THE DAILY BREAD

The Creed of the Apostles



Loving the Church in a Skeptical Age

A FORMATION BOOK BY

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The Everyday Apostle

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Loving the Church

Faithful Belonging in a Skeptical Age

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INTRODUCTION

Loving a Church You Can See

It is one thing to believe in the Church as an article of the Creed, a holy mystery confessed on Sunday, and quite another to love the actual Church a man encounters on the ground: the parish with the uninspiring homily, the bishop in the news for the wrong reasons, the history with its dark chapters, the fellow parishioners who are no holier than he is and sometimes a good deal less so. A man can affirm the doctrine of the Church with no trouble at all and still find his actual affection for her cooling, worn down by disappointment, embarrassment, and the steady cultural drumbeat that treats institutional religion as, at best, outdated and, at worst, a fraud.

This book is about that gap, and about closing it. It is written for the man who believes what the Church teaches about herself but who finds, if he is honest, that loving her is harder than believing in her, especially now, in an age that has made suspicion of every institution into a reflex and that regards loyalty to the Catholic Church in particular as either naive or complicit. The aim is not to talk a man out of his honest difficulties, which are real and deserve to be taken seriously, but to show him how a clear-eyed man, who sees the Church's human failures plainly and does not pretend them away, can nonetheless love her truly, stay in her faithfully, and even defend her gladly, not in spite of understanding her but because he has come to understand her rightly.

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. — Ephesians 5:25

We will look first at what the Church actually is, so that a man knows what he is being asked to love. We will face the scandal of her human failures without flinching, and find where the real answer to it lies. We will take up the specific objections a skeptical age throws at her, and the particular ache of loving an institution that has, at times, wounded her own. We will consider what faithful belonging looks like in practice, how a man loves his own parish, and how he answers for the Church to a doubting friend without either defensiveness or dishonesty. Through all of it runs a single conviction: that the Church, for all that is wrong with her members, is worth a man's whole-hearted love, and that learning to give it is one of the central tasks of a Catholic life.

CHAPTER ONE

What You Are Being Asked to Love

The Church as Christ Established Her

Before a man can love the Church rightly or defend her honestly, he has to be clear about what she actually is, because most of the difficulty men have with the Church comes from quietly mistaking her for something she was never meant to be. If a man thinks of the Church as essentially a human organization, a religious club or a charitable nonprofit with ancient branding, then her failures will seem to him simply disqualifying, the way corruption disqualifies any other institution. The Catholic claim is far stranger and far larger than that, and everything turns on grasping it.

You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. — Matthew 16:18

Not an Institution a Man Invented

The Church, in Catholic understanding, is not a human invention at all but a divine institution, founded by Christ himself, who gathered the Apostles, appointed Peter as their head, and promised to be with them to the end of the age. She is, in the images Scripture gives, the Body of Christ, with Christ as the head and the baptized as the members, so bound to him that to encounter her is in some real sense to encounter him. She is the Bride of Christ, loved by him with a spousal love, the object of his self-gift on the cross. She is the People of God, the new Israel, the family into which a man is born again in Baptism. These are not decorative metaphors; they are the Church's actual account of herself, and they mean that she is something a man could never have built and has no authority to remake, because she is Christ's own, established by him and animated by his Spirit.

Divine and Human at Once

Yet this same Church is, undeniably, a human society, made up of sinful men and women, run day to day by fallible leaders, carrying a long and mixed history. The Catholic claim does not deny this for a moment; it insists on both things at once. The Church is at the same time divine and human, holy in her origin, her teaching, and her sacraments, and yet composed of members who are sinners, every one of them, from the Pope to the newest baptized infant's parents. The ancient phrase calls her a chaste harlot, holy and sinful together, and the Second Vatican Council taught plainly that the Church is at once holy and always in need of purification. A man who grasps this is no longer scandalized to the point of leaving when he meets sin in the Church, because he was told to expect exactly that; what would truly be surprising, given what she is, is not that her members sin but that despite their sin she still reliably hands on the faith, still confects the sacraments, still produces saints in every generation.

A homely comparison helps. A hospital is full of sick people, and a man who argued that hospitals must be frauds because everyone inside them is ill would have badly misunderstood what a hospital is for. The Church is a hospital for sinners, not a museum of the already-perfected, and the presence of sin in her is not evidence against her claims but exactly what her claims predict and what her sacraments exist to heal. The Catholic who grasps this stops expecting the Church to be a society of the flawless and starts seeing her for what she is: the place where flawed men are slowly, really, being made into saints, which is a far greater and stranger thing than a club for the respectable.

Why the Distinction Saves a Man

Holding these two truths together is what allows a man to love the Church without either illusion or despair. If he forgets her divine side, every human failure becomes a reason to walk away, and he will eventually find enough of them to do so. If he forgets her human side, every human failure becomes a crisis of faith, because he expected a perfection she never promised in her members. The man who keeps both firmly in view can look squarely at the worst of the Church's history and her present, grieve it honestly, and still say: this is the Church Christ founded, bearing the treasure of the faith in these very cracked and earthen vessels, and I will not leave the Body of Christ because some of its members, myself included, are sinners. The distinction is not a debating trick. It is the thing that makes faithful love of a flawed Church possible at all.

CHAPTER TWO

The Scandal of Her Sins

Facing the Failures Honestly

No honest book about loving the Church can hurry past the fact that she has given the world real reasons to doubt her. The abuse crisis and its cover-up, the corruption and worldliness of churchmen in various ages, the episodes of cruelty and compromise that stain her history, these are not inventions of her enemies, and a man does himself no favors by pretending otherwise. The first duty of a Catholic who would love the Church honestly is to refuse every temptation to minimize, excuse, or explain away the genuine evil that has been done within her and sometimes by her ministers.

It is time for judgment to begin at the household of God. — 1 Peter 4:17

No Minimizing, No Excuses

There is a defensive instinct, understandable but corrosive, that wants to soften the Church's sins the moment a critic names them: to note that other institutions are worse, that the numbers are exaggerated, that the media is hostile. Some of those points may even contain truth, but deployed as a reflex they amount to exactly the covering-up that so deepened the scandal in the first place, and they corrode the soul of the man who makes them, because he ends up defending the indefensible to protect an institution he has confused with the Gospel. The far healthier and more Catholic response is the one the saints always modeled: to feel the Church's sins as a wound, to grieve them, to name them plainly, and to desire with one's whole heart their purification. A man who loves the Church the way a man loves his family does not pretend his family's crimes did not happen; he mourns them precisely because he loves, and his honesty is a form of that love, not a betrayal of it.

The Sin Is Against the Church, Too

It helps enormously to see that the sins committed by churchmen are not expressions of the Church's holiness but violations of it, offenses against the very thing the Church is and teaches. When a priest abuses, when a bishop covers up, when a Catholic in power acts with cruelty or greed, he is not acting as the Church but betraying her, doing the opposite of what she exists to do and failing the very standard she proclaims. The abuse is damnable precisely by the Church's own teaching; the hypocrisy is hypocrisy only because the Church holds up a holiness the hypocrite has abandoned. This is why the scandals, as horrifying as they are, do not actually disprove the Church's claims about herself. A counterfeit proves the existence of real currency; the betrayal of a standard presupposes the standard. The men who sinned did not reveal what the Church really is underneath her pretenses; they fell short of what she really is, and she judges them by a measure they themselves failed to meet.

This is worth pressing, because the critic often assumes the opposite, that the scandals expose the Church's true nature while her holiness is the pretense. But a man has only to ask by what standard the abuse is condemned. It is condemned by the Church's own teaching about the dignity of the human person and the sanctity of the child, teaching the Church proclaimed long before the world took it up. The outrage the world rightly feels borrows, whether it knows it or not, from a moral vision the Church did more than any institution in history to put into the world. The sinners in the Church are measured and found wanting by the very light the Church carries; they are the shadow that light casts, not the proof that there was never any light.

Where Purification Begins

And here is the turn that keeps honesty from curdling into mere bitterness. Scripture says that judgment begins with the household of God, which means the Church is meant to be purified, painfully and from within, and that a man who sees her sins clearly is being handed not merely a grievance but a vocation. The response to corruption in the Church is not to leave her to the corrupt but to become, oneself, part of her purification: to live the holiness her sinners have betrayed, to insist on accountability, to refuse the cover-up, to be in one's own corner of the Church the kind of Catholic her scandals cried out for. Every great reform of the Church came not from those who left in disgust but from saints who stayed and suffered and insisted she be what she claimed to be. The scandal, honestly faced, does not finally drive a serious man out of the Church. It gives him something to do inside her.

CHAPTER THREE

Answering the Skeptical Age

The Objections and the Replies

A man who would love the Church today does so surrounded by a chorus of objections, some from the wider culture, some from friends and family, some rising unbidden in his own mind. These objections have a characteristic modern shape, and a man is strengthened by learning to answer them, not with slogans, but with the reasoned confidence of someone who has thought them through. He need not be able to win every argument to hold his ground, but he should know that the ground is solid.

Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and respect. — 1 Peter 3:15

Who Are They to Tell Me What to Do

The deepest modern objection to the Church is not really about any particular teaching; it is about authority as such. The age holds as a near-axiom that no institution has the right to tell a free individual how to live, that morality is self-authored, and that a Church claiming to teach with divine authority is therefore an affront to human dignity. The Catholic answer is to question the axiom. No man actually authors his own morality from nothing; everyone receives his moral vision from somewhere, and the modern individual who imagines himself free of all authority has simply exchanged the Church's authority for the shifting authority of his culture, his feelings, and the spirit of his age, none of which love him or died for him. The Church does not claim authority in order to dominate but in order to hand on, faithfully, a truth she did not invent and cannot

change, the way a trustworthy witness hands on testimony. To a culture that hears all authority as oppression, this is genuinely hard to receive, but a man can at least see that the choice is never between authority and freedom; it is only ever between which authority he will trust with his soul.

There is a further point a man can make gently when the conversation allows it. The Church's authority is not the arbitrary will of men but a stewardship, a handing-on of something received. The bishops cannot vote to change the Creed any more than a nation's judges can vote to change the facts of a case; their authority is precisely the authority to guard and transmit a deposit they did not create and are not free to alter. This is a strange kind of authority to the modern ear, which assumes that whoever holds power may remake the rules. But it is also, on reflection, the only kind of authority worth trusting in matters of ultimate truth, an authority bound to something higher than itself, rather than one free to tell a man whatever the age, or the institution's own convenience, would prefer he believe.

The Church and the Progress of the Age

A second family of objections holds that the Church is simply on the wrong side of history, that her teachings, especially on sex, marriage, and the body, are relics that an enlightened age has outgrown, and that she will eventually have to change them as she has supposedly changed before. Two things steady a man here. The first is that the Church's inability to change her settled moral teaching is not a bug but the very thing that makes her worth trusting; a Church that revised her doctrine to match each era's consensus would be merely an echo of the age, with nothing to offer it, and the teachings the age finds most offensive are often precisely the ones that will look wisest when the age's confidence has passed. The second is that the premise of inevitable progress is itself a faith, and a shaky one; the twentieth century should have cured the modern world of the superstition that newer always means better and that history has a direction that happens to coincide with current opinion. The Church measures herself not against the moving target of the age but against Christ, and a man who grasps that is freed from the exhausting demand that she keep up with a world that does not know where it is going.

Organized Religion and the Spiritual Man

A third objection is gentler and more pervasive: the sense that one can be spiritual without being religious, that a sincere personal relationship with God needs no Church, no sacraments, no institution with its rules and its buildings and its collection basket. This is perhaps the hardest to answer because it contains a half-truth; God can of course reach any soul, and private devotion is real. But the Catholic conviction is that Christ did

not found a vague spirituality; he founded a Church, with sacraments that actually convey grace, with a visible communion, with a structure meant to carry his life through time. The purely private spirituality, for all its appeal, tends over time to shrink to the size of the self, a god made in one's own image who conveniently wants exactly what one already wanted. The Church, with her stubborn externality, her demands, her givenness, is what keeps a man's faith from collapsing into himself. She is harder than private spirituality precisely because she is realer, an encounter with a God who comes from outside and will not be reduced to a feeling.

CHAPTER FOUR

When the Church Has Wounded You

Loving Her Through Personal Hurt

For many men the difficulty with the Church is not abstract at all. It is personal and particular: a cold or cruel priest, a parish that failed them in a crisis, a rejection that stung, a hypocrisy witnessed up close, a wound inflicted in God's name that has never quite healed. These injuries are different from intellectual objections and cannot be answered by argument, because they do not live in the mind. They live in the memory and the heart, and loving the Church through them is a work not of reasoning but of healing and forgiveness.

Bear with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgive each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. — Colossians 3:13

Name the Wound Truthfully

The first step is neither to nurse the wound nor to deny it, but to name it honestly before God. Many Catholics who have been hurt by the Church fall into one of two errors: they either let the hurt harden into a permanent grievance that quietly governs their whole relationship to the faith, or they bury it under a false piety that insists good Catholics are not supposed to feel such things. Both are evasions. The healthier path is to bring the actual injury into the open, to say plainly, this person in the Church wounded me, and it was wrong, and it hurt, without either exaggerating it into a reason to leave or minimizing it into something that does not matter. God is not threatened by a man's honest anger at being hurt by those who represented him badly; the Psalms are full of exactly such honesty. The wound has to be named truthfully before it can be healed, and a man who will not admit he was hurt gives the hurt permanent power over him.

Distinguish the Lord From His Servants

The decisive move in healing a wound inflicted by the Church is to separate, firmly and repeatedly, the failures of Christ's servants from Christ himself. The priest who was cruel is not Christ; the parish that failed you is not the Body entire; the Catholic whose hypocrisy disgusted you is not the faith he betrayed. The enemy's whole aim in a Church-inflicted wound is to get a man to transfer his just anger at a person onto Christ and his Church, so that a human failure costs him his faith, which is to let the one who wronged him rob him twice. A man guards against this by consciously refusing to let a particular person stand in for the whole, by remembering the many faithful priests and parishioners who did not fail him, and above all by taking his wound directly to Christ, who was himself betrayed by his own, who knows exactly how it feels to be wounded in the house of his friends, and who does not defend the servant who misrepresented him.

The Freedom of Forgiveness

Finally there is forgiveness, which is not the same as deciding the wound did not matter and is in fact the opposite. Forgiveness looks the real injury full in the face, grants that it was genuinely wrong, and then releases the offender from the debt, not for the offender's sake primarily but for the sake of the man's own freedom. A man who will not forgive a wound the Church dealt him remains chained to it, carrying the one who hurt him everywhere he goes, letting a past injury quietly dictate his present faith. Forgiveness is how he sets the burden down. It is rarely a single act and more often a daily choice, renewed as the memory resurfaces, to hand the offense again to God and to refuse to let it own him. This is hard, and a man may need the help of confession, of counsel, sometimes of time. But it is the door out, and on the far side of it is a man who can love the Church freely again, no longer loving her warily through the scar of an old wound but loving her as a son who has made his peace.

It is worth saying plainly that forgiveness does not mean a man must return to the situation that harmed him, trust an untrustworthy person, or stay silent about a wrong that others need protected from. A man can forgive a priest who wronged him and still report him, still keep his distance, still warn those at risk. Forgiveness releases the debt in a man's own heart; it does not suspend justice or prudence. Confusing the two keeps many a wounded Catholic from forgiving at all, because they imagine forgiveness requires them to act as though nothing happened. It requires no such thing. It requires only that a man stop carrying the poison of the grudge, which was never hurting the offender anyway, and was slowly hardening his own heart against the Church he is meant to love.

CHAPTER FIVE

What Faithful Belonging Looks Like

Loyalty That Is Neither Blind Nor Grudging

Between two unworthy ways of belonging to the Church lies the faithful one, and a man does well to learn its shape. On one side is the blind loyalist, who will not hear a word against the Church, treats every criticism as an attack, and defends even the indefensible out of a loyalty that has stopped thinking. On the other is the grudging member, who stays but with one foot out the door, perpetually disappointed, loud with complaint, belonging without love. Faithful belonging is neither of these. It is a loyalty with its eyes open, a love that sees the flaws clearly and remains anyway, not because it must but because it has chosen to.

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. — John 6:68

The Loyalty of a Son

The best model for faithful belonging is the way a good man belongs to his own family. He does not imagine his family is perfect; he knows its faults better than any outsider. He does not leave it when it disappoints him, nor does he pretend its failings away. He belongs to it because it is his, with a loyalty that is compatible with clear sight and even with honest criticism, offered from within and in love. This is how a faithful Catholic belongs to the Church: as a son, not as a customer evaluating a service he can cancel, and not as a critic who has appointed himself her judge. Peter's words capture the whole posture. He has just heard a hard teaching and watched others walk away, and asked whether he too will leave, he does not claim to have no difficulties; he says, in effect, where else would I go, you have the words of eternal life. That is the loyalty of a son who has nowhere else he would rather be, difficulties and all.

Criticism From Within and In Love

Faithful belonging does not forbid criticism; it locates and seasons it. There is all the difference in the world between the criticism of an enemy who wants the Church discredited and the criticism of a son who wants his mother to be well, and the faithful Catholic is free, even obliged at times, to speak honestly about what is wrong in the Church. But he does so from inside her communion, not from the posture of one who has already left in his heart; he does so to build up, not to tear down; he does so with love, which is willing to be patient, to suffer with, to stay. The grudging complainer and the loyal reformer may say similar words, but they are doing opposite things, the one feeding

his own disappointment, the other spending himself for the Church's good. A man examining his own criticisms can test them by this: do I say this as one who is leaving, or as one who is staying and willing to help bear the cost of what I am naming?

Belonging Shows Up

Faithful belonging is finally not a feeling but a practice, and it shows up in the body. It means being there, at Mass, in the pew, week after week, whether or not the homily moved him, because the Eucharist does not depend on the preacher's gifts. It means giving of his time, his money, and his effort to his parish, not as a consumer who pays for services rendered but as a member of a family who shoulders his share. It means staying through the dry seasons, the disappointing pastors, the parish politics, the years when faith feels like duty more than delight. The man who belongs faithfully is known not by the warmth of his feelings about the Church, which will rise and fall, but by the steadiness of his presence and the reliability of his contribution. Love of the Church, like every real love, is proven not in its emotions but in its fidelity, in the showing up, especially when showing up is hard.

CHAPTER SIX

Loving Your Own Parish

Where the Universal Church Gets a Face

The Church a man is actually asked to love is not finally an abstraction but a particular place with a particular name: his parish, the ordinary, unglamorous, specific community where the universal Church becomes something he can walk into on a Tuesday. A man may have grand feelings about the Church across twenty centuries and still have no love at all for the people three pews over, and if so his love of the Church is largely theoretical. The test and the training ground of loving the Church is loving the actual parish one belongs to, with all its ordinariness and its irritations.

By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.
— John 13:35

Love the Parish You Have

The temptation is perennial to love an imagined parish rather than the real one: to spend one's energy wishing the music were better, the preaching deeper, the community warmer, the people more like oneself, and to withhold one's heart from the parish that

actually exists until it measures up. This is a way of never loving any parish at all, because no real parish will ever match the one in a man's head. Faithful love begins by accepting the parish one has been given, with its mediocre coffee and its off-key cantor and its congregation of ordinary sinners, as the concrete community God has actually placed a man in. A man who keeps shopping for the perfect parish, or who attends his own while perpetually comparing it unfavorably to some ideal, never puts down the roots from which love grows. Love starts when a man stops wishing for a different parish and commits himself to this one.

You Are Part of What It Is

A crucial and bracing truth is that a man's parish is partly made of him, so his complaints about it are, in part, complaints about his own contribution or lack of it. If the parish feels cold, that is partly a question of who is being warm; if it feels uninvolved, partly a question of who is involving himself; if the man wishes someone would start a men's group, visit the homebound, welcome the newcomer, he is someone. The consumer approach to a parish treats it as a service that others provide and the man evaluates; the faithful approach recognizes that a parish is a communion that a man helps to constitute, and that he gets out of it very much what he puts in. The surest way to come to love a parish is to serve it, because a man's heart follows his labor, and he comes to love what he has poured himself into. Many a man who felt nothing for his parish discovered real affection for it only after he began to give himself to it.

This reverses the order most men unconsciously expect. They assume they must first feel love for the parish and then, moved by that feeling, decide to serve it, and so they wait for an affection that never comes. But love of this kind runs the other way: a man serves first, often out of mere duty or obligation, and the affection follows the service, growing quietly out of the hours given and the people come to know. The man who waits to feel before he acts waits forever; the man who acts before he feels finds the feeling arriving unbidden, as the natural fruit of having invested himself. If a man wants to love his parish, the counsel is not to work up a feeling but to find one concrete thing to do for it, and to begin.

The Parish as First Mission Field

Loving one's parish is not only an end in itself but the first field of a man's wider mission, the place where his formation becomes visible and begins to bear on others. It is in the parish that a man's faith is seen by other men who might be drawn by it, that newcomers decide whether this is a community they could belong to, that the young take their reading of what a Catholic man looks like. A parish full of men who merely attend is very different from a parish with even a few men who have come to love it and to give

themselves to it, and the difference is felt by everyone who walks through the door. When a man loves his parish well, serves it, and helps make it a place of genuine welcome and life, he is already doing the work of an apostle, and he is building the very community from which the wider mission goes out. The love of the Church that this whole book commends comes finally to earth right here, in whether a man will love the ordinary parish that bears, for him, the face of the Body of Christ.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Speaking for the Church

Defending Her Without Defensiveness

Sooner or later a man who loves the Church will have to speak for her: to a skeptical friend, a hostile coworker, a struggling family member, a child with hard questions. How he does this matters enormously, because a clumsy or defensive defense can do more harm than silence, while a wise and gracious one can open a door no argument alone could open. Learning to speak for the Church, honestly and winsomely, is part of loving her, and it is a skill a man can grow in.

Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person. — Colossians 4:6

Concede What Is True

The single most disarming thing a man can do when defending the Church is to concede, freely and first, whatever in the criticism is true. When the scandals are raised, he does not minimize them; he says, yes, that was evil, and the Church's own teaching says so. When the history's dark chapters come up, he does not pretend they did not happen; he grants them. This honesty is not a weakness in the defense but its foundation, because it establishes the man as someone telling the truth rather than running a public-relations operation, and it clears away the caricature so that the real question can be reached. A defender who will admit nothing is rightly distrusted and easily dismissed; a defender who admits what is true earns the standing to say what else is true. Paradoxically, a man defends the Church most effectively by being the first to acknowledge her sins, because only then will anyone believe him about her glory.

Witness Over Argument

The second principle is that a man's life speaks louder than his arguments, and that the most persuasive defense of the Church is usually a Catholic worth imitating rather than a case well argued. People are rarely reasoned into the faith against their will; they are far more often drawn by seeing a Christian whose life has a quality they lack and want, a peace, a joy, a integrity, a love, that they sense has something to do with his faith. A man who wins every argument but whose life is indistinguishable from the world's has defended the Church to no effect; a man who may lose the argument but whose life quietly testifies to the reality of what he believes has made the strongest case there is. This takes the pressure off a man to have all the answers. He does not have to be a theologian to speak for the Church. He has mainly to be the kind of man whose life makes the faith look like what it is, true and good and worth having, and to let that witness carry what his words cannot.

Gentleness and the Long Game

Finally, a man speaks for the Church best when he plays the long game and holds his gentleness, refusing to let any single conversation become a battle he must win. The goal is almost never to score a decisive victory on the spot, which usually only hardens the other person, but to leave a door open, to plant something, to be the Catholic who was unexpectedly reasonable and kind and honest, so that when the person's own questions ripen, as they often do, the man's words come back to them. This means staying calm when provoked, declining to answer contempt with contempt, being content sometimes to say no more than a single honest thing and let it rest. The Scripture asks for speech seasoned with salt and full of grace, and that combination, savor and kindness together, is exactly what moves people over time. A man who defends the Church with gentleness, who is impossible to dislike even when he is disagreed with, does the Church a service that the fiercest apologist cannot, because he makes her not only credible but attractive.

CONCLUSION

A Love With Open Eyes

The love of the Church this book has commended is not a naive love and never asked to be. It does not require a man to pretend the Church's sins away, to stop his questions, or to feel warmly about every parish and every priest. It asks something harder and better: that a man see the Church whole, her divine origin and her human failures together, and love her anyway, with the clear-eyed loyalty of a son who knows his mother's faults and does not leave.

Such a love is possible only because of what the Church finally is. If she were merely a human institution, her failures would be reason enough to go, and the skeptics would be right. But she is the Body of Christ, bearing in her cracked and sinful members the real presence, the true sacraments, the whole deposit of the faith, the words of eternal life that are found nowhere else. That is why Peter stayed when the teaching was hard, and why the saints stayed and suffered and reformed her from within rather than abandoning her to her corruptions. They had seen, as a man today can still see, that there is nowhere else to go that has what she has, and that the right response to her sins is not to leave her but to help make her holy.

So love her with open eyes. Face her failures honestly, answer her critics gently, forgive the wounds she has dealt you, belong to her as a son, give yourself to the ordinary parish that wears her face, and speak for her with grace. A man who loves the Church this way has done something the skeptical age finds almost unintelligible and badly needs to see: he has shown that it is possible to be fully honest about an institution's failures and fully devoted to it at the same time, because the thing he is devoted to is not finally the institution but the Lord who founded it and will not abandon it. The gates of hell will not prevail against her. A man can stake his love on that, and loving her well, in this of all ages, is itself a quiet and powerful witness to the world.

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