

CHURCH AS COMMUNITY



Community

Jesus is the true vine, we are the branches. We bear fruit by living Jesus' words and doing the Father's will.

Our experience of a family, a sports team, or a group of people working together toward a shared goal gives us a sense of unity. We become part of something larger than us; at the same time, we experience the valuable contribution we can make as individuals. The image of church as community communicates these same notions.

Community is an important and popular image of the church. Jesus himself described our mystical union with him and with one another when he said:

I am the vine,
You are the branches.
Whoever remains in me, with me in him,
Bears fruit in plenty;
For cut off from me you can do nothing.
John 15:5

The Lord wants us to be one with him and, because of this union, to be one with others. The second chapter of *The Constitution on the Church* discusses the image of the People of God. The church is a fellowship of life, charity, and truth that Jesus uses for the redemption of all (No. 9). Paul teaches that all of us are members of the Lord's

body, each with individual talents and duties, but all united in the Holy Spirit to Jesus, who guides us.

The image of the community underscores our common fellowship in the power of the Spirit. It emphasizes common goals, ideals, and intimate sharing. We form a community with a life, tradition, and story of its own. We are responsible for continuing the Lord's work of building up the community and serving others.

The image of mystical communion shows how the church is the presence of Christ in the world through a community of faith. The church is a *visible* community made up of united individuals. The *invisible* Lord works through his body to continue his work of redemption. The Spirit forms the church into the People of God.

Church as Community or Mystical Communion. Most of us know what it means to be a member of a close family or to play together on a team or to participate with friends in common activity. We sense a spirit of unity. We feel part of something larger than ourselves, but we know that as individuals we have an important part to play as well. The image of the church as community evokes these same kinds of feelings and understandings.

Community is a popular image of the church today. Chapter 2 of the *Constitution on the Church* discusses the church as the People of God with a certain common task and mission. St. Paul also considered this an important metaphor when he referred to the church as the Body of Christ (1 Cor 12:12-30). What Paul had in mind is that we are members of Christ's body, each with our own talents and duties but all united in the Holy Spirit to the head Jesus Christ who guides our work. Christian art has often depicted this image with a picture of a vine. All the members (the branches) receive their life from the true vine (Jesus). They are to

bear fruit by living Jesus' words and doing the Father's will.

The image of the church as community stresses the common fellowship of all believers who are united in faith by the Holy Spirit. It emphasizes common goals, ideals and intimate sharing. These individuals form one community with a life, tradition, a story of its own. The People of God who are branches on the vine of Christ and members of his body are responsible for living his life by serving each other and building up the community.

Our first description of the church then, is that it is the presence of Christ in the world through a community of faith in him as Lord and savior. The church is a visible community made up of individuals who are united as members of a body. These members are guided by the Lord as they continue his work in the world. The church is like a vine whose branches derive their life from the risen Lord. They share a common life and are one People of God.

Faith, Friendship and Service

The first model for our consideration is that of **community**. Today it is not uncommon for people to think first of a building when they hear the word "church." Or perhaps they think of "going to church." The earliest meaning of the word, however, described a people of God. The church was the faithful. The New Testament uses many different images to describe the church, but the one that has had the most lasting effect on the church's self-understanding is Paul's description of the church as the body of Christ. Paul was writing to the people living in the city of Corinth. This was a seaport city famous for its sexual immorality. Paul had a great deal of success in the community, but after he left, divisions developed within the Church. There were arguments over who was the most important in the community.

Paul seeks to show them that in the church, all the various gifts and talents within the community are for the good of the whole group:

There are many gifts by the same Spirit; there are different ministries but the same Lord; there are different works but the same God who accomplishes all of them in everyone. To each person, the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good... But it is one and the same Spirit who produces all these gifts, distributing them to each as he wills.

The body is one and has many members, but all the members, many though they are, are one body; and so it is with Christ. It was in one Spirit that all of us, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, were baptized into the one body. All of us have been given to drink of the one Spirit. Now the body is not one member, it is many. If the foot should say, "Because I am not hand I do not belong to the body." Would it then no longer belong to the body? If the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye I do not belong to the body," would it then no longer belong to the body? If the body were all eye, what would happen to our hearing? If it were all ear, what would happen to our smelling? As it is, God has set each member of the body in the place he wanted it to be. There are, indeed, many different members, but only one body...

You then are the body of Christ. Every one of you is a member of it (I Cor. 12:4-7, 12-18, 27).

There are many important ideas in Paul's image:

1. The Church is composed of a wide diversity of people and gifts. This diversity is an essential element in the church. We are not to be clones of one another. Our unique gifts are for the good of the entire community.
2. Although the Church is diverse in its members, it is united by its Spirit. The church is one, not because its members are alike but because of their differences are united by the Spirit at work in each of them.
3. The church is the presence (the body) of Christ on earth. The risen Lord needs

our bodies, hearts, courage, intelligence, goodness, generosity, care, to make himself present through us.

4. Christ's body is made up of people who are not all saints. Thus the church will be a combination of human and divine.

The Spirit that unifies and inspires us is the divine element, but the fragile sinful people who get unified and inspired is the human part.

Paul's vision of the church is one in which the entire community through its unique and varied gifts continues to make Christ present on earth. Perhaps the best way to be part of this body of Christ is to come to recognize the unique gifts that you have to offer, to develop them and give them away. To waste your gifts is to cheat not only yourself, but all who would be served by them. Paul makes it clear that the greatest gift we can offer is that of ourselves, for the greatest of all gifts is love.

The Church as the Christian community is to be known and distinguished as a community of love.

This notion of the church as community places special importance on the local church. The church is not only the pope and the bishops; the church exists wherever the people of God come together in faith. For most people this local experience of faith occurs within the parish. It is within the parish that all the gifts of the community must be used for the good of the whole and all the needs of the community must be ministered to.

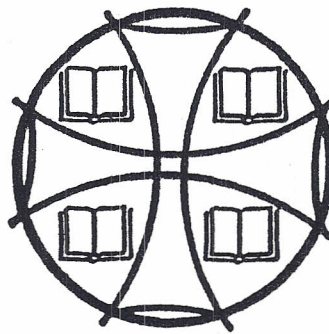
Many people today are discovering that sometimes the parish structure is too large for the experience of Christian community. A growing movement in the church is the formation of small faith communities within the parish. These often meet for prayer, education, scripture, study or social functions. Sometimes these groups will reflect the interests of the people involved: the peace and justice group, teen groups, the

elderly, the divorced or separated, the widowed, etc.

Within the New Testament there are two elements that especially characterize the Christian community. They are to be a community of friendship and a community of service. Both of these elements are critical. The first recognizes the basic human need for friendship and social relationships. Thus parishes will sponsor athletic events, picnics, dances, teen clubs, etc. But the second element reminds us to make sure that we serve those in need, especially the poor and the sick.

Finally, there is one last element to the church as community. The universal church is also a "community" of faith. The bonds of the community are not social or personal but spiritual. Christians are united with one another in a faith which transcends all boundaries of race, language, culture, or nationality. The spiritual connection is sometimes referred to as the mystical body of Christ.

Church as Herald



Herald

Jesus entrusts his followers to preach the gospels to the four corners of the earth.

A herald receives an official message and has the mission to pass it on to others. Jesus himself was an extraordinary herald as he traveled around the countryside proclaiming the good news of God's reign. He commissioned his apostles to go to the four corners of the earth to preach the gospel and to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

The church must be a herald. This image highlights the word of God. Jesus expects his community to continue to preach his good news of salvation and call people to faith and repentance. In word and deed, each Christian must communicate Christ's message.

The Church as Herald

"Hark! The herald angels sing: glory to the newborn king." Remember those herald angels in the Christmas carol? The word "herald" refers to a messenger. The herald angels brought the message of Christ's birth to the shepherds. This notion of proclaiming the message of faith and the word of God is behind the idea of the church as a herald. According to this model, the church is primarily a proclaimer of the good news of faith in Jesus Christ.

This idea of the church has strong roots in the Protestant traditions. The focus is placed not on the church itself, but on the word of God. This idea of church points away from itself to God's word. What is important is not doctrines, laws, sacraments, or even the people themselves. The heart of the matter is the word of God proclaimed for all the world to hear. This is the "evangelical" element of the church. This model of the church has a strong biblical basis. St. Paul writes that "faith begins with hearing." The early church saw much of its mission as proclaiming the good news. Today, we see this mission being carried out by preachers and television and radio evangelists. Some of these men, like Billy Graham, have reached international fame.

The Catholic Church has recently rediscovered the importance of this model. More and more emphasis is being placed on the Bible. Lay people are being encouraged to read and study it. (In the not too distant past, it was almost unheard of for Catholic laity to be encouraged to read the Bible.) The Catholic Church has developed its own television evangelists and placed greater emphasis on the teaching and message of Jesus. This model places great emphasis on "evangelism": proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ. It is extremely important for the church to find new and creative ways to evangelize: to proclaim the message in a way that really affects the lives of its listeners.

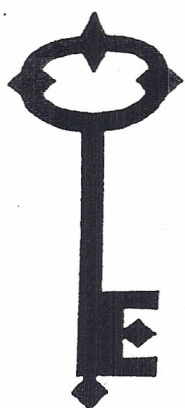
This model, like others, however, cannot stand on its own, especially for Catholics. Its emphasis on the word of God is extremely important, but it runs the risk of substituting words for actions. It can proclaim God's reign without working to build that reign.

Church as Herald. What would you do if you opened a letter from a prestigious university and read that you had been awarded a generous four-year scholarship? After the initial shock wore off a bit, you would want to share your good news with someone, your close friends, parents, classmates or teachers. The church performs a similar task of spreading joyful good news. This image of church as herald—one who receives an official message and is given the mission of passing it on to others. Christians believe Jesus gave the church this commission when he instructed the apostles to baptize and teach in his name. The task of the church is to share the good news that God will the salvation of all people and has accomplished this through Jesus Christ.

This image of church as herald puts considerable emphasis on the word of God. The diagram for herald depicts a cross with one of the four gospels at each corner. It stresses that the church is entrusted with preaching the good news of Jesus Christ to

the four ends of the earth, and that Jesus calls people to respond to his word in faith and come together in a community of fellow believers whose main task is to proclaim the good news of God's kingdom.

Church as Institution, Magisterium, and Hierarchy



Institution

As a symbol of authority, a key calls to mind the church's power to forgive sin and direct activities in the Lord's name.

The Church is, by the will of Christ, the teacher of the truth. It is her duty to give utterance to, and authoritatively to teach, that Truth which is Christ Himself, and also to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the moral order which have their origin in human nature itself (*Declaration on Religious Freedom*, No. 14).

The next model is that of institution. This model is the most dominant one in the minds of many Catholics. When they think of the church, they think of the pope, the bishops, their pastor and priests, nuns, church teachings, etc. These are all key ingredients in the church as an institution. In saying that the church is an institution, we mean simply that it is an organization which has certain structures, standards, teachings and authority. In one sense it can be compared with IBM or General Motors. In order for computers and cars to be built is it necessary for there to be an organization or institution capable of getting the job done. Of course the goal of the church is vastly different than those corporations, but the concept is similar. **A huge body of people with a goal must have some organization.**

The Catholic Church has a hierarchical structure of authority. This hierarchy (literally, "sacred order") is **built on the bishops and the pope. The bishops are considered to be successors to the apostles. The bishop of Rome, the pope,**

is the "first among equals" and the successor of Peter. In this sense, the pope is the head of the universal church. This does not mean that he is the bishop of all Catholics; rather, he is to ensure the unity of the church in matters of faith. Individual bishops have as their task teaching, celebrating the sacraments and governing the church in the local dioceses. Bishops also teach as national bodies of bishops (e.g., the American bishops issued two important documents in the 1980s: one on the economy and the other on peace in a nuclear age). The bishops, together with the pope as their head, govern the universal church as well. Bishops throughout the world meet in synods in Rome on a regular basis to discuss issues related to the universal church.

The official teaching of the church may be communicated in a number of ways. Whenever a bishop preaches, he teaches on behalf of the church. Local bishops may also issue pastoral letters to guide the members of the church in matters of faith and morals. The pope may issue an apostolic letter or encyclical in order to communicate with the universal church on a matter of faith and morals. The most authoritative teaching of the church comes from an ecumenical council which brings together all bishops throughout the world (with their advisors). The most recent ecumenical council was Vatican II, held in the years 1962-1965.

In essential matters of faith and morals, the teaching of the church is infallible (incapable of error). This infallibility belongs to the entire church whenever the bishops concur as a whole on a matter to be believed. It belongs also to the bishops in union with the pope whenever they teach definitively on matters of faith and morals and intend for such teaching to be infallibly declared. The pope also possesses infallible teaching authority when he "proclaims with a definitive act that a doctrine of faith and morals is to be held as such."

The teaching on infallibility is one of the most confusing and difficult in the church. For many people it is simply nonsense: How can any person or persons be infallible? Perhaps it should first be noted that the pope and bishops are fallible, that is, they are human beings capable of error. Their infallibility comes not from a divinely infused wisdom, but rather from the faith of the church. It is the faith of the church that is guaranteed to be true. Put simply, this means that the church's most essential teachings are not just opinions but reflect God's revelation. For example, is Jesus really Lord and Savior? Or is it something about which we can change our minds? The church says that his teaching (as well as others) is infallibly true. It is not something that we think is a good idea: it is part of God's revelation. The infallibility of the pope and bishops is limited to "matters of faith and morals" and reflects only those teachings, which are essential to the faith. The church also notes that a teaching of the pope is to be considered infallible only when declared as such. (The exercise of papal infallibility has been extremely rare.)

Church as Institution. Every organization has an institutional aspect—a formal structure that enables it to accomplish its many tasks. Catholics believe that Jesus founded his church on Peter and the apostles, who derive their authority—an authority of service—from Jesus himself. Clearly appointed leaders and administrators ensure that the gospel is preached authentically through the ages. Catholics believe that the pope is the successor to Peter. Along with the other bishops, he is a pastor or shepherd of souls with the three-fold task of teaching, sanctifying, and governing through service. Ordained priests and deacons work with the bishops to serve God's people.

When we emphasize the institutional aspect of the church, we focus on its external, visible organization: schools, church buildings, foreign missions, hospitals, retreat centers and the like. Without clear lines of

authority, the many charitable activities that go along with preaching the gospel would not get done. The church as institution governs through service and sanctified (makes holy) by administering the sacraments and the sacramentals.

The magisterium, that is the official teaching authority of the church, residing in the pope and the bishops, has a vital function. Our official teachers ensure the authentic teaching of the gospel message.

An institution is a group or organization of people structured in a formal way in order to ensure that a job gets done.

The community of faith called the church is organized to carry on the mission of Jesus Christ. This society has its ordained ministers whose task, like the task of the institution itself, is to serve the members through teaching, making holy and ruling. The supreme authority rests with the pope, the Vicar of Christ, who is joined with the bishops, the successors to the apostles. Priests and deacons work with their bishops in serving God's people.

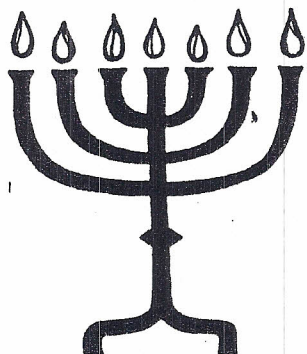
One symbol of the institution church is that of a key. The key is a symbol of authority and calls to mind the church's power to forgive sin and to teach and direct various organizations and activities in the Lord's name.

As institution the church teaches authoritatively in matters of faith and morals. *Sharing the Light of Faith* (the National Catechetical Directory for Catholics of the United States) points out the value of this teaching role:

These teachings give the faithful assurance of truth in their profession of faith and their adherence to moral standards and ideas (No. 69).

The church as an institution also makes holy through the sacraments and sacramentals, and rules by serving all people.

The Church as Sacrament



Sacrament/Sign

"Your light must shine in people's sight, so that, seeing your good works, they may give praise to your Father in heaven" (Mt 5:16).

When we go to mass or celebrate the sacrament of penance or receive confirmation, these are all signs of a deeper reality. They are sacraments. Sacraments are signs which not only point to an invisible reality (God's love and grace), but also make that reality present. Thus, at the Eucharist, we believe that Christ is truly present to us. In penance God's mercy is really given to us. In confirmation the Spirit is truly given to us. The sacraments are signs, but they are not just signs. God is really present in and through them.

The church is also a sacrament. It is not one of the seven official sacraments of the church, but a more basic sacrament. The church is a sign of Christ present in the world, but it is more than just a sign. To some extent it truly is Christ present in the world. (This idea is part of Paul's teaching on the body of Christ which we saw earlier.)

In the sacramental model, the church is most fully and deeply itself in the celebration of the sacraments. Although the church is not limited to the sacraments, it is through them that the church expresses its meaning. It is a eucharistic community in which one enters into a new life of faith (baptism) and lives in the Spirit of Christ (confirmation). It is a community of those in need of healing (anointing the sick) and forgiveness (penance). It is a community served by those chosen for a special ministry

(holy orders) and symbolized by the love of a man and woman in marriage (matrimony).

The sacramental model of the church is a distinctively Catholic one. Although the Protestant churches have sacraments (but not all seven), this model is not one that fits their self-understanding very well.

The strength of this model is that it helps Christians to develop a sense of spirituality and identity through the sacraments. These sacraments continually get us in touch with the most basic elements of faith. On its own, however, this model can be cut off from the real world and the life of the church in the everyday experience of people.

Church as Sacrament/Sign. In the *Constitution on the Church* the Second Vatican Council offered this definition of the church:

By her relationship with Christ the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind. She is also an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity (No. 1).

This definition highlights the sacramental nature of the church. A sacrament is a mystery, an outward sign which points to some deeper, invisible reality.

Jesus is God's great sacrament. He is God-in-the-flesh. He was visible, hearable, touchable, human like us, an outward sign. In him God lived, invisible made manifest. His kind face, his forgiving words, his healing touch showed the glory of God's love. Jesus came as the sign of God's great love, how he understood and forgave human failure, all we have to do is look to Jesus who said, "To have seen me is to have seen the Father" (Jn 14:9).

But where is this Jesus today? Where can we hear, touch and see the great sign of God's love? When Jesus died, rose from dead, ascended into heaven to be glorified at the right hand of the Father, he did not

abandon his people. He left another sign of his presence. This sign is the church—the sacrament of Jesus Christ. As the Father lived in his Son Jesus, so Jesus lives in the church through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This reality is a mystery. Jesus is the mystery of God made flesh, incarnate in history, his Body. The church derives its very life from the continuing presence of the Lord after his resurrection. It is a community for, of and in Jesus Christ. It is a living organism, united in the friendship of the Lord. All members are united in this community as sons and daughters of the Father.

Church as Sacrament/Sign. The Second Vatican Council taught that the church itself is a sacrament:

By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament of intimate union with God, and the unity of all mankind, that is she is a sign and an instrument of such union and unity (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, No 1).

A sacrament is a mystery, an outward sign that both points to and brings about some deeper spiritual reality. Jesus himself is God's prime sacrament. He was visible, human like us. Yet, he was extraordinary, because in him God actually lived. His kind face, forgiving words, and healing touch revealed God's love for us because Jesus is God-made-human.

The church is Jesus' body today. When Jesus died, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven, he did not abandon us. He left another sign of his presence—the church. The church, then, is the sacrament of Jesus Christ, and outward sign of the Lord's presence, but it can be sinful because of its human members. To be an authentic sign of Jesus to Christians and non-Christians alike, the members of the church must live up to their identity as the Lord's presence in the world.

Through its celebration of the sacraments, prayer, worship, good works, and sacrifices, the church shines with the light of Christ. Through its ministry forgiveness, for example, the church serves as a beacon of God's reign, showing the Lord's love to the world. When the church allows the Spirit of love to burn brightly in its members, it becomes a believable sign of God's reign to all people.

The Church as Pilgrim



Pilgrim

Jesus promised to be with his followers during stormy times.

"And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time."

— Matthew 28:20

Life is a journey. Along the way you experience adventures, meet friends, confront good and bad. But the journey is not haphazard. You have a final destination. You are a pilgrim. So is the church. Jesus himself was a pilgrim as he traveled around Palestine, but his vision was steadily fixed on God's reign. He calls his church to remain faithful to him as it moves into an uncertain and at times even dangerous, future. He strengthens his church by promising his continual presence.

Church as Pilgrim. Your life is not yet complete. In front of you, God willing, are exciting discoveries and adventures. You have a career to undertake, friends to meet, perhaps a family to raise. In short, you are a traveler in this life. You are a pilgrim.

The church is also a pilgrim. Although it is the budding forth of God's kingdom on earth, its work is not yet complete. It is like a ship on a stormy sea which has not yet reached its final destination. Along the way individual members might sin and be

tempted to give up the journey, but true pilgrims know that they have the strength of the Lord to guide them on their journey. It is the Lord who helps the members combat the temptations within and without the community as he leads the community to its destiny.

This image of the church underscores the truth that the church as pilgrim is going somewhere. It has the continuing work of remaining faithful to the Lord as it moves into uncertain, even, at times dangerous future. But it has the confidence that the Lord will help it keep steering in the right direction, correcting itself when it gets off course.

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Church as Servant



Servant

The church must serve others as the Lamb of God did when he gave his life for all people.

"Anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be slave to all."

— Mark 10:43

The final model of the church, the servant model, places its focus not so much on proclaiming God's work but on serving God's people. In this context **the goal of the church is to work for love, justice and peace in the world.** Those who prefer this model believe that the church must "die to itself" and serve others. It takes seriously the mandate of Jesus in Matthew 25: "I was hungry and you gave me to drink, naked and you clothed me, a stranger and you welcomed me, imprisoned and you visited me." The church's mission is to place itself at the service of those in need, especially the poor and the oppressed.

According to this model of the church, proclaiming faith in Christ is more than a matter of words or even of God's word. It is following the example of Jesus in reaching out to those in need.

This understanding of the church, has grown and developed immensely in the past few decades. The Catholic Church gave it official recognition when a Synod of Bishops in 1971 wrote:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of preaching of the gospel, or, in other words, of the church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.

What the bishops were saying is that redemption is more than a "spiritual" reality. An essential element in the church is to strive for the liberation of the whole person. This cannot exclude the spiritual, but includes the liberation from hunger, disease, homelessness, psychological oppression, etc.

In many parts of the world the servant church has become, by necessity, the dominant expression of the Catholic Church. This is most true in Central and South America where countless millions of Catholics live in dire poverty and often political repression. From these areas the church has developed what is called a

theology of liberation. The focus of this theology is application of the gospel to the needs of the poor. The church has developed a "preferential option for the poor" by which it evaluates political and social choices in terms of their impact on the poor. There has developed not only a church on behalf of the poor but a church of the poor.

The servant model has grown tremendously in the past thirty years. However, it is not without its problems. The weakness of the servant model is the tendency to lose a sense of identity of faith. Christians must serve the world, but all people are called to do this as well. The servant model cannot lose sight of Jesus Christ as the true liberator of human beings. Likewise, the reign of God will always be much more than human achievement or political and economic development.

Church as Servant. Who makes a good class officer? Is it the person who only seeks the prestige of the office, or the one who tries to use the office to help others? Do you have much respect for an officer who likes to dominate others? Probably not. You probably have more respect for the officer who wants to serve fellow classmates. We tend to have more respect for elected leaders who use their office to help serve our needs and interests.

A valuable image of church is that of servant. It reminds us that the church is supposed to follow in Jesus' footsteps. He came as one "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt 20:28). When the apostles wanted to know what it was like to be an apostle in Jesus' kingdom, he washed their feet to show them that "anyone who wants to become great among you must first be your servant" (Mk 10:43). The church and its members must be foot-washers.

The church as servant must serve others. It has a mission to heal and to reconcile as Jesus did. It must feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, comfort the sick, visit the imprisoned. It must act out of motivations of true concern and love, not out of motivations of personal gain or glory. By serving others, the Body of Christ is a true sign of itself and others that the kingdom of God consist of concern for the least of God's children on a pilgrimage to the Father.

Church as Servant. A popular image of the church today is that of servant. The church must follow in the footsteps of the Master. He came as one "not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:28). Jesus showed his apostles what it meant to be a leader when, at the Last Supper, he washed their feet. Christians must do likewise.

Service is not optional for Christians. The church has a mission to heal and reconcile as Jesus did: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, comfort the sick, visit the imprisoned. Love is the only motive for followers of Jesus. By serving others, the body of Christ truly demonstrates God's reign because it encompasses the lowly, the suffering, and the poor. On its pilgrimage to God, the church can only be a credible sign of God's love by serving others. Heralding the gospel in word is not enough; service backs up the words with active love.