Opinion

by Dennis Coday

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Welcome to our online letters to the editor column. It's online but based on the old-fashioned letters to the editor format: Send me your thoughts and ideas, reactions and responses. I will collect them, curate them, and post a collection to the NCR Today blog.

Directions on how to join the conversation follow the letters.

Deacons and clericalism

Thanks for your editorial (It's time to choose the painful path of purification). It is time to choose the painful path of purification. I am a deacon reluctant at this time to identify myself as such. To your truth and purification call, a special imperative needs to be added that calls deacons to ask how they have participated in clericalism and how they can assure its future demise.

For starters each deacon should examine his conscience: Have I promoted the clerical culture of privilege when I agreed to subordinate my spouse in sacramental ministry? When I agreed to officially sit only with other deacons and not her? What does my “maleness,” dress and place in liturgy speak to the faithful? Are my ritual practices and language inclusive of all the faithful or do they set me apart and above? Have I dressed like a priest when not acting liturgically? Do I embrace being called by clerical title rather than my name? Does my deacon educational preparation and status foster superiority? Have I sought lay input and approval of my deacon assignment? Have I ever preached transparency and my personal availability to vigorously pursue clergy abusers and advocate for victims of abuse? Have I accepted stipends for my own benefit for ministerial services and what message does that send?

And more…

Deacons need to confess not only what we have done but what we have failed to do. Then a solemn pledge needs to be made by every deacon to avoid future clericalism and to commit to concrete positive steps approved and overseen by the community of the faithful.

Name withheld upon request

More thoughts on clericalism

Your editorial (It's time to choose the painful path of purification) calls "for a national inquiry into every diocese across the 50 states ... led by a body that is independent of the church and includes a strong representation of laity, especially women, and non-Catholics." That has already started to happen, though not in the way you envisioned. Attorneys general across the country are going to start investigations, empanel grand juries, and issue subpoenas.

We are going to find out the sordid details. The attorneys general will rifle through files the bishops thought were private. The process will be utterly outside the control of the hierarchy. And politicians will not dare protect the episcopate.

Any Catholic who cares for the Church should welcome this process and support it. It has become obvious there is no other way to rip out the evil, no other path to purification. The tipping point for me came when Cardinal Wuerl refused to resign.

Jack Harllee

Washington, DC

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These are thoughts that I have on the article "The evil of clericalism." The article says what we should believe and as children we followed what we were told, God only speaks to the ordained. There is a big difference between belief and faith and our Catholic church has instilled in us a belief system. Our great commandment is about loving God, neighbor and self. Self was left out of my education until I was in my 40s and the Second Vatican Council arrived. We each have God within us and are instruments of his love. This to me is faith.

Joan Grieser

Washington DC

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Lord Acton wisely observed: "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

With the exception of Henry VIII, virtually every church disaster has been brought about by the clergy. Their conduct of late convicts them of still more unspeakable criminal abuse. The present structure of the church is only a way that it can be, not a way that it must be. The clergy cannot possibly be trusted to investigate — let alone to reform — themselves. Judaism and the Bahai faith do perfectly well without a clergy. The Catholic church can do likewise if it is to continue. Only the clergy need the clergy.

If the Catholic church is to have a future, it cannot have a privileged clerical caste ruling over a subjugated laity. The clergy in general and the hierarchy in particular need to go.

John Barbieri

Delray Beach, Florida

Responding to clergy sex abuse

In a recent Morning Briefing, Joshua McElwee provided a link to James Carroll's article in The New Yorker titled "After Pennsylvania, What Pope Francis Should Say In Ireland." Unfortunately, Francis didn't say any of it. But he still can, and Carroll has some great ideas that could dramatically transform the entire church.

- Look on the current "crisis of sexual morality" as an opportunity, not a temptation.
- Empower deacons — 40,000 worldwide (13,000 in U.S.)— to preside at the Eucharist.
- Accept current proposals for women to be deacons.

Then, if you add one additional action to the package, you can make a full sweep: setting up "Truth Commissions" in every diocese, with all accused clerics (including bishops and members of religious orders) testifying on camera, under oath, before lay-led panels.

James Ewens

North Lake, WI.

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The atrocity of pedophilia in the Roman Catholic Church continues to fester, from Untied States to Ireland to Europe and Africa — pretty much the whole planet. The report from the grand jury in Pennsylvania covers 70 years of Catholic abuse and cover up. This report is horrifying. But I have a few questions for the grand jury. In the non-Catholic world: How many children were molested by their teachers during this same 70 year time period? By their coaches during this time? By their parents, relatives or family friends?

I ask these questions not to minimize in any way the depths of depravity of the priests and members of religious orders who violated so many children and vulnerable people. But I think it is important to have a sense of the context, the times and the societal practices in the 1950s. Pedophilia occurred in many venues well outside of Catholic institutions, and in general, it was a taboo subject. Neighbors knew about kids being molested at home, but didn't say anything. This was the norm in the 1950s through the 1970s. Sweep it under the rug.

This in no way justifies the sinister cover ups that went on to protect perverted priests and sadistic nuns. But it provides a context in which the church's cover-ups coincided with society's cover ups. The level of indignation being flung toward the Catholic Church might best be shared or distributed with society in general. It is not fair to judge the Church more harshly than society at large, who basically didn't handle it too well.

The most current movement in the Catholic Church by a block of conservative clerics, wants to blame Pope Francis for so much of the history of abuse in the Church. I think Francis will weather it. And he should weather it and keep leading the church where the Spirit leads.

Dennis Choiniere

Berkley, Michigan

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As a retired school psychologist and a life long Roman Catholic who was taught by nuns through high school, it is beyond my patience to have powerful men refuse to talk about the sexual crisis in our church and simply ask for forgiveness. We cannot solve any problem without admitting it, taking it out of the closet and shinning a spotlight on it. I do not believe that anyone can resist evil or the devil in our lives unless we recognize it. God created us with free will and expected us to approach it with intelligence. Which we cannot do unless we recognize our choices and contribution to the behavior.

Jackie LaBouff

Torrance, CA

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Ireland. Australia. Chile. Bankruptcy of a dozen diocese across the USA, and more. Every day more. Thousands of credible sexual assaults on our children hidden by priests, bishops, cardinals and popes. My heart is broken. The deep, deep, deep betrayal I feel is heavy, palpable. I'm physically sick and broken. My faith in the church and its leadership is lost.

As a cradle Catholic, I attended Catholic school and sent my daughter as well. She attended the College of St. Benedict's and St. John's University, Minnesota. After she graduated I learned St. Johns secretly housed sexual criminals. It upset me, but it pales compared to what happened last week. Our tiny little parish in the Wasatch Mountains in Utah has been secretly harboring a sexual predator priest. We weren't told until last week. Eucharistic ministers resigned. Volunteers resigned. People walked out. I am one of them. I'm done with this filthy, lying, infested excuse of a religion.

I have no trust, no respect, no words left. The teachings of Jesus are in my heart and that's all I need.

Ann Mary Howe

Ogden, UT

Jansenism and discipline

Michael Sean Winters' article on Archbishop Viganò's shallow and hypocritical attempt at a Vatican shake-up was most welcome. Charting the interests and the structures of conservative networks in the church seems crucial right now. Understanding the relations between EWTN, its subsidiaries, and, yes, even its episcopal allies is crucial to truly understand the moment that were in, and these relationships and allegiances often seem to baffle mainstream media outlets.

The claim that the EWTN crowd was looking for any reason to call for Cardinal Donald Wuerl's resignation long before the Pennsylvania grand jury report is an important consideration, including for left-leaning Catholics, who, it seems to me, have been quick, perhaps too quick, to jump on the resignation bandwagon, even though I'm not sure that the actual evidence presented in the report should lead to such a conclusion.

Still, Winters' treatment of Jansenism and Cardinal Louis de Noailles deserves more historical consideration. Daniella Kostroun's *Feminism, Absolutism, and Jansenism* (2011) gives an excellent account of the Port-Royal-des-Champs nuns who comprised the epicenter of Jansenism. She shows that Noailles, who was sympathetic to Jansenism at the beginning of his episcopate, was pressured by forces of crown and state to reprimand the nuns and took many measures to do so, including a decision to rescind the nuns' admission to sacraments, for example. Still, many in power thought he didn't do enough.

If anything, Noailles' role in the Jansenist controversy might stir Catholics today to consider not just questions of papal authority, which Winters relies on a bit too easily, and which Pope Francis has spent much of his papacy downscaling ("Who am I to judge?"), but the extent to which the weight of political considerations, rather than ethical ones, has influenced the decisions of our hierarchy, often regardless of their theological, ideological, and political commitments.

Winters is right to seize on the example of Jansenism and Noailles as one relevant for our moment, but I wonder if he does so for the wrong reasons. As in the time of the Port-Royal-des-Champs nuns, the roles of bishops as disciplinarians of vowed women who followed their consciences and as gatekeepers for the sacraments are all too familiar in our own times. The problem with clerics like Viganò might not be so much that they are wantonly disloyal, but that they attempt to mask power plays as moral interventions.

Richard Hoffman Reinhardt

Paris, France

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This is in response to the article on why some young people are not giving up on the Church in the wake of recent scandals. I was glad to see that. We all need to recognize more and more that the Church is everybody.

I repeat what I heard in a recent homily: "We do not worship priests and bishops; we worship Jesus Christ." And so in the face of all the bad things we are hearing, that is

a good truth to keep in mind. The Church does not belong to the hierarchy.

And another thing that must be considered in view of all that is happening: we must do our best to get more and more women involved in positions of advice and decision making. If more women would have been in important positions in the dioceses, I simply believe much of this bad behavior would not have happened.

(Fr.) Tom Zelinski OFM Cap.

Washington MI 48094

Bishop Morrie was deceptive

I came across your Bishop Morrie Resigns story and immediately posted it to my Facebook page. Then, I wanted to learn more so I started to Google the names. No such luck, nothing showed up. Now, I see your comment about this being fictional. In these times, with the Pennsylvania report and the on-going disaster, I feel strongly that we don't need fictional stories about bishops resigning.

I feel betrayed by NCR. As a survivor, I feel directly impacted by such a story, and had deeply hoped it was true. Now I must apologize to my family and friends who have seen this story on my Page and inform them that it was bogus.

Carl J Malischke

Milwuakee, Wisconsin

Editor's note: *After we received complaints, like the one above, we added an additional note to this column. Bishop Morrie is a fictional character columnist Michael Leach created in 2012 as a trope to discuss contemporary issues in the church. There is no Diocese of Paris, Kansas. The Bishop Morrie columns have been very popular with regular NCR readers, who understood he was fictional. New readers to the site did not realize this, and too many did not see the disclaimer at the bottom of this column. We apologize to people for whom this column caused confusion. If this column caused anyone pain, I apologize.*

Time to rethink celibacy

Has nobody indicated that there might be a relationship between the sexual abuse scandals and the requirement that Rome Catholic clergy are required to practice

celibacy? I hope that the NCR addresses this issue in a future issue.

Michael Rooney

Kansas City, KS 66109

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Until and unless the hierarchy declares celibacy optional and abolishes clericalism in all its forms with certain laity selecting and recommending men and woman candidates for seminary and priesthood with evaluations, supervisions, and oversight, for certain periods of time, we will continue to have platitudes, apologies, abuses, studies, conferences, and the wringing of hands.

There is desperate need for laity forceful actions to withhold church contributions, demands for purposeful power to undertake radical transformation of every aspect of church cultural, historical, economic, and inadequate tribal functions asap or this situation will continue with band aid results on the bark of Peter which is hemorrhaging daily. No more excuses!

Lawrence Quilici

Tucson, AZ

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Currently, sexual abuse in the Catholic Church is getting a lot of attention. Your article, "Abandoning celibacy won't stop sexual abuse by priests" (December 19, 2017), is only one of hundreds of articles on the subject.

Pope Francis is to be congratulated and encouraged in his attempts to publicly deal with clergy abuse problem. Even though he may have been part of it, let's assume he is repentant enough to do something positive.

Try this solution: the rule that priests must be celibate may be a primary cause. Let's look to Holy Scripture for some answers. Study 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:6-9. It is obvious that church leaders must be married men of good reputation, who are in the process of raising a family. This is a prerequisite for taking care of the church of God.

The Bible is the Word of God, but The Church has failed to take it seriously. "Celibacy been the rule for over 1,700 years." Error, no matter how long perpetuated, never becomes truth.

Dale Ferguson

Polson, MT 59860

Far too legalistic?

As usual, the Sunday scripture reflection by Sr. Mary McGlone for the 22nd Sunday in Ordinary Time is both concise and pithy, as well as thought-provoking.

On the subject of laws and legalism, I've often wondered whether the Catholic Church, in having, as I understand it, 1,752 canons at last count, has been, perhaps for centuries, far more legalistic (and unnecessarily so), than the scribes and pharisees (representing the religious and "righteous" people of Jesus' time), who prided themselves on upholding, strictly and without compromise, a mere 613 mitzvos?

How did we come to this and has it really done us any good as "The People of God"?

Gilbert Lau

Singapore

We are one in the Spirit

St. Joseph's Parrish in Easton was closed some time ago, but the members of its men's choir chose to continue their music ministry by performing for local seniors in nursing homes and similar places. Reading Dani Clark's beautiful article "This Is Why It's Holy" I was struck by the similarities in effect of the two ministries. While there is no sacramental element in what we do (we perform "Golden Oldies" in the summer and carols at Christmas time), nonetheless the bonding happens. Our mission statement is "Lifting the hearts and minds of shut-ins and the forgotten through song". We see, and hear, and smell the same kind of folk as the people at Sant'Egidio, and they listen, some half attentively, some carefully, responding with clapping of hands, smiles, hugs, and the occasional tear.

We can't say "the Body of Christ" as in the Eucharist, but we can say we are one in the Spirit, and believe truly the Spirit moves us, and molds us into Christ's body. Even if it's not mentioned, it is deeply felt.

Thank you publishing that article. If there are any groups out there whose home base is threatened with closure, please consider nurturing His Body with your talents among those shut-in or forgotten.

Brian Davis

Easton, Pennsylvania

Join the Conversation

Just like the old-fashioned letters to the editor, I will not be posting everything sent to me, and submissions will have to conform to the rules, but I pledge to do my best to represent the full range of letters that I receive. Here are the rules:

- Letters to the editor should be submitted to comments@ncronline.org.
- Letters to the editor should be limited to 250 words.
- First consideration is given to letters written in response to an article that has appeared on NCRonline.org.
- Letters must include your name, street address, city, state and zip code. — We will publish your name and city, state, but not your full address.
- Please include a daytime telephone number where we can reach you. — We will not publish your phone number. It may be used for verification.
- We can't guarantee publication of all letters, but you can be assured that your comments will receive careful consideration.
- Published letters may be edited for length and style.

These are the same rules that have guided the letters to the editor column in our print edition for 53 years, so I hope they work here, too.