

## Are baptized Catholics who don't practice still members of the Church?

**Q.** Dear Father Francis, I have several close relatives who are baptized Catholics but no longer practice their faith. Are they still members of the Church? How do we continue to belong to the Church at a time when many feel tempted to step back, disengage or walk away altogether?

**A.** Dear Friends, This question rarely comes from mere curiosity. It almost always comes from a place of love. Many have experienced the quiet ache as a parent, a sibling, a spouse or a friend who wonders what has happened to a faith once shared with a loved one.

We carry memories of baptisms, First Communions, confirmations and weddings. We also carry the unspoken hope that what once took root might bloom again.

When someone we love no

longer practices the faith, we are not merely asking about where people fall into different categories. We are asking about communion.

We wonder: Has something been severed? Has something been lost beyond recovery? Are they still part of us? Are they still part of the Church?

### WHAT BELONGING MEANS

The Church addresses this concern carefully, and she does so with hope.

To belong to the Church is not merely to have one's name

recorded in a parish register. Nor is it simply to identify culturally as Catholic.

The Church understands herself as a communion, a living body drawn together by Christ Himself. St. Paul writes, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (1 Cor 12:27). A body is not an idea. It is organic. It is relational. It is alive.

This means belonging has both a foundational reality and a lived expression.

Fundamentally, incorporation into the Church through baptism establishes a real bond. The Church does not treat that bond as fragile or easily erased.

God's covenantal actions are not casual. When Christ claims a person, He does not do so provisionally. He does so forever.

Yet the lived expression of belonging matters deeply.

The early Christians "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). Their communion was visible. It was enacted. It was nourished by Word and Eucharist.

To step away from that shared life does not nullify belonging, but it does weaken the experience of communion.

Many families feel this tension in concrete ways. A son who once served at the altar no longer attends Mass. A daughter who sang in the choir now describes herself as spiritual but not religious. Conversations become cautious. Invitations are declined. Holidays carry both joy and quiet sadness.

Holy Scripture does not pretend that distance is foreign to the life of faith. After the crucifixion, the disciples were not radiant witnesses.

They were hidden behind locked doors, "for fear" (Jn 20:19). Fear altered their lived communion. It constricted their witness. Yet it did not dissolve their belonging.

What is striking is how Christ responds. He enters the room. He stands among them. He says, "Peace be with you" (Jn 20:19). He does not chastise them or revoke their mission. He restores it. He breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (Jn 20:22).

Belonging, in that moment, is sustained not by their courage but by His fidelity to them.

### CHRIST GATHERS US TO HIM

This is crucial for us to remember. The Church is not held together by the emotional steadiness of her members.

She is held together by Christ's ongoing initiative. He gathers. He reconciles. He sustains.

Consider St. Peter. His denial was not subtle. "I do not know the man" (*Mt 26:72*). Yet after the Resurrection, Jesus does not replace him. Instead, beside a charcoal fire that mirrors the setting of his denial, Jesus asks, "Do you love me?" (*Jn 21:15*). Three times Peter responds. Three times, he is entrusted again with care for the flock.

Failure only wounded the relationship. It did not erase it.

Or consider the Prodigal Son. When he returns, rehearsing his apology, the father interrupts with an embrace. "While he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion" (*Lk 15:20*).

The son had distanced himself from the life of the household. But he had not ceased to be a son. His identity endured beneath his absence.

These passages do not trivialize disengagement. They do not suggest that participation is optional or irrelevant.

Jesus speaks plainly about abiding. "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (*Jn 6:56*). The Eucharist is not an accessory. It is communion with Christ Himself. To withdraw from this communion is spiritually serious.

Yet even in *John 6*, we read that "many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him" (*Jn 6:66*). Jesus does not force their return. Instead, He asks the Twelve, "Will you also go away?" (*Jn 6:67*). Peter answers with words that echo through every generation: "Lord, to whom shall we go?"

You have the words of eternal life" (*Jn 6:68*).

Belonging rests there. Not on flawless understanding. Not on unbroken enthusiasm. But on the recognition that Christ alone gives life.

### STILL PART OF THE CHURCH

In our present time, stepping back can feel easier than remaining. Cultural pressures are intense. Trust in institutions has eroded. The Church herself has faced scandal and internal conflict.

Some struggle with teachings that challenge modern assumptions. Others feel hurt by personal experiences. Some simply drift amid the demands of work, family and constant distraction.

Each person's story is different, but each deserves compassion rather than caricature.

So, what does it mean to belong to the Church today?

First, it means remembering what the Church is. She is not merely an organization with policies and programs. St. Paul writes that Christ "loved the church and gave himself up for her" (*Eph 5:25*). The Church's origin is sacrificial love. Her holiness flows from Christ's self-gift, even when her members require purification.

Second, belonging means persevering in communion. The *Letter to the Hebrews* urges believers not to neglect "to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another" (*Heb 10:25*). Community strengthens faith precisely when faith feels thin. Isolation magnifies doubt. Communion steadies it.

Third, belonging means

hope. "Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (*Rom 5:5*). Christian hope is not optimism about sociological trends. It is trust that the Spirit remains active in our lives. It is confidence that grace can reach hearts in ways unseen.

If you find yourself praying for loved ones who no longer practice, remember that your role is not to win arguments. It is to remain faithful. It is to embody the peace Christ speaks into fear-filled rooms. It is to trust that seeds planted long ago are not lifeless.

Remember also that belonging is not solely an individual matter. The Church prays constantly for all her children, no matter where they are or what they've done. At every Mass, the living and the dead are remembered. No one is outside the reach of this intercession.

And if you yourself feel weary, perhaps even tempted to disengage, remember this: The Church does not require perfection before participation. She always offers mercy.

Belonging, ultimately, is covenantal. It is participation in Christ's own life. It is communion sustained by grace.

When others step back, remaining becomes a quiet act of courage. When others drift, praying becomes an act of love. When history feels unstable, fidelity becomes an act of hope.

The Church has endured fragile moments throughout its history. Through persecution, confusion, reform and renewal, she has remained because Christ has remained. "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (*Mt 28:20*).

That promise is not rhetorical. It is the foundation of our belonging.

So, are your relatives still members of the Church? Yes. But more importantly, they are still loved by Christ. They are still remembered in prayer. They are still within the horizon of grace.

And what does it mean to belong in a time of disengagement?

It means trusting that Christ's hold on His people is stronger than our wandering. It means remaining in communion even when enthusiasm fades. It means believing that mercy is patient, that hope is justified and that the story of return is never closed.

And that, my friends, is reason enough to remain.

*Oremus Pro Invicem!* Let us pray for one another! ■



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