The massive crisis in the Church since the Second Vatican Council, especially in the affluent Western countries, doubtless has many and complex causes, but I am convinced that the foremost cause of it is the fact that churchmen have betrayed much of Catholic tradition and legislation and have merited a certain divine punishment as a result—let us call it a period of disciplinary suffering as an invitation to repentance and conversion. Bishops, priests, and sometimes even popes have, practically speaking, turned their backs on the preconciliar liturgy and magisterium as well as on many points in the actual teaching of the Second Vatican Council, and this is a kind of sin against the Holy Spirit, one that serves as a standing impediment to true renewal. This impediment will not go away of its own accord, but only through a conscientious repudiation of discontinuity and a courageous effort to rebuild the desolate city.

For example, the Second Vatican Council, in harmony with the Magisterium before it, says that the language of the liturgy is and shall remain Latin, while allowing for a limited use of the vernacular, and that Gregorian chant has and shall have chief place as the music proper to the Roman Rite. To the extent that the Church has abandoned Latin and chant or allowed them to be abandoned, she has rejected the decisions of the Council and therefore deserves to be deprived of that “second spring” for which Pope John XXIII prayed. He prayed for it sincerely, and he was a saintly soul. But even for saints the Lord does not grant every prayer—at least not according to their own understanding of their intentions—and it is clear that we are still in the midst of the deepest, darkest, coldest winter the Church has ever known. The Church will fail miserably in the New Evangelization unless she first cleans up her own house.

One could add, as a different kind of example, the abandonment of worship ad orientem, which Saint Basil the Great, among other Church Fathers, identifies as an apostolic practice and part of the deposit of faith—a view that, far from being patristic hyperbole, finds support in the rigorous scholarship of Father Michael Lang, for whose book on the subject Cardinal Ratzinger supplied an introduction.
Enforced Optimism

For decades there has been an enforced optimism, a truly embarrassing fantasy to the effect that renewal is blooming everywhere, the Church is so much better off, the liturgy is better than ever, and so forth. One sees it in many writings of John Paul II—for example in Ecclesia de Eucharistia, where he rhapsodizes: “Certainly the liturgical reform inaugurated by the Council has greatly contributed to a more conscious, active, and fruitful participation in the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar on the part of the faithful.”¹ A particularly striking example of this fantasy occurs in Pope Francis’s sprawling interview in September 2013, where he claims:

Vatican II was a re-reading of the Gospel in light of contemporary culture. Vatican II produced a renewal movement that simply comes from the same Gospel. Its fruits are enormous. Just recall the liturgy. The work of the liturgical reform has been a service to the people as a re-reading of the Gospel from a concrete historical situation.²

It’s nice to know the reform was a success on Mars; I wonder if Pope Francis will have more sober thoughts when he returns to Earth. Confronted with the lowest Mass attendance rates in recorded history, churches closing, religious houses empty, clerical abuse cases having liquidated or bankrupted dioceses everywhere, contraception and abortion ubiquitously accepted, and the youth culture a cesspool of violence, addiction, and sexual depravity, we dare to prattle about the enormous fruits of the Council and of its liturgical reform? The element of unreality in such statements truly forces one to question whether there might be an alternate reality somewhere to which members of the Church hierarchy have privileged access, while the laity are left to muddle along in the all-too-painful world of liturgical mediocrity, abuse, and banality, the comfortable residence of modernism in pulpits and classrooms, and proliferating public and private vices.

These words of Wilhelm Roepke, in chapter 1 of A Humane Economy, are remarkably apropos:

For decades there has been an enforced optimism, a truly embarrassing fantasy to the effect that renewal is blooming everywhere, the Church is so much better off, the liturgy is better than ever, and so forth. One sees it in some of the committee documents cranked out by the Vatican that seem bent on ignoring or downplaying all the statistics and trends and the plain facts of apostasy, modernism, abuse, catastrophic catechesis, and rupture.

It is quite terrifying to see how people, and not least their spokesmen in public, remain insensitive and criminally optimistic in the face of the social and cultural crisis of our times. If anything, the crisis is getting worse rather than better, and the danger of exaggerating it seems incomparably smaller than that of minimizing it with deceptive, soothing words. … So, once more, we move in a fateful spiral from which no easy escape is now possible, least of all by the reckless optimism of those who refuse to face the facts and problems of the crisis.

Although Roepke is writing about an economic and cultural crisis, his words are applicable to the liturgical and cultural crisis within the Church. Think about the frequency with which the hierarchy’s spokesmen issue statements “clarifying” some new inanity uttered by a Prince of the Church.

The Man Who Dared Speak the Truth

My hero in this desperate situation is, and has long been, Joseph Ratzinger. While I would not dare to compare myself (or, really, anyone) to him in most respects, there are at least two things he and I, and today’s stalwart Catholic theologians and pastors, have in common. First, he is not a professional liturgist. Indeed, this is the reason the “specialists” have dismissed his books—he is not one of the credentialed cognoscenti. Second, he is not afraid to speak boldly and openly about the crisis in the Church, and, particularly, its liturgical causes and manifestations. Consider the following characteristic statements he made in print:

I am convinced that the crisis in the Church that we are experiencing today is, to a large extent, due to the disintegration of the liturgy.

The liturgical reform, in its concrete realization, has distanced itself even more from its origin. The result has not been a reanimation, but devastation. In place of the liturgy, fruit of a continual development, they have placed a fabricated liturgy. They have deserted a vital process of growth and becoming in order to substitute a fabrication. They did not want to continue the development, the organic maturing of something living through the centuries, and they replaced it, in the manner of technical production, by a fabrication, a banal product of the moment.
We have a liturgy which has degenerated so that it has become a show which, with momentary success for the group of liturgical fabricators, strives to render religion interesting in the wake of the frivolities of fashion and seductive moral maxims.

I am of the opinion ... that the old rite should be granted much more generously to all those who desire it. It's impossible to see what could be dangerous or unacceptable about that. A community is calling its very being into question when it suddenly declares that what until now was its holiest and highest possession is strictly forbidden and when it makes the longing for it seem downright indecent.

In reality what happened was that an unprecedented clericalization came on the scene. Now the priest—the “presider,” as they now prefer to call him—becomes the real point of reference for the whole Liturgy. Everything depends on him. We have to see him, to respond to him, to be involved in what he is doing. His creativity sustains the whole thing.

The turning of the priest toward the people has turned the community into a self-enclosed circle. In its outward form, it no longer opens out on what lies ahead and above, but is locked into itself. The common turning toward the East was not a “celebration toward the wall”; it did not mean that the priest “had his back to the people”: the priest himself was not regarded as so important. For just as the congregation in the synagogue looked together toward Jerusalem, so in the Christian Liturgy the congregation looked together “toward the Lord.”

Moving the altar cross to the side to give an uninterrupted view of the priest is something I regard as one of the truly absurd phenomena of recent decades. Is the cross disruptive during Mass? Is the priest more important than Our Lord?

As Bishop, Cardinal, and Pope, Joseph Ratzinger did not believe that pretending or keeping quiet was the approach to take. So many of the faithful clergy and laity have, for decades, sat back twiddling our thumbs while the Church has been crumbling around us, for fear of speaking hard truths. While we must always intend to speak with humility, charity, and respect for legitimate authority, it can never help to tiptoe gingerly around the real issues that face us—beginning with the absolutely unprecedented rupture in the Roman liturgy that was perpetrated by Pope Paul VI. One may not contest the validity or licitness of the Novus Ordo, but one may seriously question its fidelity to Vatican II, its continuity with the Tradition, the pastoral wisdom of its promulgation, and its long-term viability. These are wide-open questions that we can and must discuss for the sake of the Church’s common good—a good that is not exclusively the hierarchy’s concern, although the hierarchy makes final dispositions and judgments concerning it, but one that extends to and involves every Catholic according to his abilities and circumstances.

Blessed John Henry Newman argued in his Letter to Pusey that a Catholic convert has the right and the duty to express his opinions on debatable matters, an observation that applies to any sincere Catholic:

He perceives that, in matters which happen to be in debate, ecclesiastical authority watches the state of opinion and the direction and course of controversy, and decides accordingly; so that in certain cases to keep back his own judgment on a point, is to be disloyal to his superiors.

While it will be hard to find anyone more eager than a traditionalist to defend the office of the pope, his universal jurisdiction, and all else that the Church taught in Pastor Aeternus of the First Vatican Council, at the same time he will adamantly oppose a certain kind of papal over-reaching and its corresponding ultramontanism. Ratzinger has eloquently written about how the pope should be the servant of tradition and not one who acts as if he can, with a wave of the hand, change whatever he pleases. Here are his exact words from The Spirit of the Liturgy:

After the Second Vatican Council, the impression arose...
that the pope really could do anything in liturgical matters, especially if he were acting on the mandate of an ecumenical council. Eventually, the idea of the givenness of the liturgy, the fact that one cannot do with it what one will, faded from the public consciousness of the West. In fact, the First Vatican Council had in no way defined the pope as an absolute monarch. On the contrary, it presented him as the guarantor of obedience to the revealed Word. The pope’s authority is bound to the Tradition of faith, and that also applies to the liturgy. It is not “manufactured” by the authorities. Even the pope can only be a humble servant of its lawful development and abiding integrity and identity. ... The authority of the pope is not unlimited; it is at the service of Sacred Tradition.

In a technical sense the Pope has the authority to change the human elements of the liturgy, but such an exercise of papal authority risks bringing many evils in its wake. When Paul VI, in virtue of promulgating the new Missale Romanum, abolished the Offertory rite of the traditional Mass or the Octave of Pentecost, did he have the authority of office to do so? Undeniably. But did he do the right thing—was this a virtuous exercise of papal authority, or could it have been a moral abuse of his power, one that was destined to produce bad fruits? A Pope should receive the benefit of the doubt whenever possible, but there is by now simply too much evidence, both theoretical and practical, of the failure of the liturgical reform and its implementation to allow us to be ostriches with our heads stuck in the sand of pious platitudes. Can anyone read the sober scholarly work of Dr. Lauren Pristas on how the orations of the new Missal were produced by a modernism-driven committee with scissors and glue, and come away feeling anything other than a sense of profound tragedy and even righteous indignation? The Catholic people were robbed of their tradition. No wonder the Church is in a state of crisis!

**Early Retirement for the Novus Ordo**

Here is what I have come to, after many years of living with and thinking about these problems.

The Ordinary Form of the Roman Rite, the Missal of Paul VI, is irreparably broken. Due to the false principles, exploded assumptions, and rationalistic method behind its composition, it was wrong from the first day, and it remains wrong, no matter how well it is celebrated. Its very prayers and rubrics embody a hermeneutic of discontinuity that cannot be cured without a complete reworking that would bring it substantially back into line with the preceding liturgical tradition. In the language of the philosophers, it would require not an accidental but a substantial change. As far as incremental reform goes (for example, if we look to how some Oratorians celebrate the new rite), nearly every successful step has involved adding or substituting something from the old Missal, or removing something painfully novel. In most respects, the Ordinary Form becomes better by becoming the Extraordinary Form. As such, the Ordinary Form does not so much need to be reformed as it needs to be retired, so that the genuine Roman Rite may once again occupy its proper place in the life of the Catholic Church, as it had done for centuries before.

A sign that this judgment is true was the enormous, more than ten-year saga over the new translation of the Roman Missal. After so much ink had been spilled, so many versions and revisions, such bitter partisan polemics, so much anticipation and emotion, the fact remains: this new translation is not only uneven in quality, in some places erroneous, and bereft throughout of traditional language of pleading (deign, vouchsafe, beseech); above all, it is simply a more accurate translation of prayers that are themselves flawed and represent discontinuity. All this fuss for an inherently flawed missal! At its best, a translation is only as good as the original text.

Consider, on the other hand, the situation in any parish or chapel that celebrates the traditional Latin Mass. The prayers are the classic prayers that have nourished the faithful for centuries, going back in some cases to the earliest centuries of Christianity. And the people in the pews have hand missals with eloquent translations of the prayers. Sometimes these translations are not completely accurate, either, but it does not matter so much, because the worship being offered to God is not done by means of a translation, but by the altogether reliable Latin in the altar missal. As Pope John XXIII argued in the Apostolic Constitution *Veternum Sapientia*, it is entirely fitting that the Church’s worship should be conducted in a language that is no longer evolving but has achieved stasis of diction and meaning, a language that is not the possession of any nation but the common heritage of all. When we use the Church’s mother tongue and follow her time-honored tradition, we find peace, security, stability; there are no decades-long battles about what “register” of language should be used, no disappointments about lost opportunities. The world of the classical Roman rite, though it, too, sees occasional change, is far beyond all that bureaucratic wrangling and Heracleitian flux. The traditional Latin Mass is serious and single-minded about worshiping God, and it does so...
without cutting corners, without compromises, and, above all, without committees.

Once again, the future of the Roman rite is the old Roman rite in its slowly developed perfection, not the new Roman rite that resulted from some editorial hack-job intended to respond to the needs of that most stable of targets known as “modern man.” The real end of the “reform of the reform,” if I may be permitted to hazard a prediction, is the retirement of the Bugnini Missal as a colossal mistake, a novelty, and a deviation that does not even successfully embody many of the plain desiderata of Vatican II’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, Sacrosanctum Concilium. Maybe a “reform of the reform” will be necessary for a time of transition, but since the thing we call the Ordinary Form is not by any stretch of the imagination a renewal of the rite that existed prior to it but a radical departure from it—a liturgical invention on a scale never seen before in Church history, never even dreamt of—it follows that the Novus Ordo must be laid to rest and the old Missal taken up again universally, with the immense reverence it merits and with an appropriate attitude of trust in the Divine Providence that gave this very liturgy to the Catholic people for over 400 years, with the substance of it stretching back at least another 1,000 years.

In the short term, the new translation of the Novus Ordo will unquestionably improve the “worship experience” (as they say) of Catholics in the English-speaking world. In the long term, however, the new translation’s greatest achievement will be further exposing the inherent defectiveness and poverty of the Ordinary Form as compared with the richer prayers and spirituality of the Extraordinary Form. It has been remarkable to me to see how often, in recent years, eminent clergy and theologians are willing to say outright, without beating around the bush any more, that the Extraordinary Form emerges from a deeper Eucharistic and priestly spirituality and builds it up more effectively. For example, in response to the interview question “Why is it worthwhile to promote the [traditional] Latin Mass?” Archbishop Guido Pozzo of the Ecclesia Dei Commission candidly responded:

Because the ancient rite of the Mass makes explicit and highlights certain values and certain fundamental aspects of the liturgy that deserve to be maintained, and I am not speaking only about the Latin or Gregorian chant, I am speaking about the sense of mystery, of the sacred, the sense of the Mass as a sacrifice, the real and substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the fact that there are great moments of interior recollection, interior participation in the divine liturgy. All these are fundamental elements which are particularly highlighted in the ancient rite of the Mass.

With the ordination every year of priests dedicated to celebrating the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in the usus antiquior, the question is no longer “Will the old Mass survive?,” but: “Will the new Mass survive?” Although the number of Catholics regularly attending the traditional liturgy is relatively small, it is steadily growing (if only because the inseparability of marriage and children is still a reality for them), while the number of Catholics attending the Novus Ordo is shrinking across the Western world. In a talk on religious life, His Eminence Franc Cardinal Rodé admitted that young men drawn to the priesthood today are almost always marked by a conservative, even traditional bent. This has led and will continue to lead many of them to learn and embrace the usus antiquior. In short, if the Catholic Faith survives

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The world of the classical Roman rite, though it, too, sees occasional change, is far beyond all that bureaucratic wrangling and Heracleitian flux. The traditional Latin Mass is serious and single-minded about worshiping God, and it does so without cutting corners, without compromises, and, above all, without committees.
in any given diocese of the West, it will survive either by embracing the Tradition of the Church or by dwelling in the shadows of that Tradition. The liberal territories are drying up rapidly; the moderate or eclectic approach has shown itself weak and spineless, incapable of responding effectively to the aggressive and even demonic secularism of our time.

Don’t Yell “Fire”!
Recently a rash of pundits has appeared who believe that talking about a “crisis” in the Church is needlessly emotional and polarizing language, and that, after a few decades of meandering, we are finally regrouping into a stronger Church with a clearer identity. Why rain on the parade, just when things are getting back to normal?

It is true that in some ways and in some places things are getting better, but we cannot honestly speak of a turnaround when every poll that is taken indicates fewer and fewer Catholics who accept the Church’s solemn teaching on any issue remotely controversial, from the truth of the Real Presence to the evils of contraception, abortion, and sodomitic liaisons. A majority of self-identified Catholics are reporting that they wish to see homosexual “marriage” legally approved everywhere; the same people support Obama’s HHS mandate. One could go on, depressingly, about the complete catastrophe in catechesis, the decline and fall of most of the Catholic schools, the self-serving bureaucratization of curias and chanceries, the abysmal state of sacred music and the fine arts—but what would be the point? Anyone with eyes to see and ears to hear can tell that, apart from a remnant of more or less traditional Catholics, the Church is in the throes of a desperate disease called modernism, and the prognosis is looking grim.

As for me, then, I will regretfully but more truthfully stick with the language of crisis. And we will never find a solution to our crisis until we recover our innermost Catholic identity through the celebration of the traditional Sacred Liturgy. When the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the Divine Office, and the sacramental rites of the Church are once again offered to God in a manner truly in continuity with Catholic Tradition, then and only then will come that Second Spring about which postconciliar popes have spoken with such premature confidence; only then will the New Evangelization begin in earnest, with the Mass of the Ages as its pulsing heart.

We could not more fittingly close our reflections than with this quotation from Father Alessandro Apollonio of the Franciscans of the Immaculate, the young and vibrant religious order whose widespread devotion to the Lady of Victory, Pray for Us!

Father Apollonio’s simple and luminous summary of why the Franciscans of the Immaculate came to embrace the traditional Roman liturgy, as if by a spontaneous interior movement:

Our Franciscan and Marian spirituality is characterized by its being Theocentric, Christocentric, and Mariocentric. God, the God-Man, and the Immaculate Coredemptrix are central to our vocation. And, in its sacrificial and mystical dimensions, the traditional liturgy responds really fittingly to this spirituality of ours. There is salvation only in God made flesh in the womb of the Virgin, died on the Cross and risen, and the millennial liturgy of the Church constantly reminds us of this, even in its most subtle details.

I quote these words not only because of their glowing truth but as a reminder to all of us to pray for these Franciscans in their time of trial, and for all the men and women, the priests, religious, and laity, who suffer frequent setbacks, misunderstandings, rebukes, signs of hatred, and acts of persecution in their heroic efforts to adhere to the immemorial liturgical Tradition of the Catholic Church. It is a battle supremely worth fighting, and the victory shall be ours in the end, in God’s good time. Our Lady of Victory, Pray for Us!

Notes
1. I appeal to Maritain’s and Journet’s distinction between Church and churchmen. The former, being the immaculate Bride of Christ and animated by His Holy Spirit, cannot go astray in teaching or lose her essential holiness. The latter, being fallen men, can and do fall away from the faith or from good morals or from prudence and wisdom in their judgments. Hence we may not say that the Catholic Church has failed, but we can and must say that individual clergy, religious, and laity have failed. Indeed, what they have failed is the Church and Christ; it is not Christ or His Church who have failed them.
3. Ecclesia de Eucharistia, n. 10.
7. The interview was given in September 2011; retrieved from http://gloria.tv/?media=201394 on September 25, 2013.

Nicholas Postgate, Ph.D., has taught at the university level in Europe and America. He must not be confused either with the Elizabethan martyr or the eminent Assyriologist of Cambridge University.