

## BELONGING (Frosh week) Random violence

A few weeks ago, a 16 years old girl was shot to death outside a fast food place. The police say that it is probably an act of random violence by a gang member practising his initiation ritual.

You all know there are gangs out there, but, do you know how one becomes a member of a gang? Let me tell you.

First, a member of the gang has to recommend the new candidate to the other members. Then, he is introduced to the gang, where he has to undergo all sorts of abuse, they kick him around, put dirt on him and sometimes they cut him with knives, and he has to endure all of this to prove that he is worthy to belong to the gang. After passing this test of passive endurance, he is asked to do something crazy like kill someone, to finally gain the right to belong to the gang.

The guy who killed this girl probably did so in order to gain the dubious privilege of belonging to a gang. He sacrificed a human life, and could have been killed himself, had the police chased him soon enough. He will certainly be caught and will spend the rest of his life in jail. He risks all of this for the sake of belonging to the gang. Silly, isn't it?

And yet, to some degree, we all do the same. In your class at school, there is this elite little group of boys or girls, who form an exclusive club, and every one is ready to do anything in order to belong to this elite group of cool guys, even Christian boys and girls like you.

For this sake, we sometimes sacrifice our Christian principles. They swear, so, we swear in order to be accepted by them. They smoke, so, even if we hate it, we too smoke in order to belong. Sometimes it even gets worse, we get dragged into smoking marijuana or other drugs for the sake of belonging.

As we grow up, we wonder how stupid we were to do these things, and yet, as we go to college or University, again there is this group of cool guys or girls, and again, we trample on our Christian values in order to belong. They go to discos, so, we go with them, they drink, so, in spite of the screams of our conscience, we go along. Why do we do all these things? Because we want to belong.

But, let me ask you, what satisfaction do you get from belonging? When you eat an ice cream you like it because of the taste, and when you hear nice music, you feel happy because of the sounds. But, what does belonging give you? It has neither taste or smell, you can't touch or feel it. It is just an abstract thing, an idea in your mind, that you follow senselessly. Let me tell you what you get from this kind of belonging, you get nothing useful and you lose a lot. Your relationship to God suffers. You lose your peace because of the guilt feelings. You may even lose your eternity if you don't wake up and repent. And in this crazy world we live in, you don't know when you will meet God, whether at 61 or at 16. So, belonging in this fashion may actually give you an eternal sentence in the lake of fire, where the fire is not quenched and the worms do not die.

Now, let me tell you about another kind of belonging. Like your school, this world has an elite and exclusive little group. It is called the Church. To belong, to this elite group, you don't have to be kicked around or broken in, neither do you have to kill someone. Belonging to this club has been granted to you freely the day you were baptized. What do you get from belonging to this group? You can have all the clean fun you want. You enjoy God's blessing and favour in this life, and you get a chance to make it to heaven, to see what an eye has not seen and hear what an ear has never heard and feel the feelings that have never entered into the heart of a human.

And yet, no body is clamouring to belong to this group that promises eternal happiness, most people clamour to belong to the other groups that promise nothing but eternal misery. Why is this happening?

It is because belonging to the Church has become so easy, so, we take it for granted. Belonging to the Church is presented to you on a golden platter, you don't have to earn it. That's why it has become so cheap.

In days gone by, it wasn't so. Centuries ago, if someone wanted to belong to the Church, he had to find a sponsor, a Christian neighbour or a friend to vouch for him or her. This sponsor was called the god-father or god-mother. The sponsor brings the candidate to the Bishop, who anoints him with oil, puts his name in a book and calls him a catechumen. He is put for three years under probation. During these three years he has to live a Christian life of virtue. He is allowed to come Church to attend the first part of the service, called the Liturgy of the catechumens, which includes the readings and the sermon, the three long prayers and the prayer of reconciliation. After the deacon says greet one another with a holy kiss, the catechumens had to leave, they were considered unworthy to attend the rest of the service, the Liturgy of the faithful.

During lent of the third year, the catechumens who have proved themselves worthy of belonging to the Church, had to spend all of the forty days of lent in the Church, receiving daily instructions into the Sacraments, the Creed, the prayers of the Church. They had to learn about the second coming of Christ and the Judgement and the coming of Antichrist.

At the end of lent, successful candidates were baptized and allowed to have communion. Now they have earned the right to belong. It was a big deal to belong to the Church. Now it's so easy, maybe that's why we don't cherish it any more.

The other reason we don't cherish belonging to the Church is that we don't appreciate our Church as much as we should.

I'm sure you all have Christian friends that go to other churches, so, let me ask you, how many of these other churches are as old as ours, having its beginning in the first half of the first century? How many of these other churches have such a beautiful Liturgy like ours? How many of them have beautiful Pascha services like ours? Or a Good Friday service like ours? How many of them have a beautiful Joyous Saturday service like ours? How many of you attended the Joyous Saturday service this year? I know that some of you invite your friends to come and share with us the beautiful services we have.

You know, people from other churches envy us. I know that because they tell me so. One day I was flying to Halifax, when the person sitting beside me on the plane recognized me and said, You must be Coptic and I said yes. So he told me that he is the Chairman of the central Mennonite committee, something like the pope of the Mennonites, and he confided in me, I envy you! And I said why? He said, your church is two thousand years old., Ours is two hundred.

In Halifax, we used to hold our Liturgy in a Church borrowed from another Orthodox denomination, and the priest of that church used to attend our services. One day he told me, I like your Liturgy better than I like ours!

Then there was this professor from Montreal, who was Catholic. He specializes in Saint Athanasius, and he wrote a hundred books and articles about him. His wife by the way is also a University professor specializing in Saint Anthony. One day they were speaking to a group of Coptic youth in New Jersey and he told them, I envy you guys, I admire Saint Athanasius so much but I am a stranger to him, but you guys, you have Saint Athanasius in your genes.

Did you ever think about this? That you have saint Mark and saint Mena and saint Maurice and Pope Kyrillos in your genes? That you have Saint Demiana and saint Verena and saint Mary of Egypt in your genes. That's one privilege of belonging to the Coptic Church.

Our Church has more saints and martyrs than any other church on earth. That's why it is the greatest Church on earth. It's like a giant tree that has grown over the last 2000 years, nourished not

by water but by the blood of its martyrs.

Throughout the years our great grand fathers shed their blood in order to deliver to us the same church they have received from saint Mark the Apostle. Time and time again Rome and Constantinople tried to bring us under their influence, to force us to use their own liturgies and follow their own customs, but our great grand fathers preferred to die rather than change. That my friends has put a lot of responsibility on us when we decided to immigrate to Canada or the USA or Australia. We had to make sure that we deliver to you the same church that our grand fathers died for. That's why we translated everything to the language you understand. That's why we have put your needs before the needs of the grown ups and the language they understand.

But that also puts a great responsibility on you. You have to make sure that you will deliver the same church we delivered to you to your own children.

We teach you in Sunday school and you don't like the way we speak your language and make jokes about our accent. Do you think your children will listen to us? They will need Sunday school teachers who grew up in the same country, who speak their language and know their culture. So, if you do not take seriously your responsibility, if you do not aspire to becoming Sunday school teachers and take the necessary training for this, who will teach your own children?

Today we have priests that grew up in Egypt. When you have your own children, then some of you will have to put on the yoke of the priesthood in order to serve your children. We cannot go on importing priests from Egypt, not for the third and fourth generations.

Someday we will need a Bishop for your own children. A Bishop they can relate to, a Bishop who had gone to the same schools, played the same sports and experienced the same challenges they had. If some of you don't covet the monastic life, how else can we get Bishops for the coming generations?

If you do not take active interest in what goes on in your church now, how are you going to form the Boards of Deacons of the Church when the time comes.

You cannot afford to be spectators, you have to get involved, because someday, you will meet our glorious grand fathers in heaven, and they will tell you, we shed our blood in order to preserve this church for you, what have you done to preserve it for your own children?

If you don't participate in singing the hymns of the Liturgy today, who will teach your children these hymns? If you don't observe the fasts of the Church today, what kind of children you think you will have?

Some time ago, we asked you guys to help paint two Sunday school classes. It took a dozen of you guys and four supervisors two days to do the job. You know with two of the supervisors working alone, the job would probably had been done in one day! Why did we bother? Because we want you to belong to this Church. We want you to be able, someday to tell your children, you know this Sunday classroom, I painted it when I was your age! Now it's your turn to paint it.

We put a lot of time and effort in preparing for this trip. We came with you in order to make sure that you enjoy it. That you can have a holy fellowship with one another. We wanted you to get together, to bond, to feel that you belong to one family, for the church is the household of God. We believe that you are the future of this church. We hope that someday you will do the same things for your own children.

So, belong to the household of God, be involved. Get interested in taking on your responsibility in a serious way. God bless you.