

## LIFETIME MEMBERSHIP?: CONFIGURED TO CHRIST IN BAPTISM

Do you remember the 1980's commercial for the Black Flag Roach Motel, a device used to capture unwanted insects? "Roaches check in, but they don't check out." Musical fans easily recall the **Eagles** 1978 mega-hit *Hotel California*, including the eerie lyric: "You can check out any time you like, but **you can never leave.**" These two blasts from the past came to mind while reading some disturbing statistics about Mass attendance, compiled as U.S. Dioceses prepare for their *Ad Limina* visits to Rome later this year. Consider Providence RI, where weekly church attendance has **declined by a stunning 57%** since the year 2000. What happened—where did these people go? Ought they to be considered **non-practicing Catholics**, **lapsed Catholics** or simply **ex-Catholics**? It sounds crass, but if you no longer desire to be part of the club, may you leave? While it seems like an easy question, the reality is far more complicated. And not without some measure of controversy.

In order for "a formal act of defection from the Catholic Church" to occur, several steps need to occur. It cannot simply be a whim when someone is frustrated because Father preached a lousy homily or changed the Mass times—"I'm outta here!" Thankfully, people do not typically react that way. Still, many "check out" for a time even if they feel quite differently some time later. According to a 2006 notification from the Pontifical Council for the Interpretation of Legislative Texts, a **formal act of leaving** the Church requires three distinct steps: a) the internal decision to leave the Catholic Church; b) the realization and external manifestation of that decision; and c) the reception of that decision by the competent ecclesiastical authority. The decision may be manifest by a letter to one's bishop.

When considering the possible rupture of ecclesial communion, an individual must manifest an act of the will to break the bonds in three key areas: faith, sacraments, and pastoral governance. Thus, a person **no longer believes** what the Church teaches, **refuses to participate** in the sacraments, and **no longer adheres** to Church governance. Those are the bonds that undergird our relationship with the Catholic Church. One who is guilty of **apostasy** does not merely question or dissent from one of her fundamental teachings, but effectively has abandoned the faith completely. In what arguably appears to be **counterintuitive**, the notification states: "heresy (whether formal or material), schism and apostasy **do not** in themselves constitute a formal act of defection if they are not externally concretized and manifested to the ecclesiastical authority in the required manner." Spoiler alert: Folks, it **ain't easy** to leave the Church!

Here's the catch. No matter what you believe, say or do, you **cannot be unbaptized**. The Church does not recognize—**quite rightly**—any mechanism whereby one could **annul** his or her own Baptism. Why? Because it incorporates us in the Church and leaves an indelible mark on the soul, as do the sacraments of Confirmation and Holy Orders. It is entirely possible to reject any effects of grace from one's own Confirmation. But it is impossible to "annul" it, to erase it as though it did not happen. Because it did. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: "Baptism incorporates us *into the Church*" (CCC # 1267), and "Baptism seals the Christian with the indelible spiritual mark (*character*) of his belonging to Christ. No sin can erase this mark, even if sin prevents Baptism from bearing the fruits of salvation" (CCC #1272). My question remains: Is "once baptized, always baptized" equivalent to "once Catholic, always Catholic"?

There is a **difference** between **long-term absence** from the practice of the faith and **defection** (formal or otherwise) from the Church. Here is the key phrase from the authoritative interpretation of the Church's Canon Law: "...the formal act of defection **must have more** than a juridical-administrative character (the removal of one's name from a Church membership registry maintained by the government in order to produce certain civil consequences), but be configured as a true separation from the constitutive elements of the life of the Church: it supposes, therefore, **an act of apostasy, heresy or schism.**" While Baptism effects an indelible mark on our soul, for all intents and purposes, sadly many people do leave the Church and do so definitively, never to return. In making a formal defection difficult, the powerful configuration of a soul to Christ through Baptism is upheld. Theologically and sacramentally this is true.

Yet, many see this as an underhanded way to retain people "on the books." In several European countries, these statistics carry civil effects. People pay a civil "worship tax" which is applied to their specific religious

branch unless they specifically “opt out.” Many have done just that; the Church could stand to lose millions of Euro (€) as a result. Cynics contend that this ruling was in part to avert this turn of events. In the Church, as in life, the **door swings** in both directions. For us priests, there are **few greater joys** than facilitating an individual’s return to the sacraments after many years— we call it “reeling in a big fish.” God is good and His grace is abundant. No matter how wounded those bonds may have been, people **do** return to the practice of the faith. May we work assiduously, both to live our Catholic faith with integrity and proclaim it with hope and joy.

- The Catholic bishops in the **Philippines** are taking a strong stand in hopes of forestalling an effort to legalize divorce in the most Catholic nation in Asia. The Philippine Constitution (Article XV, section 2) states that “marriage, an inviolable social institution, is the **foundation of the family** and shall be protected by the State.” The bishops support ways to “work to modify existing laws on marital separations” in a path that “respects the Constitution.”
- The **Twin Cities Marathon** certainly takes a bite out of both our attendance and Sunday stewardship. Our capital city makes it extremely difficult to make it to Church! Please consider placing a little extra this Sunday in the collection to help recover some of the losses, which have historically reached nearly \$10,000 difference from a typical Sunday. I am all for running races and being a good neighbor, but we also have to pay the bills! Special envelopes are in the pews.
- Tiny **Finn Hill**, son of Chris and Jessica Hill of Lakeland, FL was born on May 21 at **24 weeks’** gestation, weighing just 1 pound, 2 ounces. And he recently went home following several months in the neo-natal intensive care at Nemours Children’s Hospital in Orlando. The work of NICU doctors and nurses is truly amazing.
- “**No children allowed**”— this was a sign seen on a Chinese Church recently. Life in China is extremely difficult for Catholics, and so far, it appears the recent Vatican-China accord (the contents of which were not made public), has done little or nothing to improve the situation. The ruling Communist Party has made it illegal to hold Sunday School classes for anyone under the age of 18, though they maintain that anyone can attend church services.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel  
Rector