Opinion
Editorial

A sacramentary is seen on the altar during a traditional Tridentine Mass July 18, 2021, at St. Josaphat Church in the Queens borough of New York City. (CNS/Gregory Shemitz)

by NCR Editorial Staff

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It was a bit jarring to see a recent secular media account of how some parishes are being taken over by extreme right bishops — especially when it was presented with

a blaring headline that suggests the Catholic Church in the United States is somehow on a mass march into the past.

"A step back in time" the Associated Press headline announced. "America's Catholic Church sees an immense shift toward the old ways."

But is it? Exactly how one defines "immense" is crucial to the telling of this tale. The report never attached any solid numbers to this trend, except to say that such drifts into whatever is meant by "old ways" are "not happening everywhere" and that "Conservative Catholics remain a minority."

Indeed.

A more accurate assessment of the landscape of U.S. Catholicism would be that the church here is undergoing immense shifts, in the plural. This is just one of those shifts — and one that seems more interested in cutting itself off from the wider world, even the wider Catholic world.

The AP report quotes one student at the very conservative Benedictine College about life on his campus: "We don't all agree on everything, obviously. But I would say everyone has an understanding of, like, truth."

But "truth" in places like Benedictine is often less some immutable, universal truth — but something closer to an alternate reality. Parents of students there call that reality "the Benedictine bubble," and they mean it approvingly. The institution's version of truth, it seems, is often — and happily — sealed off from realities beyond the Kansas campus.

But does Benedictine College — enrollment 2,200 — foreshadow the future of the Catholic Church in the United States, as the AP article asserts? This is the college that recently hosted a controversial commencement speech by Harrison Butker of the Kansas City Chiefs, where he dismissed working women and demanded an end to the "cultural emasculation" of men. No reasonable assessment of Catholicism would claim that as our future in the face of other much larger, far more influential, far more numerous and thriving Catholic institutions.

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ever been.

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Wouldn't it be more reasonable to claim the future of the church is on view at St. Francis Xavier Church, an active and engaged Jesuit parish in New York City? It is much larger and with a much higher profile than St. Maria Goretti parish in Madison, Wisconsin, which was featured in the AP report after it was recently taken over by a traditionalist pastor.

The same might be said of St. Thomas Aquinas in Brooklyn, for its extensive and generous work with the migrants pouring into New York.

The point is that expressions of Catholicism in the United States, particularly with an influx of migrants in recent years from around the globe, are as varied as they've ever been. There are parishes where Mass and sacraments are offered in multiple languages to accommodate parishioners from the Caribbean, Central and South America, West Africa, India and elsewhere. In some cities, parishes primarily serving African Americans flourish, while nearby other parishes serve vibrant Vietnamese or Korean populations.

Some of those parishes tend to be progressive, others conservative, a lot are somewhere in the middle. The best have the grace, wit and imagination to serve the "everybody" that makes up the church.

The threats to the Catholic Church in the United States are real and significant. The AP article mentions some of them: a precipitous drop in recent years in practice, including Mass attendance and sacraments. The number of ordinations continues a steady decline that began decades ago. The same goes for other vowed religious.

But those problems cannot be addressed by some enthusiasts seeking a walk into the past.

What the article describes as an immense trend is, instead, one of many trends pulling at the fabric of an institution that often presents itself as timeless, sacrosanct and forever predictable. The trend in question is a kind of Catholic fundamentalism that has, indeed, surged in recent years. Catholic fundamentalists may self-identify as conservatives or orthodox or traditionalists. They are, instead, caught up in Catholic nostalgia. They wish for some golden era that never existed, one in which

certainty abounds, father knows best, and the world is held at bay by black-and-white images of Spencer Tracy or Karl Malden in a Roman collar.

The lure of nostalgia has increased under a papacy that began with the insight that the church had become too insular and closed in on itself. Francis, who meets with people once condemned or marginalized, who welcomes those previously unwelcome, who not only tolerates but invites and seems to relish in the questions from those previously banned from the highest-level meetings of the global church, is often perceived in fundamentalist circles as a clear and present threat.

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The eminent religion scholar Martin Marty, in a 2018 interview about the massive Fundamentalism Project that he co-directed, addressed how the advances in communication technology, which essentially dismantled walls that once kept cultures and ideas separate, influenced the rise of fundamentalists. "It's harder to keep walls, so you have to work harder to build walls. And there's a lot of that going on," he said.

History amply demonstrates that those walls don't hold.

The future of Catholicism may not rest in the expressions of fundamentalism and extreme conservatism afoot today, but the larger point should not be dismissed. Catholicism in the U.S. is in many ways a fractured enterprise. The forces are as varied as the problems we're living through: the general disengagement by Americans from institutions; the ongoing result of the clergy sex abuse; a distrust of the hierarchical culture that betrayed the community by covering up the abuse scandal; a vacuum of leadership and deep divisions among the U.S. hierarchy; a hierarchy that has engaged in partisan politics to an unusual degree; the effects of the COVID pandemic; and unprecedented public dismissal of a papacy by some Catholic outlets and organizations as well as by Catholic leaders.

It is tempting to seek easy alternatives to that thicket of troubles and just as tempting to seek quick answers to explain what's happening. But the sprawling Catholic community, of many languages, traditions, roots and dreams, resists simple analysis — whether by AP or any variety of nostalgists selling "like, the truth" as they see it.

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