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Title: Can we still love and serve
the church?

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Can we still love and serve the Church? *Fr Eugene Duffy, All Hallows College, Drumcondra, Dublin 9, writes:*

I was at a party recently and as I sat comfortably ensconced in my armchair, a middle-aged lady, of comfortable means, sat on the arm of my chair and began to tell me what she thought of the Church. She went through the familiar litany of scandals and added, with a certain pride I thought, that her two children no longer went to Mass and that she couldn't really blame them. So, as she knocked back her 'Jimmy and white', I didn't argue with her- it wasn't the time for making neat theological points about the Church being the people of God, or that all of us make up the Church and share a responsibility for it. However, in the meantime I have thought about what she said and the barely concealed anger with which she delivered her piece.

I'm quite sure that she represented a position held by a lot of people today about the Church. She was angry because she, like so many of her generation, was led to believe that the Church in its public representatives, clergy and religious, is good and holy and even if there are weak links you don't say anything about them. At present all the pent-up feelings trapped in silence for so long are being allowed to flow. People today are able to speak about the contradictions they see between what is being said and what is being done, and they are not hesitant in voicing their perceptions.

Understandably, many find it difficult to cope with the stories of financial greed, the abuse of power and sexual deviance among clergy and religious. These revelations raise many issues. For many they provide the ideal excuse to abandon the Church – giving a more plausible excuse than they ever had before. For others they provide a reason for not contributing financially or joining voluntary groups. For others again it may be a good reason not to risk the commitment of priesthood or religious life.

The scandals and the folly of the Church today are clear for all to see and the difficulty of membership is real, wherever one situates oneself- as the parishioner in the pew or the preacher at the lectern. Those who expect the Church to be perfect will be disappointed. Yet the challenge to our faith is to see in the midst of the reality of sin, weakness, in all kinds of abuses and folly, something of God's presence and love at work.

Paul liked to speak about the message of Christ crucified as a scandal to the Jews and folly to the Greeks. We have learned to

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cope with that scandal because we have sanitized it. We have become so familiar with the cross as the emblem of our religious beliefs that we forget the real horror and contradiction of claiming that the power of God was being embodied in a disgraced criminal hanging on a cross. Even those who knew him fled the scene of execution because, among other things, they knew how horrendous a spectacle it would be. It was neither a credible nor a flattering end to a life claimed to be lived exclusively in the service of God.

Today a Church which is so utterly human, so weak and scarred by terrible failures, is indeed a difficult object for our faith. It can easily and understandably appear as scandal and folly. But just as Paul was able to see in the scandal and folly of the crucified Christ God's power at work, we are still invited today to see in the Church God's presence and plan at work. This has been a recurring theme in the readings from Ephesians in the liturgy of recent weeks. It is through the Church that God's plan is being made known to all and encompassing all of creation.

The first chapters from Ephesians are not an invitation to naïvete. Just as our respect for the full humanity of Christ must also hold in tension our faith in his complete divinity, so too, our ready acknowledgement of the sinful aspects of the Church's members should not blind us to its divine mission and the fact that God uses it in the advancement of the divine plan here and now. That is a mystery – it is God's design and it is hard to fathom.

In all of the painful and confusing events of recent years there may be a real maturing taking place which enables us to acknowledge in an open and healthy manner that all is not well in the Church and that it never will be perfect. It is not to condone or to encourage what is wrong or evil, but it is to acknowledge that even in the midst of this evil and suffering God is still at work. If we try to deny these painful realities then all we can expect to find is more pain and confusion. Instead we have to be honest and seek God and God's plan in all the mess which is part of the Church. This, too, may enable us to be more tolerant with those who have been sources of embarrassment or scandal for us. Those whose sins have been made public are as loved by God as those whose sins are secret. Paul could proclaim with confidence his love for Christ and him crucified. He knew divisions and scandals in the communities which he had founded and yet he could call these communities, and the whole Church, the body of Christ and express his love for them. It is still that body and we are called to love and serve it in all its members, strong and weak alike, locally and universally.