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Too far, too fast -- in either direction

by Joe Ferullo

NCR Today

I can vividly remember the day Vatican II went too far. I was 11 years old and serving Mass at my Bronx parish.

It was 1969 -- must have been the 8 a.m. Sunday Mass, because it was celebrated in Italian. I looked out from the altar at pews crowded with older women dressed all in black, small veils pinned to their hair, rosaries in hand, religious medals hanging from their necks like military commendations.

I could barely make out the Italian, but our pastor, Fr. Charles, announced that something big had changed: St. Christopher was no longer considered a real saint, and his July 25 feast would not be celebrated. The faces of the congregation fell as if on cue. A murmur rose, and person after person touched their necks, where St. Christopher medals no doubt hung.

Every car in my neighborhood rode with St. Christopher, patron saint of travelers. In Southern Italy, simply walking rutted roads from one town to the next presented layers of danger -- and St. Christopher provided the protection needed to give people the courage to venture out. But now he was gone.

There was no discussion, there was no consensus -- he was just gone.

I thought about that day while reading Ross Douthat's column in *The New York Times*, about how the Episcopal church has shrunk into near-irrelevance in the face of a radical leftward tilt. Douthat is one of the brightest conservative observers out there, and I always find his columns thought-provoking -- but this one was a little too pat. Let me explain.

Douthat argues that many mainstream Protestant churches have declined because they have embraced radically liberal notions, and he sets this up as a cautionary tale for Catholics seeking a more liberal face

in Rome. The central thesis here is that Christians run away from the left-wing but don't mind the right-wing nearly so much.

But what has diminished Episcopalians and other mainstream Protestants is not left versus right -- it is extremism. It is the making of every spiritual moment into a political moment, and it is the same path the church could find itself on just simply from the rightward side of the road.

Douthat points out a few examples of the liberal drift: an Episcopal presiding bishop who waved away membership decline by explaining that her congregants valued "stewardship of the earth too much" to reproduce. He points to Protestant theologians who debate even the most foundational elements of the faith -- including the Resurrection. And he talks about how "the leaders of the Episcopal Church and similar bodies often don't seem to be offering anything you can't already get from a purely secular liberalism."

These are arguments that few Christians of whatever stripe could go against -- but they apply as succinctly to the right-wing. It brings up a lesson that ideologues never seem to learn: Change should be done through consensus. And there is clearly no consensus from the pews about many of the decisions mainstream Protestant churches are making on behalf of their believers.

There was no consensus about St. Christopher, either -- and that small moment at my parish became, I think, a touchstone for many in the pews (especially older congregants) who felt things had gone far enough in the '60s. But the year before, in 1968, the Vatican had done something else without consensus: it forbade the use of contraceptives. And many Catholics looking for the church to be a bit more modern saw that as a regressive move -- many felt a church that seemed to be moving forward with them was now trying to pull them back. Consensus works both ways, from both ends of the political spectrum. The ideological stance is always one of "we know best, you just need to run along behind us," and rarely serves any institution well for long.

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Douthat's take is, then, not something the current Vatican should ignore. More and more, the church now seems to be offering little that you "can't already get from a purely" conservative political organization.

That is not what people want, either.

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