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"I Follow Christ, But I'm Not a Christian." Really?

Revelife recently featured a great post about author Anne Rice renouncing Christianity though stating that she still believed in Christ. I can see why this is popular: Christianity isn't exactly cool, and members of the Church are not always (or even usually) perfect. But this is no reason to abandon your fellow believers, indeed to do so is hypocritical and elitist.

The poster (ModernMelody) had a good response:

Whether it's the dumb Christian t-shirts, the annoying Christian pop music, or the politically charged nature of many vocal Christians, there's always going to be something you dislike about Christianity. But these things do not describe the whole of Christianity, and many people who call themselves followers of Christ are just as capable of doing unlikeable things in Jesus' name. The bottom line is that we're all sinners, all broken vessels in need of a potter.

And I would like to second this response with a bit of tradition. St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo lived in the late 300s, early 400s AD. When dealing with a particularly zealous group of schismatics (those who would separate themselves from the Church), he always enjoined unity. Here are some reasons:

1) Separating is elitist. Many groups (such as the Donatists and Pelagians) thought the Church was too full of sin and desired to separate themselves to create a real church of the pure. The problem with this is that it is inherently saying that you, the separatist, are better than the others. But really, all men and women are equal. No one's life or soul is worth more or less than another person's. To claim that you are better and you have it right is to set yourself above others, which really is just a flagrant display of pride, the root of sin. (Adam and Eve first sinned when they thought they knew better than God about whether or not to eat the apple)

Yes, Westboro Baptist Church is unsavory. But they are not the only Christians, and to separate from the "term" Christian because of people like them is throw every other Christian under the bus. It says: "Some Christians are politically undesirable (or flat out

wrong), so I will not besmirch my own holy (or politically correct) image by being associated with them." This makes the mistake of roping all Christians and Christianity with the parts you don't like of it and setting them up as inferior to you and your practices. Even if they're the Westboro Baptists, it's still pride on your part not to earnestly love your enemy.

2) Staying in the Church is a teaching opportunity. Augustine was adamant that it took more love to love sinners within the Church than to up and leave. Essentially, it is not charitable to leave others who are in error out in the cold. What if we tried to engage with Westboro Baptist Church instead of asserting that "naw, we're just better than them"?

It takes much more effort and charity to stay and work with those who need it. It takes...selfless sacrifice...kind of similar to what Christ did. Even if you're just a Catholic who is angry about the sex abuse scandal (which is completely legitimate to be upset about it). It doesn't help anyone who is struggling or burdened to just leave. Staying and supporting those who are hurt and hurting actually helps. How are institutions going to change if members don't do anything?

Everyone makes mistakes; we are all fallen and broken. And if we go off on our own renouncing formal Christianity, we are just as liable to sin as those other Christians simply because we are human. So when in doubt, side with unity. (The Church is the Body of Christ. Who are we to divide it?)

And now for my own reasons: if you leave, you leave the tradition of the Church. It is so sad to see people falling away in droves or joining other groups because the whole history and wealth of handed-down knowledge becomes lost to that person.

What if more people studied the Church Fathers? Perhaps ancient wisdom would be enough to soften their hearts into love of others, even others who are broken members of the Church.

For more on why we shouldn't kick people out of our Church, click here.

What do you think of leaving the Church or the label "Christian?" What benefits are there to staying in or opting out?

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