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What is the Church?¹

Introduction: “Church”

Today, we see many organizations calling themselves “church.” They use the names “Jesus,” “God,” and “church” very freely. But are they really churches? Who founded and established them? Do you they have any connection to our Lord Jesus Christ and His apostles? Isn’t it possible for the devil, who appears as an angel of light and who twists the words of the Holy Scriptures, to use these “churches” to lead people away from the Truth, God, and the Way to salvation?

The Definition of the Church

We can describe the church in many different ways:

- The Church is the Body of Christ through which He is present and active today
- The Church was founded by Christ through the apostles and maintains a living, historical connection to the apostles through the ordination of the clergy (bishops, priests, and deacons)
- The Church is one, because God is one.
- The Church is holy, because the Lord has made her holy.
- The Church is universal, or *catholic*, because she embraces all people.

We cannot have God as Father without the Church as mother.

We will focus on a definition offered by Saint Clement of Alexandria:

The Church is the divine fellowship of repentant sinners who trust in their Savior and enjoy unity with Him and with one another in Him and through the Holy Spirit.

¹ Based on a lecture by H.G. Bishop Youssef, Bishop of the Diocese of the Southern United States

Let us break this definition down and see what each part means and how it relates to us.

Divine Fellowship

Fellowship means sharing in common the same interest and the same goal. We associate together in order to reach the same aim. Our fellowship, according to Saint Clement, is divine. We are uniting with God Himself. We can understand this as being united with the Holy Trinity.

The Holy Spirit is active in the church through the sacraments of the church. For example, through the action of the Holy Spirit, the waters of baptism are made holy and when we enter into this water we share in our Lord's death and resurrection and we become members of His body. Then we receive the Holy Spirit in the sacrament of Holy Chrism. The Holy Spirit abides in us. The Holy Spirit is one with the Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore, if we become one with the Holy Spirit, we are becoming one with our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit works in the sacrament of repentance of confession. When we confess our sins, we, who were once separated from our Lord Jesus Christ, are now reconciled with Him. The Holy Spirit makes holy the bread and wine to become the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, so that when we eat of these things, we are united with Him.

Why is it important for us to have unity with the Son, Jesus Christ, through the Holy Spirit? In the Son, we become children of God the Father. This is the only way we can say, "Our Father Who art in heaven..." A person not baptized and united with the Son, cannot possibly call God "Father."

The kingdom of heaven is like a great inheritance for us. Is it possible for someone that is not related to you to get your inheritance? Of course not! Therefore, in order to inherit the kingdom of God, we must become His children.

To summarize this point, our common goal as members of the church is to inherit the kingdom of heaven. We can become children of God the Father in the Son and through the action of the Holy Spirit.

We must also point out that the Church is not an earthly organization. If the Church is divine fellowship, then it is an organization that has to do with God. God is holy and heavenly, and therefore the Church is holy and

heavenly. The prayers of the Divine Liturgy, for instance, are meant to raise our hearts and our minds to heaven. The Church gives us so many ways (through the sacraments, through the Holy Scriptures, through prayer and fasting) that lead us to simply uniting and being with our Lord Jesus Christ.

Repentant Sinners

Saint Clement did not say that the Church is the divine fellowship of saints, martyrs, believers, or holy people. He said that the Church is the divine fellowship of repentant sinners.

We are all sinners. No one is without sin. Saint John the apostle said that if we claim that we are without sin, than we are liars.

Sin means death. Sin means darkness. There can be no fellowship between evil and righteousness or light and darkness. So, if we are all sinners, how can we have fellowship with God the Father, who is righteous, light, pure?

This is why the word “repentant” is important. Only through repentance, can we have unity with God. There is a difference between repentant and unrepentant sinners. Only repentant sinners are members of the Church! Those who do not live the life of repentance have separated themselves from the Church.

Saint John the Baptist prepared the world to receive the Lord Jesus Christ by telling them, “Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!”

Just because your name is on the membership list, or just because you come to church every Sunday, or just because you come to activities in the Church, you may still not be a member of the Church. I must watch my actions and repent of my sins constantly in order to be a true member of the Church.

Also, we should not be surprised when we see others making mistakes in the church. The Church was established exactly for sinners, to lead them to healing and to repentance. We should not judge our neighbor, but only examine ourselves. We do not know how God judges the heart, and if others are repenting of their mistakes and sins.

Trust in their Savior

The members of the Church must trust in their Savior. Our faith in our Lord Jesus Christ or our belief in God is what we share in common in the Church. Saint John wrote his gospel for us that we might believe in our Lord Jesus Christ and have eternal life. We must believe in His words, in His promises, and in His commandments without doubting anything. The devil might try to make us doubt the promises of God. These doubts will be an obstacle to receiving eternal life. We must trust our Lord Jesus Christ, and know for sure that if we follow the commandments of God, we will be saved. The apostles and disciples had this kind of trust and faith. When they were called with the simple words, "Follow me," they left everything and followed our Lord. They left everything because they trusted Him. The Church is built on this rock of faith: Jesus is the Christ and the Son of the Living God.

Enjoy

One of the main characteristics among Christian believers is joy. The members of the Church enjoy their unity with our Lord Jesus and with one another.

Since the time of the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, the angels appeared to the shepherds and told them that they had news of great joy. The wise men from the east saw the star and rejoiced. Our Lord Jesus Christ promised His disciples that they would have great joy, which no one could take away from them. Indeed, after the Resurrection, they were filled with great joy.

Saint Paul was imprisoned and he wrote a short letter to the Philippians. He was in prison and he told them, "Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice!" Can you imagine that even in the time of suffering, Saint Paul had joy and encouraged others to rejoice?

Also in Acts 5, the Jewish leaders beat the Apostles and told them not to preach the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. The apostles did not leave them angry or wanting to get revenge. They actually left rejoicing that they were worthy to suffer for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, the Christian should always have joy. Grief and sadness should not find its way into the heart of any Christian. It was said in the early centuries of the Church that when a non-believer returned to his house

joyful, he would be asked, “What happened? Did you meet a Christian today?”

As real Christians, we should not find the Church as boring. If we find that the Church and her services are boring, then there is something wrong with me, because I cannot enjoy the presence of God. I must examine myself and see why I am not enjoying unity with God and with the other members of the church.

In all conditions, we should be experiencing the joy of our Lord Jesus Christ in our hearts.

We should enjoy unity with one another in order to enjoy unity with God. Saint John told us in his first epistle that if we love God, but hate our brother, then we are liars. Our love for God is shown in our love for others.

Before baptism, we were individuals. Individuals do not share anything with anyone else. The individual only cares about himself or herself. The Church is not a church of individuals. The Church is the one Body of Christ. Therefore, when I am baptized, I go from being an individual to becoming a member. It means that I cannot survive outside this Body. Some people say, “I don’t have to go to church. I have a good relationship with God, and I don’t have to deal with other people at church.” This is a lie. The members of the Body cannot say that I have no need for the other members. If we separate from these members, then we are also separating ourselves from the Head, Who is our Lord Jesus Christ. The members will support one another.

Also, any fellowship without our Lord Jesus Christ is not the Church. If we have meetings together, we should ask ourselves, “Is Christ present?” If the answer is ‘no,’ then we are not being members of the Church.

Conclusion

The Church is not just a building. The Church is not just a gathering of some people who call themselves a church. We should memorize this definition by Saint Clement, to really understand what the Church is and how we can become true members of the Church.

Glory is due to God forever. Amen.