

“Holy Catholic Church, Communion of Saints”

Ephesians 2:19-22; 3:20-21

My grandmother died this past Tuesday. Our family will be heading to Ohio to grieve and celebrate this week. It's a joyous thing: she loved and followed Jesus. And she brought my dad into the world, raised him up into a good man, and sent him off to college and to marriage and to fatherhood.

I've been thinking lots about these movements of family since she died. I'm imitating her with my own family. Ellie and I brought our boys into the world and into our family. We are trying to build them up into the young men they're meant to be. And our hope is, some day, to send them out into the world to love and serve their families and neighbors.

The family of God is the same.

To be the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, is to be brought in, built up, and sent out. Maybe some of you can hear our up, in, and out theme here. That's exactly God's desire for us. That we'd be brought into the family. Built up and prepared for his presence and mission. Sent out to fill the earth with his glory.

Let's take a look.

First, to believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, means that you've been brought in.

Paul says in his letter to the Ephesians (2:11ff) that they used to be on the outside. They were strangers. People who were a long way from Jerusalem--the center of God's action and the place where God's temple stood. People who were a long way from God's promises. They didn't hope and pray that God would make Abraham's many sons and daughters into a great nation---a nation that God would use to bring blessing to the whole world. They didn't hope and pray for a king to sit on David's throne forever. They were hopeless and godless.

But now they're not foreigners and strangers (19)! They're fellow citizens!

I quickly learned, when we moved to Korea several years ago, that I could never become Korean. I could learn the language. I could live there my whole life. But no matter how hard I

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tried, and no matter what my documents or passport said, I would not be Korean. That kind of broke my heart a little bit. But then I just decided to enjoy Korea’s wonderful food and their great coffee culture, and enjoy my time there.

But it did make me think of a boy named Gustavo; a kid in my school growing up. His nickname was “Guga.” He was from Brazil, but his family became US Citizens. Sometimes he made fun of me. He always ended up with the pretty girls---the ones I liked. He was proud and sometimes mean. So I got back at him. In two ways. The first one, I’m proud of. He had a pretty sister. Guess who became her boyfriend? The second way I got back at him was awful, and I’m ashamed of it. One time when he was being unkind to me, I shouted at him: “Oh yeah, well the Constitution says that you can never become President of the United States, cause you weren’t born here!”

He was an American, but he wasn’t fully included in every way. He didn’t have the same status as someone who was born an American.

But Paul says that even though we Gentiles from many different nations used to be outsiders, we are full citizens in God’s one household. You see, God finally did to us Gentiles what he did to the first Jews---the members of Abraham’s family. Abraham was a stranger and foreigner and a worshipper of pagan gods. And the One God called him out and brought him in close (Gen 12) and made his family a nation, a people, a household. And God promised Abraham that God would one day bring in people from every nation and family on earth through Abraham’s family (Gen 17).

Abraham was a stranger, and he was brought in---he and his family and the nation they became. We were strangers, and now we are brought in! When we say “I believe in the holy catholic church,” we’re saying, literally, “I believe in the called-in and set-apart, universal and from every nation of the earth, gathering of God in Jesus Christ, through the Spirit.”

And he’s made you part of the communion of saints by gathering you not only with those who are alive today, following Jesus---but also with Abraham and his daughters and sons who trusted that God would send Jesus, but died before he came; and also with everyone who followed Jesus when he came, but who has died. If you’re following Jesus, you are vitally connected with my grandmother, who died on Tuesday, trusting Jesus. Her body awaits its resurrection. But her spirit is with the same Jesus that we follow today. And that means that when we are brought in, by pure grace, not even death can take us out.

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So we’re brought in. But we’re also, secondly, built up.

Paul says that we all--Jews and Gentiles who belong to Jesus--are built together into a temple (21). The Jews were gathered together and formed into stones in God’s temple by the work of the prophets. The Gentiles were gathered together and formed into stones for the same temple by the apostles---“sent ones”. When the prophets and apostles had done their gathering, bringing in Jewish and then Gentile stones, Paul says they were placed beside Jesus main cornerstone of God’s temple. And then, as they are gathered together, Jew and Gentile, people from every tribe and tongue and nation are piled on top of Jesus and the prophets and the apostles until the temple is built higher and higher and wider and stronger.

And you realize what the goal is, right? The goal is that, just like the temple of Solomon was filled with God’s glory, God wants the whole earth to be filled with his glory---for all creation to become the temple of God, with living stones praising and serving him everywhere! (See 1 Pet 2:4-8; 2 Chron 7:1) That’s why Paul, a Jew, shouts for joy about what God is doing among the nations at the end of Ephesians 3! |To him be glory in the church---the one assembly of God’s people!--and in the Messiah Jesus, throughout every generation, forever and ever!”

How does this “building up” happen? At least two ways. First, Jesus does it all by himself. Or rather, in collaboration with his Father and Spirit. But the point is: God does it without us. God selected you to be a living stone in his temple before the world was made. And he made and shaped you to be just the stone he wanted. Even when you had become a mis-shaped stone in a faraway place. Ephesians is so clear about this: it’s all by God’s grace from beginning to end. We can never be proud of ourselves: God selects us and makes us the holy stones we are in Christ alone.

But then, God uses his holy catholic church to keep building us up together. We are chosen and precious (1 Pet 2:4) because of him alone. But Paul says we are still being built up (Eph 2:22). This is how Christianity works. We are made worthy by Jesus and his grace alone. And we are being made worthy together--to be a temple that’s built up in majesty and holiness so that the fullness of his presence and glory can be present and on full display.

The “building up” is still happening, and lots of it happens in local churches like ours. We have a unique opportunity to be built up together as many nations. We have a special opportunity as a multicultural and international church to live life with, and honor, and serve,

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and embrace, and learn from, people that don't always look, talk, eat, think, and act quite like us. It's going to happen to the one holy catholic church worldwide sooner or later. We get the chance to experience it now, right here in Zurich. And as we get built up together, our city can see a temple of Jesus rising and even see the Spirit of God filling us with the beauty of holiness.

But for this “building up” to happen here, we've got to commit to each other. We do this in a thousand small ways week by week. But one of the most basic ways we commit to this building project here in this place is by becoming a member of this church. By taking vows, making promises to each other and to the Lord. By saying “Jesus, these are the people I will be built up with. Use them to shape me into the living stone you want me to be, and use me to help shape them for your temple and for your glory.” To be a member of the one holy catholic church, the communion of saints, is to be a member of one particular holy communion of saints: one specific church. You're not strangers and auslanders to God's family. So don't be a church auslander. Be members together here, as the most obvious way of expressing your membership everywhere in the holy catholic church. If you're struggling with that, come talk with me.

Third, we're sent out. Brought in, built up, and sent out.

There many places in the NT that speak explicitly about our call to continue to gather people from every nation. But in Ephesians Paul celebrates and shouts it without explicitly telling us about it. He says (3:20) the task isn't done yet. He wants God to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine. Why? To bring glory to him *in the church!* As it assembles, and as it gathers new people and assembles them! In every generation, throughout all the world, and for all time (3:21).

To be holy means not just to be cleansed from sin and to leave our sin behind. To be holy means to be energized and set apart and sent into God's mission!

To be catholic means not just that we're united with Christians everywhere; it means that we are partnered with all Christians everywhere in the mission of making disciples of all nations!

To be a church means not just that we are assembled; it also means that we are sent to gather and assemble more and more and more people, so that Jesus has more and more living stones in his worldwide temple!

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To be part of the communion of saints means not just that we go to heaven when we die. It also means that God’s people live to make Christ known, and die to make Christ known. When they die, they pass the torch on. And then, from heaven, they cheer us on (Heb 12:1).

The torch is now in our hands, church. We’ve got light to show and hope to proclaim and people to gather in---so that they too can be built up and sent out.

What are we going to do, IPC? We’ve got to *go*.

We’ve got to think and talk and pray together about how we’re going to *go*, to whom we are going to go. And then we’ve got to go. You all have people in your lives that know you, like you, and trust you. You’ve got to go to them. You’ve got to form partnerships with one another to go and gather these people whose lives you are already touching. You’ll have to be thoughtful, courageous, wise, patient, generous. But you’ve got to go. Being part of holy catholic church, the communion of saints is not a long way of saying “I go to church.” It’s a way of describing your most fundamental identity and mission in this life. The most joyful thing about your life. The most challenging thing about your life. The most dynamic and hopeful thing about your life. It’s a movement out. We will be focusing on this outward movement in the next couple of years.

If we say we believe in the holy catholic church, we aren’t just brought in and built up into a temple. We are sent out, so that the whole world becomes a temple for the glory of Jesus.

Conclusion

He’s made you holy by forgiving your sins and setting you apart to bring him glory. He’s made you catholic by connecting you with every follower of Jesus, Jew or Gentile, everywhere on planet earth. He’s made you church by assembling you together into his temple. And he’s made you a communion of saints--an assembly of those on earth and in heaven.

Do you believe in the holy catholic church, the communion of saints? Are you ready to live like it?

1. Not foreigners but fellow citizens and members of his household
2. Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of a temple filled with God’s glorious Spirit

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I am a visitor here in Switzerland. It's my home now. But I am not a Swiss citizen. It's president and executive council and government has authority of what I do here, and I enjoy many of its benefits. But I'm not a citizen. Your president is not my president. I can be drafted to serve in the US military. But the Swiss military has no claim on me. If I disturb the peace of this canton and my gemeinde, the Swiss authorities can ask me to leave. I'm here, and I hope to be here for a long time. But I'm not Swiss. I'm not a tourist. I live here. But I am an Auslander.

In a very real sense, if you are not a member of this church, our elders are not your elders, our deacons are not your deacons, and Sam and I are not your pastors. When Jesus Christ, the true Senior Pastor of his church, asks me to give an account of how I oversaw and shepherded the flock of IPC church, it is the members of this church he's asking about. The ones who have said “yes, you will be my pastor, these will be my elders, and this congregation will be my family.” I am responsible for how I treat all of you, whether you are a tourist here once, whether you're here for 3 months, 3 years, or 30 years. But it's the members of this church that are the sheepfold over which I am shepherd.

Don't be a church Auslander.

If you are following Jesus Christ, you are part of his worldwide (catholic) house, where he dwells in glory, a building he fills up with his Spirit. What a privilege! If you are following Jesus, you are one of the stars that was shining in the sky when God told Abraham to look up and see how many daughters and sons he'd have. If you have given Jesus your life, it's because he moved heaven and earth and history and nations and cultures in order to find you, way far off, and bring you into his one family.