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# A Church Without Purpose

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In a [virtual conversation](#) conducted earlier this year with His Excellency Bishop Robert Barron of Los Angeles, Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson bemoaned the overwhelming decline experienced by the Catholic Church in recent decades:

*My sense is that it's because the Church does not demand enough of young people. And by not demanding enough it doesn't indicate its faith in their possibility.... And this isn't hit home. Look, the Church demands everything of you,*

absolutely everything. *And the reason that people are leaving.*

**The picture Peterson paints is a familiar one.** For anyone with eyes to see, it is obvious that—between its stultified missionary efforts and the mass exodus from its pews—the Western Church is undergoing a catastrophic decline and has been for some decades.

Within this context, the Holy Father's [comments](#) back in September regarding the distribution of Holy Communion to pro-abortion politicians were not particularly surprising. For what they betrayed was the already rife assumption that one's salvation is assured—or at least highly probable—*regardless* of one's sins and *regardless* of whether one is baptized. On this account, anybody can and should receive Holy Communion because such antiquated concepts as “mortal sin” and “state of grace” simply don't matter anymore.

Needless to say, Pope Francis is not alone in his views; for multiple decades now, these same suppositions about the optionality of sanctifying grace have functioned as the new *de facto* dogma for most of the hierarchy. The result has been to create exactly the kind of hackneyed, turbid Church that Peterson laments. For if more or less everybody is saved regardless of the condition of their souls, then the importance of persevering in a state of grace becomes radically diminished. But if this is so, then what exactly, we must ask, is the Church for?

The views of the most important theologian of the past 60 years, Pope Benedict XVI, are indicative. They are also perplexing. In a notable homily from 1964, then-Father Ratzinger defined the problem:

*The question that torments us is, much rather, that of why it is still actually necessary for us to carry out the whole ministry of the Christian faith —why, if there are so many other ways to heaven and to salvation, should it still be demanded of us that we bear, day by day, the whole burden of ecclesiastical dogma and ecclesiastical ethics?*

As Ratzinger's musings make clear, this issue cannot be considered as merely one theological puzzle among many. On the contrary, this is *the* defining question, not just for our age but for every age. It is the decisive question as to what the *raison d'être* of the Church consists of. And it is precisely our collective failure to provide a compelling answer to this question that has been at the heart of much of the decline we have experienced over the past 60 years.

**A more significant contribution from the Pope Emeritus came in his 2007 encyclical *Spe Salvi*.** There he proposed a radical soteriology that has never received the attention it deserves. Remarking on the problem of Hell, Benedict readily ruled out the possibility of universalism. But in so doing, he made a seemingly untenable bargain, for the parameters he assigns for the damned are so limited as to make the idea of Hell more or less nugatory. He [wrote](#):

*There can be people who have totally destroyed their desire for truth and readiness to love, people for whom everything has become a lie, people who have lived for hatred and have suppressed all love within themselves. This is a terrifying thought, but alarming profiles of this type can be seen in certain figures of our own*

*history. In such people all would be beyond remedy and the destruction of good would be irrevocable: this is what we mean by the word Hell.*

On this theologically neoteric account, Hell is reserved for only that tiny number of souls who have “totally destroyed” the good within themselves. But, we are told, “For the great majority of people...there remains in the depths of their being an ultimate interior openness to truth, to love, to God.” Hence, in one fell swoop, the majority report of the tradition—including such luminaries as Augustine, Aquinas, and Newman—is overturned, and in its stead we may now presume with some degree of confidence that “the great majority” of people will eventually be saved. This temerarious optimism leaves the Church of 2021 in a precarious position. Whereas in the past salvation was primarily seen as something that souls had to ‘opt in’ to by the grace of Christ manifested through good works and the Sacramental life of the Church, nowadays the prevailing consensus within most parishes is that salvation is purely an “opt out,” reserved only for exceptionally malign and twisted characters like Henry VIII or Judas Iscariot.

“Unless you are an extraordinarily bad human being, you will almost certainly be rewarded eternal bliss with God in Heaven,” reads the missionary manifesto of the modern-day Church. Unsurprisingly, the direct result of this colossal paradigm shift has been to leave the ordinary Mass-going Catholic wholly unsure as to what the Church is or why it matters. Per Peterson, the Church has been reduced to a prosaic and desultory institution, one that lacks purpose—and therefore appeal.

**The only way to overcome this crisis is to begin to seriously engage with those vexatious but essential questions** upon which our salvation may well depend. For example, how exactly do we distinguish the extraordinary from the ordinary means of salvation? And how prudent is our preoccupation with the former at the expense of the latter? Doubtless this ecclesiastical soul-searching is an uncomfortable business, one which risks offending our modern sensibilities. Yet that is why it must be addressed.

For too long we have bewailed declining Mass attendance and growing institutional corruption while ignoring the elephant in the room—or, perhaps more aptly, the dragon in the presbytery—which is summed up in **our inability to articulate what the Church is for.** (It is, moreover, surely indicative of a wider problem that even a figure as learned and saintly as Pope Benedict should feel hesitancy as to the underlying mission of the Church.)

Looking to Sacred Scripture, I would venture to suggest that there we discover a twofold solution. On the one hand, put negatively, it is abundantly clear that the mission or *télos* of the Church is to prevent you and me from being eternally damned, because Hell is real and people actually go there. This truth is affirmed literally dozens of times in all four Gospels as well as the epistles and especially in the book of Revelation. Verses such as Jude 1:7 establish it beyond reasonable doubt.

On the other hand, put more positively, **the mission of the Church is to provide mankind with the perfection of supernatural life, a life that will be fulfilled in the world to come but that begins in the here and now.** This theme is especially prominent in the Johannine corpus,

but it also finds expression in, for example, Matthew 5:48: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

To put the matter succinctly, we could say that **Christ established the Church in order that we might be saved, both in the negative sense of delivering us from sin and damnation and in the positive sense of calling us to the divine life.** The latter is the more metaphysically significant, but the former cannot be neglected; in fact, it is the one that Jesus seems to epistemically prioritize.

Whatever humanity’s final fate, therefore, it seems that the psychological *modus operandi* Jesus invites us to adopt is one of extreme caution. It is the Pauline perspective of working out one’s salvation with “fear and trembling” (Philippians 2:12). For although it is not our place to know who or how many will be damned, *the simple and undeniable fact of the matter is that the Gospels give us every indication that the numbers are great and they could easily extend to you or me.*

**For the first 1,900 years of the Church’s history, this approach was taken for granted.** It was an approach which prompted souls to personal conversion and which inspired the community of believers in their missionary efforts. It was an approach that took the Great Commission seriously because it could provide a cogent explanation as to why that commission mattered. Compare this to the compromised sacramental life and ersatz evangelism of today and the contrast becomes stark.

When assessing the present, doleful state of the Church, the question put by the rich young man to Our Lord—“Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” (Matthew 19:16)—ought to be at the forefront of our minds. In

making this assessment, we should avail ourselves of that distinctively Christian vantage point of hope: “Rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer,” St. Paul tells us (Romans 12:12).

I believe it is precisely our commitment to this spirit of hopeful realism that will enable us to strive anew for that Christian ideal that Professor Peterson identifies with such perspicacity. It is only through the lens of Christian hope that we will come to rediscover that central, salvific purpose of the Church, which inspired such saints as Paul the Apostle, Francis Xavier, and Katherine Drexel. But until that comes about, there can be no doubt that our institutional decline will continue unabated, our sole hope lying in those valiant quarters, small yet growing, that retain some sense of fidelity to that purposeful Tradition that preceded them.

*[Image Credit: Jordan Peterson Podcast]*



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# The Highly Religious “Nones”

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**Just what is that telling line that is often spoken by today’s “nones?”**

“I’m spiritual, but not religious.” Over the years, I’ve heard those very words many a time.

**In all likelihood, it’s not a deliberate lie to say that one is spiritual but not religious.** In fact, “nones” who resort to this self-description may well believe that they are being entirely accurate. But are they?

A more accurate, not to mention more telling, line from a fully self-aware “none” might go something like this: “I’m really not very spiritual at all, but I am highly religious.”

**What does it mean to be spiritual? For that matter, what does it mean to be religious?** Webster tells us that **being spiritual has “something to do with the spirit or soul,” while spirituality is a “devotion to spiritual things instead of worldly things.” Finally, a “quality of being spiritual” translates to a condition of being “neither corporeal nor material.”**

And religious? It can and does mean many things, from a “belief in God or gods” to being “pious, devout, strict, exact, scrupulous,” and so on.

Do any of these definitions accurately capture any of the modern, materialistic “nones” of your acquaintance? If so, you have not encountered any of the “nones” of my acquaintance, casual or otherwise, let alone the “nones” in my family, immediate or extended. **None of the “nones” I know anything about are remotely spiritual, but all are highly materialistic.**

**In other words, none of my “nones” would actually qualify as pagans in good standing.** After all, a good pagan truly was spiritual—and religious. None other than G.K. Chesterton certainly thought so.

In Chesterton’s day it had become “customary” to say that “modern youth” were pagans. But he remained unconvinced. The real trouble with the young, as he saw it, was not that they were pagans but that they had somehow shed any “vestige of paganism.” The same might be said of today’s “nones.”

Already by that point, 1932 to be precise, Chesterton had concluded that his version of the “nones” had not lost their Christianity—because the “sober truth of the matter” was that **most of them never had any Christianity to lose in the first place.**

This, he hastened to add, **was not necessarily the fault of the young, but it surely was their “misfortune.”** In other words, insofar as Chesterton was concerned, the basic problem was not that the young had lost their Christianity but that they had “lost their paganism.”

After all, as Chesterton reminded his readers, **to a real pagan wine was always more than wine; “it was a god.” And corn was always more than corn; “it was a goddess.”**

**To be sure, the ancient pagans were not Christians, or at least not yet Christians, but they were spiritual—and they were religious. As such, they were never satisfied with—or by—mere materialism.**

And today? Chesterton, of course, is no longer with us. But his words and thoughts are. His “wish” should be our wish: if only his “rebels” (and our “nones”) could actually be trusted to be “good, hearty pagans.”

Instead, his “rebels” and our “nones” have somehow learned to be content to live their lives under the “strange delusion” that “eggs are simply eggs” or that “wine is nothing more than wine.”

What might be done about ridding society of such delusions, he wondered? Perhaps missionaries might be dispatched among the young to convert them to paganism, he joked.

Or was he simply joking? Chesterton, after all, was known to make a joke in order to make a point. And here his point—and his concern—was that the problem even then was “very deep indeed.”

And the problem faced today by America in particular and the West in general is much, much deeper.

**So, is there a solution short of pagan-trained missionaries among hordes of pre- or post-pagans?** Maybe, just maybe, the “nones” are already grasping at some form of paganism with their claims of spirituality.

And maybe, just maybe, their strict religious practices will eventually help lead them toward paganism as well. After all, the environmental movement is essentially a religious movement, complete with religious practices and religious demands, not to mention apocalyptic visions and conclusions.

**At this point in Western history, the entire project of the Left is a substitute for conventional religion. To be sure, it is a secular religious movement, but a highly religious movement nonetheless. The goal is not to achieve individual salvation but to create a heaven on earth instead.**

For the time being, or at least for this historical moment, much of America’s youth have lost what Chesterton thought that the youth of England had lost long ago—namely, any sense of the “critically important tradition of heathenry.”

**Having cut themselves off from the “truths that come to the sensitive in silence,” they had lost any awareness of the “atmosphere that surrounds every object that is almost visible, like a halo.” As a result, they had lost the sense that there is something in and about our world that is “more real than realism.”**

**Is there any possibility of recovery from such a loss short of sending missionaries to minister to the losers?** While it might (but shouldn’t) be surprising to learn, Chesterton thought that there was. What was *not* surprising to him was that the youth of his day knew next to nothing about “historical Christianity.” Nor was it surprising to him that **some among the young were “so innocent” that they**

**were actually beginning to “get in touch with orthodoxy without even knowing that it is orthodoxy.” And why not, he concluded, because that was precisely what had happened to him!**

So perhaps the day will come when large numbers of “nones” will recover what they have lost. The process, no doubt, will be very gradual. After all, it will take time, perhaps even generations, for a critical mass of society to achieve the status of what might be termed “paganhood.”

Having finally arrived at that way station, travelers might then be on the verge of being able to say that they are both spiritual and religious—and in the Christian sense of both conditions. Impossible, you say? Not really. Even a cursory understanding of the early history of “historical Christianity” ought to tell us that much.

*[Photo Credit: Unsplash]*



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