

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Year of Saint Paul

Part 5: Saint Paul and the Church¹

One of the most common things that I hear from people who don't attend church is that they don't believe in "organized religion." As they say the words, "organized religion," there is an air of disdain in their voice. It's as though they believe in the importance of following Christ, but despise the idea of followers banding together in solidarity as "the Church." Their ignorance about the importance of the Church is ultimately ignorance about Christ's love for the Church.

In order to better understand the role of the Church in Christ's plan of salvation we will look at St. Paul's understanding of the relationship between Christ and the Church. We will do this with the help of Cardinal Carlo Martini, S.J., who, in his book, The Gospel According to St. Paul, dedicates an entire chapter to the Church.

There are seven important aspects to the relationship of Christ and the Church that Cardinal Martini points out; all of which are based on chapter five of Paul's letter to the Ephesians. They are summarized by Cardinal Martini in these words—

Christ has so loved the Church that he purifies her, he sanctifies her, and he nourishes her. His love is altruistic and not for his own gratification. He helps her to become beautiful, good, and perfect. All his activity is focused on her.

- The Gospel According to St. Paul, pg. 60

Despite the fact that Christ obviously had a great love for the Church—for the organization and solidarity of His followers—many Christians today are all-too-familiar with the humanity, brokenness, and sinfulness of the Church. Cardinal Martini describes three stages of spiritual growth that mark our changing relationship with the Church and our coming to terms with her brokenness. These stages begin with the idea that every single one of us, in the immaturity of our youth, struggle to relate with institutions and often rebel against them. In Cardinal Martini's words, the maturing of our understanding includes:

1. [Beginning] to understand that all that we are, all the good that we have and that represents our high moral and spiritual ideals, comes to us from the Church and not from our own efforts.
2. [Understanding]... the value and necessity of institutions and their capacity for continuity and duration.
3. [Investing] something of value in the Church, [so that we] participate in the Church and suffer for her.

These steps are just the beginning. The *fullness* of our understanding and loving the Church is when we allow our love for Christ to overflow into our love for His Bride, the Church. Cardinal Martini writes, "If we love Christ, we enter into his thoughts, and we realize how he 'loved the church and gave himself up for her' (Ephesians 5:25)." This is precisely the maturity that St. Paul possessed—he loved Christ so much that his love for Christ overflowed into a profound love for Christ's Bride, the Church. Saint Paul expressed this great love, writing, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church" (Colossians 1:24).

¹ In honor of the "Year of Saint Paul," this is part five of a ten part series on his life and writings.