

Fr. Tom's Celestial Musings

The Screwtape Letters- by C.S. Lewis

Part 9: Division in Church Congregations¹

Surely you know [Wormwood] that if a man can't be cured of churchgoing, the next best thing is to send him all over the neighborhood looking for the church that 'suits' him until he becomes a taster or connoisseur of churches.²

The seasoned demon, Screwtape, offers some very clear instructions to his nephew, Wormwood, regarding church attendance. In fact, an entire chapter in C.S. Lewis' book is dedicated to the topic of church attendance and how it can be used by Satan to undermine faith, hope, and love. There are two particular issues that the demon addresses with his nephew in The Screwtape Letters.

Screwtape's distaste for church first stems from the fact that churches are often places of unity. They bring together people of many different cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, and ways of life. Churches, by their very nature, are communal and inviting, while evil, by its nature, is divisive and excluding. To combat the benefit of unity, Screwtape suggests that people be tempted to understand their churches to be more like clubs, where only particular kinds of people can belong. This will inevitably lead to the division that Satan desires.

Another reason why Screwtape despises churches is because they are places of learning—especially learning about his “enemy,” God. Growing in authentic wisdom, knowledge, and understanding leads Christians deeper into humility and, therefore, closer to the God Who is Truth. The tactic against such education, according to Screwtape, is to tempt human beings to search for a “suitable” church, thus making them critics instead of pupils. After finding the “suitable” church—that is, one that does not challenge them and whose membership contains similar people—Screwtape suggests that humans be tempted to join a particular faction or “party” within the parish. He writes, “If your patient can't be kept out of the Church, [then] he ought at least to be violently attached to some party within it.”³ And, where there are various parties, there are numerous divisions.

Based on the suggestions that Screwtape offers to his nephew, the Christian reader can draw a couple of important conclusions. First, Satan will always try to divide every faithful Christian church. Rarely will this attempt at division appear blatantly evil or divisive; no, Satan is far too smart for that. Instead, it will appear innocent, maybe even spiritual. It might even appear as an important need within the Church. But, once people's pride gets involved, division will manifest itself. Every Christian should be diligent in praying for unity in the Church and ministers should make a point of praying daily for the unity of their congregations.

Secondly, Lewis invites us to look at our own criticalness. How often do we spend the church service judging the people around us, categorizing them in either envy or disgust? How often do we leave Mass only to criticize the sermon, the music, people's clothing, couples' parenting, etc.? How often have we missed an opportunity to learn because we were too busy critiquing? C.S. Lewis reminds us that Church is about unity within diversity, solidarity through acceptance, learning through humility, and resurrection through the cross.

¹ This article is part nine of a twelve part series that I am writing on C.S. Lewis' The Screwtape Letters.

² The Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis, HarperSanFrancisco, 2001, pg. 81.

³ *Ibid.* pg. 84.

