

Catholic

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO 'BE CHURCH'?

As a Church, we have to be one person—one body—as well as an instrument to bring it about.

BY GREG FRIEDMAN, OFM



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The more I read and talk to people on weekend retreats or in parish adult-ed classes, the more conscious I am that we have an “identity crisis” on our hands when it comes to knowing what being Catholic or being a Church member is all about.

There have been so many changes in Catholicism in the last 50 years that lots of people feel confused. And when the topic is sacraments or morality or dogma, somehow the confusion always seems to come back to a vague sense of rootlessness. Perhaps the example of growing up might help us explore this idea. As I grow to adulthood, I need to be in touch with my childhood, so that I don’t lose my roots, the helpful things I learned when I was little. And, at the same time, I need to understand my present, in order to make the right choices now and in the future. In the same way, clarifying our image of Church—from both our Catholic past and present—may help ease our “identity crisis” as Church.

THE CHURCH WE GREW UP IN

We all have lots of memories—good and bad—about the Church we grew up in. For many of us the “big C” Church is wedded in our memories to the *church building* where we spent a lot of Sunday mornings.

My childhood *feelings* about that church are important. It was big, often dark, and peopled by heroic, distant figures. Somehow, God was part of that distance as well. I can remember the fear, going to confession in the dark church on a Saturday night. That, too, was part of my image of Church.

But there were also feelings of reverence, awe, and mystery. I recall colorful celebrations like the annual Forty Hours. There would be incense, candles, and the procession with that curious umbrella over the Blessed Sacrament. As a server, I was assigned my hour before the tabernacle and felt proud to be there in the presence of the Lord.

The long, dark, high-ceilinged church of my youth represented the kind of church structure that I learned about in the *Baltimore Catechism*. The pope was the head, far away in Rome. With him were cardinals and other high officials. In my city lived the bishop, but I rarely saw him, except on one or two occasions, and that was usually from a great distance.

And finally my parish priest was also a figure at a distance—far up on the altar and with his back to me through a lot of the Mass. He lived in the house attached to the church and moved in and among those far-off scenes around the sanctuary. As I grew up, he became a friend, but I also came to see him as an authority, someone with all the answers.



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