

Pope Francis a ray of hope for struggling Catholics



At times, I have been a struggling Catholic, a joyful Catholic, a conflicted Catholic. A few months ago, when I cut ties with my longtime parish, I added a new adjective: A “homeless” Catholic.

I joined a long line of parishioners leaving our beloved home, a once-engaging community devoted to social justice that walked in the steps of a man named Francis long before he was pope. Our parish had grown increasingly gloomy around the edges, its spirit deflated by new leadership that valued strict adherence to doctrine above all else.

As my friends and fellow parishioners exit in this trying hour, the words I hear from them again and again are these: This pope, the one coming to the U.S. in a little over a week, he gives us hope.

Catholicism is not an easy practice. From grade-school nuns with stern faces, endless rosary beads and heavy rubber shoes, to the shadowy walls of the confessional, early exposure can be intimidating for those who share the label “raised Catholic.”

Like others, in my college and young adult years there was a struggle to carve out a religious identity. Throughout, I was guided by my angel of a mother, whose zeal for her Catholic faith was amazing. She had saints on speed dial; she never saw anything but the good in people; and like Francis, she always looked to offer a helping hand. That is the Catholicism I wanted to embrace.

And 25 years ago, I found a parish that did just that. My church was a vibrant, glad-to-have you community that thrived on tolerance, inclusiveness and ministry. Staffed by energetic volunteers, there were groups that ran the gamut, from sponsoring schoolkids at a sister parish in Haiti to visiting the homebound to filling a food pantry for the homeless. Songs were sung with gusto; the pews were packed; people gabbed with glee before Mass.

It didn’t matter what you wore, what your sexual orientation was, whether you had memorized the

Beatitudes. It was all about love of God and serving others. It was what Francis preaches today.

I would sometimes attend Mass with my elderly parents at their church of 50 years and watched as they became disheartened by the dark turn at their parish. The weekly bulletin, a place normally reserved for prayers for the sick and mention of bake sales, became filled with rants by the pastor who railed against homosexuality, the media, anything Democratic.

In the run-up to the 2008 election, there was so much vitriol against Barack Obama, that my mother, then 89, decided to confront the priest in the confessional. “You didn’t confess that you voted for Obama?” I asked. No, she said, and explained how she told the priest all of the good things Obama had done.

Sadly, six years later my progressive parish would take a similar path. Programs were dismantled; authoritarian sermons thundered; people were chided for talking before Mass; intolerance hung in the air. It became a gutted and empty place, and I finally had to leave.

In 2013, Pope Francis issued this mission statement: “I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a church concerned with being at the center and then ends up being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures.”

For those of us looking for a new church we can call home, we know it is a place out on the streets — one not so caught up in obsessions and procedures.

This pope, he gives us hope.

Miller is USA TODAY's copy desk chief. Follow her on twitter @susmiller

Susan Miller, - SA TODAY