What Will Happen to Conservative Catholicism?

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ABSTRACT (ENGLISH)

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FULL TEXT

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Last month the Vatican and Pope Francis hosted the Synod of Bishops for the Pan-Amazon Region, a meeting to discuss the challenges facing Amazonia and the Catholic Church therein that managed to be extremely wild and extremely predictable at once.

The wild part featured not just the expected debates about married priests and female deacons, but an extended meltdown over whether a wooden statue of a naked, kneeling pregnant woman, used in a ritual on the Vatican grounds, embodied indigenous reverence for the Virgin Mary or indigenous pantheism and nature-worship. Vatican officials seemed determined not to clarify the matter, traditionalist outrage ran wild, and eventually a young traditionalist swiped one of the statues from a Roman church and pitched it into the River Tiber —making himself either a successor of Saint Boniface or a racist iconoclast, depending on which faction of Catholic media you believed.

All exciting stuff —but also a bit irrelevant to the actual outcome of the synod, which featured little of the conservative resistance that characterized earlier synodal battles over divorce and remarriage, and eventually produced a document backing the major project of the Francis era: the decentralization of doctrine and discipline, with priestly celibacy the latest rule that's likely to soon vary across different Roman Catholic regions, as the interpretation of church teaching on divorce and remarriage already does.

And even the act of traditionalist defiance was part of the predictability of the proceedings. As conservative resistance to Francis has grown more intense, it has also grown more marginal, defined by symbolic gestures rather than practical strategies, burning ever-hotter on the internet even as resistance within the hierarchy has faded with retirements, firings, deaths.

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Four years ago I wrote an essay describing the Francis era as a crisis for conservative Catholicism —or at least the conservative Catholicism that believed John Paul II had permanently settled debates over celibacy, divorce, intercommunion and female ordination. That crisis is worse now, manifest in furious arguments within the Catholic right as much as in online opposition to the pope himself. And I don't think we're any closer to a definite answer to what happens to conservative Catholicism when it no longer seems to have the papacy on its side.

While the synod was going on, I conducted a long interview, online in accompaniment to this column, with one of the pope's most prominent conservative critics, Cardinal Raymond Burke. I had never met him before, but he was as I anticipated: at once obdurate and guileless, without the usual church politician's affect, and with a straightforward bullet-biting to his criticism of the pope.

The Burke critique is simple enough. Church teaching on questions like marriage's indissolubility is supposed to be unchanging, and that's what he's upholding: "I haven't changed. I'm still teaching the same things I always taught and they're not my ideas." What is unchanging certainly can't be altered by an individual pontiff: "The pope is not a

revolutionary, elected to change the church's teaching." And thus if Francis seems to be tacitly encouraging changes, through some sort of decentralizing process, it means "there's a breakdown of the central teaching authority of the Roman pontiff," and that the pope has effectively "refused to exercise [his] office."

This is a position with some precedents in Catholic history. John Henry Newman, the Victorian convert, theologian and cardinal recently sainted by Francis, once suggested that there had been a "temporary suspense" of the church's magisterium, its teaching authority, during eras in which the papacy failed to teach definitively or exercise discipline on controversial subjects. And the church's saints from such periods include bishops who stood alone in defense of orthodoxy, sometimes against misguided papal pressure.

But you can also see in my conversation with the cardinal how hard it is to sustain a Catholicism that is orthodox **against** the pope. For instance, Burke himself brought up a hypothetical scenario where Francis endorses a document that includes what the cardinal considers heresy. "People say if you don't accept that, you'll be in schism," Burke said, when "my point would be the document is schismatic. I'm not."

But this implies that, in effect, the pope could **lead** a schism, even though schism by definition involves breaking with the pope. This is an idea that several conservative Catholic theologians have brought up recently; it does not become more persuasive with elaboration. And Burke himself acknowledges as much: It would be a "total contradiction" with no precedent or explanation in church law.

The pull of such ideas, though, explains why you need only take a step beyond Burke's position to end up as a kind of de facto sedevacantist, a believer that the pope is not really the pope —or, alternatively, that the church is so corrupted and compromised by modernity that the pope might **technically** still be pope but his authority doesn't matter anymore. This is the flavor of a lot of very-online traditionalism, and it's hard to see how it wouldn't (eventually) lead many of its adherents to a separation from the larger church, joining the traditionalist quasi-exile pioneered after Vatican II by the Society of Saint Pius X.

Are there alternatives to Burke's tenuous position or the schismatic plunge? At the moment there are two: One is a conservative Catholicism that strains more mightily than Burke to interpret all of Francis' moves in continuity with his predecessors, while arguing that the pope's liberalizing allies and appointees are somehow misinterpreting him. This was the default conservative position early in the Francis pontificate; it has since become more difficult to sustain. But it persists in the hope of a kind of snapping-back moment, when Francis or a successor decides that Catholic bishops in countries like Germany are pushing things too far, at which point there can be a kind of restoration of the John Paul II-era battle lines, with the papacy —despite Francis' experiments —reinterpreted to have always been on the side of orthodoxy.

Another alternative is a conservatism that simply resolves the apparent conflict between tradition and papal power in favor of the latter, submitting its private judgment to papal authority in 19th-century style —even if that submission requires accepting shifts on sex, marriage, celibacy and other issues that look awfully like the sort of liberal Protestantism that the 19th-century popes opposed. This would be a conservatism of structure more than doctrine, as suggested by the title of a website that champions its approach: "Where Peter Is." But it would still need, for its long-term coherence, an account of how doctrine can and cannot change beyond just papal fiat. So it, too, awaits clarifications that this papacy has conspicuously not supplied.

The importance of that **waiting** is the only definite conclusion that I can draw from the whole mess. Where conservative Catholics have the power to resist what seem like false ideas or disastrous innovations they must do so. But they also need to see their relative powerlessness through their own religion's lens. That means treating it as a possible purgation, a lesson in the insufficiency of human strategies and wisdom, and a reason to embrace T.S. Eliot's poetic admonition: **There is yet faith, but the faith and the hope and the love are all in the waiting**.

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