

Jesus and Me? Not Exactly

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(Slightly edited)

The recent debate over the ecclesiastical status of pro-abortion Catholic politicians has sharpened several issues in US Catholic life... Many of these issues have been debated before. What has been a bit surprising, though, is the dramatic confusion in some Catholics' minds about the Church and its place in a Catholic's life.

That the Church is central to Catholic faith has been a settled question for the better part of two millennia. One of the early Church's premier theologians, the great North African martyr-bishop, Cyprian, put it this way in the mid-third century: "You cannot have God for your father unless you have the Church for your mother." By the same token, a Catholic cannot have Jesus as savior and brother unless he or she has the Church as mother. That theme goes back at least as early as Colossians and its great Christological hymn: "He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creatures. In Him everything in heaven and on earth was created, things visible and invisible. All were created through Him; all were created for Him. He is before all else that is. In Him everything continues in being. It is He who is the head of the body, the Church!" (Col 1:15-18).

The Church is neither incidental nor peripheral to Catholic faith. The Church is an integral part of the faith. To deny that is to confess oneself confused, at the very least, about the creed. We do not profess "one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church" every Sunday as a matter of taste, tribal allegiance, or sociological self-definition. We "believe in" one holy, catholic, and apostolic Church as an integral part of our confession of faith in God and in Christ. That's the true "seamless garment."

And that's why many commentators on the Second Vatican Council have stressed the idea of "communion" as a defining characteristic of the Church. In prayer, in reading the Word of God, in our reception of Christ's Body and Blood in Holy Communion, in our service to those people who are "Jesus in a disturbing disguise" (as Blessed Mother Teresa put it), our personal "communion" with the Lord is mediated through that *communio*, that "communion," which is the Church. It's not a question of "Jesus and me" over here, and the Church over there. Because Christ is the head of the body, the Church, our relationship to the Lord and our relationship to Church go together.

Thus when Rhode Island Congressman Jim Langevin says, of the recent debate over Catholic politicians and their position in the Church, "I'm very comfortable with my status, and quite frankly, my relationship with God is direct and personal and the Church is merely a guest in that relationship," he sounds like an untutored Baptist, not a Catholic. No Catholic who understands the symphonic nature of the truth of Catholic faith can say that the Church is "merely a guest" in his or her relationship with God. If the Church —

the body — is “merely a guest,” then what is Christ, the head of the body? Another guest?

I don't mean to pick on Congressman Langevin. His confusions about Christ-and-the-Church-and-me are probably shared by many, perhaps millions, of his fellow-Catholics. Protestant notions of individualism are thickly woven into the fabric of American culture. So it's perhaps not surprising, although it's always a bit disconcerting, when Catholics in the United States talk like Protestants, saying, in effect, “My faith is a matter of my personal relationship to Christ; ‘the church’ is the building where I bear witness to that relationship on Sunday.”

Forty years ago this fall, the Second Vatican Council was finishing work on its central document: the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. Four decades later, it's surely time for every adult Catholic in the United States to revisit that great text, ponder its challenge to individualistic distortions of the faith, and make its teaching our own.

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