

We have grown used to people who have problems with “organized religion” and “the institutional church,” who say that they are spiritual but not religious, and who pick and choose from things as light as aromatherapy and the less demanding forms of meditation to cobble together a personal devotional observance. This sort of thing can seem fluffy and irritating. But some people who have moved away from churches and synagogues are more serious in their search, and their disenchantments are real and grounded. We should pay attention to them.

The scandals in the Catholic Church had to do with more than the sexual abuse of children and young men (and, less frequently, young women). They had to do primarily with bishops who seemed more concerned about the way this might reflect on the institution (if the truth were known) than about those whose lives had been blighted. One can see how someone might look at these cowardly people who are said to be successors of the apostles and decide that any truth worth living for might have to be sought, and found, elsewhere.

My own Orthodox Church has its share of scandals. One in my own jurisdiction has to do with the gross misuse of money, much of it collected for charitable purposes, by chancery officials. It has involved stonewalling on the part of responsible parties and infighting among bishops, as well as the attempt to silence and threaten priests who protested-threats that didn't work. A great many priests and a couple of bishops have demanded an honest accounting, and some healing may come of it. A beginning has been made toward remedying a situation that has made many priests and laypeople distrust the church's administration, but whether it will end in a satisfactory way is unclear.

My point is that it is too easy for some of us who stick with the church to say, “Where else have we to go?” That was said of Jesus Christ, not of the institution. These days there are many other paths a seeker might choose—not only other churches (all of which have their own share of sorrows), but an honest, individual, inquiring search that might or might not end up leaving the searcher open to the truths of the gospel. Such an individualistic course is a great loss, I think, where the life of the sacraments and spiritual counsel is concerned; but I can see how someone might end up there.

We excuse the institution and its representatives too easily. One of my teachers, the late historian and theologian John Meyendorff, pointed out that Jesus' denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees, the representatives of organized religion at the time, can—and should—be understood as a criticism of a similarly complacent and self-satisfied Christianity.

One woman I know came from a home where she and her sisters were frequently beaten by her father, who was a bipolar alcoholic. Her mother was passive in the face of this horror. My friend told me once that she was afraid to have children. Knowing her, knowing what she had apparently learned from her own difficult childhood, I felt that she would not only be a good parent, but an even more attentive one, better at avoiding the infliction of pain, than someone who had not gone through her experience. But I understood her fear. That was the only home—and her parents the only parents—she had ever known.

Despite the failings of the institution, I remain committed to it because I have been influenced personally by many serious, holy men and women who were themselves nourished by a church that has many flaws but also many saints. A rich experience of the church can anchor you, despite the frustrations. The venality and cowardice of some—even many—bishops can't make me leave the company of such people, or make me forget such people as Mother Maria Skobtsova, who was martyred by Hitler for helping Jews, or St. Silouan of Mount Athos, or St. Seraphim of Sarov, whose radiant life took place during a bad period in the history of Russian Orthodoxy.

And, of course, Roman Catholics can point to similar heroic and compassionate figures. But what if your experience and knowledge of the church is not very deep or rich, and you aren't even aware of these people, or the depth of your tradition? It isn't necessarily that you weren't paying attention. The state of preaching in both Orthodoxy and Catholicism and the level of serious adult education are usually pretty abysmal. (That's one of the things that unite us.) What if your experience is confined to your parish, your priest, and, marginally, your diocese? What if, like my friend, this is the only home you have known? When you see corruption at that level, and a way of living that simply contradicts the gospel, both its letter and its spirit, it is easy to see why someone might reasonably say, “No thanks; I'll look elsewhere.” And while it is tempting to blame the spirit of the age for people who wander away, it really isn't that simple. The millstone doesn't belong around the neck of the Zeitgeist (the spirit of the age). That's a false consolation. The church, and those of us who are supposed to represent it, shouldn't be let off the hook so easily.

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