Opinion



by NCR Staff

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

February 1, 2019
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

NCR received hundreds of reader responses to Melinda Henneberger's "Why I left the church, and what I'm hearing about it" perspective and its counterpoint "Memo to Henneberger: The logical thing is to 'hang in there' " written by Fr. David Knight. Following is just a sampling of those letters. They have been edited for length and clarity.

I have just finished reading the article "Why I left the church" and immediately identified with the writer. I was born and raised Catholic, even spending two years in a convent. That was at the end of the Second Vatican Council and there was so much promise that the Catholic Church would reform itself.

Five years ago, after being a member of the same Catholic parish for over 40 years and having held almost every role a woman could hold in the Roman Catholic Church, my husband and I decided we had stayed long enough as it became very apparent that we lay people did not have the power to effect any significant change. We began to feel like hypocrites as we could no longer believe that LGBT people were "disordered" or that divorced and remarried Catholics who had not sought invalidation of their Catholic marriage could not receive Eucharist, that it was an injustice that unmarried teachers who were living with their fiancé were fired and that birth control was sinful.



Not to mention the sexual abuse and cover-up or the priest we personally knew who had female partners. We were tired of apologies and holy hours of reparation when those bishops who covered up abuse have never been sanctioned and those who were abused were not given justice but many times just ignored.

It was a difficult decision and we spent time discerning where we could find a new church home but realized that our spiritual well-being demanded we make a change. We visited several denominations and found that the Lutheran community near us had a very similar liturgy, the wording being closer to what it was before "the dew fall and for many" became the language of Catholics and God remained "He" in every prayer. This Lutheran parish is very inclusive of women and LGBT members. It

is very social justice oriented and ecologically aware. The language is inclusive and they believe in the real presence of Jesus in Eucharist and that we do not "have to" but "get to" respond to God's grace in our life.

Because of my long involvement with my Catholic parish I still maintain membership there and participate as lector, belong to the funeral choir, help provide funeral meals and donate to some outreach projects. I do not believe I am bound for hell because I believe that it is necessary for everyone to find a spiritual community that enables one to live one's life in a more Christlike and serving way.

HELEN WELTER

Indianapolis, Indiana

***

I am a Catholic. Like other Catholics, I am horrified, mortified and numbed by the revelations of innocent children in Pennsylvania being molested by predator priests, and Catholic bishops enabling and covering up their heinous crimes. But God is my rock. My faith is grounded in Jesus Christ, not in any human being or group of human leaders.

I will never abandon my unconditional faith in Jesus Christ because I believe He is the Son of God who gives us the promise of eternal life through his life, death and resurrection. I will never abandon my unconditional faith in the pope and bishops because I never had nor ever will have an unconditional faith in them.

The faithful who kneel in the pews are 99.9 percent of the Catholic Church. To me they are often the living presence of Christ on earth. I will never leave them. They refresh and deepen my belief in Christ. I will instead do everything in my power to purge this family of believers of their criminal leaders.

What the bishops did was a sin and a crime. It is left for the community of the faithful to pursue repentance, conversion and healing. It remains to law enforcement to pursue investigations, prosecutions, convictions and incarceration of the guilty regardless of rank. This is what faith and justice requires.

TIM MANNELLO

Williamsport, Pennsylvania

***

Having recently coped with two kitchen ceiling leaks during Virginia 's rainiest year in history, I understand the need for immediate action and creative problem solving. The same solution will not stop water pouring in through an exhaust fan and through improperly installed chimney flashing. A homeowner has to stop, think, and pursue two different courses of action.

What is driving me to the brink of leaving the Catholic Church is the hierarchy's refusal to try new ways of solving problems. Bishops seem to hope that a rain bucket will buy them some time, and then maybe another man will eventually figure out how fix the leak that's causing the emergency. No women are empowered to do the critical thinking, problem resolution, and future governance. It seems that the bishops think everything is "business as usual" and that buying time will ride out the storm. It won't. Those days is gone.

CAROLANN CIRBEE

Nokesville, Virginia

***

I was immediately inspired to respond to Melinda Henneberger's "Why I left the church." When I read Fr. David Knight's response, I thought, "He's said it all." But there are a few comments I'd like to add.

We are blessed with modern day commentators who have grasped the Word as practiced for the past 2,000 years, regardless of the personal behavior of its messengers, and made it real to us. They have not ignored the imperfection, but rather have described the church, warts and all.

As to perfection, Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr suggests: "The demand for the perfect is the greatest enemy of the good. Perfection is a mathematical or divine concept; goodness is a beautiful human concept that includes us all."

Dorothy Day had this to say: "As to the church, where else shall we go, except to the Bride of Christ, one flesh with Christ? Though she is a harlot at times, she is our mother."

Trappist Fr. Thomas Merton writes, "The advent of Christ in history is not bound up with the development and progress of a Christian civilization, 'Christendom.' ... Christendom has never been an absolute and unqualified good or an end in itself. Christendom is not Christianity. It is not 'the Kingdom' and it is not the Mystical Body of Christ."

Most people who leave the church today are leaving Christendom.

JAMES T. DETTE

Weehawken, New Jersey

**

For Melinda Henneberger: Thank you for your article. For you and the thousands (millions?) of others who could no longer stay, I highly recommend *The Other Catholics: Remaking America's Largest Religion,* by Julie Byrne.

I belong to one of the "other" Catholic churches and feel at home in the arms of love.

ALEEN M. SMITH

Bend, Oregon

***

I compliment Fr. David Knight's perspective on the clergy sex-abuse crisis questioning the logic of Melinda Henneberger's choice to leave the church in protest. Like him, I am long in the tooth, having just celebrated my 50th year as a priest. I have written a justice and peace column for the Camden diocesan paper for 40 years, joining the chorus of outrage. Like 96 percent of my collared colleagues, I have never molested a youth.

Like probably every NCR reader, I reacted negatively to Watergate, furious that a party could try to steal a presidential election. As atrocious a crime as that was, I never heard of anyone so disgusted that they were leaving the U.S. in protest. It

never occurred to me perhaps because my citizenship meant so much to me.

Perhaps my church membership means as much today. Why should my membership depend on some cleric? If we know about St. Peter's three denials and other offenses, thank the earliest church since it authorized the New Testament for all to see. What Peter's or what Nixon's behavior may have been says nothing about whether I stay or go. It may be emotionally satisfying but intellectually illogical to hang my membership on their necks.

Having said that, I wish Pope Francis success in his planned February convocation on the dismal subject.

(Fr.) ROBERT J. GREGORIO

Glassboro, New Jersey

Advertisement

***

I am at the same crossroads as Melinda Henneberger. All of this discussion about what church leaders should do about sexual abusers — all of them need reported to the civil authorities. Church authority can still do what they want to do, but the civil authority needs to investigate whether they are credible or not. Civil authorities investigate many actions that turn out not credible, but they have investigated and that is what they are supposed to do.

If church authority wants to regain some respect, they might just turn over all, not just some, of these cases.

JIM OFFENBERGER

Vienna, West Virginia

***

Fr. David Knight's memo to Melinda Henneberger was excellent. He is always good and he was at his best in his memo.

It is a most difficult matter to address. So many good people are so outraged and "at their wit's end" in knowing how to think about the matter, or where to turn or how to go on in view of the horrendous sexual abuse by priests and bishops that has taken place in the Catholic Church, and Knight's insights were some of the best I have seen or heard.

When I have to field questions on that matter, I tell people that I can understand their hurt and disillusionment and desperation. And that I feel the same way. And I do. But then I tell them: "Don't take it out on Jesus. He didn't do anything wrong. He has suffered enough already, why make him suffer even more by abandoning him. That would almost be like saying, 'Well if they can go to hell, so can I!' " And I say, "I guess that is true, but why do that?" "Nothing is gained by that."

Knight's reference to "dark night of the soul" was a good one. It is like that. And so many in the church are in their own "dark night of the soul." And when one is there, the only thing one can do is trust that God is there, too. And then "comes wisdom by the awful grace of God."

(Fr.) NORBERT F. DLABAL

Salina, Kansas

***

This article resonates so close to my own life, I could have written it myself. There are times when leaving is the only way to remain sane.

I had great hope in this pope only to be greatly disappointed and angry. It is disturbing to see the leaders of the Catholic Church abandon the teachings of Jesus to protect themselves and their positions.

I am now attending a Presbyterian church.

JEANNE McBRIDE

Norfolk, Virginia

***

Dear Melinda:

Has Christ done anything wrong, to leave the church?

THOMAS PAVEY

Perth, Australia

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts and ideas, reactions and responses to letters@ncronline.org. The editor will collect them, curate them and publish a sampling in Letters to the Editor online or in our print edition.

We cannot publish everything. We will do our best to represent the full range of letters received. Here are the rules:

- Letters to the editor should be submitted to letters@ncronline.org.
- Letters to the editor should be limited to 250 words.
- 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.
- If the letter refers to a specific article published at ncronline.org, please send in the headline or the link of the article.
- 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 submission will receive careful consideration.
- Published letters may be edited for length and style.

This story appears in the **Your thoughts** feature series. View the full series.