

I Am A Catholic Church

by Father Michael Gilligan

I celebrate my birthday on Pentecost, but I am much older than that. I am born again every time a baby is baptized, every time someone dies in faith.

In fact, I was born about 4,000 years ago in Egypt. I was a small group of slaves, yearning for freedom. I fled from Pharaoh and all his troops. And so it was. God made me what I am. He did great things for me. He brought me through the Red Sea. He led me through the desert, with a cloud by day, a pillar of fire by night. He gave me manna, to nourish my body; he gave me his Word, to nourish my soul. Even though I wandered away, again and again, he led me to safety, to the Promised Land.

Yes, I am the heritage of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob. I am Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah. It was hard for me to hear the Word of God; and I wandered away, again. So, I was led off to slavery a second time, in Babylon. The temple was destroyed. My life was ruined; I spent years in exile. But then my fortune was restored. God let me return home, to the land he gave me. The temple was rebuilt as beautiful as ever. Yes, I am David and Solomon. I am the splendor of Jerusalem. I am the joy of God himself, the daughter of Zion.

But pagans came again, different ones this time. They brought slavery, as they had before. When I saw young men die for God, when I saw the wicked prosper, I knew God would set things right. I believed his promise of resurrection. I looked forward to new life for the dead. I prayed for the coming of the Messiah. Yes, I am Daniel and the Maccabees. I see a vision of the future, and I trust in God all the days of my life.

When the Messiah came, I found him hard to understand and harder to follow. I was torn apart and divided; yet, where else could I go? Who else had the promise of eternal life? Yes, I am Peter, James, and John. I am Matthew, Mark, and Luke. I am Mary, the Mother of the Lord.

I am Jewish. I was born Jewish. I am always Jewish.

I am the Catholic Church, and I wanted to welcome the Messiah. I searched for him. I longed for him, I waited for him. Yet, in the end, it was my sins that brought him down, my guilt that had him crucified. Because I did not listen, because I was unfaithful, because I refused to obey, my Savior died. So it was, and so it is. I was thrown out of the synagogue. And yet, many gentiles welcomed me. They were not chosen by God or favored by him. And still they turned to me, in great numbers. Even though I was persecuted, I grew stronger. I am Stephen the deacon. I am Justin the martyr. I am all those who died, believing in Jesus. I am Irenaeus of Asia, Hippolytus of Rome, Cyprian of Africa. All those who suffer find in me a home.

Soon, God gave me great teachers and many converts, a rich heritage of wisdom, learning, and light. I am Origen and Augustine, Basil and Chrysostom, Gregory and Leo. Against heresies, against schisms, against false teachers, I triumphed. As the Roman world crumbled, I took on all foes; and I won.

I speak Hebrew and Greek, Latin and Spanish, English and Old Slavonic. I speak Creole and Ibo, Inuit and Balinese. My language is the language of faith. All cultures are my own. I am at home everywhere, wherever people believe the Gospel, wherever people turn to Christ and his Father.

Before the sword of the unbeliever, I suffered greatly. Whole nations were lost; whole communities fell. Churches were turned into museums and mosques. Yet, through all the Dark Ages, I kept learning alive. My monasteries sustained the faith for future ages.

So, the peoples of northern Europe came to join me. Yes, I am Patrick of Ireland, Augustine of Canterbury, Boniface of Germany, Cyril and Methodius of Eastern Europe, Vladimir and Olga of Ukraine. Against all my enemies, I endured and prospered, against the Viking, the Hun and the pagan.

In the Middle Ages, my enemies were vanquished. It was a world of faith. I am Dominic and Francis of Assisi. I am Aquinas and Albert the Great. I am the refuge of the philosopher, the strength of the scientist, the solace of the scholar.

Yet. I needed to reform. As I found it hard to follow Moses, Isaiah, and Jesus, the words of the new prophets were hard to hear. So, I suffered again, from the Reformation, from the Enlightenment, from the age of revolution. I became rigid, set in my ways, a firm fortress, closed against the world. Yet, even in this time, there was reason for hope. I reached out to new nations and new peoples. Converts joined me, as never before, from Latin America to the Philippines, from China to Africa. I became more universal, more catholic than ever. I am Ignatius Loyola. I am Francis Xavier, I am Matteo Ricci. I am the martyrs of Korea and Uganda; I am Andrew Kim and Charles Lwanga. My home is in Manila, in Nagasaki, in Mexico City.

In the present age, I am ever ancient, ever new. I am a small community in Brazil, living by the Bible. I am an undocumented worker, in the fields of California. I am a soldier in Lebanon, prepared to fight to survive. I am a Nigerian, working as a missionary. I am an Indian in Calcutta, building a school. I am a Vietnamese, building a new nation. I am one, holy, catholic and apostolic. I am all over the world, united in one faith and one baptism. I have never been greater or stronger. In Austria, I am *Silent Night*, a gentle welcome for the Lord. In Detroit, I am *Holy God, We Praise Thy Name*, a strong song of thanksgiving. In Durban, South Africa, I am *We shall Overcome*, a living prayer for justice. At the Vatican, I am the Sistine Choir. In Ethiopia, I am the cry of a hungry child.

Everything I do is done in the light of faith, that all will be restored in Christ. I am Palestrina, Byrd, Vivaldi, and Mozart. I am Dante, Erasmus, Copernicus, and Thomas More. I am Michelangelo. But I am also a member of a choir, a journalist, and a printer. I enter data in a computer. I prepare advertising for publication. I am a salesman. I serve people in a restaurant. I am a construction worker. And I am the Catholic Church.

I am Al Smith and Danny Thomas. I am Robert Kennedy and Malcolm Muggeridge. I am Pope John XXII and Mother Theresa. I am Dorothy Day and William Buckley. I am also a young mother, teaching her child. I am a student, working his way through school. I am a letter to my senator, a vote in a ballot box, a word of hope on the phone, a visit of kindness in a hospital, a business transaction, made in honesty and fairness.

I am the pine fragrance of an Advent wreath. I am the fresh incense at a Midnight Mass. I am the touch of ashes on the forehead, at the beginning of Lent. I am the bright candlelight of Easter. I am the oil of gladness at baptism and confirmation. I am the holy water at a funeral, gently falling on the casket.

I am the volunteer worker in a soup kitchen, the gentle nurse in a hospital, the inspiring preacher, the wise counselor, the helpful teacher, the loving father. In all these people, I am the Catholic Church.

You know my adversaries in the past. You know my adversaries in the present. Pharaoh is dead. Nero is silent. Stalin has turned to dust. Through it all, I remain what I have always been, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. What I bind on earth is also bound in heaven. What I liberate in this life is set free for eternal life. If you would be wise, then learn from me. If you would be holy, then walk the way of my saints. If you would live forever, then share my sacraments and join my prayer of thanks, Sunday by Sunday.

I am the suffering servant of Isaiah. I am the chosen of God.
I am the remnant of Israel, the New Jerusalem, the temple restored.
I am the flock of Jesus, the unity of the Spirit, the gift of Pentecost.
I am the heritage of the fathers. I am the witness of the martyrs. I am the joy of the saints.
You call me Mother. And you are right. I bring you to birth. I nourish you. And I sustain you.

If you believe in God, if you believe in Jesus, believe also in me. The faith I offer you is the pearl of great price. Hear me and live. Come what may, the gates of hell will not prevail. I am still young. I will endure to the end of time.