

# The paradoxical freedom of organized religion, and surviving a time of uncharitable unclarity

There is beauty in the desert...

MARK NOWAKOWSKI



One of the key things which brought me out of agnosticism and back into Catholicism as a young man was what seemed to me a paradoxical realization at that time. **Years of intellectual inquiry** - and asking the questions that often made my family and friends uncomfortable at our various gatherings (yes, I was that guy) - **helped me to see that the supposed freedom of modern secular living was breeding the most intolerable of herd mentalities, while the supposed strictures of this “organized religion” were actually the guide-rails to free, independent, and aspirational thought.**

At the time I knew very little about the Church’s history of beauty outside of the small sampling of sacred music that I had studied as a young composer. While I certainly believed in a God and prayed in a sense daily, I also was not yet cognizant of why

Christ was an unavoidable necessity in the human story. But it was precisely the Church's intellectual tradition, and a handful of its modern teachers who presented it clearly and without apology, that brought me in for a second, third, and ultimately a final look. Simply put, the world had nothing like it.

In the intervening 23 years, the “intolerable herd mentality” I mentioned has taken shape into a monstrosity that even my pessimistic and dystopian young imagination could not have foreseen, while the Church - at least at her traditional core - remains a lone bastion. **In our time, the only organization which will give you a picture of human dignity daring in its breadth and clarity is the Catholic Church.** For example, concurrent with various hot-button “culture war” issues, the only place where you can have an ideologically unencumbered discussion about the full import, meaning, and ontological orientation of human sexuality is in the Church. Outsiders may scoff, but the fact remains that for a well-read Catholic, modern secular talk about gender and sexuality is painful and eye-roll inducing, because it always reveals an unread ignorance which often culminates in a hormonally-driven narcissism. In reality, there is no “culture war” — there is only an island of sane clarity, and around it the waters sometimes come to a boil. And here we are.

**The Church's intellectual clarity is part of her mission and her strength,** which is why so many faithful Catholics these days find the Francis papacy to be so distressing. I think that **we can charitably form a picture of a pontiff who really is deeply concerned with those at the peripheries. Yet in seeking lost sheep, the shepherd must remain a shepherd, and cannot stop thinking about the sheep he has temporarily left behind to find the lost ones. In this particular case, the method of engaging the peripheries has often involved a blurring of moral boundaries and concomitant Jesuit casuistry,** which have

proven to be poor methods of engagement indeed. The lack of clarity is never the beginning of charity.

**Clarity is charity.**

This is something I always remind myself of, especially as I have a naturally diplomatic personality which is often ready to hem and haw and compromise in order to bring order and direction to a situation. For those who prefer to cook with honey rather than vinegar, we must remember that unclarity is the equivalent of cooking with gall.

One of the most distressing aspects of this current Papacy is how it has excluded many of the brightest leaders in the Church, and in their stead brought in previously exiled people from the intellectual margins. Perhaps this is just another of Francis's attempts to bring in the marginalized and make sure that all are heard. **Yet margins exist for a reason, and when one brings margins to the center, chaos occurs. In this case, the type of thinking which sought to bring secular terminology into Catholic conversations — shaping the Church into the world's mold as opposed to boldly Christifying the nations — has now taken center stage in the most distressing of ways.** And as is almost always the case, those Christians who “wish to find people where they are” have little plan of where they actually want to get them, while this “lost sheep” mentality often is merely cover for the attempt to conform the ecclesia to the koinos.

Recently we saw a day of Jubilee for 2025 be declared for “LGBTQ persons” on the Vatican website, one which was summarily deleted and denied once the appropriate uproar occurred. To those outside of the ecclesia who live in the mind of the world, this might seem hateful to that particular group of people. Yet it is nothing of the such. **For the Church, it remains essential to define and steer the conversation towards charitable clarity, and this cannot be done using**

**a terminology which normalizes and embraces various forms of ideological confusion.** You do not help the heroine addict, for instance, by labeling them a heroine addict. **You help them by insisting on their God-given and immutable - and yes, eternal - dignity. This is why 12-step programs begin with an essential metaphysical reorientation, and why they are successful. As great as 12-step programs are, the Church has something much better to offer, and she forgets this identity at her own peril.**

I return to the early days of my reversion, when I attended a painfully rendered modern mass at our local Newman chapel. The building was horrifically ugly, the music clanged away with misplaced juvenile enthusiasm, and I found the entire process mostly horrifying. I was back in the Church that I had rejected years ago, and much of it behaved in the way that disgusted me back then. Yet I intuited that I had a responsibility to be there, and so — outside of the homily and consecration — I mostly focused on a single small beautiful icon of what I later learned was Our Lady of Perpetual help. I didn't know yet about the traditional mass or the rising tide of beauty taking shape in our Church. The uglier things became, the more I focused on that beautiful small icon, losing myself in our Mother's presence until the consecration came.

A few years later, in prayer, I wrote what would be my first sacred peace [piece]: a setting of the Ave Maris Stella. It became a part of my private prayer, and I only attempted a choral setting two years ago for His Majesty's Men. At that time I also — driven by my experiences in a Paulist-run church — discovered the vital movement of traditionalism in the Church, and along with it the still scattered and disorganized but growing renaissance of traditional North American Catholic artists and creatives. The work is posted below.

Nor could I imagine working with an organization like the Catholic Art Institute, and the types of beautiful works on display in their annual national art competition. Just look at this gallery of winners and honorable mentions - look at what the modern



*Our Lady of Help by Fabrizio Diomedi - Honorable Mention in the 2024 Catholic Art Institute Sacred Art Prize, and my favorite work of the bunch.*

Clearly, there is great beauty to be found in this time of hunger.

For those who felt the renaissance about to dawn under the guidance of Benedict XVI, the regression under Francis has been beyond distressing. The dissenters, experiments, and clowns at the periphery have indeed taken the citadel. But we must remember that their grip hangs on a single unhealthy lung, while



word reaches me that the discontent from this time has suffused even more liberal members of long-term Church leadership. It is unlikely that we will have to endure a Francis the Second, but in the event that we do, then **this time in the desert should be pursued fruitfully: in mortification, the growth of patience, the cultivation of a (very) long-term vision, and the pursuit of Beauty Himself.**

We cannot expect a world which crucified the perfect man to immediately embrace the wonders of truth, beauty, and goodness so quickly, and **we cannot expect a church which has become drunk on the spirit of the world to remember her identity overnight.** Not even a hero Pope could accomplish this in short order.

**The transformation of societies from goodness to chaos can happen in a heartbeat, as we have all just witnessed. Building goodness is comparatively difficult and by nature an uphill, generational slog. Meanwhile the one “who makes all things new” works on His own timeline.**

A blessed Advent to you.

Dr. Mark Nowakowski's substack. For the full experience, upgrade your subscription.