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I have a memory of watching baseball game from childhood. I was so young that I don't even remember if the game was part of a documentary or live. The phrase "perfect game" was used, and I was confused. I said, "But Dad, that player did hit the ball, he just didn't get on base. And the pitcher did throw pitches outside the strike-zone, even though the player didn't walk. Perfect should mean every pitch was a strike." And my father said, "Well, that's just not how it's defined in baseball. Perfect has a particular meaning in baseball, which is that no one got on base." Words have context.

Today we celebrate Pentecost, what some people call the birthday of the Church, because this is when the Holy Spirit came, the one who testifies on behalf of Christ. We hear at Mass today in the preface that "This same Spirit, as the Church came to birth, opened to all peoples the knowledge of God and brought together many languages of the earth in profession of the one faith."

The Church has throughout her history called herself a perfect society, which meant something particular from Aristotle's politics regarding in terms of her relationship with civil states. The Church has also said that she cannot officially teach error regarding faith and morals, that she is perfect in her teaching. In fact, the Catechism says that "The Church . . . is held, as a matter of faith, to be unfailingly holy." Unfailingly, meaning perfectly, holy.

But how can this be when we see that members of the Church fail? How can this be when we begin every Mass asking for mercy and confessing we have sinned? How can it be when we turn on the news and see our Holy Father apologizing for misjudging a sex-abuse case in Chile, seeing a priest arrested for stealing money somewhere, and hear of bishops who themselves are teaching things contrary to the clear words of our Lord and the Catechism?

Yes, the Church has sinful members, but the Church itself is not just those members.

"As a body is one though it has many parts,
and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body,
so also Christ.

For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body,
whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons,
and we were all given to drink of one Spirit."

Christ is perfect, and thus his body must be as well. The Church is the Mystical Body of Christ. We are the parts. Sometimes the Holy Spirit, who is the soul of the Church, breathes and acts in us. Other times, we choose not to act in the Spirit.

As the Catechism teaches, “The Church is therefore holy, though having sinners in her midst, because she herself has no other life but the life of grace. If they live her life, her members are sanctified; if they move away from her life, they fall into sins and disorders that prevent the radiation of her sanctity. This is why she suffers and does penance for those offenses, of which she has the power to free her children through the blood of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

This is why when people in the Church do bad things, we do not do a service to God or to them by trying to justify it. Think of the Inquisition, which in many ways served the Church well in clarifying aspects of the faith, also had some grave abuses associated with it. Do we defend the abuses? No. They were wrong. As great twentieth century philosophy Jacques Maritain said,

“The faults, incompetence, shortcomings, and stupor of Catholics do not involve Catholicism. The latter is not charged with furnishing an alibi for the negligence of the former. The best apologetic does not consist in justifying Catholics when they are wrong, but, on the contrary, in marking these wrongs—both those that do not touch the substance of Catholicism and those that only serve to place in bold relief the power of a religion that is always living despite them. The Church is a mystery; she has her Head hidden in the heavens, and she is not seen adequately. If you seek that which represents her without betraying her, look at the pope and the bishops teaching and faith and morals, look at the saints in heaven and on earth. Do not consider us sinners. Or rather, look at how the Church dresses our wounds and leads us hobbling along to life eternal...The great glory of the Church is being holy with sinful members.”

Often, when we think of “the Church” we think of the hierarchy, or some institution. This is part of the visible structure of the Church, but the Church most fully exists in her saints. This is why Mary, not Peter, is the perfect image of the Church. As the Catechism says,

"[The Church's] structure is totally ordered to the holiness of Christ's members. And holiness is measured according to the 'great mystery' in which the Bride responds with the gift of love to the gift of the Bridegroom."¹⁹³ Mary goes before us all in the holiness that is the Church's mystery as "the bride without spot or wrinkle."¹⁹⁴ This is why the "Marian" dimension of the Church precedes the "Petrine."¹⁹⁵

This is what it means when we say the Church is perfect or holy, not that her members are, but that as founded by Christ, as existing by the power of the Holy Spirit, produces saints. That is the sense in which we mean perfect, not that we imperfect instruments are, but that God is. And that is something to celebrate.