Opinion



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Despite political slogans to the contrary, there has never been a time when America was "great." The same thing could be said about the Roman Catholic Church.

There has never been a "great" time, a "golden age," a context in which the church was actually a "perfect society" or anything apart from what it always has been and remains: a pilgrim community of the baptized. It has always been simultaneously holy and sinful (a theme theologian Brian Flanagan takes up in his recent book *Stumbling in Holiness: Sin and Sanctity in the Church*) because it is composed of imperfect, weak and ordinary human beings like you and me and everybody else.

While many Catholics, especially those in ecclesiastical leadership, have focused a lot of attention on the sanctity of the church over the centuries, the real sinfulness of the church can no longer be merely brushed off or avoided altogether.

In the wake of the crises of faith and trust renewed by the revelations of the abuse and assault allegations against former-Cardinal Theodore McCarrick and witnessed in the Pennsylvania grand jury report, women and men of faith have had to grapple with why they continue to identify as Catholic and what that identity means to them. And the responses have varied.

A lot of attention has been paid to those who have opted out of Catholicism entirely. Such is the case with Melinda Henneberger as expressed in her *USA Today* column and her essay in this publication. I understand this decision and the feelings that precipitate such a serious choice. I, too, have had my own struggles with how to square my faith in the God of Jesus Christ and the church with the darkest and most-disturbing criminality of some of its leaders. Being a member of a religious order and an ordained presbyter doesn't make me immune from doubt, anger and frustration. But I have not, at least for now, followed Henneberger's path.

As someone who has made a conscious decision to remain in the church, I have been interested in the responses of my sisters and brothers who have made similar choices in the face of such tragic crises. In voicing their righteous anger and expressing their understandable frustration, some Catholics have proposed constructive pathways and calls for change. Among these, I think increased lay leadership and ministerial oversight in numerous forms makes tremendous sense and its implementation is long overdue.

Others have suggested dramatic and, at times, unrealistic responses. While well-intentioned, calls for widespread episcopal resignations or even just that of Pope Francis alone do not adequately address the structural issues that were the conditions that make possible such egregious abuse, assault and cover-up.

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And still others have taken a different approach entirely. Which brings me to what we might call the ecclesial equivalent of the Trumpian rally cry to "Make America Great Again."

While not an overwhelming number, there is a small but vocal group of Catholics who have taken the latest revelations as an opportunity to suggest the source of the crises in the church are the theological and liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council. This sort of conjecture is as incredible as those who claim gay clergy are the problem (a preposterous assertion that has been incontrovertibly disproven by scientific research).

The response has been a renewed call from such camps for a return to some kind of earlier — "greater" — era of propositional claims and Latin collects. A few authors have pointed to the fact that even some young adults have been drawn to the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite as evidence for the potential appeal of a Tridentine style as an answer to the problem.

In an essay published last November, Susanna Spencer, a freelance writer, named this population of young people the "Modern Traditionalists." In addition to a Latin liturgy with polyphonic choral accompaniment, characteristics of a "Modern Traditionalist" include a vision of church and world shaped by Pope St. John Paul II, identifying as conservative, and embracing the "Theology of the Body."

Spencer explains, "A Modern Traditionalist is a lover of all things traditional, not out of a nostalgia for things pre-1965, but out of a real love of the beauty preserved in it. For them it is not just a preference, but the realization that the older liturgy is more beautiful and profound."

I wholeheartedly agree that those hankering for the Extraordinary Form are not doing so out of nostalgia. How could they be? Most weren't alive when Latin was the liturgical lingua franca (and for most Millennials and Generation Z, their parents

weren't either). But it is the second line in this description that gives me pause. It is the presentation of an aesthetic opinion as an uncontestable fact: the Extraordinary Form *is more beautiful and profound* than what is known as the "Novus Ordo" (literally, the new "way" or "order") liturgy of Vatican II.

What I find extremely disturbing with this sort of logic — and it is not limited to Roman Catholics, as one recent piece in The Times of London showed — are the ahistorical and untenable theological foundations it presupposes.

For instance, in a church that is two-millennia old, a liturgical form that has existed since the 16th century is hardly the most "traditional." It's practically a fad. Ironically, it was the bishops and their *periti* at Vatican II that went back to the earliest Christian sources and examined the historical development of rites and rituals through the centuries in order to offer the best footing for what we might rightly call the most "traditional" approach to liturgy. It is traditional in that it better reflects the Christian tradition.

I think there is plenty of room in the church for those who wish to worship in diverse ways. But the "smells and bells" of a Latin liturgy in an ornate cathedral are no more beautiful or profound than the simple house liturgy of the first century communities or the massive liturgies on a beach during World Youth Days.

Change can be a terrifying prospect. So too is the realization that what so many of us generally presumed about the goodness, virtue and moral standing of our religious leaders might not be as accurate as we rightly hoped. But change in itself is not the problem and reactionary attitudes of yearning for a greater time that never was is also not the answer. The desire to return to what some see as past liturgical perfection, for example, reflects the fear of change in unfamiliar times seen today in broader society. It is a symptom of something more troubling: a desire for control presented as authentic reform.

As we begin this new year, a year in which real reform and change is needed in the structures of our community of faith, we must be mindful to avoid the easy answers and simple solutions. This includes the indignant cries of those who would use the real tragedies, crimes and sins uncovered to advance an agenda of ecclesiastical politics in an effort to recreate a fantasy of a simpler and holier and better church.

There's no going back to this reverie of some past great church, because the only church that exists is the pilgrim one composed of all the baptized on a journey

forward. The question for us this year is *how* exactly do we let the Holy Spirit lead us forward?

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