

# The Church's "Ultimate Trial"

*We have arrived at a point of such intellectual and moral confusion that myriads of intelligent and educated people deny the basic facts of our biology and humanity, but, as G. K. Chesterton reminds us, asserting that the sky is green does not make it so.*

March 2, 2025 Bishop Donald J. Hying  
Print



*St. Anne's Church in Vilnius City Municipality, Lithuania. (Image: Yevheniia / Unsplash.com)*

An intriguing paragraph in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which I have often pondered, is #675:

*The Church's ultimate trial. Before Christ's second coming, the Church must pass through a final trial that will shake the faith of many believers. The persecution which accompanies her pilgrimage on*

earth will unveil “the mystery of iniquity” in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth. The supreme religious deception is that of the Antichrist, a pseudo-messianism by which man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah come in the flesh.

Very few people sin because they want to make themselves miserable and endanger the salvation of their soul.

**Evil usually comes to us disguised as an angel of light, promising us happiness and fulfillment if we simply surrender to our temptations** towards the seven deadly sins, whether it be pride, avarice, anger, lust, sloth, envy, or gluttony.

**Once we have fallen for the treachery of sin, it rips off its deceptive mask and reveals both its moral ugliness and its radical inability to ever fulfill its false promises of joy, shaming us for our sinful choices.** Or, worse, it convinces us that we need just a little more of that sin to be satisfied, creating a pathway to dependency or outright addiction.

Because of humanity’s fundamental enslavement to sin and its tragic consequence of death, **Jesus Christ came to rescue us and restore our original identity as children of the Father, freed and forgiven, through the power of His death and resurrection.**

## **Forgiveness and Redemption**

As the essential “sacrament” of Christ’s presence and mission in the world until the end of time, the Catholic Church both teaches the divine revelation given to us through the Scriptures and the Tradition and **offers the merciful reconciliation**

won for us in Christ, so that we can be freed from the grasp of sin and death.

**In other words, the Church both convicts us of our sin, getting us in touch with our profound need of Christ and His salvation, and then offers the only solution to our lost and broken state: Forgiveness and redemption in the Lord through faith and the grace of the Sacraments.**

In a world where we are increasingly awash in conflicting information, the Church offers us God-given truth. As we become ever more polarized, the Church reminds us that we are brothers and sisters in the human family, and invites us to even deeper unity by becoming adopted sons and daughters in God's family through Baptism. When we invariably fall short and choose sin over the good, the Church extends God's mercy and healing by forgiveness through Reconciliation. And since we are too weak to fight the spiritual battle on our own and need to be strengthened and transformed by the One who is greater than us, the Church nourishes us with the very Body and Blood of Christ.

### **The Current Crisis**

Despite these incredible gifts, we remain affected by Original Sin—darkened in intellect so that it's harder to identify the good and weakened in will so that it's harder to choose it. Although we are still “very good” and made in God's image (cf Gen 1:31 and Gn 1:26–27) we feel a pull toward sin. A bad fruit of our inclination to rebellion against God and His truth, brewing in the West for a very long time but now reaching fever pitch in the wake of the sexual revolution, is the fundamental denial of moral absolutes and natural law. We may not be living through the persecution described in the Catechism reference above, but **we certainly are living in a time when “man glorifies himself in place of God.”**

Many influential voices in our society question the given reality of human nature, the sacredness of life in the womb, the meaning and purpose of sexuality, the definition of marriage, and even the identity of man and woman. **Catholics voicing opinions opposed to Church teaching are too common.**

In April 2023, Dan Hitchens **insightfully wrote** that Catholicism faces its third **great crisis**. **The first, addressed by ecumenical councils over multiple centuries, was a theological crisis: Who is God? The second, from the Great Schism to the Protestant Reformation, was ecclesial: What is the Church? And the third, raging since last century, is anthropological: What is man?** This last question is ravaging the Church and the culture. Who exactly is man? Does he have a fixed, God-given nature or is he completely autonomous, deciding for himself what he is? Is there a universal moral law to which he either submits and blossoms or rebels and harms himself, or does he decide right and wrong for himself? Is he part of a community through which he both sacrifices and benefits on his way to becoming the person God created him to be, or are any bonds and communal obligations things to be thrown off and avoided so that he can create an identity for himself with as few restraints as possible?

**Wrestling with these previously settled questions has provoked both an identity and a common sense crisis.** We have arrived at a point of such intellectual and moral confusion that **myriads of intelligent and educated people deny the basic facts of our biology and humanity, but, as G. K. Chesterton reminds us, asserting that the sky is green does not make it so.**

### **Reaffirming the Truth**

This desire to redefine moral reality has now found a voice within the Church Herself, as some individuals, certainly

theologians, but even some bishops and priests, advocate for fundamental shifts in Catholic teaching regarding the acceptance of contraception, homosexual activity, transgenderism, even including puberty blockers and surgery for minors, and euthanasia.

While I am not suggesting that we are in the “final trial” or that the end of the world is near (although that always remains a possibility), could this current dynamic of seeking to redefine Church teaching be part of what the Catechism refers to in paragraph #675: **The deceiving temptation to solve man’s problems by denying the Truth which the Church has always taught, and to redefine sin, in order to simply affirm people in their moral choices?**

In this confusing time when everything seems up for critique, redefinition, and question, it is vitally important to reaffirm the eternal and unchanging realities of Truth.

**God, the Scriptures, the beautiful teachings of our Faith, the inestimable gift of human nature, and the identity and mission of the Church do not change.**

We can change, hopefully for the good, as we grow in our understanding of these timeless gifts revealed to us by God, but **we do not have the power to redefine or adapt what the Lord has given us just to conform to the cultural fashions of the moment.**

**There is no faster or easier way to render the Church impotent and irrelevant than to follow the cultural zeitgeist.**

Rather, **we must stand courageously and lovingly in the radiant light of the Lord, teaching the Truth given to us as the lasting guarantor of human freedom and dignity and compassionately accompanying those who struggle and even fail to accept and live aspects of that Truth.**

We are all sinners. Despite assertions to the contrary, **one can and should be faithful and pastoral at the same time.** We can follow Jesus' example when the Pharisees brought a woman caught in adultery before Him. The religious teachers of the day were trying to trap Jesus: He could either uphold Mosaic law and declare the woman deserving of death (and appear to be a rebel, since by law only the Roman government claimed the right to capital punishment), or He could equivocate (and appear to be a lukewarm Jew, who eschewed Mosaic law). Instead, **Jesus chose a third and better option: to judge the action ("Go your way, and from now on do not sin again") but not condemn the person ("Neither do I condemn you" [Jn 8:11]).** Today we are often similarly confronted with two choices: to be faithful to Church teaching and condemn the person, or to be pastoral and soften Church teaching in an attempt to show him or her compassion. We must follow Jesus' third and better way: to love the person by sharing the truth; to be merciful and compassionate while also holding up what is truly good for him or her.

**We can profoundly harm a brother or sister by not offering them the fullness of Church teaching, just as we can harm them by not loving and walking with them in their hurt, pain, and struggle.** Each of us is inclined toward one of these approaches over the other. Whichever our particular preference, we must work to extract what's good and true in both approaches and leave behind what's misguided as we follow Jesus' third way.

**This fusion of truth and charity is the hallmark of Jesus' identity and mission, and so it must be for us.** What we need now is to take up this missionary identity, live it out with Jesus' holistic approach, and offer a hurting world the grace, forgiveness, hope, and love found in the Church.



*(Note: This essay, which is revised and adapted from a column originally appearing in the Diocese of Madison's Catholic Herald on **July 26, 2023**, was posted on the **What We Need Now Substack** and is reprinted here with kind permission.)*

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