News
Opinion



by NCR Staff

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November 30, 2018
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We received dozens upon dozens of responses from you, our dear readers, to our editorial published Nov. 9: "Open letter to the US Catholic bishops: It's over." Below is a sampling of those letters. They have been edited for length and clarity.



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Thank you for speaking for me in so many ways in your letter telling the U.S. bishops' conference: "it's over." As a spiritual director and Catholic psychotherapist, I received my first referral of a clergy abuse victim/survivor in 1988 from a large midwestern diocese.

After treating dozens more survivors, serving on review and advisory boards, giving talks and trainings, arguing, begging and praying with bishops, collaborating with beautiful and faithful survivors, parents, caring priests and Catholic and non-Catholic professionals, I have seen weariness, disappointment and, finally, full belief in the reports of victim/survivors over decades.

It's over — the curtain has been pulled away and instead of the quaking incredible Wizard of Oz, we have very human men with serious illnesses and sinful versions of power, sexuality and justice operative over decades. The curtain is forever pulled back and the mysteries of priest and bishop has been revealed. It's over.

It is time for us, the faithful, to turn to the true Mystery, the God of scripture and doctors and mystics of the church; the God of prayer and teaching and saints and community and good works; the God of love, not harm; the God of truth, humility and transparency, not secrets and lies and scandal after scandal. This God has been waiting for us, comforting us and keeping us close, healing us and calling to us the whole time, and this true God will not let us down.

U.S. bishops, turn your face and meet God, we pray. It's over.

KATHY COFFEY-GUENTHER

Elm Grove, Wisconsin

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Thank you for clearing the distracting brush of church politics away up front and homing in throughout the text on the central actors in the tragedy of widespread clerical abuse in my church, those bishops who saw or who knew what was happening and took the devil's way out by protecting unremorseful sinners by all means possible.

I don't think anything the bishops might do at, and after, their retreat in the new year will serve as the denouement of this sorrowful, seeming endless chapter in church history, but with the help of the God whom so many bishops failed by only being men for others in clerical garb and by being tribunes of an insidious, inbred clericalism, maybe their decisions will produce a glimmer of light beckoning from the direction of the final reckoning the church needs to have with itself and with its faithful.

THOMAS MULVOY

Medfield, Massachusetts

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I say a tearful "Amen!" Maybe I will consider going to church again. I still call myself Catholic because I love the innermost kernel of the faith, but have not been able to attend because of the power hungry pompousness I have finally allowed myself to see at the age of 74.

I want to come back. Please, bishops, take heed. It's over.

MAGGI YOCIS

Durham, North Carolina

***

I found air coming into my body in ways and quantities I haven't felt in a long time.

Thank you very much, very much, for this profound and real look at the church.

I am particularly drawn to your suggestion that the bishops leave all their finery at home when they come together. It so repulses me to see all those men in those outfits. Like a costume party. When they should be in their work boots and flannel shirts, working.

As always, I salute you. Here's to our future.

SUSAN MURPHY

Pawtucket Rhode Island

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As I read, I go back to those years and see my seventh grade Catholic school students before me. I failed to see the sad pain filled expressions on faces — their self-blaming shame, their numb and silent screams, the beginnings of what still seems permanent pain and in some instances was fatal (two died of overdoses and another took his life).

These I have learned of in recent years and pray I may do my part in helping to make "it over."

(Sr.) KAREN CAVANAGH, CSJ

Jamaica, New York

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Thank you for the open letter to the US bishops.

Yes, it has come to this.

They keep talking about restoring trust.

They seem to have no idea about how shattered that trust is.

Who in his right mind would ever trust a child — or anyone else — to them ever again?

The present corps of bishops may well need to pass away before there can be reconciliation.

JOHN BARBIERI

Delray Beach, Florida

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Thanks for your editorial! When I saw the photo of the cardinals at the synod in their royal robes in front of the faithful laity in attendance, my thought was: this is all wrong! Remove the plumage of privilege, bishops and cardinals; it's over!

(Sr.) JO'ANN DEQUATTRO, SNJM

Alhambra, California

***

It was over when the first bishop decided it was more important to protect the assets and image of the church than it was to safeguard the sanctity of a child. It was over when "clericalism" became the bishops' moral standard. It was over long before the bishops colluded and shared defense strategies. It was over when victims were handed nondisclosure agreements, and when money that was put in the basket on Sunday was handed to victims later in the week.

Unfortunately, canon law did not guide the bishops to the truth. Expert legal counsel did not prevent the inevitable. And peers in the hierarchy did not speak loudly enough, or at all, to prevent the titanic loss of trust.

The Holy Spirit cannot be blamed for leading bishops into this swamp, but only the Holy Spirit can drag the church to dry land. The whole church, all the baptized, have a stake in the next effort. The wisest and most trust women and men should be invited to find the right path to the best system that will send bishops off to shepherding while reserving all matters financial and legal to lay boards.

The bishops have hit bottom. Let's pray they accept that, and ask for our help.

BOB KLOOS

Cleveland Heights, Ohio

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Perhaps a far, far deeper issue and tension than your letter to the bishops, I suggest, is the constant conflict between the Jesus of the Gospels and the church of Paul. Everyone knows the differences: how the Gospels offer the life of Jesus — a model and being a child of God — or listening to superiors lecture to us. Perhaps, we need both, and the one has just overwhelmed the followers of Jesus.

The current crop of hierarchy are followers of Paul; many of the laity are trying to follow Jesus. That tension is the one creating havoc. Councils define and defend the hierarchical church but people keep going back to the Gospels to live by.

JORIS JOHN HEISE

Bloomington, Illinois

***

Your open letter to the U.S. bishops is the most powerful, coherent, and helpful statement on the problem of clerical sexual abuse that I have read or heard.

I am a 71-year-old gay cradle Catholic. I have known many good priests, many of whom are among the good (sometimes holy) men who educated me in my kindergarten-to-grad school Catholic education. I never knowingly have met an

abusive one. I, therefore, have reason to respect our clergy.

If I have lost any respect for the ordained members of the church, it's for the bishops who, in my view, are the men at the root of this horrible scar on the Body of Christ. Their concern for abusers over victims, their outrageous cover-ups, the lies they have told: these behaviors have made the scandal worse and have prolonged it.

I have a deep devotion to Mary. As Pope Francis requested recently, I have been praying my daily rosary for the church, specifically for the church in the U.S. I see your letter to the bishops as an early answer to my prayers. I'll be praying for the bishops' repentance and conversion as they meet in Baltimore.

God bless you! I admire your courage and insight.

ED HAWKINS

Martinsburg, West Virginia

***

While I completely support your editorial, what good will it do? When there are bishops like Bishop Richard Malone in Buffalo, New York, who steadfastly insist on their own innocence, how can you convince the rest of the self-deceived to confess their sins and repent? However, I support your effort and wish you well.

I am a 75-year-old cradle Catholic, raised by parents who gave 100 percent to their parish, serving in every capacity open to the laity in their time. I spent 10 years in the seminary before leaving to marry and start my family.

Nevertheless I served my archdiocese for 40 years, and I continue to volunteer in my present parish. But I have no faith in my Catholic Church today. As much as I admire Pope Francis, I don't see how he will ever overcome the forces of clericalism, careerism, and a lust for power and control that continues to be the driving force of too many bishops and priests.

DON HENDERSON

Frederick, Maryland

***

As a Canadian Anglican, I have been following this tragedy. We have all heard the cries of those whose lives were irreparably altered. I see people leaving churches that aren't Roman Catholic because Christianity everywhere has been besmirched by association.

I have been disgusted at the harm done to the gay community when they were scapegoated. It has been disheartening to see men ostensibly representing God acting with such complete evil so that their exalted status can be maintained.

This letter shines a beacon into the darkest of places. I pray that it is read and understood, and that hearts and motivations can be brought back into the light of God.

PATRICIA BRUSH

Smiths Falls, Ontario, Canada

***

My mother taught me not to gloat, but I am gloating with your "It's over!" editorial. I didn't know it at the time, but I was a brand-new electrical engineer out of University of Notre Dame in 1952, when I moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, to work on atom bombs.

In our parish, we were aware of a retreat house in the nearby mountains for "wayward priests." We just assumed that these were perhaps alcoholics, or some guys with girlfriends. Wrong, they were pedophile priests. From 1949, to 1993, the Jemez Springs facility had treated 1,200-plus priests for sexual issues.

Your NCR report of June 7, 1985, started it. That group of intrepid whistleblowers became my life heroes; Tom Fox, Fr. Tom Doyle, Jason Berry, Patrick Wall, Richard Sipe, lawyer Jeff Anderson, Barbara Blaine and the

Bishop Accountability folks.

It was personal for me. I searched the BishopAccountability.org database of pedophiles and found Fr. Al Larkin. This was a priest that my wife liked a lot and invited him for dinner a few times in the 1970s when my son was serving as an altar boy. About five years ago, with trepidation, I asked my son if anything ever happened; he is 60 now. He told me no, but I don't know whether to believe him.

Moreover, it took half of our 60-year married life for my wife to tell me her secret that she had been sexually abused by her parish priest in Wyandotte, Michigan. She told her mother, who just laughed it off. Imagine the

loneliness and dread of such treatment to a teenager.

JOHN MINCK

Palo Alto, California

***

Wonderful editorial. But no real specifics on what you/we are asking of bishops, other than get rid of their clerical garb.

May I suggest the bishops agree that all pastors and all bishops in this country immediately report sexual offenses against children (and adults) to police authorities and the state attorney general. May I also suggest the bishops do this under threat of potential excommunication (or defrocking) if they fail to comply. Transparency about reporting is critical.

In addition, bishops should be required to submit annual reports on their reporting actions and any subsequent follow-up.

DIANA DIAMOND

Palo Alto, California

***

I can only pray that the bishops at their retreat will as we say "guts up" and face the truth. If they do not then the church — the people — seeing that the leaders chose not to be good and truthful shepherds will go in search of God elsewhere.

They should remember that they will one day come face to face with The Almighty who knows all and who wants justice.

SUSAN GRIFFITHS

Milan, Illinois

***

I'm in full agreement with your editorial — enough is enough!

There is no excuse for the behavior of the church or the bishops; they need to be removed from office and prosecuted for violating the law.

I feel like my church has been taken away from me.

I feel embarrassed to attend Mass, or support any church functions.

I stopped attending Mass for a long time, then decided to return — but, I do not and will not put any money in the collection.

I think we need to end the practice of an all-male, isolated, celibate, clergy. We need "normal" men and women, living a "normal" life to be running our parishes and the church.

I took great offense when with all the problems going on in the church, our so called leaders decided that the major issue we needed to address was the language in the Mass! Obviously the wrong in our church was saying that Jesus "took the cup" when he obviously used a "chalice" at the last supper. And, saying Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary was incorrect, "incarnate of the Virgin Mary" is much easier understood.

I'm glad that the church decided that our major problems that needed to be addressed were these words of the Mass rather than clergy abuse. "One in being with the Father" was confusing and important to change? Saying Jesus is "consubstantial with the Father" is much easier to understand and helps

strengthen my faith — glad we addressed that before clergy abuse!

The audacity of the church to make changes, but refuse to address real issues has to be changed!

ED FLAHERTY

Tewksbury, Massachusetts

Advertisement

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I will be forwarding this to Pope Francis, citing your copyright, but noting that I agree with every word.

There is only one addition I would make. We must ask Pope Francis to call for the immediate written resignation of every abuser and the written resignation of every member of the hierarchy who participated in what continues to be a criminal cover-up. Their examination of conscience will easily allow them to self-identify. Those that don't come forward will eventually be identified and their failure to have resigned will speak to the heavens. Then we can truly say "it's over."

Those of us who love the church, who are the church, who will always be part of the church, thank you for your leadership and courage, in the name of the child victims and in the name of the faithful priests who continue to serve us so well, in spite of the harm they have suffered from the hierarchy cover-up.

Please make this a global referendum and let me help get it circulated to every living Catholic for signature.

JOHN M. HAZLIN III

Huntington Beach, California

***

I have been waiting, seems like forever, for this indictment of our Catholic leadership. Is it any mystery why so many young and old people are leaving to join the nones? Your letter is so well written and so specific as to the crimes visited on the faithful, the harm that has been done to the innocent and the massive rupture to our trust in those responsible for "leadership."

People are much more sophisticated than in the days of "pay, pray and obey." A past pastor of mine had a quote that so fits this disaster, "Institutions have a propensity for evil when they lose sight of their mission."

"Its over." For me it has been so painful watching our church implode. And the pain is renewed each time

a scab is pulled from this wound. I love my church and am not leaving but it is getting more difficult to say why.

(Deacon) MAURY REED

Appleton, Wisconsin

***

Just to commend your staff for this beautifully written summary of the clergy sex abuse scandal from 1985 onward.

Your truthful, succinct unraveling of events that ravaged the lives of countless victims, whistle blowers, advocates and their families over the past 30 years helps enormously to relieve the burden many of us still carry from those earliest years; that of not being believed, as well as the many humiliations inflicted by those of the clergy and laity who militantly tried (and still try) to silence, marginalize or contain us. Like post-traumatic stress disorder, the memories of their misplaced loyalty will haunt us for the rest of our lives. Making trustworthy friendships within the church community extremely difficult if not impossible.

Still, we are grateful to NCR for being there for us from the beginning, for giving space to our outrage through the years and for giving us the backbone to continue the good fight. May we remain open to the obvious movement of the Holy Spirit as

our church continues to be purged by the spotlight of truth and be willing to be part of the healing solution as we move forward under the courageous leadership of our earthly, good shepherd, Pope Francis.

NANCY McGUNAGLE

Kalispell, Montana

***

As Eliza Doolittle said, about two men in particular:

> *I'm so sick of words,*
>
> *I get words all day through,*
>
> *First from him, now then from you,*
>
> *Is that all you blighters can do.*

But she could just as well have been echoing the thoughts of the Catholic laity as we confront our (men-only) bishops,

> *Don't talk of love*
>
> *Lasting through time,*
>
> *Make me no undying vow;*
>
> *Show me now.*

It's showtime, guys. You've said all the appropriate words — appalling, shameful, embarrassing, sorry, sorry, sorry and the like — over and over again. Now is the time for some action. Show us.

Sing us no song,

Read us no rhyme,

Don't waste our time,

Show us.

If your words are to mean anything at all, if you are really sincere in seeking change, then they must translate into action. Now. You've talked about the problem often enough and long enough, what are you going to do about it? Now.

You have put in place, often it seems belatedly and reluctantly, measures to protect children and other vulnerable people. Great. But what measures are in place to show accountability for and to fix institutional cover-ups? Are those responsible to get off scot-free? If a dysfunctional institutional culture is to blame, what is being done to fix it? So "clericalism" is the problem? As Pope Francis believes. How are you moving to a solution of the problem? Not just discussing all of this, but actually doing something about it all.

Show us, and we might start to believe you.

JOHN R. SABINE

Hazelwood Park, South Australia

***

Thank you for your straightforward letter to our U.S. bishops. Well-said and succinctly. "It's over." No more charades, no need for pretentious behavior and the "Aw shucks, I sure didn't know."

Good call to bishops, challenging their core relationship as brothers; perhaps that's where they can begin. No one has to take sole responsibility, as this is an embedded institutional problem. They just need to begin at the beginning, in sackcloth, taking the time needed for repentance and grieving. Then transparently, with God's help, confess to the world what it needs to hear from their mouths.

CATHERINE HARTRICH

St. Louis, Missouri

***

This is a powerful open letter. There are sexual deviant priests and powerful men who manipulate their power for bad reasons. These are humans. But something else is involved here.

It occurs to me a contributing issue may be the viewpoint that ordination equates to being "wedded to the church." Is this a factor in reporting and dealing with abuse cases? I think there are well meaning clergy who are perplexed over how to do the right thing while protecting their "spouse."

What is the analogy for lay married people? What would you do if your spouse does something wrong? Of course we all think we would do the right thing and many of us would, but I think you get my point about how this tradition introduces difficult choices.

Maybe this tradition needs to be replaced with something more realistic like "wedded to the vocation." An abusive priest is unfaithful to their vocation. But the church as an institution is not the individual or collective priests' duty to protect. Maybe this would be a step towards a healthier relationship between priests and these issues. Maybe it would change the powerful manipulators ability to gain acceptance of their ineffective remedies. Change the tradition.

JERALD O'HARA

Peachtree City, Georgia

***

In regards to your open letter to the U S. Bishops, I do have say that the solution — lay oversight — is not a solution, but a problem in and of itself.

I know of and heard about too many lay people who are enmeshed in the parish and diocesan apparat who don't hold to the Catholic faith in its entirety, yet their preferences weigh in rather heavily on how the church should be run resulting in a loss of true Catholic identity in parish life by creating a hybrid identity with main line Protestantism driving many Catholics to evangelical Protestantism "to get to know Jesus better."

What has failed to keep Catholics in the pews before the scandal, fuller lay participation, is now the magic bullet to get us out of this mess?

The choice of Sr. Teresa Maya, past present of the head of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious is indicative of the problem with hybrid Catholicism with its being neither this or that. According to Wikipedia, the average age of the members of LCWR is 74. There are not enough novices to replace their aging population making her message to our bishops "To listen to the heart of our people." almost laughable. Is this the case of the nearsighted leading the nearsighted?

My message to the bishops is "Listen to the heart of Jesus whose Vicar you are to be for us. Think about your particular judgement as you give your account as to how well you represented Him to us. Be true Catholic bishops. Stop being another hybrid with CEO's of major corporations. Faithful Catholics will hang in there. That's a promise that God can keep."

Lord grant us priests. Lord grant us many holy priests and many holy bishops.

ALBERTA TRAFFICANTE

West Chester, Pennsylvania

***

"It's over!" Finally, words strong enough to reflect the abyss into which the Catholic Church has fallen.

But then these words: "This is not about debatable matters, celibacy or the filioque clause, or the primacy of scripture or whether the earth is the center of the universe, or whether women should be allowed ordination or any other hot button issues that have kept us roiling and at each others' throats these last decades. This instead is

about the rot at the heart of a culture entrusted with leadership of the Catholic community."

And there it is: women's place in the church tossed into a cauldron of stale scientific and theological debates and by implication, certainly not as vital as a path to redemption for clerics who have participated and/or covered up the horror of child sexual abuse.

The rot at the heart of Catholic leadership is centuries of male dominance, idealization of priestly celibacy, and a cult of Mary that rarely touches on the earthly realities of women.

That only men can experience the ontological change brought about by ordination defies scripture ("neither male or female ... all are one in Christ" Galations 3:28); Jesus' friendships with women; and common sense.

Certainly, we can all pray that current Catholic clerical leadership will get together for a sincere and epic mea culpa. But hot topics are "hot" for a reason. Without real change in who and how people are called to leadership within the church, it's over.

CARLA CALDWELL

Port Townsend, Washington

***

Thanks, NCR editorial staff, for having the clarity and courage to write this letter. You certainly speak for me. And countless others.

Thanks for challenging the ridiculous idea that being gay makes one an abuser.

Thanks for articulating concerns about the rush to canonization of Pope John Paul II. The fact that he promoted Marciel Maciel was at least one red flag among many.

Thanks for addressing the "Catholic League." How have we ever come to the point of having such a group?

And I think of the good people in second marriages who are not welcome into full membership in our parishes when so much of our leadership is itself morally

bankrupt. Something is very wrong.

I feel for the good bishops in our church. Again, I appreciate NCR's courage to name dysfunction. May we not be past the point of no return.

(Sr.) MAUREEN KUNZ, RGS

Blaine, Washington

***

This is very good journalism that speaks to the dreadful crises that permeate our beloved church. Your letter was courteous yet direct and what was said needed to be said with some urgency. There appears to be some conflict between the Vatican and the mostly well-intentioned majority of the U.S. bishops, who must be dismayed at the request from Rome to have ordered they abstain from voting on any major decisions regarding the sexual crisis that permeates and continues to besmirch the church. By writing such a letter also keeps the laity informed and the title "It's over" is most appropriate.

I feel a sense that the Vatican has not yet fully acknowledged the chaos these scandals have caused, and is even at this late stage, still trying to maintain a good image of the church that must be preserved at all costs. I also believe that the church hierarchy within the Vatican (sometimes referred to as the princes of the church) are too conceited and more interested in their own personal agendas and pious lifestyle, (and for some already leading double lives) to recognize the very real situation that plagues the church. I commend you for your efforts to convince the U.S. bishops to maintain their stand. May we all see very soon some good resolution and resolve.

DAVID J. O'CONNOR

Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

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