News



St. Peter Cathedral, Erie, Pennsylvania, 2007 (Wikimedia Commons/Pat Noble)



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October 23, 2018

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An anonymous supporter of church reform went the whole Martin Luther, pinning 21 theses on the door of St. Peter Cathedral in Erie, Pennsylvania, Sept. 13. The 21 points called for, among other items, ordaining women and increasing lay involvement in church governance.

It was a clear mimicking of the Protestant reformer's 1517 posting of 95 theses on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The Erie document is addressed to Pope Francis and written on behalf of the Catholic laity.

The style of the author is more literary than dogmatic.

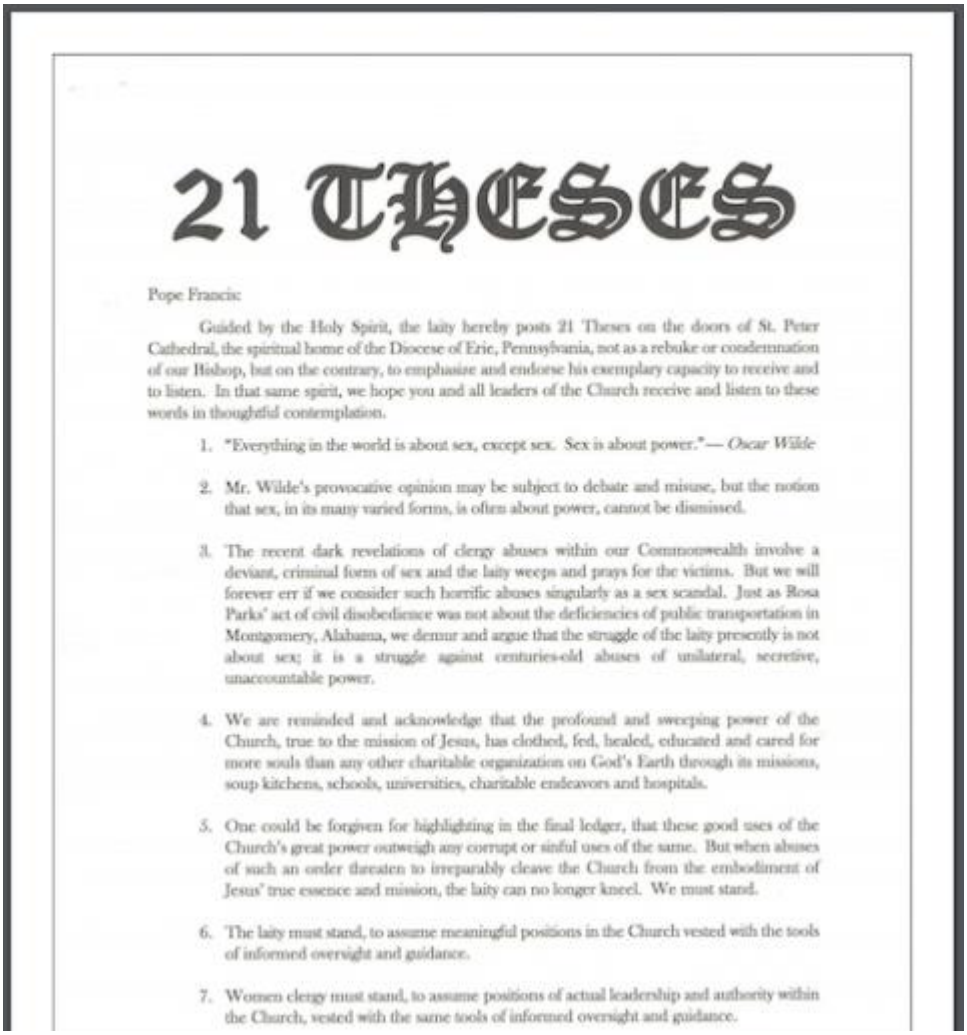
The first thesis states a quote often attributed to playwright Oscar Wilde: "Everything in the world is about sex, except sex is about power."

Other points mix in laudatory praise on the church, at one point describing it as the most charitable institution in human history, while castigating abuses which "irreparably cleave the Church from the embodiment of Jesus' true essence and mission." It argues that the laity should quit kneeling and rather stand in protest, and it blames much of the sex abuse crisis on clericalism.

The document states that priestly celibacy and the church's view on sexuality "has fed its unique culture of secrecy and exclusion," creating "a cloistered, secret world of men, accountable only to one another."

Msgr. Henry Kriegel, pastor of St. Patrick Church in Erie, reprinted the text in his parish bulletin.

"It hits the nail on the head," he said, adding that it reflects much of the discussion in Erie Catholic circles after the release of the damning Pennsylvania grand jury report and revelations regarding now-former Cardinal Theodore McCarrick this summer. He is among a handful of Erie church leaders who were mailed copies of the document.



21 THESES

Pope Francis:

Guided by the Holy Spirit, the laity hereby posts 21 Theses on the doors of St. Peter Cathedral, the spiritual home of the Diocese of Erie, Pennsylvania, not as a rebuke or condemnation of our Bishop, but on the contrary, to emphasize and endorse his exemplary capacity to receive and to listen. In that same spirit, we hope you and all leaders of the Church receive and listen to these words in thoughtful contemplation.

1. "Everything in the world is about sex, except sex. Sex is about power."— *Oscar Wilde*

2. Mr. Wilde's provocative opinion may be subject to debate and misuse, but the notion that sex, in its many varied forms, is often about power, cannot be dismissed.

3. The recent dark revelations of clergy abuses within our Commonwealth involve a deviant, criminal form of sex and the laity weeps and prays for the victims. But we will forever err if we consider such horrific abuses singularly as a sex scandal. Just as Rosa Parks' act of civil disobedience was not about the deficiencies of public transportation in Montgomery, Alabama, we demur and argue that the struggle of the laity presently is not about sex; it is a struggle against centuries-old abuses of unilateral, secretive, unaccountable power.

4. We are reminded and acknowledge that the profound and sweeping power of the Church, true to the mission of Jesus, has clothed, fed, healed, educated and cared for more souls than any other charitable organization on God's Earth through its missions, soup kitchens, schools, universities, charitable endeavors and hospitals.

5. One could be forgiven for highlighting in the final ledger, that these good uses of the Church's great power outweigh any corrupt or sinful uses of the same. But when abuses of such an order threaten to irreparably cleave the Church from the embodiment of Jesus' true essence and mission, the laity can no longer kneel. We must stand.

6. The laity must stand, to assume meaningful positions in the Church vested with the tools of informed oversight and guidance.

7. Women clergy must stand, to assume positions of actual leadership and authority within the Church, vested with the same tools of informed oversight and guidance.

Screenshot of St. Patrick Church Sept. 23, 2018, parish bulletin

Kriegel said the author is correct in promoting more lay and women's leadership in the church. Response to publishing the theses in the parish bulletin has been overwhelmingly positive, said Kriegel, whose parish is adjacent to the cathedral parish.

The mystery of who wrote it is a topic of discussion in Erie church circles. Kriegel thinks it might have been authored by Catholic women who are educated in theology. But, he admitted, "I could still be wrong on that."

The document was also mailed to Erie Bishop Lawrence Persico. This summer, Persico forged a reputation for transparency, releasing information on priest sex abusers in advance of the volatile grand jury report.

Anne-Marie Welsh, diocesan director of communications for Erie, said Persico welcomes discussion but will not respond to the 21 theses because they were written anonymously and they call for action, such as ordaining women, that is beyond the purview of a diocesan bishop.

The last of the 21 theses argues for ongoing action. The author argues that the points raised are not intended to be infallible. They are to be seen as discussion starters and a blueprint for action.

"For the 21 Theses are not the end, but merely the beginning of a deep, unflinching, self-examination of the Church, the fruits of which can and must be realized. With haste," the author wrote.

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