarily coincide completely with the Church. To be a Christian means to belong to the Church, for Christianity is precisely the Church. Outside the Church there is no life and there cannot be.

Finally, in order to understand how important the concept of the Church is, it is sufficient to look attentively at the Symbol of Faith (the Creed), for the various articles were introduced into the Symbol of Faith after the appearance of various heretics who distorted one or another truth. Thus the whole Symbol of Faith can be called polemical. Its history reveals that its contents were enlarged as the result of the struggle with one heresy or another.

Such is not the case, however, with the ninth article, which concerns the Church. This article was found in the Symbol of Faith from the very beginning. It was introduced independently of the appearance of any sort of false doctrine. At that time there were still no Protestants who dreamt of some sort of churchless Christianity.

It is clear that, from the very beginning, the concept of the Church lay at the head of Christian beliefs and that this truth, that Christianity is specifically the Church, can be considered to have been given from the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

Having risen to this height of Church consciousness, it will be of great benefit to look at contemporary life, at the trends and opinions which are widespread in it and to give them an appraisal from the point of view of the Church.