Opinion



by NCR Staff

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NCR readers are welcome to join the conversation and send us a letter to the editor. Below is a sampling of letters received in the month of January 2019. If you want to respond to an article published in NCR, follow the steps listed at the end of this post.

This fine commentary by Franciscan Fr. Daniel P. Horan with his topic "Make the Catholic Church Great Again" is a most profound and thought-provoking insight into where the Catholic church stands today.

With so much dismay, sadness and at times anger expressed by the laity at the current situation, Horan's insight and deep understanding of the way things appear, is urging lay Catholics to stop and reflect prayerfully on what needs to be done moving forward. I have personally followed the mostly angry forums, yet have managed to maintain my faith.

As a traditional Latin Mass Catholic, I never really embraced the Novus Ordo or new directives that came with the Second Vatican Council, hoping in a way there a may be a move back to the more traditional form of Catholic worship. However, Horan's explanation of how the church has over the centuries never been completely holy and without faults, has made me now more accepting of the status quo.



"I think there is plenty of room in the church for those who wish to worship in diverse ways. But the 'smells and bells' of a Latin liturgy in an ornate cathedral are no more beautiful or profound than the simple house liturgy of the first century communities or the massive liturgies on a beach during World Youth Days," Horan writes. These wise words have resonated strongly with me.

I still remain distraught and unhappy at the hierarchy's seemingly lack of acknowledgement for some of the recent scandals and abuse and for the lack of action or direction being shown. Horan has shown great insight and understanding of the crisis but with some sound advice and how to maintain our faith via the Holy Spirit in these disturbing times.

DAVID J O'CONNOR

Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

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With appreciation, I read Franciscan Fr. Daniel P. Horan's article. He puts some new clothes on an old cadaver. I wrote a book to quiet my own discomfort with the phenomena he recounts.

Control as a response to the "messiness" of the liturgical reforms alive after Vatican II is a great way to consider the opposition to so many non-consequential reforms. Consider the "consubstantial" brouhaha and all the painful responses to the "necessary Latinizations" which brought the liturgical texts into conformity with the Tridentine "original."

In The Priest and the Pendulum: Reconciling the Orders of Melchizedek and Aaron, I explored the two paradigms of priesthood for all the faithful, finding that the need for control often resulted for me personally in abject assault, demanding that kindness be subjugated to forcing the faithful to adherence to local preferences of powerful priests and some pitiless parishioners.

There is a swing from one paradigm to another which must be studied in order to find a way to be a priest/follower of Jesus, the only high priest, according to the Epistle to the Hebrews. Complete dedication to one paradigm precludes Christian performance. There's a narrow path we must find

in the middle way, all of us who wish to "participate in the one priesthood of the Lord, Christ," especially perhaps the ordained! We must seek that path.

(Fr.) DENNIS MCNALLY, SJ

Merion Station, Pennsylvania

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Is it fate or divine intervention that I read this article just after it occurred to me that "Make America Great Again" is a backhanded way of saying "America sucks" and "Make America white again"?

For a long time, even before the last 10-20 years of revelations of pedophilia and sexual abuse within the church, I knew that the institutional Catholic Church is not God, but just another fallible institution of man. Our two millennia of history includes eras when popes condoned torture, committed serial murder and kept harems, in some cases harems of little boys. That doesn't happen anymore. I

wish that those who've recently abandoned not only the church but God altogether could include this historical perspective in their decision-making.

The Catholic Church is certainly not unique among institutional religion in sin such as pedophilia and I think it's efforts at reform and redress of these evils is real, reaches from the lowest to

the highest levels and is perhaps the greatest such effort in the recent history of organized religion.

It is a difficult time to be liberal and Catholic. Yet, I still love the church into which God saw fit to have me be born and I'm not ready to second-guess his wisdom. I believe that our church is

on balance a powerful and independent force for good.

I wholeheartedly agree that calls for a "return to tradition" are mostly an attempt to hide from rather than address and solve the problems of the present. They are a clear, and frightening, parallel

the cries of "MAGA" in the realm of politics.

KURT REIMER

Abington, Pennsylvannia

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Franciscan Fr. Daniel P. Horan makes so many powerful points in this article. I am a former alumnus of Catholic Theological Union where Horan is presently on faculty. I respect his stated decision: "As someone who has made a conscious decision to remain in the church, I have been interested in the responses of my sisters and brothers who have made similar choices in the face of such tragic crises."

Personally, my choice is different. I respond to questions about my status with this reply: "I no longer identify as Catholic. I am a follower of Jesus." This is not a choice I have made lightly. It reflects a previous choice I made to seek dispensation from the priesthood and the religious community of which I was a member, the Priests of the Sacred Heart.

Under Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI, I experienced a church which demanded loyalty to the pope as the main quality. I believe the canonization of John Paul II was a serious mistake. Celebrating Mass continually said to me, "Something is not working here."

I see so much resistance to Pope Francis' attempts to make the Catholic Church great again — particularly by U.S. bishops — that I found staying impossible. Presently I worship in an intentional community that is composed of people who take the social doctrines of the church seriously and are putting this doctrine into actions and practice.

DAVID JACKSON

Edinburg, Texas

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Fr. Horan:

You are terribly, outrageously, almost unforgivably, wrong about this country having never been great.

This country was great when the founders wrote the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution.

This country was great when we helped win World War I.

This country was great when we defeated the Nazis and the Japanese empire.

This country was great when my peasant father arrived from Italy, processed through Ellis Island, worked as a "shoeshine boy" in Brooklyn, New York, and raised a son who managed to get 13 years of college.

Wake up. You owe this county an apology.

FRANCIS J. TEPEDINO

San Diego, California

The report on Capuchin Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa's talks to the U.S. bishops by Tom Roberts includes three deeply flawed understandings of theology and reality.

1. Suggesting that "many bishops in the Catholic Church, starting with the Bishop of Rome, are experiencing right now exactly what Jesus experienced in Gethsemane" and proclaiming that the pope and bishops are taking upon themselves "sins that he had not committed himself" is outrageous. The bishops of the United States, as a group, have failed the church for many years. Even if one accepts the questionable "atonement theology" underlying his statement, the bishops, corporately, are not without sin in the abuse scandal.

2. Citing St. Cyprian is hardly sufficient to support the assertion that "virginity-celibacy is, however, eschatologically more advanced [than marriage] in the sense that it more clearly approximates the definitive state toward which we are all

journeying." After all, it took the church 12 centuries to decide that marriage is a sacrament!

3. It is false to claim that "throughout history, the proclamation of the gospel and the church's mission have in large part rested on the shoulders" of men and women who have renounced marriage." No, the proclamation of the gospel and the church's mission have, in great measure, rested on the shoulders of parents who have tried their best to pass the faith on to their children.

JIM PURCELL

Los Gatos, California

[Jim Purcell is NCR board chair.]

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No, the Capuchin Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa gave a traditional talk to traditional men who heard it and hearing did not hear it because they had preached much the same stuff themselves as priests and bishops. It was stale.

He should have talked how to pray and re-directed prayer to the father (as Jesus did); his discussion of celibacy was unhappily a restarting of statements restated ad infinitum. He should have discussed really loving. Loving priests who were troubled whether by celibacy or faith or hope, whether by loneliness or exhaustion, whether by aged or regrets.

The sermons, in fact, almost surely, were received by the traditional bishops in the traditional way of so many, many Catholics: same old, same old. Now maybe the man's saintliness and passion compensated for the lack of spiritual interiority and freshness. That no one knows.

And some bishops may have needed that, but I suspect few felt the need for repentance — a fresh-ever-fresh resurrection with stigmata that involves a change of life and attitude. Yes, the preacher mentions the danger of honor, but not the positive role of modeling the poor, grief, meek, hunger for justice.

JORIS JOHN HEISE

Bloomington, Illinois

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I have read a fair sampling of the talks that were given at the recent retreat and I must say I found them sound and reassuring.

This was not a strategic planning conference called to address a pressing and terrible practical problem. It was a thoughtful and prayerful call to each and every bishop to explore his own interior life.

The men attending the retreat are not solely "division managers" of a large corporation. They are also successors of the apostles and as such a solution to the current crisis needs far more than a corporate-style solution.

BRIAN J. CUDAHY

Bluffton, South Carolina

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I just read the article on the bishop's retreat in Chicago. First of all, I want to comment on the photo. Why are the bishops wearing their official regalia? Why not a pair of dockers and a sweater? Or clothes

suitable for Chicago weather? After all this was a retreat for bishops which means they knew who they were.

The fact that a priest from the Vatican gave the retreat doesn't give a lot of credibility to the gathering. Were there any women, survivors, people from the LGBT population to give input to the bishops? At any time during the retreat did they sit in small groups for sharing of the heart, to talk to each other about what the laity — groups, organizations, professionals and individuals are saying, what they think needs to be done? Or, did they sit in a chapel listening to the priest talk at scheduled times?

(Sr.) ELAINE COUTU, CSJ

San Jose, California

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The institutional church today is not in a "golden age" as the pope's preacher alludes to but rather in an age of unrepentant clericalism and privilege that, left to itself, suffocates the word.

Today, the faithful are experiencing a depth of suffering similar to what Jesus experienced in Gesthemane. They have taken on sins they have not committed themselves, bearing responsibility and actively seeking a way toward healing. There may be a redemptive and expiatory power in doing this but, fundamentally the faithful's bearing of this burden challenges the institution to accept culpability honestly and to embrace repentance and change.

Throughout history the proclamation of the Gospel and the church's mission has rested on the shoulders of the faithful who have enfleshed the Gospel, sacramentally, in their daily lives. In this journey the faithful have entrusted clerics to celebrate, with them, the sacraments of their tradition with the hope that the clerics themselves would live sacramental lives.

This trust has been severely broken. The faithful call upon the institutional church to join with them as they seek life-giving ways to abolish this attachment to clericalism, to together embrace an ecclesial movement of hope.

Our brother, Jesus, neither hid, juxtaposed nor subordinated prayer to action but incarnated prayer and action as one, with a fluidity that cannot be separated. The bishops must begin to incarnate "prayer and action." They must stop hiding. This will give hope.

MICHELE MICKLEWRIGHT

Brooklyn Park, Minnesota

It seems abundantly clear to me that your editorial, "Reality check was missing at US bishops' retreat," misses entirely the whole point of a spiritual retreat. A retreat is not — repeat, not — the time nor place for a discussion. It is a time for personal reflection, for talking to God and for listening to him.

Each bishop was charged to examine his conscience, to determine with the help of the Holy Spirit where he had gone right and where he had gone wrong in this whole abuse mess. Especially where he had gone wrong. And then, crucially and again with the help and guidance of the Holy Spirit, what he was going to do about it.

Capuchin Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa's job, his commission from Pope Francis, was not to tell the bishops how to fix the church in America, as he so rightly acknowledged right at the beginning of his talks. His task was simply to provide background material, a spiritual, historical and theological framework to help each bishop, individually, to discern his own failings and to formulate his own, individual response. I am certainly no expert in these matters but I would have said he did a pretty good job.

Thus the success or otherwise of the retreat will be measured not by the magical appearance of some solution to the abuse crisis, as your editorial appears to imply, but by how many bishops are prepared to say, "I'm sorry." "We are sorry," no longer cuts it. Personal confessions are needed if U.S. Catholics are ever to trust a bishop again.

JOHN R. SABINE

Hazelwood Park, South Australia

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It amazes me that the clergy continue to be so tone deaf. Here in India, the laity in general are not kept informed either through the weekly sermons, nor through regular letters from their bishops about the state of affairs in the church. Not even papal encyclicals are made known to all. Faith largely equals attendance at Sunday Mass, the occasional retreat, novena, or pilgrimage and unquestioning obedience to the clergy.

Your editorial is absolutely on point. The crimes of individual priests are one thing; the larger crime is the cover-up by the higher clergy. The biggest scandal is the fear of scandal, which led to such cover-ups. It amazes me that almost 1,000 years after the power struggle between Henry ll and Thomas Becket, church authorities still operate under the mistaken notion that the church is not governed by secular criminal laws.

In the face of such intransigence, what's left to the laity, but to vote with their feet?

ANGELA KORETH

Chennai, India

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As a lapsed Catholic, I specifically signed up for your newsletter with the hope that the Catholic Church could restore my faith in it.

Alas, all my hopes were dashed with this editorial. For this gathering of bishops to refuse to even acknowledge and discuss their complicity in the sexual abuse of thousands of victims further indicts them.

Why in heaven's name (and I mean that literally) should I respect or take to heart anything they have to say about my life as it relates to living within the church when they have utter disregard for people's suffering and "Cantalamessa's oratory presumes that there is not much wrong with the status quo. He seems oblivious to the depth of the problem or how disruptive it's been to the victims, their families and, by extension, the wider Catholic community."

I do appreciate your decision to call them out and hope that Pope Francis will show courage and rebuke them for their cowardice.

ADRIENNE A. FERMOYLE

Mountlake Terrace, Washington

NCR's editorial on "The lesson of Opus Dei Fr. McCloskey's downfall" concluded: "The clergy culture ... is at the heart of the church's problem. It is in need of dire reform." But, as my book *Roman Catholic Clericalism* documented, clericalism is not a "culture." It is an institutional system separate from and superimposed upon the Sacrament of Orders.

Now dysfunctional and crippling the Western Catholic evangelization, the Roman Catholic clerical system needs to be dismantled in canon law, in order to liberate the Sacrament of Orders and re-empower the Western evangelization.

This clerical system was constructed historically by three stages of legislation — first imperial, then papal, and finally conciliar:

- In the fourth century, Roman imperial legislation established the clerical state — mutating lay episcopal and presbyteral servant-leaders into a priestly-hierarchical class imperially mandated to rule over the Laos (laity);
- In the 11th century, papal legislation by the 'Gregorian Reform' mutated the Western Catholic clergy into a clerical celibate caste — rejecting the 1,000-year-old apostolic tradition of married bishops and presbyters, and forming monastic-like celibate cadres for the papacy's new theocratic power, administered by the new papal curia;
- In the 16th century, legislation by the Council of Trent intellectually and spiritually segregated Western candidates for ordination into monastic-like clerical seminaries, insulated from the Catholic Laos.

Clearly counter-evangelical, the Western Catholic clerical-celibate-seminary system constitutes an institutional uprooting from Jesus' egalitarian lay movement. Dismantling all three parts of the system in canon law is urgent. But it will take love, courage, prudence, and, probably, an ecumenical council.

JOE HOLLAND

Venice, Florida

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Another sad indictment of the situation that presently exists within the church that the hierarchy seem to fail to recognize and accept that we are in crisis. The fact that Fr. C. John McCloskey III tended to befriend those who were well positioned in society, embracing politically and economically well-placed people, tends to suggest he is a man of vanity and conceit and full of his own importance.

I am sure he also embraced the deference that is so often showered upon men of the cloth and even on those of the Vatican hierarchy who wear red birettas. Sadly, so many clerics from all their various stations seem to aspire to grandiose idealism and privilege.

McCloskey's statements about good Catholic men who seek wives from foreign countries because they may be more submissive, is almost demeaning of women

and sends the wrong message to good Catholic menfolk perhaps seeking a spouse.

The private settlement payment that was made for McCloskey's indiscretion only further adds to the overall debt that the church is facing and it seems to be ongoing with new revelations almost daily.

DAVID J. O'CONNOR

Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

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I can't believe it. People donated to Opus Dei for the promotion of the faith, not to use the people's money for a settlement for a sexual misconduct of one of its members.

(Friar) ED DEBONO, OFM Conv.

Kingston, Ontario, Canada

I'm an old white guy who has been an Elizabeth Warren fan ever since her winning battle to create the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, which has since been trashed by the Trump administration.

I became wild about her when I read about her lunch with Larry Summers when she was elected senator from Massachusetts. Summers told her that now that she was a U.S. senator, she was an insider and that insiders don't talk about other insiders. She almost immediately tweeted this incident and, of course, it went viral.

As Michael Sean Winters' column pointed out, Warren has a moral center. I am convinced that only such a person also has the courage and authentic eloquence to fight for the poor and the working class, to act like an outsider. As I look back on our most recent Democrat presidents, I see consummate insiders. They will no longer do. The moral strength that shines through in Warren is, so far as I can see right now, our best hope.

JOSEPH COYLE

Paris, France

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Although I admire Sen. Elizabeth Warren for her beliefs and stamina, I would like to see someone like the leader in the House of Representatives as president of the United States.

She shares our beliefs and demonstrates this as she leads our country in the terrible time.

JOAN M. GRIESER

Federal Way, Washington

The article "Vatican opens medical clinic for the homeless" should be an embarrassment. It is open three days a week, has three examining rooms, an office, and a waiting room. Can ya spare it?

I live in a town of about 70,000. We have three such free clinics, each of which are open more hours with more exam room than this Vatican enterprise. The wealth of the Vatican is impossible to calculate. That tiny clinic is the best the Vatican can do? Pit the treasures the Vatican has laid up against what Jesus said in Matthew 6:19 (counsel about not laying up treasures here on earth), and you have a recipe for spiritual disaster.

The church needs to rethink its hoarding of treasures (among other practices and laws) if it is to ever become credible again.

(Rev.) J.O. "PETE" WRIGHT

Redlands, California

Thank you for your article on EWTN. I watched EWTN and used their online materials for several years; I appreciated the access to religious programming.

However, after reading Raymond Arroyo's biography of Mother Angelica, I began to believe he was making something of a false idol of this very human woman. When I later watched Arroyo's decidedly unprofessional newscasts, complete with sneering remarks about Pope Francis, I felt that my suspicions regarding Arroyo's poor

judgment were confirmed. I abandoned EWTN altogether.

If I want ugly partisanship, there are 100 other media outlets at my disposal, but I cannot tolerate a supposedly Catholic television station promoting hatred, fear and disrespect of the Holy Father.

DIANA WEBER

Anchorage, Alaska

Advertisement

I read with interest your article about the New Pro-Life Movement. The old pro-life movement did not consider that any issue was as important as stopping abortion, so its adherents elected a despot. And look what happened and it's not even surprising. A thinking person doesn't just vote on one issue. And the pro-lifers have become so militant that it is scary.

And what else is scary and disgusting? The Republican Party has the Catholic bishops in their hip pocket. That, more than anything else has driven me away from the church.

I am a cradle Catholic and like the much-maligned Nancy Pelosi, I am the mother of many children. I chose to give birth to a child 54 years ago after I caught the mumps from one of my children. There were birth defects which my husband and I were able to handle. It wasn't easy but my son, who struggled mightily, turned out to be a wonderful human being. However, we were equipped to sustain our family with help and supportive grandchildren. Not every woman has the physical or financial strength and ability to do that. The pro-lifers talk about the babies who "die," most of whom are safely aborted very early in the pregnancy. What about the mothers who will die from botched up illegal abortions if *Roe* vs. *Wade* is repealed? Why are they never mentioned in your pro-life articles?

Lastly, I shake my head at the male leaders of the church who blindly continue to oppose artificial contraception. Such an archaic rule which the majority of Catholics now ignore. And the church will not acknowledge that where contraceptive is offered to women at a low or no cost price, abortions decline dramatically.

I can no longer believe in such a hypocritical church. I do, however, believe in Jesus' teachings and will continue to incorporate them in every part of my life.

LYDIA LOMBARDO

Tampa, Florida

I wish to make a salient point that Congresswoman Jeanette Rankin was a Republican, as were so many other famous women involved with women's rights issues back then.

I feel this is important to know because, today, the "Party of Lincoln" has changed radically — a sad fact.

ROSS HOFFMAN

Grand Rapids, Michigan

I am a lifelong practicing Catholic. At age 75, I've seen a lot and done a lot. I care deeply about what's happening in our nation and the world.

A friend from church passed on to me a copy of Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister's column "Trump destabilizes the nation's soul." Reading that information-free screed led me to your website and pieces from Michael Sean Winters, Jack Jenkins and Alex Mikulich.

From that sampling, National Catholic Reporter strikes me as frightfully one-sided.

Your Catholic readership deserves balance. Surely you understand that every one of today's controversial issues has two sides — that's why they're controversial. Surely you recognize that by reflexively favoring Democratic politics and political candidates, you are implicitly endorsing some positions that are anathema to all Catholics.

Tops on the list of course is abortion, enthusiastically supported by every Democrat seeking national elective office. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo (supposedly a

Catholic), signed legislation — to a cheering assembly — that legalizes abortion until the moment of live birth. We've watched Democratic senators challenge the "dangerous" views of Catholic judicial nominees, and one because of his membership in that extreme-right wing cult, the Knights of Columbus. And the list goes on.

Voting Catholics need to make reasoned judgments; they need objective information and perspective, not political talking points.

JACK DeVINE

Aiken, South Carolina

Massimo Faggioli is correct in pointing out that the Catholic Church faces her greatest crisis since the Reformation.

I believe the root of the word "crisis" comes from the Greek, "to grapple with."

The issue of sexual abuse has stirred the contemporary pot as a catalyst for issues that have been brewing for a long time — papal and clerical authority, role of the laity especially women, collegiality, sexual morality, etc.

While all these issues and more are weighty, they offer the Catholic Church a great opportunity to "grapple: in the sense of clarifying and reaching out to our contemporary world with possible pastoral solutions.

Yes, a great challenge as well as an opportunity presents itself. It will take insightful leadership from the papacy, episcopacy, laity and all members of the body of Christ to dialogue in solidarity and maybe synodality to discover the spirit's will in moving the Catholic Church forward into this 21st century.

(Fr.) PASCAL IPOLITO

West Seneca, New York

In the column "To work toward a just society we need a Green New Deal," the writer calls for a "radically practical and visionary plan that people of faith and justice ought to be advancing over the next two years," a position which is neither practical

nor visionary.

Instead, rather than advancing radical policies in a take-it-or-leave-it manner, people of faith should spend the next two years endeavoring to ensure that the next president and Congress will be compelled by the moral concerns of their constituents into acting on climate change. Those who, to date, have obstructed or failed to prioritize action must be brought to the realization that action is imperative. That too much time was spent on the spurious claims that climate change is not occurring is unfortunate but not to be dwelled on at this time.

A weighing of climate change with other considerations, seems to be pervasive in those of faith who nonetheless support the administration. That a man who claimed global warming was a Chinese plot was elected largely with the support of people of faith reflects a failure of our religious leaders and their flocks. People of faith need to spend these next two years confronting others of similar faith with their moral responsibility. They should be advancing initiatives that will bring others to a reckoning with the moral component of the climate crisis. Advancing radical and visionary plans before that reckoning are, I fear, counterproductive.

BRIAN HANNAN

Montclair, New Jersey

Adding to the review of "Roma" and visual motifs, I want to point out the image of water as it relates to Christian symbolism. The movie opens with water that is cleaning the entry of the home. It is a recurring image — washing dishes, washing clothes on the roof of the home, and especially, the scene at the beach where Cleo rescues the children as the waves are dashing, perilously engulfing them — and they are saved. There are more scenes of water being used to clean and to cleanse.

The motif appears throughout the film, which concludes with Cleo's ascending the stairs to do another wash. Surely, this is a dominant image in "Roma" that suggests new life, salvation and resurrection. Cleo's water has broken, but her spirits are not broken. The waves threaten to take the lives of the children, but they escape alive. The quotidian of daily washing down the entry suggests that water revivifies the spirit through rituals that are ordinary but have extraordinary outcomes.

LENORE NAVARRO DOWLING

Los Angeles, California

This letter was wonderful to read. I am grateful for the Bishop John Stowe's clarity of thought, insight and his compassionate and inclusive understanding of the right to life, to human dignity and to the seamless approach the church needs to take in facing issues in our contemporary society.

(Sr.) ESTHER KENNEDY, OP

Adrian, Michigan

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