

## The American Church: Going, Going . . .

*Russell Shaw*

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As Holy Week got underway this year, many people were surprised to learn of a new Gallup survey showing fewer than half of all Americans now identify with any particular church, synagogue, or mosque. But for those who've followed the rise of America's "Nones," and the corresponding decline in religious identity, this was old news.

Actually, self-identified Catholics didn't come out – relatively – all that badly in the Gallup numbers, with 58 percent still identifying with a church while the overall figure for Americans was 47 percent. But any comfort Catholics might find in that vanishes when one realizes that the new figure is a drop of 18 percent from the 76 percent that Gallup reported for Catholics two decades ago.

In any event, these numbers need to be seen in their larger context. Here it seems fair to say that, while American Catholics have lately been looking down their noses at German Catholics, they'd do well to look at themselves in the mirror. For as the Germans have paraded noisily down their "synodal path" toward schism, we Americans have been slipping quietly into something approaching remnant status.

Take Sunday Mass attendance. Back in 1970, reports the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, 54.9 percent of American Catholics went to Mass every Sunday. A half-century later, on the eve of the pandemic, that had fallen to 21.1 percent. And now, the Center for Church Management at Villanova University projects an attendance rate in the neighborhood of 12 percent by next year or the year after.

Who can say where this decline will bottom out? Working from pre-pandemic numbers, Stephen Bullivant in his illuminating study of Catholic "disaffiliation" in the United States and Great Britain finds Mass attendance rates in both countries declining for the last fifty years "with no sign of abating." Self-described Catholics who seldom go to church may be kind to animals and scrupulous in paying their taxes, but it's a stretch to rank them with the "regular practisers," as Bullivant oddly does.

Mass attendance is only one area of decline. Hardly less disturbing is the fact that roughly two out of five U.S. "cradle Catholics" no longer identify with the Church. And in key sectors, such as Catholic marriages and infant baptisms, the numbers are way, way down. Several years ago I congratulated a tribunal official on the sharp drop in annulments in his diocese. That's no cause for celebration, he told me grimly. Upon splitting up, many Catholic couples these days simply get a divorce, go their own ways, and – in many cases – remarry outside the Church.

In light of all that, one surprise of the present moment is how little attention the shrinkage of American Catholicism appears to be getting from those to whom one might reasonably have looked for leadership.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has had nothing to say about it up to this time. Individual bishops in their dioceses have scrambled to close and consolidate parishes and deploy a diminishing number of overworked priests for pastoral duties, but it's a well-kept secret how they see the future.

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Catholic universities, which boast a formidable array of institutes and think tanks, aren't addressing the situation.

And, except for occasional reports about school closings and parish consolidations, the Catholic media have been silent.

Might it at least be a good idea to explore our options for the future together instead of simply sitting back and watching the great collapse go on?

We do have the prophetic voice of Rod Dreher calling our attention to the unfolding crisis in *The Benedict Option* and in last year's *Live Not by Lies*, and offering suggestions for action. In his recent book, Dreher counsels "Christian dissidents" to organize themselves in small groups ("cells") in order to withstand onslaughts from the woke culture's "social justice warriors" bent on overt persecution to enforce conformity and punish resisters.

And here and there one sees signs that the wake-up message is getting through. A more than ordinarily thoughtful Catholic friend, reacting to something I'd written, says this: "You are right that the laity can't sit around and wait for 'the Church' – i.e., the clergy – to do something. I think the faith will be preserved by families joining together to form their children. That task will certainly involve the clergy – supportive and unsupportive alike – but it can't wait for them."

On the brink of what may strike many as a gloomy future, it's helpful to recall a prescient utterance by Joseph Ratzinger (the future Pope Benedict XVI), back in 1969.

Though he has been frequently quoted as predicting that "the Church will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning," and adding that the process of shrinkage would be "hard going" and involve "tremendous upheavals," he nonetheless also said this:

When the trial of this sifting is past, a great power will flow from a more spiritualized and simplified Church. [People who had lost sight of God] will discover the little flock of believers as something wholly new. They will discover it as a hope that is meant for them, an answer for which they have always been searching in secret.

The more – and sooner – that we accept that as an achievable proposition, the better prospects will be for the future of the American Church. The hard times are just beginning. But the Church, so faith obliges us to believe, isn't finished yet.

After all, as a threadbare mantra of post-Vatican II Catholicism puts it, we are an Easter people. And doesn't dying have to come before rising, for the American Church as much as for any of us?

**\*Image:** Gabriel Baseman runs the livestream of Easter Sunday Mass on April 12, 2020 at Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church in South Orange, New Jersey. [Photo by Elsa/Getty Images]

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