

After Easter I got away for a week of vacation. At the airport I bought a TIME magazine for reading material on the plane. The issue was all about “The 100 Most influential People.” Among them were some of the presidents and prime ministers you might expect to find in the most influential list, but most of the people chosen weren’t powerful in the political sense of the word. So, it struck me: there were almost no religious leaders among the influencers. Only Pope Francis received a short, perfunctory paragraph. Taylor Swift, Sandra Oh, Mark Zuckerberg, and Spike Lee were more typical of the people inside.

I’m not really disagreeing with this evaluation of the lack of religious influence in our world. And I agree with the thrust of the issue that most power to influence is “soft” power rather than political coercion. Authors, tech innovators, inventors, journalists and film directors shape the world’s dominant culture. These are the people TIME editors hold up and admire as our leaders.

But the near absence of religious leaders among the world's dominant culture drove home a point for me that's also made in our first reading from Acts. The Apostles are brought before the Sanhedrin, representing the establishment of the day, and told to stop teaching about Jesus. But St. Peter answers them, "We must obey God rather than men." Then, "the Sanhedrin ordered the Apostles to stop speaking in the name of Jesus, and dismissed them. So they left the presence of the Sanhedrin, rejoicing that they had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name."

We see in this scene from the very beginning of the Church the basic tension Jesus creates in the world. That tension is always present when the Gospel is fully preached and lived in the world because the world and the Body of Christ are ultimately not reconcilable.

That tension is again growing stronger in the West today. It's a significant part of what feels like the societal-wide mental break down we experience these days. One of the ways we might feel that tension

in our own lives as American Catholics in 2019 is the sense of trying to straddle two worlds, the secular society and the culture of Christ, that are drifting farther and farther apart.

Imagine standing on an ice floe in a cold sea. A crack appears between your feet, running the length of the ice floe. Soon, the floe completely separates into two smaller floes of ice. They slowly begin to drift apart. The distance between the world and the gospel is getting so wide that we are going to have to step with both feet onto one or the other or fall into the sea. Trying to live in both will eventually be too contradictory – and the social price will be too high. That’s why many are leaving the faith. Yes, the scandals in the Church contribute, but sin has always been present. This ebbing of the faith goes deeper.

Increasingly to be a Catholic means standing outside the common sources of society’s status, power, influence, notice, approval. I’m an American historian. In the Colonial Era and early Modern Britain Catholics were shut out of the universities and the professions. They

had no influence. This has begun in our own society. It's increasingly difficult to openly hold all the teachings of the Church and thrive in academia, the arts, media, education, the tech industries, health care, etc. – the kind of positions held by those top 100 influential people.

Most of the people in Time's top 100 are cool people – “cool” being shorthand for culturally successful. In the last fifty years the Church in the West has felt insecure and apologetic toward the secular culture. There have been many attempts to fit in and receive its approval. Any time a Pastor or church tries to act cool this is probably the dynamic at work. Some of this might be a legitimate strategy to reach those people unfamiliar with Christ. But a good deal comes from cultural insecurity. And that cultural begging doesn't really work – for the Church or for individuals. It ends up being pathetic, which isn't actually a good evangelization strategy.

The time is approaching when the only people left in the Church are going to be those who accept they aren't cool and never will be,

who are never going to be favored or approved of by the world. That's really difficult to face – and the younger you are, the harder it is. But there is also a great liberty that comes from not seeking the world's approval. There's less to fear or protect.

In many ways this exclusion will be a return for us Catholic Americans, not something brand new – and not simply a return to 1775. In the very beginning it was so. We can forget the plain oddness of the early Church. The Apostles announced the arrival of God into the world as a man who was also rejected by the secular and religious authorities of His day and executed between two criminals, leaving behind a handful of poor, ignorant losers who claimed this itinerant Rabbi had risen from the dead.

Those are our strange, awkward roots. In our Gospel today we have the Apostles at the Sea of Tiberias saying to one another, "I am going fishing." Even after the Resurrection they are who they are – simple fishermen: common workers, who will never be accepted by the

leaders of the Sanhedrin. But they've come to a point where they don't need to, or care to, be accepted. They have met Jesus raised from the dead and that changes everything. He is enough. They will "obey God rather than men."

Will we? That's a question we will each be asking ourselves soon - sooner than we think, I'm guessing. Maybe you're already there. What will we each do? Some of us will step off the ice floe of the Church. But some will remain on it, "Rejoicing that [we] had been found worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name."