

The abuse crisis and abandonment by the Church

Openness to those who left

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Taken from his 2024 Lenten sermon in the Catholic parish of St. Georg in Bocholt, Germany, the author describes how he deals with the phenomenon of numerous Church members who have chosen to step away in recent years. Membership in the German Church is inextricably linked to payment of "church taxes," amounting to ten percent of contributions one pays to the state. A person's Church membership or non-membership is made known to the state, and the reason for abandonment is sometimes purely economic. Other times it goes hand in hand with decisive distancing from the institutional Church. How should we view this and what should our attitude be?

For years it was difficult for me to accept the fact that people could suspend their church membership without having any contact with their parish. When receiving notice from the civil authorities, I would write personal letters but rarely received responses. And almost no one took me up on my offer of a conversation. I reworded these letters and tried to make them entirely positive. They contained no rebuke nor expressed disappointment, and did not announce any penalties. I also created a simple questionnaire that showed my interest in their reasons and circumstances for leaving, even enclosing self-addressed stamped envelopes. This indicated our hope for their feedback and a desire to understand the reasons for leaving the Church. Then, we began including a QR code to allow people to instead respond to the questionnaire by cellphone. This increased response numbers considerably and brought me to a new way of thinking and feeling.

Never have so many left the Catholic and Evangelical Churches as in recent years. The appointments at the local courts, where this step is taken, are full. If it were possible to do online, many more would complete the process, and this alone is reason enough to try to find the underlying cause of the issue.

What exactly does it mean to "leave the Church"?

First, it should be clear that it is not **truly** possible to leave the Church, since all the baptized belong to the Church. Baptism cannot be annulled. However, we can distinguish between visible and invisible dimensions of the Church. The invisible Church is like a sea in which you swim like a fish and cannot leave, even if you want to. The visible Church is a secular institution with precise contours and accompanying boundaries: buildings, property, meetings and services, doctrinal documents, and rules.

It is possible to leave this visible Church, and the reasons for doing so are varied. Often, it is the result of an evolution spanning several generations. Religious socialization no longer takes place during childhood and teen years. And at some point, God and faith no longer

have any meaning. When people here look at their tax returns, many ask: Why should I pay church taxes if I don't believe and don't go to church anyway? Apparently, this is the main reason people leave the Church. But there is also a more recent phenomenon: It is the various scandals and painful Church abuse cases in our country. Even people who want to be Catholic and Christian no longer recognize themselves in the Church and turn their backs in protest.

How do we address this phenomenon?

In Germany, a person must go to a local court for a simple administrative act in order to leave the Church. The court then informs the diocese, which forwards notification to the parish. The person's name is not removed from the baptismal registry, since baptism remains valid. It is only noted that he or she has left the Church.

This is our challenge as a parish: what attitude should we assume?

In the past, the Catholic Church reacted from a position of strength. Leaving the Church was seen as a complete renunciation of the Church and the faith. For example, there was a refusal then to conduct funerals for those who had left. However, pastoral care in more recent years has made it more evident that many people leaving the Church are critical of the institution and no longer want to pay church taxes, but they still remain believers and do not want to break contact with it altogether.

This has slowly changed the Church's attitude toward these people. Many parishes now allow those who officially left the Church to baptize their children, act as godparents, and marry in the Church. And a few years ago, the diocese of Münster officially authorized Church funerals for those who had left the Church.

But it must also be acknowledged that many leave the Church because they want to distance themselves permanently because of the abuse, together with other reasons, many turn away from the Church with disdain and anger. They do not want to have anything more to do with "this association." I do not think the Church can do much about this and needs to realize that many people are turning their backs on it forever.

Alarming trends

Here are statistics about our parish of St. George in Bocholt. From 2016 to 2021, 1025 people left the Church, or about six percent of parishioners. Of these, 658 are men and 367 are women. The number of young women leaving has increased significantly in recent years. Even greater numbers would have left if the local courthouse had not been temporarily closed due to the pandemic and if it had offered more appointments.

It hurts to receive many notifications. Sometimes I read the names of people I know well. Things have clearly changed. In the past, the Church could address those who left from a position of superiority. Now, it has to justify its many mistakes and weaknesses, and it is increasingly losing public esteem. Many Catholics tell me that they find themselves under fire in their workplaces because they are still in the Church. People often say to a young secretary in the diocese: "Why do you work for the Church? That's just crazy!"

Making contact and listening

What can we do at the parish level? I think we can do a lot! In recent years, more and more people have been returning the questionnaire, usually anonymously but sometimes with their own name. They can also do it online, and I now have a valuable collection of more than 300 completed questionnaires.

In the questionnaire, we ask for some personal information: age, gender, etc. This is followed by six boxes in which a person can indicate their reason for leaving: Rejection of the Church as an institution/Irrelevance of faith/Economic reasons /specific issue at the level of the larger Church/specific issue at the level of the local parish / Other.

Although I have not yet analyzed responses in detail, a clear trend is evident. In the past, the motives were mainly economic. Instead, today, it is more a rejection of the Church as an institution.

Some respondents also add a few comments and others write long letters. Here are excerpts:
A 60-year-old man: "The attitude regarding the role of women in the Church. The way abuse cases are handled (attitude toward victims and especially toward perpetrators)."

A 39-year-old woman: "The views of the Catholic Church are no longer in step with the times. We need to re-evaluate. Priests should be able to marry and have a normal family life, like Protestant pastors."

A 22-year-old man: "As a homosexual, I cannot identify with the Catholic Church."

A 61-year-old man: "I am upset by the way the 'leaders of the Church' behave toward law and order. I am proud to have taken this step and drawn a line."

We could go on, and these people often put their finger on the wound. It is not pleasant, and of course we could respond to each topic. We could reject some criticisms and others we could confirm. But it is more important to first accept the criticism. I carefully read all the letters, short or long, to grasp what the people who leave us have in mind. I try to write to those who include an address.

A new way of thinking

I am grateful to everyone who completes the questionnaire. The responses have had a profound effect on me. They have encouraged me! First, because people took the trouble to answer the questionnaire. This shows how much they still care about the Church. Second, to improve, we need to recognize mistakes and failures. We know this from the practice of penance, which starts with the awareness of having done wrong and repenting. Only then is healing possible.

People who respond are expressing what many others think, for example about how the Church treats homosexuals, the limited role of women, how money is handled, and the Church's exercise of power. We should learn from this and change. In my opinion, the Roman Catholic Church has failed to carry out many necessary reforms since the 1970's. In

some respects, it has even gone backward from what was already achieved. We could have progressed much without breaking with tradition.

The fact is that a chasm has been created between modern society and the Catholic Church. We have simply become intolerable to many of our contemporaries. The only thing that can work in our favor is a return to the origins and to Jesus' message. Those who have left can help us do this. We must accept their criticism and take it seriously.

Openness to those leaving the Church

Many who have left the Church emphasize that although they have left, they do not reject their faith. Many continue to feel they belong to the Church and firmly uphold Christian values. Here again are some quotes from the questionnaires:

A 49-year-old man: "Of course I still believe in God! Thank you for the offer to continue attending celebrations. I will keep it in mind. I will gladly consider coming back in the future."

A 69-year-old woman: "My leaving the Church had nothing to do with my faith in God."

A 39-year-old man: "Yes, I was a Christian and will always be a Christian even after leaving. I am a believer and very devout, and I cannot imagine my life without God. Faith is hope and guidance at the same time... As a Church community, you make a huge contribution to the cohesion of our society and our community. I would like to thank you for that."

A 47-year-old man: "I continue to believe in God and to attend Church and masses. I take this opportunity to thank you for the pleasant memorial service for my deceased father."

Of course, such encouraging messages are only a few voices. Many who have left the Church are clearly its opponents and do not know what to do with faith and worship. But there are many who think long and hard before taking the step of leaving.

Respect, cooperation, solidarity

I would conclude with three attitudes that we can adopt as a Church and as a community.

First, those who left the Church deserve respect and esteem! They have not simply disappeared and are not *ipso facto* adversaries. Sometimes – or perhaps often – I think they live values compatible with the faith and the Church, such as helping the needy, trustworthiness and honesty, etc. Although I am convinced it is better to remain in the Church and work for renewal, there is also a positive and constructive aspect to protesting abuse. Those who leave reject the fact that abusers have not been stopped, demand equal rights for women and homosexuals, criticize wasteful spending, and want a Church in tune with today's world. This is all good!

Second, we can work together with these people. Someone provocatively asked: '*But where do those who leave the Church go?*' They go out into the world! We can hope they bring with them the Christian values that they breathed for decades, values so needed today. Especially charity. There is never enough of that. Thus, we can see them as potential friends and companions for a better world. It is important to open ourselves to them and seek points of contact to do good together. Pope Francis strongly urges us not to be self-referential. Let us

not be self-centered! Let us go into the world and work with others for good, whether they are members of the Church or not!

Third, those who leave the Church are baptized Christians. We are all children of God. This brings me back to the beginning: baptism cannot be erased. There is a subliminal bond between all baptized people, regardless of their membership in the visible, institutional Church. In God's eyes, all men and women are brothers and sisters. Psalm 15 says: 'Lord, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy mountain?' The answer cannot be found in references to religious affiliation: 'Those who walk blamelessly and do what is right and speak the truth from their heart; who do not slander with their tongue and do no evil to their friends nor heap shame upon their neighbors'. In God's eyes, what matters is truthfulness and justice.

I would certainly like people to be Christians and Church members! I am grateful and happy to be a Catholic. Even if I were not a priest, I would never leave the Church. As the Church of Jesus Christ, we are filled with so many gifts and have everything we need to lead a good, meaningful life. I am grateful to all those who are a living part of the Church -- sometimes with difficulty, but always with much love and faithfulness! However, we should not assume negative attitudes toward those who have left the Church but rather feel connected with them and seek good in them. I believe that God neither condemns nor rejects. Rather, God loves all and values every effort to live a good life. Thus, the Church must also be open to those who have distanced themselves from her.