

DO FOUR WALLS MAKE A CHURCH?

Randall Smith



Photo: flickr.com/taama

The basilica of San Simpliciano, Milan, was commissioned by Saint Ambrose and completed under his successor, Saint Simplicianus.

In book 8 of the *Confessions*, Saint Augustine repeats the story of how the famous pagan scholar Marius Victorinus said one day to his friend Simplicianus, Bishop of Milan, that he had become a Christian. He said this “not openly, but secretly, and as a friend.” As a friend, Simplicianus replied: “I will not believe it, nor will I rank you among the Christians unless I see you in the Church of Christ.” To this, Victorinus replied “with some faint mockery:” “Then is it the walls that make Christians?” As is common of the banter between friends, Victorinus went on insisting that he was a Christian; Simplicianus went on insisting that he was not until he came to church; after which Victorinus would always repeat his same snarky comment about four walls not making a Christian. Augustine tells us that Victorinus was afraid that if he was seen entering the

church he might “offend his friends and important people” and that “their enmity might fall heavily upon him.”

The happy ending of that story is that “suddenly and unexpectedly” one day, Victorinus said to his friend, “Let us go to the church; I wish to be made a Christian.” And so, after he was given instruction in the faith (and remember, Victorinus was one of the preeminent intellectuals of his day), he was baptized and received into the Church. “The proud saw and were enraged,” reports Augustine. “They gnashed their teeth and melted away!”

We have similar issues today with people who say they are “spiritual but not religious.” They ask, “Do I need to go to a church *building* to worship?” In one sense, obviously not. We are asked to pray throughout the week and often each day.

Do four walls make a Christian?

If not, what’s the point of the *building*? Isn’t the Church made of “living stones, built into a spiritual house to offer spiritual sacrifice?” (1 Peter 2:4-8). Isn’t “the Church” the *people*, not the *building*? Some modern liturgical experts have proclaimed that we should think of the church building as simply a “skin” around the liturgical action of the people, which could just as well be done in the living room or dining room of a house. We could pose Victorinus’s question this way: Do four walls make a *church*?

In one sense, the obvious answer is: “Yes, four walls *do* make a church.” If that’s unclear, ask yourself this: Do four walls make a house? Granted, four walls (and a roof) don’t by themselves make a *home*. But try to make a *home* without having the four walls of a nice, warm *house*. We feel bad when people are “homeless” for a reason.

We call them “homeless,” but the real problem is that they don’t have the four walls of a *house*.

I have lived in places where there are small worship communities without a church. Nearly all of them have had as one of their primary aims growing so they could eventually build for themselves a *church*—and by that, I mean a church *building*. Why would they care—why would they scrimp and save and sacrifice—if the building meant nothing? But clearly, it does. They want a *place* to worship. Only intellectuals or others who spend all their time in their heads or being “spiritual” can fool themselves into thinking that *place* doesn’t matter. It’s not as though most people don’t care *where* they live. They want to be with people they love in a place they love.

We talk about the “*genius loci*,” the genius, or *character*, or spirit of a place. Often, places are associated with things we love because they have become associated with people or events. People say things like, “This is the place where I proposed to my wife,” or “This is the place where I first saw your mother.” When the place we are talking about is a church, people say things like, “This is the place where I was baptized, where I got married, where I baptized my children, and where I went to the funerals for my parents.” “This is the place where I prayed when I was in despair; this is the place where I went to confession month after month; this is the place my family and I went to Mass.” Ecclesiastical bureaucrats who decide to “update” a church should remember what that church building and all its furnishings have meant to those who have spent their lives worshipping there.

A cleric once told me the story of his work in the planning stages to renovate a large inner-city church. During the planning, a woman came to him and pleaded, “Please, don’t destroy my church. I was baptized there, married there, and raised all my children there. Please, please don’t destroy it.” “Of course we wouldn’t *destroy* it,” he chuckled. “We just updated it.”

The moment I stepped across the doorway of the church, my immediate reaction was: “They destroyed it.” All the beautiful wooden confessionals along the wall were gone, replaced by a single chair. The solid stone altar



Exterior of the basilica of San Simpliciano

had been replaced by a small wooden table, which was (for the record) a flagrant violation of the norms of the General Instruction on the Roman Missal. And although the church had a large choir loft, space had been made behind that tiny wooden table altar for the members of the music ministry to perform. The walls had been painted and carpeting installed. I imagined that poor woman weeping. And then finding another church to attend.

For the cleric, the church was embodiment of an ideology. For the woman, it was her home. Because he was deemed a liturgical “expert,” he got his ideological “fix.” She lost her home.

When Church officials show so little respect for the people of the parish, you can expect them to stop saying “our parish” and instead start calling it “their parish.” And when they have concluded that they don’t “count,” you can expect them no longer to include themselves in the “head count” of the parish. And if that has insufficient meaning for ecclesiastical officials, let me add that people support the things they love. When

they stop loving their church, they stop giving money to support it. I suspect it was not long before the church I saw “renovated” was closed or the parish was integrated with another.

“We shape our buildings; thereafter, they shape us.” Winston Churchill may not have been the first to say this, but the quotation is often attributed to him. And it is a motto that should be emblazoned at the top of all parish building or renovation projects. Is this the church of the liturgical “experts”? A church designed to win modernist architectural prizes? Or is this the Church of the Incarnate Word of God who gave himself on the cross for our redemption, opening up for us a participation in the heavenly banquet feast? One look at the building will tell you.



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