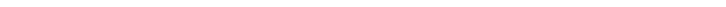


# THE CHURCH IS JUST A BUILDING?

*Posted on March 1, 2024 by Brother André Marie*



For some strange reason, in numerous conversations I have had with Protestants, the same statement has been made over and over by the other party while discussing the nature of the Church: "The Church is not a building!" The observation is most often accompanied with a special sort of emphasis — the cultivated certitude, the dead-eye look, the relish of one enlightening a fellow human being trapped in the depths of ignorance, topped off with a dramatic pause at the end allowing the auditor to savor the profundity of it all. It is same rhetorical flare that often accompanies that other great revelation: "You know, it's not the heat; it's the humidity."

The curious thing is that this arresting disclosure that the Church is not a building is often said at the beginning of a discussion of what constitutes the true Church, and it has never been in response to me saying, "You know, the Church is a building."

I am convinced that these various interlocutors all heard this negative definition of the Church from preachers versed in the same "ecclesiology"—which is probably the wrong word because what they learned is less like theology and more like bad rhetoric about the Church. My reaction to this claim has invariably been to agree with it and to point out that this higher, more spiritual, and less material reality that we are both calling "the Church of Christ" is actually the one to which I belong. After all, my objective in these conversations is — of course — to communicate to the other party that the one true Church of Jesus Christ is indeed the Catholic Church.

But I think I have been wrong in my approach all along. Consider:

"And I say to thee: That thou art Peter; and upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

"Now therefore you are no more strangers and foreigners; but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and the domestics of God. Built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone" (Eph. 2:19-20).

"I will build..."; "built upon": this is not pure symbolism. It would be much more true to say that the churches (oratories, chapels, etc.) that we worship in are the symbols. Regardless of the practical functions that they fulfill as places both of worship and of shelter from the elements, these earthly

edifices stand as symbols of the more sublime reality that Jesus came to build, the one that extends beyond our time and space into Purgatory and Heaven itself.

My preferred hand missal, the Saint Andrew's Daily Missal, has this gem of a paragraph in its brief commentary for the Feast of the Dedication of the Basilicas of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul (Nov. 18; spelling and styles as in original):

The Dedication of St Mary Major at Rome was celebrated on August 5, that of St Michael on September 29, St John Lateran on November 9; the local feast of the dedication of all the consecrated churches has been fixed in many dioceses about this time; finally, today we celebrate the dedication of the Roman basilicas of St Peter and St Paul. These dedication feasts are fittingly placed in this season: after having celebrated the Kingship of Christ, we have remembered two provinces of His Kingdom: the Church triumphant (All Saints) and the Church suffering (All Souls): **our material churches, carved with chisels and mallets (Vespers hymn), are an image of the Church militant.** [Emphasis mine.]

The "Vespers hymn" mentioned by the Saint Andrew's editors is the *Cœlestis urbs* Jerusalem. It is one particularly beautiful part of the liturgy for the dedication of a church, which, in its Mass, Divine Office, and pontifical ceremonies of consecration, is itself a sublime ceremonial edifice.

Let us not forget that Jesus was derided by some of His unbelieving critics not only as "the carpenter's son" (Matt. 13:55), but also as "the carpenter, the son of Mary..." (Mark 6:3). When the creative Logos became Man, He through whom all that is made was made had as His earthly father a carpenter from whom He received that trade. It is most fitting that the humble Patriarch of Nazareth, the great Saint Joseph, toiled at this particular craft, for he was an image of the Eternal Father, the Creator of all things, "of whom all paternity in heaven and earth is named" (Eph. 3:15).

Jesus came as a builder. His saving mission included building a Church. The Church is a building.

But what a building! It is built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, that "stone which the builders rejected," who "is made the head of the corner" (Mark 12:10), and "upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (Eph. 2:20). Atop that foundation other stones are laid. Speaking to Christians, Saint Peter, who knew something about rocks, refers to this same Old-Testament passage that Jesus and the

Evangelists invoke (Psalm 117: 22) and builds upon it. We Christians, he says, come to Christ, "as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen and made honourable by God"; then follows the apostolic admonition: "Be you also as living stones built up, a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ" (I Pet. 2:4-5).

In I Cor. 3:9-17, Saint Paul employs similar imagery, concluding his exhortation with these words:

Know you not, that you are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? But if any man violate the temple of God, him shall God destroy. For the temple of God is holy, which you are.

There is a tropological reading of all this "building" language (see *The Four Senses of Scripture* if you would like an explanation of the word tropological). If we are the living stones upon which the Church, the Temple of God, is built, then we must be chiseled, hammered, shaped, scraped, and put into our place, whether visibly resplendent in the structure or ingloriously crammed into some crevice to be seen by God alone.

In other words, in this life, we must be both perfected by prayer, penance, and patient suffering, and fit into our place by accepting our proper vocation or state in life and virtuously fulfilling its duties. God willing we do so, we will overcome our enemies (the world, the flesh, and the devil) and become pillars in the New Jerusalem, that glorious heavenly temple the Apostle saw from Patmos (Apoc. 21:1-5a):

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth was gone, and the sea is now no more. And I John saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice from the throne, saying: Behold the tabernacle of God with men, and he will dwell with them. And they shall be his people; and God himself with them shall be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes: and death shall be no more, nor mourning, nor crying, nor sorrow shall be any more, for the former things are passed away. And he that sat on the throne, said: Behold, I make all things new.

The title of this *Ad Rem* is ironic, if only slightly so—because of the word "just." The Church is a building, as I believe the Scriptures make amply clear. After all, it is built by Jesus Christ. But it is a building that is

also a bride, and a bride that is also a city, and a city that is also a kingdom, and a kingdom that is also a Mystical Body.

Let us make sure to remember all this when someone says to us, "The Church is not a building!"

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**[Featured:](#)** *West Front of Rouen Cathedral at Sunset*, by Henri Vignet; painted in 1903.

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