

What does it mean to belong to the Church? (Jeremias)

[Ξένες γλώσσες / In English](#)

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1.



If people believe in Christ, read the

Gospel, but don't want to belong to the Church, aren't they still good Christians?

2. No! Being Christian doesn't mean that we believe some things theoretically, but rather that we live in the Church. Florovsky puts this very well, and we quote him here: 'Christianity from the very beginning existed as a corporate reality, as a community. To be Christian meant just to belong to the community. Nobody could be Christian by himself, as an isolated individual, but only together with «the brethren,» in a «togetherness» with them. *Unus Christianus—nullus Christianus*. Personal conviction or even a rule of life still do not make one a Christian. Christian existence presumes and implies an incorporation, a membership in the community.'

This must be qualified at once: in the Apostolic community, i.e. in communion with the Twelve and their message. The Christian «community» was gathered and

constituted by Jesus Himself «in the days of His flesh,» and it was given by Him at least a provisional constitution by the election and the appointment of the Twelve, to whom He gave the name (or rather the title) of His «messengers» or «ambassadors.» For a «sending forth» of the Twelve was not only a mission, but precisely a commission, for which they were invested with a «power» (Mark iii, 15; Matt, x, 1; Luke ix, 1). In any case as the appointed «witnesses» of the Lord (Luke xxiv, 48; Acts i, 8) the Twelve alone were entitled to secure the continuity both of the Christian message and of the community life. Therefore, communion with the Apostles was a basic note of the primitive «Church of God» in Jerusalem (Acts ii, 42).

Christianity means a «common life,» a life in common. Christians have to regard themselves as «brethren» (in fact this was one of their first names), as members of one corporation, closely linked together. And therefore charity had to be the first mark and the first proof as well as the token of this fellowship. We are entitled to say: Christianity is a community, a corporation, a fellowship, a brotherhood, a «society,» *coetus fidelium*'.

1. Why do we say in the Creed that we believe in the Church ('I believe...in one... Church'), since the Church is visible, as we've defined it but faith, as Saint Paul says is proof of things unseen (see *Heb.* 11, 1)?
2. In the first place, the verb 'believe, which we say in the Creed, has more of the sense of 'trust'. So we have to trust in the Church, in this divine organization - divine, not human- within which resides the Grace of God. But the Grace of God, which resides in the Church and in all those who are sanctified by the Church, isn't visible. And it's this, the fact that the Grace of God isn't visible, that makes the Church an object of faith. Because it is the custodian of invisible divine Grace and it requires faith to accept what we can't see.

And then, even though the Church is visible, in the sense that it embraces all the Orthodox Christians living in the world, it's also invisible, since it includes all those who've departed this world in faith and sanctity and are now in heaven. So the Church lives and exists both in heaven and on earth and, in one aspect, the heavenly, the 'Church triumphant' as it's known, is invisible, whereas, as the 'Church militant' it's an earthly, visible and historical community. But, whether on the earth as militant or in heaven as triumphant, the Church is a communion of saints.

1. Where in the Scriptures do we find the idea that the Church is, at the same

time, in heaven and on earth?

2. In the words of Saint Paul, where he says to the Christians: 'But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. (*Heb.* 12, 22-4).

1. According to this, can we divide the Church into visible and invisible?

2. No, the Church can't be divided. We quote what Ioannis Karmiris, Professor of Dogmatics, says so well on this question: 'The Church must not be divided into the invisible and the visible. Because there's one and only one Church, though it consists of two elements which are joined seamlessly: on the one hand the divine, spiritual and invisible; and on the other the human, material and visible. In precisely the same way as divine and human nature were united without confusion in the Person of Jesus Christ. Just as, in a living organism, the soul can't be separated from the body, the spiritual from the human and material, so, in the Church, the divine and spiritual element can't be separated from the human and material, which is the external expression of the former and the necessary organ for the saving energies of the Church among people.



So on the one hand the Church is a divine, spiritual, invisible and eternal institution, but on the other it's a historical community of people which can be described, experienced and seen. Yes, the Church is invisible, because its Head, the Lord, is

invisible, as is the Holy Spirit Who resides within it. Also invisible is the indwelling divine Grace, which justifies and sanctifies and saves. The Church also has its invisible part in heaven and so the mystical Body of Christ is made up of both the heavenly and earthly parts. This is why the Church is a spiritual entity for its one divine Head and for the one Holy Spirit Who guides it in the way to all truth. But it's also, and at the same time, the visible and tangible Church Militant on earth, working for our salvation. It transmits Divine Grace through our senses, it has worship and external organization (in which God and people act and interact), leaders and led, that is the pastoral hierarchy of bishops and the flock of the faithful, all the devout and impious, indiscriminately, the pure and the sinners. (Σύνοψις τῆς Δογματικῆς... p. 81).

1. How can we be sure that the Grace of God resides in the Church?
2. First of all, from this: the Head of the Church is Jesus Christ, Who is God and Human, full of Grace and truth and He also fills His Body, which is the Church, with the same Grace and truth (see *Jn.* 1, 14-17).

Saint Paul says of Jesus Christ that God the Father: 'And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all' (*Eph.* 1, 22-3).

The same Apostle says to the Shepherds of the Church: 'Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood'. (*Acts* 20, 28).

1. How can we be sure that the Grace of God still resides in the Church today and that it'll do so till the end of the world?

A. From the words of Christ Himself: 'I will build My church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it' (*Math.* 16, 18); and 'And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age' (*Matth.* 28, 20). And Saint Paul adds: 'to him [God the Father] be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, unto the ages of ages. Amen' (*Eph.* 3, 21).