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St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Lincoln, Nebraska. (Unsplash/Creative Commons/Channel 82)



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There are numerous signs that the Catholic Church is failing in Western countries. There are few vocations, church attendance is down and young people are leaving the church in droves. There are as many theories explaining this decline as there are commentators, but the theories can be collected in two major baskets: those that blame culture and those that blame the church itself.

The Catholic hierarchy tends to blame contemporary culture for the church's problems. Consumerism, individualism and secularism top their list of negative forces. The media bombards people with images and messages that are antithetical to Christianity: Happiness comes from sex, money and power. Life is too busy with work and leisure to have time for religion.

The social structures that supported religion have also weakened.

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Ethnic neighborhoods that once reinforced religious communities and values have seen a decline as their residents have been disbursed to the suburbs. As Catholics joined the mainstream, they lost their roots. Fewer children go to Catholic schools. Interfaith marriages have increased as young Catholics socialize with non-Catholics. As they got better educated, they were less likely to follow the clergy without questions.

There is a lot of truth in this cultural explanation for the church's failings, but blaming the culture is like blaming the weather. That is the world we live in; learn to deal with it. Retreating to a Catholic ghetto is not an option.

The theory that the church itself is to blame for its decline features a conservative and a liberal version. Both blame the hierarchy for not dealing properly with the sex abuse crisis. Liberals stress the lack of accountability and lay involvement, while conservatives point their fingers at gay priests.

Conservatives also blame the changes in the church ordered by the Second Vatican Council. Prior to the council, the church was a rock of stability and certainty in a stormy world. Change undermined the credibility of the church because change was an admission that the church was wrong in the past. One week you would go to hell for eating meat on Friday; the next week you were OK. One year you were told that the Mass would always be in Latin; the next year it would be in English.

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Conservatives also blame theologians for confusing the people by publicly debating moral and doctrinal matters that the hierarchy says are definitive teaching. They also believe that the social justice message of the church distracts from its traditional dogmas. Some argue that ecumenical and interreligious dialogue has led to the belief that all religions are equally valid. Emphasizing the role of the laity in the church took the priest off his pedestal and made the priesthood less attractive.

Conservatives believe Pope Francis is going in the wrong direction and pray for a return to the policies of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

The liberal version, meanwhile, points the finger at the hierarchy.

Liberals believe Vatican II was just the beginning of reforms that were necessary for the church. They believe the hierarchy, especially John Paul II, feared chaos in the church and shut down any further reform. The documents of the council were interpreted through a conservative lens, and theologians were labeled dissidents

and silenced if they did not toe the Vatican line.

Commentators such as the Fr. Andrew Greeley believed that the hierarchy lost the laity when Pope Paul VI reaffirmed the church's prohibition against artificial birth control. The teaching was rejected by both moral theologians and the laity.

Denying Communion to divorced and remarried Catholics has also been problematic for couples and their children.

Liberals also blame the hierarchy for the vocation crisis because, they argue, there would be plenty of priests if they were allowed to marry, and even more if women were permitted ordination.

Liberals also argue that the hierarchy's opposition to abortion and gay rights has alienated many people, especially the young. People have also been alienated by bishops who deny Communion to certain Democratic politicians.

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The liberals say that the hierarchy is following much the same path it took in Europe, where it alienated the working classes in the 19th century with its alliance with the upper classes. For much of the 20th century, anti-clericalism was nonexistent in America because the bishops sided with unions and the working classes. Anti-clericalism only blossomed when bishops aligned themselves with the Republican Party against abortion and gay rights.

As a social scientist, I believe that the preponderance of evidence supports the liberal explanation of the decline of the church, but I think that the conservatives make some good points. Certainly, the changes after Vatican II were not well explained or implemented. The clergy were as confused as the laity. And liberals need to explain why more Catholics are joining evangelical churches than liberal churches.

One of the problems with all these theories, however, is that they were developed by theologians who believe that ideas are what motivate humans. Ideas are important, but experience often matters more.

Lots of people stay in the church even though they disagree with some church teaching. But a bad experience in confession, at a wedding or at a funeral can turn people away for good. More people are driven away from the church by arrogant priests than by disagreements over theology. This is why Francis is so critical of clericalism.

And the fact is, we lose more people through boredom than because of theology. Now that people do not believe that they will go to hell for missing Mass on Sunday, they are not going to come unless they benefit from the experience.

If the preaching is dull, if the music does not move them, if they do not feel welcomed, then they are not going to come back. If the Mass is seen as something that the priest does, if the Scriptures are the domain of the clergy, if there is no sense of community, then why come?

This is why many Catholics are drawn to evangelical churches. Ideas are important, but Catholicism must also be a lived experience that is relevant to the lives of the faithful. The pre-Vatican II church provided such experiences in popular devotions. After Vatican II, the liturgy was supposed to provide this experience but too often it did not.

So the next time we have a discussion of why the church is failing, don't invite the theologians; invite sociologists, psychologists, artists, musicians and the people who have left the church.