Opinion



by Dennis Coday

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I started my career in journalism working in a newspaper's morgue, the filing cabinet-filled room that holds the newspaper's old stories, carefully clipped from each issue and meticulously sorted, labeled and filed in yellow business-sized envelopes. I loved sorting through the old files, reading fragile, yellowed news clippings about events and people from long ago.

I experienced a glimmer of that time recently doing research on women's ordination. (Although I could do the research without fear of dust and crumbling paper. Now our archives — we don't even call it a morgue anymore — are electronic. Heck, the archives aren't even a place anymore, just an icon on a screen and space on a hard drive.) I found some real treasures looking through old stories, including this startling headline from Oct. 23, 1992: "Bishop Untener 3rd to challenge male priesthood." That's the late bishop of Saginaw, Michigan, Ken Untener.

The fall issue of his diocesan publication, Seasons, was completely devoted to the topic "Women and the Church." It included a 2,000-word essay penned by Untener exploring the issue of women's ordination. The question "clearly has arguments on both sides which cannot be taken lightly," he wrote. That was October.

The month before, Bishop Michael Kenny of Juneau, Alaska, had published an article in America, saying he found Rome's arguments against ordaining women unsatisfactory. A week later, Auxiliary Bishop P. Francis Murphy of Baltimore wrote in Commonweal that he believes women should be ordained because "justice demands it."

Clearly something was in the air in the fall of 1992. This adds credence to the idea that a ban on women's ordination was not clearly established in the "ordinary and universal Magisterium" in 1994 when Pope John Paul II issued his apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, which explained why women can't be ordained Roman Catholic priests.

But the real treasure in that NCR from 1992 was the story on the next page, a profile of Untener written by NCR's Vatican affairs correspondent, the incomparable Peter Hebblethwaite. It's a great portrait of a great bishop. I offer this small sample:

> At the U.S. bishops' meeting in November 1990, Untener raised some questions about a draft of guidelines for sexual education.
>
> After restating the doctrine of *Humanae Vitae*, the document went on to "hope that the logic expressed here is compelling."

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> Untener wondered whether "compelling" was quite the right word. The teaching is "not compelling to people in general," he told his fellow bishops, "not compelling to the Catholic laity, not compelling to many priests, and not compelling to many bishops."
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> Commenting on the document's "earnest belief that God's Holy Spirit is acting through the Magisterium ... in developing this doctrine," Untener added that it is also "our earnest belief that the Spirit acts through the entire people of God in developing doctrine."
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> The *sensus fidelium* is more than an opinion poll, and it is not a head count. But "when people disagree with us," Untener goes on, "we must not

> assume that it is mere opinion," and what happens "in the heads and hearts of our people must count for something."
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> The document they were considering called for those who "dissent" to study and pray over their position. Untener has a very characteristic response: "Could they not say to us: 'We will ... if you will, and let's do it together'? Would such a process weaken the authority of the bishops, or would it, in fact, strengthen our authority?"
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> So Untener asks the questions that are habitually repressed. Repressed questions do not go away; they go underground and poison the life of the church. But this is my language, not Untener's. He is extremely careful to avoid the language of recrimination, accusation or violence.
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> "I ask my questions up front and out loud," he concluded his remarks to the bishops in 1990, "in the conviction that if we do not ask them, we are unintentionally causing great damage to the credibility and unity of this church that we love."

1992 was pre-internet days at NCR, so these two articles were not readily available online. But now they are: "Untener 3rd bishop to challenge male priesthood" and "Saginaw Bishop Untener 'There goes a shepherd.' "

Untener, who led the Saginaw, Michigan, diocese for 24 years, died of leukemia March 27, 2004. He was 66. Read his obituary here: "Bishop Untener: A leadership style that bucked the prevailing wind."