

The Spiritual Roots of the Church's Crisis

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In the midst of moral and sacramental debates in the Church, it is easy to focus on ecclesial politics and to look there for solutions. Without denying the importance of such debates, it is also helpful to take a step back and to examine the roots of the crisis.

The Church's Cross: A Crisis of Faith

I've had a few friends ask for my perspective on why God has been allowing what Bishop Athanasius Schneider has called a crisis permitted by divine providence. Why is God allowing confusion and dissension in his Church? Of course, no one can really answer that question. Whenever anyone ever asks me why God allows anything, I always suggest a self-examination. In this case, we should examine the spiritual roots of the Church's current crisis. What have Catholics done or not done to bring about a spiritual and moral anemia?

Pope Emeritus Benedict, as would be expected, points us right to the heart of the issue. In his conversation with Peter Seewald, *Last Testament*, he states rightly that his task was both a reformer and preserver: "You have to try to renew things, and in that regard I tried to lead the faith forward, working from a modern concern. At the same time continuity is needed, to ensure that the faith is not torn down, or torn to pieces." He saw his task "to highlight the centrality of faith in God, and give people the courage to have faith, courage to live concretely in the world with faith." Through faith, God lives in and through us; he sanctifies us and the world through us. Hence, the Church's battle rests primarily on the level of the soul. When we suffer a sickness in the faith, it will manifest concretely in other ways.

What does it mean for the Church to walk in the path of our Lord? If the Church truly continues the ministry of Christ in the world, then it must embrace the Cross. It is sad to see Christians discouraged by the sins of other Catholics, and, yet, it seems that the greatest suffering of the Church comes from the wounds of her members. The *Catechism* quotes on this point a pope who personally embraced the suffering of the Church in himself: "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" (Pope Bl. Paul VI, *Credo of the People of God*, § 19). If the Church is called by God to sanctify the modern world, how else would this happen but on the Cross? The Church's path is the path of the Lord: Calvary.

Does this justify the spiritual sickness of the Church's members? As St. Paul would say: *By no means!* We must search our soul to purify ourselves so that we will be able to embrace the Cross more fully and intentionally to purify the modern world, rather than caving in to its sicknesses. In this process, here are some major points to consider.

Lack of Confessions

Any examination of conscience for Catholics today needs to begin literally with our lack of examination. I live next to a large, suburban parish, which has 30 minutes of Confession a weekend. How could such a short period of time suffice for thousands of people? It seems as if parishes have resigned themselves to serving the small percentage of Catholics who desire to go to Confession.

When we speak of mercy, it has to begin in the Confession, with the sacrament that Christ gave us to bestow his mercy on us. When we look at the numbers, it appears that Catholics are rejecting or are simply unconcerned about receiving God's mercy. A [report from CARA](#), Georgetown's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, conducted almost a decade ago shows that "three-quarters of Catholics report that they never participate in the sacrament of Reconciliation or that they do so less than once a year." Frankly, this statistic alone demonstrates the heart of the spiritual crisis facing the Church. The Church has been given the enormous grace by Christ to forgive sins, but people just aren't very interested.

Irreverence toward the Eucharist

St. Paul tells us what happens when people receive the Eucharist in an "unworthy manner":

For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are chastened so that we may not be condemned along with the world (1 Cor. 11:29-32).

This passage alone provides an answer for why the Lord allows the Church to be chastened: we are being judged from receiving him unworthily.

How do we know we are receiving the Lord unworthily? First, refer to the last section which showed evidence that an overwhelming majority of Catholics do not receive the sacrament of Reconciliation. Second, add to that regular Mass attendance for Catholics is only about 22 percent (once again, [according to CARA](#)). Catholics are not fulfilling the precepts of the Church to attend Mass on Sunday and Holy Days and to confess their sins. This means that many Catholics are presenting themselves to receive Communion are not in the state of grace.

Although some polls have found lower numbers, at least Catholics attending Mass regularly generally have preserved their [belief in the real presence](#): 91 percent for weekly Mass goes and 65 percent for monthly. However, those same groups confess at least once a year at 61 percent and 37 percent. There is a general Communion crisis in terms of spiritual preparation.

Minimal Penance

Our spiritual health comes primarily from the sacraments, but we can also gauge the health of the spiritual life in our detachment from material things. Living in a secular age with increased temptations, our need for penance has increased greatly. And yet, we see a progressive decline in the practice of penance with a virtual free-fall in the time after the Council. We have gone from fasting every day during Lent, four periods of ember days throughout the year, and on the vigil of several major feasts to fasting two days a year (and earlier in Church history there other periods of fasting, such as Advent). Although it is

generally neglected, the duty of a Friday penance is still in force, though the US bishops have enabled us to substitute another penance besides abstinence from meat.

Why does the relaxing of fasting and abstinence matter? First of all, to appeal to the highest authority, it is because God wants it: “All Christ’s faithful are obliged by divine law, each in his or her own way, to do penance. However, so that all may be joined together in a certain common practice of penance, days of penance are prescribed. On these days the faithful are in a special manner to devote themselves to prayer, to engage in works of piety and charity, and to deny themselves...” (Can. 1249). Days of penance should strengthen us communally through a general duty, which we need to grow in holiness and to do penance for our sins. In relation to the Church’s spiritual crisis, the lack of penance creates a spirit of laxity, which only further diminishes our ability to stand firmly in the spiritual life. As St. Alphonsus said: “If we read the lives of the saints and see the works of penance that they performed, we shall be ashamed of the delicacy and of the reserve with which we chastise the flesh.” If we are serious about the universal call to holiness, we will strengthen our acts of penance.

Bad Catechesis Leads to Dissent and Disbelief

We all have stories about bad catechesis, which preaches a Gospel different from the one that has been handed down to us (see Galatians 1:8): no sin, no devil, and a saccharine god. Christian Smith’s findings have been getting a lot of attention, showing us the fruits of bad catechesis and a lack of evangelization. Young Catholics, along with other youth in America, generally adhere to a pseudo-religious belief, Smith calls MTD: moralistic, therapeutic, Deism, which can be summarized as be nice, feel good, and God is absent from life, though selectively available to bail you out in a crisis (see Smith’s *Soul Searching*).

Even in key moral issues, Catholics are losing their distinction from other groups in the United States. A [recent Pew survey](#) found: “Roughly half or more of U.S. Catholics say that using contraceptives, living with a romantic partner outside of marriage and remarrying after a divorce without an annulment are *not* sins. And about four-in-ten (39 percent) say homosexual behavior is not a sin.” And further: “But even among frequent churchgoers, majorities are open to non-traditional family arrangements.” Catholic and Protestant women contracept at the same rates, Catholics have [more abortions](#) than Protestants, and [support gay marriage](#) at the same rate as the general population. Further, according to [another Pew survey](#) only 21 percent of Catholics think divorce is sinful and 17 percent think the same of contraception. As theologians debate moral topics amongst themselves, many Catholics have already made up their minds, apart from faith.

Signs of Life

So as not to be seen wrongly as a prophet of doom and gloom, I have to note that I’ve seen many encouraging things in the last twenty years in the Church. More Catholics are studying the Bible and the *Catechism*. We have much better seminary formation and many young orthodox and holy priests. Many young Catholics dedicate themselves to study and lay ecclesial ministry. Adoration chapels continue to multiply, along with more reverent liturgies. I never thought I would say this, but even liturgical music has been improving. As a sign of the active presence of God’s transforming grace in the world, canonizations continue with relative frequency and many new causes of canonization have opened within

the United States alone. And maybe as a sign that the spiritual crisis has gained notice, there has been a resurgence of exorcisms and the training of exorcists.

Response to the Crisis

The devil uses sin and controversy in the Church to discourage and distract us from our central duty to accept and share God's life and to be holy. Global headlines and international controversies take the focus away from the crisis of faith in our family, our parish, and ourselves. We have to trust God for things that are out of our control and embrace the mission he is giving us for what we can influence.

In the 1980s a book pushed a cardinal to international prominence as he put his finger on the controversy of faith in the Church following the Second Vatican Council: *The Ratzinger Report*. I found another interview book with a cardinal helpful in refocusing us on the true task at hand: Cardinal Sarah's *God or Nothing*. Throughout the book the cardinal presses the need for spiritual renewal and deep encounter with God in prayer. I think he sees right into the real combat we are facing: "The Son of God had announced to his disciples that they would never be at peace in this world. The only way to win this great combat is union with God. Christians will never succeed in overcoming the challenges of the world by appealing to political tools, human rights, or respect for religious liberty. The only true rock for the baptized is prayer and the encounter with Jesus Christ. Men whose strength is in prayer are unsinkable."

In conclusion, in this year of the centenary of Fatima, let's pay greater attention to Our Lady's call for praying the rosary and doing penance for conversion. Personally, I've tried to follow St. John Paul II's motto: *Totus Tuus*. Mary, I place myself, my family, my parish, and all of the Church in your hands. May we be totally yours so that we can be totally in the heart of your Son, Jesus.