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The Narrow Way

How a dying faith regrows its fighting core

Executive Summary

Across the Western right there is a growing nostalgia for a Christianity that was disciplined, confident, and willing to defend itself — the Crusader, the Templar, Baldwin the king with an iron mask who was dying and still got on a horse and rode to war.

The instinct behind the nostalgia is sound. What the West has lost is real: not belief, which has only thinned, but the leadership and the energetic core that every living tradition carries — the demanding, self-sacrificing minority that bears the cost, holds the line, and passes the faith on to the next generation and makes the current one proud of what the tradition can achieve.

This brief sets out how that core dies, how it is being rebuilt right now, and why the most obvious route to rebuilding it is the dangerous one.

The most successful in the modern West are not the churches but Islam, militant political revolutionaries, and the apocalyptic climate movement — and all of them run the identical machine on different content. The single variable that decides whether that machine produces renewal or catastrophe is not the machine but what it is built around: an enemy, or an ideal.

A core built on an enemy can never stop fighting, because it needs the enemy to exist. A core built on what it loves can fight just as hard and then go home. This is Paper 5 of the Civilisational Architecture series; it describes how to build the second kind without accidentally building the first.



The nostalgia names something real: a faith that was willing to defend itself. The instinct is sound. The danger is only in what the force gets built around.

1. The Nostalgia Is Right. The Instinct Is Loaded.

The Crusader mood circulates as meme and as longing for something intangible. It is spreading because the faith which built the West has gone quiet, soft, and strangely unwilling to act on its own behalf.

The grievance behind it is not imagined. Europe alone recorded more than two thousand anti-Christian attacks in a single year — churches vandalised, desecrated and burned, Notre Dame among them. The United States bishops have logged over four hundred attacks on Catholic churches since 2020. In France a Christian building is lost roughly every two weeks; in Canada dozens have burned to the ground, almost all by arson. What the ordinary believer cannot find anywhere is a leader who sounds angry on her behalf.

That instinct is correct. A faith without leadership prepared to exert pressure — that will not demand its laws be enforced and respected, will not protest, will not produce the occasional martyr willing to suffer under an unjust law and not recant — is not a faith but a relic.

A faith that will not fight for itself is already a relic. The danger is not the fight. It is building a movement that cannot survive without one.

But a resurgent movement whose identity is built around an enemy must manufacture enemies to survive, and radicalises without limit, because the supply of manufactured enemies never runs out.

A movement whose identity is the what it defends — the faith, the family, the inheritance — can exert the same vigorous committed passion, but that force has an end point, because when the threats recede so too does the force.

This is why a twelfth-century king is suddenly on every feed, and reading it as bloodlust misses what is being asked for. Baldwin rode out at sixteen, gravely ill, because he believed his people were worth defending — and when the day was won he went home. The people sharing his image are not, in the main, calling for a crusade. They are asking for one leader who is visibly proud of them and whom they can be proud of in return. They are grieving a leadership they have never had.

2. How The Energy Died

Every living tradition and movement has the same shape: a wide, diffuse base of ordinary adherents, and a small, energetic, demanding core that carries the practice at full intensity and a leadership that facilitates the recruitment from the base into the energetic core. The base supplies numbers and legitimacy; the core supplies vigour. A tradition can survive a soft base. What it cannot survive is losing its core or softening of its leadership, because these are the organs of transmission — and that is exactly what has happened to Western Christianity within living memory. The result is a faith that is broad and inert: present everywhere, but undemanding and inoffensive to its enemies.

This was not secularism attacking from outside. It was accommodation from within — the leadership steadily softening of demands to fit the surrounding culture, which is precisely the move that dissolves the costly membrane a core needs to form. The traditions that kept their demands kept their cores: Orthodox Jewry, the Latter-day Saints, the Amish, Islam and some Christian Orthodox communities. The traditions that lowered the price of membership lost the people who would have carried them.

One familiar rule shows how the damage compounds. “Love your neighbour” was load-bearing for two millennia because it was never undifferentiated: it was ordered — the household before the stranger, what the tradition called the order of love. Strip away the ordering and flatten it into “love everyone identically, the distant stranger and illegal immigrant most of all,” and the same words invert into a mechanism of self-erasure — what Gad Saad calls suicidal empathy, and what a class of political operators Prothean Institute has labelled “Empathy Predators” has learned to manufacture and feed on.

A rule written for a cohesive people, does not merely stop working when cohesion is lost, but become dangerous to the community practicing it.

3. The Radicalisation Machine Doesn't Care What You Believe

An energetic core crystallises out of a specific raw material: a cohort in whom the drives are intact — for belonging, for status earned by contribution, for responsibility that is demanded rather than chosen — but for whom the modern world has closed every pathway to expressing them.

That pressure is felt as purposelessness and loneliness, and it is not a deviant fringe. It is the modal young person living in today's large progressive cities. A structure that offers what the surrounding world withdrew — a demanding entry cost, in-person belonging, earned rank, non-optional obligation, and a project larger than the self — catches that pressure and converts a loose base into a dense, committed core.

Arie Kruglanski's built a model of this process from studying jihadists, the far right, and the far left alike, names three ingredients: a Need, a Network, and a Narrative.

The Need is the starved cohort.

The Network is the demanding in-person community.

The Narrative is the cornerstone — the answer to what the whole thing is for.

The structures running this machine most successfully in the West today are the mosque, the militant progressive left, and the apocalyptic climate cell. Any account of religious renewal that cannot look at them clearly, and admit they have solved the problem the churches have not, is not serious.

The mosque does not have to win an argument. It only has to be the one ideology offering a pathway where everything else offers none.

4. Two Cornerstones: The Enemy That Can't Stop, the Ideal That Can

The enemy cornerstone locates meaning in opposition. It is the easier to build but the most dangerous.

A core whose identity is the enemy must have an enemy to exist, and when none is at hand it manufactures one. It appears in three forms.

- 1) A real enemy: the mosque's enemy is the secular order that genuinely exists.
- 2) An illusory enemy: the militant left's real fascists are far too rare to sustain a mass movement, so "fascist" becomes an elastic label pinned on mainstream conservatives.
- 3) A distant enemy: the climate cell's enemy is distant, but apocalyptic, forever imminent and never arriving, which cannot be averted (that would end the movement) and must not arrive (that would end the world).

There is a second way the enemy cornerstone fails, and a renewal movement must guard against it too: capture. Black Lives Matter ran the same machine on the most respectable enemy of all — systemic racism, found everywhere used to explain everything — but it dropped the costly membrane and had corrupt leadership. The result was an enormous, uncommitted base and money siphoned off to fund leaderships luxurious lifestyles.

The responsibility cornerstone locates meaning in what is defended — the faith, the family, the inheritance, the people. It fights just as hard, but its force has a floor: when the thing it protects is secure, it can rest. Its characteristic danger is the opposite of radicalisation. Rest too long and the muscle wastes — which is precisely what happened to a Western Christianity that sat through generations of security until it had forgotten how to fight.

Both cornerstones build fighters. Only one can win and then go home. The other must find a new enemy the morning after victory, or die.

5. It Is Already Being Done

The claim that a fighting core can be built on the safe cornerstone is not hypothetical. It is happening now, in the convert surge in American Eastern Orthodoxy. The precise version is the one that matters: Orthodoxy is not growing in aggregate — its adherents actually fell between 2010 and 2020 — but an energetic core is crystallising, and the Church's own bishops describe it as a flood. Convert-friendly parishes that once received a dozen newcomers now receive fifty to a hundred and fifty; the converts skew young and, in the first wave, male; the second wave is young families with several children. Same starved intake as the mosque. The difference is the cornerstone — responsibility, not an enemy — and a severe, unfakeable membrane: the long catechumenate, the fasting, the hours-long standing liturgy. The converts are drawn by the demand, not despite it.

Two quieter cases prove the demand is doing the work. Rotary runs on the safe cornerstone — service, fellowship, no enemy anywhere — and by this account should be healthy. It is ageing and declining, because it asks for almost nothing: safe cornerstone, low demand, no core. Freemasonry is the more instructive: it once had a genuinely demanding membrane and a real core, then shed the demand to become respectable and sociable, and has fallen through decades of decline toward irrelevance. That is the Western-Christianity story on a shorter clock, with the ending already visible.

Orthodoxy is not growing because it made the door wider. It is growing because it refused to.

6. How the West Lost It: The Clergy Chose Respectability

The core was not taken by secularism. It was let go from inside. The clergy — the organ through which a tradition transmits itself — shifted its cornerstone from the faith to the institution that houses it, from faithfulness to respectability. This is not mainly cowardice, and calling it cowardice misreads it. The seminary that forms clergy, the hierarchy that promotes them, and the press that can praise or shame them, the political parties across the spectrum all reward the man who is not difficult, does not criticize or stand for anything and penalise the one who does. Under that structure the respectable passive choice is the rational choice. You do not fix this by exhorting clergy to be braver; you fix it, if at all, by restoring the cornerstone the structure rewards.

There is a simple test the structure never applies to itself: who is inspired by what it does? Who walks out of a diocesan statement or a minister's press conference feeling prouder, braver, safer — more willing to be known as a Christian? The answer is legible in the emptying pews. Both the bishop and the politician wonder where the young men went. They went because nothing was asked of them and nothing was offered them to be proud of.

The pandemic of 2020 was a test of character. Churches across the West closed on government instruction — many faster and more completely than the law required, and many stayed shut long after secular venues reopened. There were clergy who would not enter the homes of the dying — at the precise moment the one function no secular institution performs, “we are the people who do not abandon you at death,” was being demanded of them.

The early Church grew through the Roman plagues because Christians stayed in the infected cities and nursed the sick when others fled. The clergy of 2020 ran that mechanism in reverse. The congregations that stayed open recovered their people more strongly; the most committed members of shuttered parishes left for the ones that had held.

The impunity compounds it. Canada's entire arson wave has produced two convictions and not one serious prison term, while the Prime Minister called the anger behind the fires “understandable” and a prominent activist leader called for more churches to be erased. The same politics that casts Christianity as the villain of history now edges toward complicity in the attacks on it, and the faithful are told to keep the tone civil and bipartisan. It is worth asking plainly what that civility has earned the Church.



Several thousand anti-Christian attacks happen every year with hundreds of churches burned around the world, and as of writing, the Pope has yet to make a single statement on this tragic destruction of Christian heritage.

The same failure appears at the top. When militants slaughtered more than two hundred Christians at Yelwata in Nigeria in 2025 — a country that accounts for roughly 72% of Christians killed for their faith worldwide — the institutional reflex was to frame a one-directional slaughter in the balanced language of “Christians and Muslims alike,” and to issue a statement. The Nigerian bishops had to fly to Rome to press their own hierarchy for action, and got nothing but a statement.

Baldwin, dying, got on a horse and rode to war.

Maybe the Pope will issues a statement.

Baldwin did not have the option of the strongly worded statement — and would not have reached for it if he had. The distance between the crusader and the communiqué is the distance between a church with a core and a church without one.

7. The Prescription: Build a Core Without Killing the Base

Here is the trap that makes renewal look impossible. High demand builds a core but sheds the base; low demand keeps the base but dissolves the core. There is no stable low-demand middle — only a slower, quieter fade. A church that suddenly demanded martyr-intensity of every member would empty within a year; a church that asks nothing dies more slowly and just as surely.

Every durable tradition in history resolved this the same way: not one level of demand imposed on everyone, but a ladder of graduated tiers. A costly, highly honoured core at the top; a wide base allowed to be quieter and less intense; open rungs in between. The monastic orders sat above the laity; the tradition never asked the baker to live like the monk.

This ladder does three things at once: it lets the core impose a screening cost without that cost touching the base; it keeps the base at a level it can sustain; and it turns the base into a recruiting ground, because the energetic see and admire the disciplined, purposeful core above them and climb toward it. Two features are load-bearing and easily lost — the ladder must stay permeable and open to anyone willing to pay (the moment the core becomes a sealed elite, recruitment dies — Freemasonry’s second mistake), and the honour and respect earned at the top must be real, or there is nothing to climb toward.

Inside that structure, four jobs.

First, install the responsibility cornerstone deliberately, because the enemy cornerstone is the default the starved reach for unaided: say what the tradition is for, not only what it is against, and root it in the deep past — which is why converts cite the Church the apostles founded rather than a denomination begun last Tuesday.

Second, keep the membrane costly, *including the cost of redemption*: a conversion that demands nothing of the past is the membrane breached at the moment of entry.

Third, firewall against escalation — the fight may be a rung on the ladder, even a necessary one, but it must never be the summit. The highest honour must go to generative continuity: family, children, the lineage a man builds and hands on.

Tolkien, a master at understanding our cultural and individual characters built this into his ending — Sam, who fought for his home, his garden and his love, goes back to and picks up his life happily; Frodo, for whom the fight had become his whole meaning, is left empty and consumed.

Fourth, firewall against capture: the membrane denies the predator a costless base, the energetic core demands accountability from the leadership.

None of it runs without a leadership willing to be disliked. Concretely saying out loud that these are their people and this will not stand; name what is being done and who is doing it; treat impunity as the emergency it is — fund the investigators the state will not, get arsonists named in indictments, and put the tradition's weight behind the prosecutors and judges who enforce the law and against the ones who look away; stand in the burned-out nave and promise something taller in its place; and give every angry, aimless young man watching his inheritance burn something to build, campaign and protest for. People do not follow press releases. They follow someone prepared to trade comfort for the survival of the faith.

What the prescription does not do is write any church's manual. The structure is universal; the implementation is each tradition's own. Orthodoxy is installing these features one way, largely by recovering what it never fully shed. A Western tradition that had shed them would install them by reform of its own. The paper specifies the architecture that regrows a core safely. It does not, and should not, prescribe the doctrine that fills it.

Conclusion

The nostalgia for a fighting leadership and faith is not the problem; a faith that will not fight for itself has already lost. The problem is that the only working models of a fighting core in front of us are built on an enemy, and an enemy-built core cannot stop. The way back is narrower and harder: the same energy, the same demand, the same discipline — built on what the tradition loves rather than what it hates, with the family and the inheritance, not the fight, at the top of the ladder. It is not a theory. It is already happening. The task is to build it on purpose, and to firewall it against the two ways it turns monstrous.

This Is Paper 5

The Narrow Way is Paper 5 of the Civilisational Architecture series, which applies structural analysis to how civilisations cohere, decline, and renew. The first four papers are diagnostic: Lost Coherence, Thus Spake Ilos, The Threshold, and The Cage We Built. Papers 5 and 6 are the prescriptive pair. The Narrow Way develops the route a religious tradition walks from the inside; its

companion, The Invisible Way, develops the parallel route a secular state can build. They are separate paths to the same end, and each strengthens the other.

About Prothean Institute

The Prothean Institute is an independent strategic research organisation dedicated to understanding, preserving, and renewing the foundations of thriving societies.

Our mission is to develop political, cultural, and social frameworks that are deeply aligned with the structures, instincts, and emotional architectures that sustain human flourishing across generations.

At the Prothean Institute, all policy recommendations and strategic analyses are grounded in strict epistemic rigour and the reality of real-world conditions and human nature. Idealism, where entertained, is explicitly noted as distinct from core analysis. We reject abstractions untethered from reality and seek to equip leaders with tools that work in the world as it is — not as we might wish it to be.