

## On the Credibility of the Catholic Church

COMMENTARY: Throughout two millennia, the Church has already played this role of guardian and ferryman of civilization. But does it still have the means, and the will, today?

PDF by:  
<https://www.pro-memoria.info>



Cardinal Robert Sarah celebrated Mass in St. Peter's Basilica on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood, Sept. 28, 2019. (photo: Evandro Inetti/CNA / EWTN)

Cardinal Robert Sarah (<https://www.ncregister.com/author/cardinal-robert-sarah>) | Commentaries (/section/commentaries) | August 14, 2021

*Editor's note: The essay first appeared Aug. 14 (<https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/religion/mgr-robert-sarah-nul-n-est-en-trop-dans-l-eglise-de-dieu-20210813>) in the French-language newspaper Le Figaro. The English translation is reprinted here with the permission of Cardinal Robert Sarah. It has been edited for style.*

Doubt has taken hold of Western thought. Intellectuals and politicians alike describe the same impression of collapse. Faced with the breakdown of solidarity and the disintegration of identities, some turn to the Catholic Church. They ask her to give a reason to live together to individuals who have forgotten what unites them as one people. They beg her to provide a little more soul to make the cold harshness of consumer society bearable. When a priest is murdered, everyone is touched and many feel stricken to the core.

But is the Church capable of responding to these calls? Certainly, she has already played this role of guardian and transmitter of civilization. At the twilight of the Roman Empire, she knew how to pass on the flame that the barbarians were threatening to extinguish. But does she still have the means and the will to do so today?

At the foundation of a civilization, there can only be one reality that surpasses it: a sacred invariant. Malraux noted this with realism: "The nature of a civilization is what gathers around a religion. Our civilization is incapable of building a temple or a tomb. It will either be forced to find its fundamental value, or it will decay."

Without a sacred foundation, protective and insuperable boundaries are abolished. An entirely profane world becomes a vast expanse of quicksand. Everything is sadly open to the winds of arbitrariness. In the absence of the stability of a foundation that escapes man, peace and joy — the signs of a long-lasting civilization — are constantly swallowed up by a sense of precariousness. The anguish of imminent danger is the seal of barbaric times. Without a sacred foundation, every bond becomes fragile and fickle.

Some ask the Catholic Church to play this solid foundation role. They would like to see her assume a social function, namely to be a coherent system of values, a cultural and aesthetic matrix. But the Church has no other sacred reality to offer than her faith in Jesus, God made man. Her sole goal is to make possible the encounter of men with the person of Jesus. Moral and dogmatic teaching, as well as mystical and liturgical patrimony, are the setting and the means of this fundamental and sacred encounter. Christian civilization is born of this encounter. Beauty and culture are its fruits.

In order to respond to the world's expectations, the Church must therefore find the way back to herself and take up the words of Saint Paul: "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ, and Jesus crucified." She must stop thinking of herself as a substitute for humanism or ecology. These realities, although good and just, are for her but consequences of her unique treasure: faith in Jesus Christ.

What is sacred for the Church, then, is the unbroken chain that links her with certainty to Jesus. A chain of faith without rupture or contradiction, a chain of prayer and liturgy without breakage or disavowal. Without this radical continuity, what credibility could the Church still claim? In her, there is no turning back, but an organic and continuous development that we call the living tradition. The sacred cannot be decreed, it is received from God and passed on.

This is undoubtedly the reason for which Benedict XVI could authoritatively affirm:

**"In the history of the liturgy there is growth and progress, but no rupture. What earlier generations held as sacred, remains sacred and great for us too, and it cannot be all of a sudden entirely forbidden or even considered harmful. It behooves all of us to preserve the riches which have developed in the Church's faith and prayer, and to give them their proper place."**

At a time when some theologians are seeking to reopen the liturgy wars by pitting the missal revised by the Council of Trent against the one in use since 1970, it is urgent to recall this. If the Church is not capable of preserving the peaceful continuity of her link with Christ, she will be unable to offer the world "the sacred which unites souls," according to the words of Goethe.

Beyond the quarrel over rites, the credibility of the Church is at stake. If she affirms the continuity between what is commonly called the Mass of St. Pius V and the Mass of Paul VI, then the Church must be able to organize their peaceful cohabitation and their mutual enrichment. If one were to radically exclude one in favor of the other, if one were to declare them irreconcilable, one would implicitly recognize a rupture and a change of orientation. But then the Church could no longer offer the world that sacred continuity, which alone can give her peace. By keeping alive a liturgical war within herself, the Church loses her credibility and becomes deaf to the call of men. Liturgical peace is the sign of the peace that the Church can bring to the world.

What is at stake is therefore much more serious than a simple question of discipline. If she were to claim a reversal of her faith or of her liturgy, in what name would the Church dare address the world? Her only legitimacy is her consistency in her continuity.

Moreover, if the bishops, who are in charge of the cohabitation and mutual enrichment of the two liturgical forms, do not exercise their authority to this effect, they run the risk of no longer appearing as shepherds, guardians of the faith they have received and of the sheep entrusted to them, but as political leaders: commissars of the ideology of the moment rather than guardians of the perennial tradition. They risk losing the trust of men of good will.

A father cannot introduce mistrust and division among his faithful children. He cannot humiliate some by setting them against others. He cannot ostracize some of his priests. The peace and unity that the Church claims to offer to the world must first be lived within the Church.

In liturgical matters, neither pastoral violence nor partisan ideology has ever produced fruits of unity. The suffering of the faithful and the expectations of the world are too great to engage in these dead-end paths. Everyone has a place in the Church of God!

*Keywords:* le figaro (<https://www.ncregister.com/tag/le-figaro>) catholic church (<https://www.ncregister.com/tag/catholic-church>) cardinal robert sarah (<https://www.ncregister.com/tag/cardinal-robert-sarah>)



**Cardinal Robert Sarah** (<https://www.ncregister.com/author/cardinal-robert-sarah>) Cardinal Robert Sarah is prefect emeritus of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

---

Pdf bY:  
<https://www.pro-memoria.info>

