

Why belong?

Carolyn Chau

AS HUMANS WE ARE 'hardwired' for relationship and community; that we are social animals is a maxim as old as Aristotle, and a fact that stretches back much earlier into the unremembered past. We come into the world already attached to other persons. As the main character from Wendell Berry's novel *Remembering* observes, "That he is who he is, and no one else, is the result of a long choosing, chosen and chosen again." However, as Berry's protagonist also notes, "Those choices have formed in time and place the pattern of a membership that chose him, yet left him free until he should choose it...". In other words, the communities to which we belong are gifts, but they are also choices. Moreover, some aspects of community are given, and other aspects are chosen. We are free to choose the relationships and communities in which we will live our lives, and we are free even to choose to not belong to relationships and communities. But not belonging means being alone, and being alone can be a hard burden to bear. What the Church offers is a way to live the truth of our relational being well. Indeed, religions have always furnished guidelines for how to live together well.

The question of belonging to a community of faith becomes a new question, though, in an age where the needs of belonging and social cohesion are met in many and various ways: we have myriad focal points for community today. Several traditional spaces of belonging — family, nation, culture, place of origin, race, religion, class — have fallen away to some extent; they are not definitive, at the very least. They have been replaced by communities structured around shared interests, hobbies, forms of activism, stage of life, lifestyle, and so on. There are upsides to this development: communities based on shared class, for example, have not been communities of obvious goodness for humanity. Because societies are as healthy as their poorest members, even as classism still exists, there is

clearer awareness of how artificial and dehumanizing it really is. But what about communities of belonging that are based on shared religion? Why belong, in particular, to a church?

Yoga instructors, movie directors, politicians, and personal trainers seem to be able to point out one's capacity to be a loving, self-accepting, compassionate, brave, and dynamic individual. What does the community known as the Church add? Some would say that belonging to the Church offers a love that abides, a love that persists beyond experiences of momentary inspiration, and therefore generates more life than what we could ask or imagine. This divine love, mediated through imperfect human beings who are made whole through the gift of God's own Spirit, remains an incomparable gift to the vocation and task of being human. It allows us to live out salvation as a transformative journey.

Belonging to the Church is not simply a matter, then, of being saved (understood as a single, completed event), nor is it an insurance policy guaranteeing our entrance into heaven. It is, rather, a matter of being given a place, a time, and a life in which one may live out the journey of being human, for that is what the church believes salvation to be. The pilgrim church, ongoing conversion — these metaphors point to the fact that Christians are not the community of the arrived, but simply the community of people who have chosen to set forth on the way... to be pilgrims on the way together to God.

A basic proposal of Christianity is that persons are made for relationship and that human relationships and communities are most fruitful, authentic, and creative when they are informed by and rooted in a relationship with God. To know who we are as joyful, loving, strong,

vulnerable, wounded, wounding, and beloved persons is to know ourselves through the eyes of God. We receive the gift of God's loving and truthful vision of us through the community that identifies itself as the one who bears witness to God, revealed by Jesus Christ to be unconditional Love.

The Church is a community of belonging that forms persons in a special way, in a way that other communities do not. What is this way? The Church forms us to achieve the deepest desires of our hearts. It teaches us that the longings for truth, peace, beauty, goodness, and justice are not flawed or untrue but are, rather, desires that are feasible in and through God.

The Church does this because it knows something about the truth about being human — its best possibilities and its fragilities — and can help us to live well through both. We cannot really become who we are called to be on our own. We are born in and through others, and are at the end of a "long dance of men and women," and their choices, "chosen and chosen again." We are called into being who we are, in and through a community that loves us unreservedly and truthfully.

The way of salvation, the way of healing for human beings is to have a space and a context in which to express some of the most important things to be communicated in life: "I love you," "I'm sorry," "Hello," "I'm happy to be here with you," "Goodbye". One of the ways in which the Church sets a context for these expressions of deepest relational meaning is to celebrate them in, through, and with God and a community that welcomes God into its midst. The Church has a special name for these realities. The "sacraments" are celebrations of expressing self-giving love in a committed way (marriage), repenting for causing hurt and distance between persons and God (reconciliation), giving all that can be given to another person to sustain them on their passage into the community (baptism),

experiencing life together (eucharist), and transitioning into the eternal communion of saints (healing). These are some of the ways in which a community holds persons in their vulnerability so as to enable them to develop the strength to bear others in their fragility and humanity, and to support others in their flourishing.

Belonging to the Church is, then, less about belonging to a privileged or exclusive group, a religion, or a social circle, and more about belonging to a community that "trusts God and itself enough to live in honesty and acceptance." The Church exists for those who are not the Church. The Church, at its core, is called to spend itself for God and for the world. Christians have not, of course, always lived up to their call to "be the Church." However, the Church at its best is caught up in the eternal movement of the Spirit. In allowing itself to be "caught up" in God's life of eternal love, the Church becomes a changed being, something new under the sun, and is, above all, something that generates other realities that seem new under the sun: builders of peace, heralds of hope, signs of grace, gift, patience, and forgiveness: "they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning-hooks" (Micah 4:3).

The Church is a place of belonging where, at its best, it provides rest, nourishment, and a challenge to live more passionately and compassionately every day.

Why belong? Because perhaps the most beautiful thing about the Church is that its members are accepted in the simultaneous variety that makes up each individual person. Less systematic than DNA, more known and understood, yet more mysterious too, is the complexity of each human person as loved by God. And it is the Church that is the community on earth that is called to be witness to the message, "You are deeply loved. Now go, and love likewise."

Carolyn Chau is a Roman Catholic theologian who teaches at King's University College in London, Ontario.

Questions for discussion

1. Where do you find meaningful community?
2. What do you take salvation to mean?
3. Do the communities you belong to answer the deepest questions of your minds and hearts?
4. In what ways can the Church be more of a community of belonging?
5. Is it worth belonging to a community that has no expectations of its members?