

Fidelity to Jesus, the Bible, and the Tradition of the Church from the beginning and not according to only the past 10-60 years brings truth and growth to men and to Christ's church — Fr. Perozich

Religion: Thick and Thin

[David Carlin](#)

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I am an old man – old enough to have vivid memories of what American Catholicism was like prior to the end of Vatican II (1965). If I were asked to give a very short summary of the differences between the pre-V2 and post-V2 versions of American Catholicism, I would say the former was a “thick” religion while the latter is a “thin” religion. And I would add that thick religions are “hard” while thin religions are “easy.” So pre-V2 Catholicism was thick and hard, while present-day American Catholicism is thin and easy.

To be sure, the pre-Vatican II religion wasn't the thickest of American religions. The religion of the Amish was much thicker; and so was the religion of the Hasidic Jews. Nor is the post-Vatican II religion the thinnest of American religions. The religions of mainline Protestant denominations are thinner, and they grow thinner and thinner all the time as they grow more and more liberal.

What made Catholicism thick in the old days?

Doctrine. In the old days Catholics used to believe all the articles of the Nicene Creed plus a few other doctrines (for instance, the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist). Now, it's not that modern Catholics disbelieve in the Creed, and certainly the Church has not officially repudiated a single article of the Creed. But post-V2 American Catholics don't think articles of belief are especially important. What's important in religion is being good. As long as you're good, it doesn't really matter very much what you believe. And you can receive Communion on a weekly basis without troubling your mind about the vexed theological question of transubstantiation.

Morality. In the old days, a conscientious Catholic, when doing an examination of conscience, had to ask himself or herself questions about many topics. Am I chaste when it comes to sex? Am I temperate when it comes to drink? Do I give my employer an honest day's work for an honest day's pay? Am I honest in paying my taxes? Do I avoid profanity in speech? And more.

Today's Catholics make a much briefer examination of conscience, for there is only a single question: Do I love my neighbor as myself?

Polytheism (or something like it). Catholicism, of course, teaches that there is only one God, the Trinitarian God. But the traditional Catholic veneration of saints, above all the Virgin Mary, bears a resemblance to the polytheism of the ancient Greek and Roman world. The official Catholic teaching has always been that all the saints can do for us is to pray to God on our behalf. But in practice pre-V2 Catholics often believed that saints, if prayed to in the right way and if in the right mood, could work miracles for us; the saints were in effect minor gods. Post-V2 Catholics no longer have much interest in the saints – except of course for Mother Teresa and Francis of Assisi, who can serve as good examples to us even though they are not so godlike as to be able to make miracles.

c. 1960

Miracles. In the old days, Catholics readily believed in stories of miracles. And not just miracles that happened in famous places like Fatima and Lourdes, but miracles that happened in one's neighborhood or in one's family. And Catholics loved to be in close physical proximity to holy pictures, holy statues, holy candles, rosary beads, miraculous medals, holy water, etc.

Laws – lots of them that had to be obeyed, some of them God-made, some Church-made. You had to avoid meat on Fridays. You had to abstain from food and drink (even water) after midnight on a day in which you intended to receive Communion at Mass. You had to go to Confession before receiving Communion.

Chastity. If unmarried, you had to abstain from fornication. If married, you had to abstain from contraception. Of course, the Catholic Church still officially considers fornication and contraception sins – mortal sins. But among younger American Catholics, fornication has been demoted from the rank of mortal sin to the rank of venial sin, if not non-sin. And among married Catholics contraception has been kicked out of the category of sin altogether. It is now a virtue.

Community. And then there was the importance of staying as much as possible inside the Catholic community – the “ghetto” as it was often called. You should go to a Catholic school and college. You should read Catholic magazines and books. You should join Catholic social clubs. Above all, you should marry inside the Church. Don't marry Protestants or other non-Catholics. And if (God forbid) you do, the wedding won't take place inside a church; and the non-Catholic will first have to promise to bring up the children as Catholic.

Well, those were the “good old days” – and now they are gone, gone with the wind. Will they ever return? It’s awfully hard to believe they will.

But unless it once again becomes *something* like the old thick religion, American Catholicism will continue to shrink and shrink and shrink. It will become less and less important in American life. A religion that was once on the verge of becoming the single most important religious factor in our national life will become little more than a hole-in-the-corner religion. It will never be able to flourish if it continues to be what it is now, a “thin” and “easy” religion. If it is ever to flourish in this country, it will once again have to become what all flourishing religions are, both “thick” and “hard.”

Am I hopeful? Yes. One must never give up hope.

Am I optimistic? No. One must be realistic.

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[Theological Orthodoxy, Church Growth, and Church Decline: Observations from Canada](#)

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The argument that the Church must change or die was popular in the 1960s among Protestants and Catholics alike. We now have half a century of evidence showing just how wrong that idea was.

[Dr. Kevin N. Flatt](#)

Catholics are used to seeing the 1960s as a turning point for the faith, not least because of the impact of Vatican II and the divergent interpretations of it in different circles. Upheaval in the church coincided with social changes so rapid that historians often refer to them as a cultural revolution. At least in North America, in the decades since the 1960s the Catholic Church has had a harder time attracting people to worship, religious orders, and the priesthood. Indifference to the church’s moral and doctrinal teaching among ordinary Catholics has risen steadily and is now widespread.

Of the major religious groups in North America, however, Catholics were not the hardest hit by the changes of “the Sixties” and their aftermath. That dubious prize belongs to mainline Protestants, churches belonging to the broad type of Protestantism that used to dominate the US and English-speaking Canada. If the numerical situation of Catholicism since the 1960s could be described as troubled, the situation of mainline Protestant churches has been frankly catastrophic.

The United Methodist Church, for example, the largest of the mainline Protestant churches in the US, [fell from nearly 11 million members](#) in 1968 to well under 8 million in 2009, a loss of 29 percent. During the same period the American population *grew* by 54 percent. Things have been even worse for the Episcopal Church, [which lost 41 percent of its members](#) in the same period. Likewise, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) had [a membership 34 percent lower in 2009](#) than its founding denominations did in 1968.

Since World War II, Canada has often led the United States in major social trends, and this is true of mainline decline as well. The United Church of Canada, formed from a merger of Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalist churches, lost more than half of its members (52 percent) between 1968 and 2009. Similar trends can be seen for the other mainline Protestant churches in Canada, such as the Anglican Church of Canada, the Presbyterian Church in Canada, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada.

On both sides of the border, the membership numbers actually tend to understate the problem, since attendance and commitment have also been declining rapidly, and the remaining members are getting older and older on average. [The situation is grim.](#)

Amidst this desert of decline a few oases of growth can nevertheless be found. They are few and far between, but at the local level there are some growing mainline Protestant churches. What sets them apart?

A Canadian study probes the issue

My research colleagues and I set out to answer this very question. After months of searching the most densely populated region of Canada, southern Ontario, we were finally able to find nine growing churches from the four mainline denominations mentioned above (United, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Lutheran). We also found 13 shrinking churches—much easier to do—from the same region and denominations as a comparison group. After surveying more than 2,200 attendees, interviewing 29 clergy and 128 lay people, and observing Sunday services, we were able to develop a clear picture of what was going on at the growing and declining churches.

One of our key questions was whether the theological beliefs of clergy or laypeople in these churches were related to growth. There is ample historical evidence that more theologically conservative or orthodox Protestant denominations have fared better in the last several decades—in many cases, growing substantially—than the more liberal mainline Protestant denominations described above.

(In this context, “conservative” or “orthodox” means a high view of the reliability of the Bible, a stronger conviction of the unique value of Christianity compared to other religions and philosophies, and a closer adherence to traditional core Christian beliefs, such as the resurrection of Jesus. In contrast, “liberal” theologies tend to see the Bible as a fallible human document, hold Christianity to be one valid path among many others, and take a skeptical or metaphorical view of creedal statements.)

But researchers have not always agreed that orthodoxy is linked to growth at a congregational level. A major recent study of the Church of England, for example, concluded that the theological orientation of a church was irrelevant when predicting whether that church would grow or not. This study used a surprisingly imprecise measure of theological orientation, however, asking just one person in the congregation to summarize the theology of the whole parish along three scales (conservative-liberal, evangelical-Catholic, charismatic-noncharismatic).

Thus, we took a different approach, presenting all of our study participants with a list of several theological statements (e.g. “Jesus rose from the dead with a real flesh and blood body, leaving behind an empty tomb” and “All major religions are equally good and true”), asking them how strongly they agreed or disagreed. This approach allowed us to get a much richer picture of people’s actual views.

Conservatism a predictor of growth

What we found was that churches were more likely to grow when their clergy or laypeople had more conservative theological beliefs as defined above. This positive relationship between conservatism and growth held true even when we corrected for other relevant factors, such as the age of the church, the kinds of programs offered, and so on. We were able to confirm that theology does matter for growth at the local level—even within the same denominational group and region.

For example, while only 37 percent of declining church laypeople strongly agreed that Jesus physically rose from the dead, 66 percent of growing church laypeople did so. When presented with the statement “The Bible is the product of human thinking about God, so some of its teachings are wrong or misguided,” 66 percent of growing church laypeople strongly or moderately disagreed, while only 35 percent of declining church laypeople did so.

The same thing was true of the clergy, only even more so. While 85 percent of growing church clergy strongly agreed that Jesus rose from the dead with a real flesh and blood body, only 36 percent declining church clergy strongly agreed with this statement. Astonishingly, *none* of the declining church clergy agreed that “It is very important to encourage non-Christians to become Christians”; in contrast, more than three-quarters of the growing church clergy did so.

In fact, we found a fascinating pattern across the clergy and laity of the churches: growing church clergy were the most theologically conservative group, followed by growing church lay people. Declining church lay people came next, followed by declining church clergy—the least theologically conservative group. Most likely, clergy “pull” a congregation towards their theological position over time, both through persuasion and turnover (as people who disagree leave and people who agree join). To our knowledge, this is the first time any study has revealed this pattern.

In short, when it comes to growth, theology matters, as we put it in the title of our peer-reviewed [article](#) with that title in the *Review of Religious Research*.

But *why* does it matter? That is a harder question to answer, and experts have offered many different theories since the relative success of more conservative churches was highlighted by Dean M. Kelley in his 1972 book *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*.

The best explanations recognize that religious groups, if they want to remain strong in a secular culture with many religious and non-religious options, need a reason for being and a clear identity that sets them apart from other groups and belief systems. Christian groups that believe in the reality of the Apostles' Creed, the trustworthiness of Scripture, and the necessity of evangelization have these raw ingredients. Groups or churches that don't believe these things—but instead see all spiritual paths as equal and regard dogma as a bad word—have a hard time answering the question, “Why should I get up on a Sunday morning to go to your church?”

In other words, orthodox groups possess more *secularization resistance* than liberal ones.

What about Catholicism?

Does this principle apply in a Catholic context? Or is it a uniquely Protestant phenomenon?

Certainly it's easy to find anecdotal evidence that the most engaged Catholic young people are drawn to more traditional forms of the faith. Another [study](#) we conducted, published in the journal *Religious Education*, found this to be the case at a big Catholic youth event in Toronto.

But there are important cultural, organizational, and theological differences between Protestantism and Catholicism which make it hard to directly apply our church growth findings to Catholic parishes. For example, the parish model of Catholicism—where the faithful gather for worship on the basis of a shared neighbourhood rather than musical preference or a favorite preacher—dampens the effect of “church shopping” for many Catholics, making it harder for them to sort themselves by theological orientation at the local level.

Instead, in Catholicism the impact of theological orientation is likely to express itself in other ways. A good test case for the orthodoxy-growth hypothesis in a Catholic context is the comparative success of different kinds of religious orders. As sociologists Roger Finke and Patricia Wittberg [argue](#), religious orders (using the term broadly to include various institutes that are not necessarily “orders”) have historically played a role in Catholicism like the development of new sects in Protestantism, allowing the expression of differences in spirituality, including movements of revival and reform, but within boundaries of the Church institution. These orders can compete directly for vocations.

Since Vatican II, two distinct theological tendencies are evident among Catholic religious orders in North America. The larger group, including many of the more established institutes, has moved in a more liberal direction (theologically, as well as

socially and politically) in keeping with what they regard as the “spirit” of the council. These groups have been more willing to dissent from official church teaching, to leave behind traditional patterns of distinctive dress and community life, and to give freer rein to the individualistic tendencies of North American culture.

A smaller group of religious orders, congregations, and pious societies, many of them more recent foundations, champion a more traditional, conservative form of Catholicism and the religious life. They tend to stress fidelity to the Magisterium and follow more traditional modes of dress and rules of life.

Which group is doing better? A 2009 [study](#) of vocations to religious life conducted by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) at Georgetown University concluded that “The most successful institutes in terms of attracting and retaining new members at this time are those that follow a more traditional style of religious life.... They also wear a religious habit, work together in common apostolates, and are explicit about their fidelity to the Church and the teachings of the Magisterium. All of these characteristics are especially attractive to the young people who are entering religious life today.” According to a thorough [analysis](#) by sociologist Finke, the same trend was also evident in the 1980s and 1990s.

Even the *New York Times* has [taken note](#), commenting, “While many in the older generation moved to the left after the 1960s, in theology and politics — a trend that led in part to Pope Benedict XVI’s investigation of American nuns in 2012 — younger nuns tend to be more conservative. They want to wear the habit.... [T]hey have a strong focus on contemplative life, making time for hours of daily communal prayer. And they tend to have a strong sense of a particular mission.”

It is here, in the competition between different Catholic religious institutes for recruits, that one can see the same pattern we found among mainline Protestant churches: the more “conservative” groups are faring better, especially in attracting new members. Groups that have reduced their demands on members, departed from tradition, and mirrored social trends toward individualism, in contrast, are struggling. Finke concludes, “when religious orders blend in, they fade away.”

Orthodoxy and resilience

After our research on mainline Protestant churches garnered attention from major news outlets in [Canada](#), the [US](#), and the [UK](#), some people suggested we were trying to use our data to make a case for orthodoxy. But success is a bad judge of truth. Growth does not prove correctness, nor decline error. And in any case, liberals are unlikely to change their spots if their views are unpopular, nor do conservatives need popular acclaim to confirm them in their convictions.

Nor should these findings encourage a triumphalist attitude among Christians of more conservative or orthodox inclinations. As Ross Douhat eloquently [argued](#) not long ago in *First Things*, such triumphalism would be both premature and wrong-headed. What this kind of research does do, however, is undercut the argument that religious groups need to water down or accommodate their beliefs to the dominant secular culture to

stay relevant in today's society. The argument that the Church must change or die—where “change” means abandon core beliefs and mimic the secular world—was popular in the 1960s among Protestants and Catholics alike. We now have half a century of evidence showing just how wrong that idea was.

To the contrary, in the current social environment, orthodoxy and resilience tend to go together. And for those who value fidelity to the “faith once delivered to the saints,” that *is* an encouraging thought.

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