Opinion
NCR Voices



Parishioners gather for Mass at St. Ann's Catholic Church in Lexington, Neb., Dec. 4, 2025. (AP/Thomas Peipert)



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The polarization of the Catholic Church in the United States sometimes seems as entrenched as our nation's political divides. Indeed, the gradual sorting of the nation into two ideologically opposed camps in politics, and the way politics now subsumes so much of the culture, makes overcoming ecclesial polarization very difficult.

There is one agent of unity in our Catholic faith, however, that the secular culture lacks: the bishop of Rome.

On the day Pope Leo XIV was elected, I wrote:

> The wealthy and well-organized conservative critics of Francis will be disappointed. Good. The new pope is not someone who will be seduced by their financial power. U.S. conservatives who disagreed with Francis would often cite the parochialism of his Argentine background and, especially, what they considered his Peronist streak. They said he misunderstood the U.S. That dog will no longer hunt.

Many conservative Catholics had convinced themselves that the world felt the same way about Pope Francis as they did, that the cardinals would seek a major change in direction. Raymond Arroyo and his anti-Francis adjuncts, Bishop Joseph Strickland and his social media followers, Edward Pentin, Diane Montagna and their absurd " College of Cardinals Report," all convinced themselves that Francis' reforms would be revoked.



Banners for the Catholic Church's Jubilee Year of Hope and for the election of Pope Leo XIV hang outside Holy Name Cathedral in Chicago Oct. 25, 2025. (NCR photo/Teresa Malcolm)

As 2026 progresses, and it becomes more and more evident that synodality is not going anywhere, that a hyperfocus on homosexuality as the be-all sin of our times is not something with which Leo agrees, and that the prioritization of abortion politics above other clamant issues was always a misreading of Catholic moral theology, these conservative critics of Francis need to look in the mirror. They need to ask themselves if they are willing to limp along as dissidents from ecclesial authority. Francis was 78 when he was elected pope, and was not in good health the past few years. Leo is a young 70 and still plays tennis. There is no "waiting out" the pontificate.

The future of the Catholic Church in this country is happily not a function of the ideological blinders of our friends at EWTN. The role of younger, more conservative Catholics in the pews, and the vocations to the priesthood and religious life they

produce, matters greatly to that future. Last year's National Study of Catholic Priests by the Catholic Project at the Catholic University of America illustrates the fact that the Catholic left simply does not produce many vocations to the priesthood anymore. Those who do enter seminary tend to be more conservative, both in their theology and their politics.

I do not share the hand-wringing anxiety some of my liberal friends exhibit in the face of this development. Most of these younger, more conservative priests I have met are fine pastors who love their people. They need to be encouraged to ignore most of what passes for Catholic commentary on the internet, and spend more time reading Leo's sermons and general audience addresses. Catholic social doctrine has to be presented to them as an application of Christian anthropology, but that is something Leo is excellent at explaining.



Priests process into St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City to concelebrate the chrism Mass April 15, 2025. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)

There is one other reality, somewhat unique to the United States, with which our conservative coreligionists must wrestle: money. Poverty is one of the evangelical counsels but many conservative projects are led and shaped by plutocrats. The Napa Institute's Tim Busch is the avatar of the plutocrats, but there are others, all of whom seem unwilling to question contemporary spread-eagle capitalism and its vicious results.

If we should rightly expect conservative Catholics to do some soul-searching as to why they are out of step with the second pope in a row, liberal Catholics also need to examine some of their attitudes and ideas. The liberal Catholicism with which my generation was raised was rooted in the real-life experiences of the working class and epitomized by the Catholic Church's de facto alliance with the New Deal. Liberals have lost the working class in the last few decades. Now, liberals are the party of the educated elite.

Liberal Catholics have followed secular liberalism, turning to academic theologians as an alternate source of magisterial authority at a time when academic theology was losing touch with ecclesial reality. It is easy to find a liberal theologian who is well-versed in the gender ideology of Judith Butler but important work on, say, Augustine, is left to conservative theologians. This situation is untenable.

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Liberal Catholics are a little too quick to adopt a critical attitude to the decisions of the hierarchy and a little too reluctant to question the orthodoxy of MSNBC. It is one thing to say that abortion should not be viewed as the preeminent political issue of our time and quite another to suggest that there are Catholic rationales for supporting abortion.

One common challenge presents itself to Catholics on both the left and the right: how to prevent political assumptions and labels from defining the important distinctions in religious dialogue and even worship. It should not be odd that some Democrats like Latin at Mass or that some Latin Mass goers voted for Kamala Harris, but it is more than odd. It is almost inconceivable. Both conservative and liberal Catholics need to disentangle the faith from the politics of the day and that will only happen when both sides place their faith and its claims first.

Here is where the new episcopal appointments may be most consequential. The bishops need to help their clergy, the men on the frontlines of pastoral care and religious teaching, to reconnect the Catholics in the pews with the foundations of the faith. Gone are the days when the culture carried religion from one generation to the next, and the disintegration of a distinctly Catholic culture has resulted in the proliferation of sectarianism within the church. Religion in America is reduced to ethics and thence to politics, finally to legalisms. It is propositional: Believe this checklist of ideas and you qualify. These tendencies make polarization more and more likely.



Young people pray near a monstrance after a Mass for the feast of Corpus Christi at the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in Los Angeles June 22, 2025, during the National Eucharistic Pilgrimage. (OSV News/Bob Roller)

There is an opening, however, to rekindling a sense of Catholic culture: Young people are yearning for community, real life, incarnate community. They find information, but also loneliness, on their smartphones. The algorithms that define

our digital culture encourage a host of antisocial pathologies. The local Catholic Church should become a place where people are welcomed, all people, and where all are invited to recognize the significance of their baptism, the death to self and incorporation into the body of Christ, and to walk together toward a more humane, because more holy, future.

As Leo said in his Christmas homily:

> To heal our blindness, the Lord chooses to reveal himself in each human being, who reflect his true image, according to a plan of love begun at the creation of the world. As long as the night of error obscures this providential truth, then "there is no room for others either, for children, for the poor, for the stranger." These words of Pope Benedict XVI remain a timely reminder that on earth, there is no room for God if there is no room for the human person. To refuse one is to refuse the other. Yet, where there is room for the human person, there is room for God; even a stable can become more sacred than a temple, and the womb of the Virgin Mary become the Ark of the New Covenant.

In this new year, a renewal of Christian faith is profoundly needed, and it is up to all of us to help bring it about. All the prayers said during last year's Jubilee of Hope might, just might, come to fruition in 2026, but only if we all learn to pray with our eyes open, take seriously the call to follow the Lord and reacquaint ourselves, in our own situations, with the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience. We won't build the city of God in 2026, but we might allow God to help build that city in ourselves. And that can change human history.

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Editor's note: *Starting Jan. 5, NCR columnist Michael Sean Winters will be adjusting the number of columns he writes each week in order to focus on other projects. You can read his now weekly column on Mondays. You can also sign up here for his weekly newsletter, appearing in your inbox each Wednesday. Over the coming weeks, NCR will introduce new voices to continue our long-standing mission of publishing engaging, compelling commentary on the church and society.*