

What is the Church?

The Church to me is all important things everywhere. It is authority and guidance. It is love and inspiration. It is hope and assurance. It is God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. It is our Lady and St. Joseph. It is St. Peter and Pius XII. It is the bishop and the pastor. It is the catechism and it is our mother leaning over the crib teaching us our evening prayers. It is the cathedral at Chartres and the cross-tipped hut on Ulithi. It is the martyrs in the Coliseum and the martyrs in Uganda, the martyrs at Tyburn and the martyrs at Nagasaki. It is the wrinkled old nun and the eager-eyed postulant. It is the radiant face of the young priest saying his first Mass, and the sleepy boy acolyte with his soiled white sneakers showing under his black cassock.

It is the spire glimpsed from a train window and the cruciform miniature of a church seen far below on the earth from an airplane. It is six o'clock Mass with its handful of unknown saints at the communion rail in the gray dark and it is pontifical High Mass with its crowds and glowing grandeur in St. Peter's. It is the candle-starred procession after evening Benediction in St. Patrick's and the rosary, the night before the burial, at a stuccoed funeral parlor in Los Angeles. It is El Greco's soaring Assumption in Toledo and it is the primitive pink and blue angels on a mission altar in Peru. It is the Sistine Choir and it is the May procession of Chinese children singing the *Regina Coeli* in Peking.

It is the Carthusian at prime on Monte Allegro and the Jesuit teaching epistemology in Tokyo. It is the Scheutveld Father fighting sleeping sickness in the Congo and the Redemptorist fighting prejudice in Vermont. It is the Benedictine, the Augustinian, the Passionist, the Dominican, the Franciscan. It is all religious and especially the great unnamed Order of the Parish Priest.

It is the Carmelite Sister lighting the tapers for vespers in the drear cold of Iceland and the Sister of Notre Dame de Namur making veils for First Communion in Kwango. It is the

Vincentian Sister nursing a Negro Baptist dying of cancer in Alabama and the Maryknoll Sister facing a Communist commissar in Manchuria. It is the White Sister teaching the Arabs carpetmaking in the Sahara and the Good Shepherd Sister in St. Louis giving sanctuary to a derelict child, a home to a lamb who was lost. It is the Little Sister of the Poor salving the sores of a forgotten old man in Marseilles, the Grey Sister serving the destitute in Haiti, the Blessed Sacrament Sister helping a young Negro write poetry in New Orleans. It is the Sister of Charity... It is all the Sisters everywhere.

It is the crippled woman who keeps fresh flowers before our Lady's altar and the young woman catechist who teaches the barefooted neophytes in the distant hills. It is the girl who gives up her bride to drive the Sisters to the prisons and the homes of the poor, and it is the woman who goes from door to door begging for help for the orphanage. It is the proud mother of the priest and the heartbroken mother of the criminal. It is all mothers and sisters everywhere who weep and suffer and pray that sons and brothers may keep the Faith.

It is the youth climbing the September hill to the seminary, his heart sure of Him calling, and it is the lost priest stumbling, groping, seeking vainly afar the God he can hold in his hands, a stranger among men always and everywhere. It is the bad sermon and the good, the false vocation and the true. It is the tall young man who says the Stations of the Cross every evening and it is the father of ten who wheels the sick to Mass every Sunday morning at the County Hospital.

It is St. Martin and Martin de Porres, St. Augustine and St. Phocas, Gregory the Great and Gregory Thaumaturgus, St. Ambrose and Charles de Foucauld, St. Ignatius and Ignatius the Martyr, St. Thomas More and St. Barnabas. It is St. Teresa and St. Philomena, Joan of Arc and St. Winefride, St. Agnes and St. Mary Euphrasia. It is all the saints, ancient and new, named and unnamed, and all the sinners.

It is the stained-glass window with the ragged hole from a boy's baseball, and the small red sanctuary lamp sputtering in a dark and empty church. It is the bursting out of the Gloria on Holy Saturday and the dim crib at dawn Mass on Christmas. It is the rose vestments on Laetare Sunday and the blue overalls of the priest working with the laborers in a mine in the Ruhr.

It is the shiny, new shoes and shiny, reverent faces of the June bride and groom kneeling before the white-flowered altar at nuptial Mass, and it is the pale, troubled young mother at the baptismal font, her joy mingled with distress as she watches her first-born wail its protest against the sacramental water. It is the long, shadowy, uneven line of penitents waiting outside the confessional in the dusk of a wintry afternoon, each separate and solemnly alone with his sins, and it is the stooped figure of a priest, silhouetted against the headlights of a police car in the darkness of the highway as he says the last prayers over a broken body lying on the pavement beside a shattered automobile.

It is the Magnificat and it is grace before meals. It is the worn missal and the chipped statue of St. Anthony, the poor box and the cracked church bell. It is peace and truth and salvation. It is the Door through which I entered into the Faith and the Door through which I shall leave, please God, for eternity.

from Dan England and the Noonday Devil by Myles Connolly, 1951.