Opinion



by NCR Staff

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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. You can read part one of the responses here.

I'm a cradle Roman Catholic who remains faithful to the Roman church even though I no longer associate with a Roman parish.

In 2002, at the age of 59, I began to identify as an independent Roman Catholic and joined the independent Catholic movement. This was the option I settled on rather than going to the Episcopal church or another mainline Christian community or drop out of the church completely. I am Roman Catholic and I expect to die as one.



Disaffected Romans should check out this movement before trying any of the other options. You can be a part of the church that you want the church to be!

JERRY BROHL

Wyandotte, Michigan

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Melinda Henneberger's feelings and experiences are certainly much like mine and likely those of thousands of other Catholics. I recently spent almost two hours discussing the abuse scandal along with other topics including the role of women in the church, gays in the priesthood, right down to the nitty gritty of church finance.

I have long had one foot out the door and the only thing keeping my other foot in is my wonderful parish and its Spiritan pastors both present and past of Our Lady

Queen of Peace. What do finances have to do with the sex abuse scandal? The collection basket is the only vote I get in an otherwise totally undemocratic church. A quote shared with me by my pastor from a former assistant pastor struck me, "Like politics all religion is local." It's what your parish is doing that really counts and while I am deeply upset and concerned about what's happening in the hierarchy and will do all I can about that, I will keep my faith here at my parish.

So how am I using my vote? I have long given specific designations to my contributions so that they can't be "taxed" by the bishop. I went home, increased my donations to support our good works and I am at peace knowing that my religion, my faith, and my vote is here at Our Lady Queen of Peace. Voting might just be what we all need to do to get the hierarchy's attention.

SHANNON DOYLE

Alexandria, Virginia

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Melinda Henneberger's article seems to have touched not only the pulse of current Catholic confusion but also deeper, to a time long ago when Jesus stood up to the religious hierarchy of his day and the consequences he faced.

Henneberger is a brave example of being an upstander for reform in church hierarchy. God bless those who responded to her with nonjudgmental kindness and God bless the hell out of those who judge her act of conscience!

JEAN SULLIVAN

Cleveland, Ohio

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What a refreshing and moving item by Melinda Henneberger about leaving the church of her birth. As an Anglican I smiled at the comment about joining the Episcopalians being like falling from a first-floor window!

As an Anglican priest in England, leaning out without having yet fallen, I fear many churches, not just the Roman Catholic Church, face similar issues. I retired as rector of two country parishes in September 2018 and took up editorship of the Progressive

Christianity Network Britain website. In that role I encounter many people across all faith communities struggling with membership of institutional Christianity. NCR is a source of hope as it enables us to see the pressures for renewal that blossom in otherwise unpromising environments.

I first came across NCR when staying with Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister's community in Erie, Pennsylvania, while on sabbatical 12 years ago. The sisters pushed a copy of NCR under my door the evening before I prepared to fly home from a snowbound Erie airport.

Keep up the good work — your transatlantic friends need you!

(The Rev.) PETER C. BELLENES

Cornwall, United Kingdom

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I, too, have stopped supporting the Roman Catholic Church by no longer attending regular Masses and I stopped financial support many years ago with a letter to the priest and parish council that outlined the reasons, including the patriarchal structure that choked out any meaningful growth as it excluded the worth of anyone other than men, and the sexual abuse of vulnerable by priests and religious. I did not get a response.

I consider myself a Catholic in exile. I have been blessed to have many friends who also shared my experience and we have supported each other on our journey of faith. I have found small faith communities which are welcoming and with whom I am able to worship and celebrate. Many of us are Catholic. One of these communities is led by a Roman Catholic Woman Priest and meets at least once a month and at Christmas and Easter.

Another community grew out of a bible study group that started meeting 31 years ago. Another group started out as a group of women who wanted to experience women-inspired and women-led liturgies.

And I attend a monthly Lutheran liturgy called "Mysterium," a contemplative, meditative alternative service which includes Eucharist and welcomes everyone. I cried the first time I attended and the Lutheran pastor invited us to the Eucharist

with the words "All are welcome for it is Christ who invites you to the table and not me." I thought, this is how it is supposed to be!

Through these small groups, I have found hope and a place to be community in faith and I am sure that these communities exist where you are.

KATHY CAMERON

Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada

***

Many have walked the painful, conflicted path that Melinda Henneberger describes, but instead of looking for a different spiritual home, some have created our own Second Vatican Council-based churches after we became ordained as Roman Catholic Womenpriests.

I and a married priest, Jim Ryan, founded a community in Milwaukee, which celebrated its eighth anniversary recently. We have about 75 members. New people attend regularly. We celebrate Eucharist using the rubric of the Roman Missal but the language and theology are inclusive and rooted in Vatican II documents and reforms.

Those who had straddle the gap between their old model of church and our new model of church come to feel that they are spiritually "home." What had kept them tied to their old parishes was their relationships in the community and their commitments to various ministries, which they didn't want to lose. Their feelings of being lost and angry Catholics, of being Catholic but no longer supporting the institutional church, as the continuing revelations of abuse and cover-ups piled up, turned to a sense of futility and dissonance.

What I offer all Catholics who want to live their Catholic faith but can't in good conscience continue attending and supporting a hierarchical church that has sinned and continues to sin so grievously, is the hope and the reality that the new Catholic church is here to stay, that there are Roman Catholic Womenpriests churches all over the United States, as well as in Canada, Europe and South America.

Melinda and others don't need to leave the church; they need to embrace that they are church. Where they gather, two or three, there Jesus is. That church is rooted

and growing vibrantly. All are welcome to become part of it and to have a home that is truly Catholic.

(The Rev.) ALICE IAQUINTA

Wauwatosa, Wisconsin

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I am still one of those of the mind to stay to help my church survive and grow. I do the best I can within my parish community to carry on.

But when organizations experience widespread, systemic problems, structural changes are necessary. Meaningful changes can only made by a community of stakeholders which includes those being served. In terms of the church, I believe that significant structural changes must be led by equal parts laity and clerics.

To date, there are no such ministries showing up in my parish bulletin.

The church is not designed to be driven by popular opinion, nor should it be. But experience shows us that the existing hierarchy not only failed to constructively react to known crimes, it also continues to struggle with teachings that are perceived as directives from celibate men who are out of touch with too many of the faithful.

For many like Melinda Henneberger, sitting, praying, and waiting is no longer good enough. Yet nothing is in place that allows non-clerics to meaningfully re-build our church.

Should nothing of substance change, the church's flock will find itself grazing on increasingly thin grasses; many of us sheep will hear the shepherd's voice in a different pasture, and those remaining will need to determine if they were truly wise, or deaf.

KEN FELDT

Mechanicsville, Virginia

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Melinda Henneberger's opening sentence identifies the church with the institution. I find this disappointing. There are many thousands of us who have serious tension with the institution and have formed intentional communities.

I am a member of one, and our vision is based on the Second Vatican Council and its documents. We have not separated from this ecclesial, sacramental body. I am confident that such a community exists in Kansas City.

DONALD CONROY

Minneapolis, Minnesota

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I've been in the pew nearly all my life listening to the Gospel preached and taught. I've studied as an adult and been through lay ministry formation through the Toolen Institute for Parish Service in Mobile, Alabama.

I raised my children in the church while having to explain to them my mental reservations, as they grew up and graduated colleges and universities and left their religious practice behind. I have never blamed them.

Authentic Christianity is difficult to find within Roman Catholicism, much less anywhere on earth. Do we know for sure what the authentic message of Jesus is?

Fallen away? No. Recovering? No. Escaped? Yes. I am an escaped Catholic.

LETITIA BERTKA DIGMON

Atmore, Alabama

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My husband and I are now well into our 80s and thoroughly understand Melinda Henneberger's situation. You may have left your church but you have not left the church proper as you are the church!

However, we do understand your desire for community. We have been Benedictine Oblates for years now and find there the community, spirituality, love and

commitment that for us is missing in the institutional church.

MURIEL HANMAN

Comox, British Columbia, Canada

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Dear Melinda Henneberger,

I want to thank you for your courage and integrity in sharing your painful decision to leave the Roman Catholic Church. You have my deepest respect and admiration.

I am sorry you have been the recipient of so much vitriol from those who claim to be true believers. Such responses only confirm how separated the church has become from an understanding of God's inclusive love — modeled to us through our beloved savior. Michael Sean Winters' remark that "you will not want to settle for a cracker and grape juice" is indicative of this kind of narrow Catholic perspective regarding Christ's universal love and presence — a reality which for too long has been obscured by antiquated, self-serving clerical dogma.

Keep your heart open to the spirit's guidance. I trust that in time you will be joyfully led to a loving, sacramental and welcoming faith community.

CLARE JULIAN CARBONE

Salt Lake City, Utah

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I, too, realized I had to leave the institutional Roman Catholic Church. After a young priest I graduated with from the diocesan seminary stood before those gathered for Sunday liturgy, proclaiming that women attempting ordination in the church committed as grave a sin as those ordained men who sexually abused children, I stood up and walked out, never to return.

Since then, I stand in prophetic witness as a Roman Catholic Woman Priest, now serving as bishop to ordain those women and men who believe they, too, are called to step away from the man-made canon law that forbids such an action. I am blessed that the spirit has guided me on this journey of reformation in the church for

future generations. An unlikely prophet to be sure, but there has been no other kind in the history of our faith.

No church lasts if it loses its integrity and forgets its mission of inclusivity and love. Women are realizing their call to raise their voices and offer their lives in truth and holiness through ordained ministry in the Roman Catholic tradition.

My prayer is that the institutional church rediscovers its purpose and mission of living and proclaiming that all are equal and one in Christ Jesus, left on the roadside so long ago as it embraced a caste system in its governance and subjugation of women. Now is the time to reclaim that purpose for which Jesus laid down his own life and asked us to do the same. Women's voices will not be silenced!

MARY EILEEN COLLINGWOOD

Brecksville, Ohio

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We live today in an age of religious pluralism. Those of us who as Catholics have been involved in interreligious dialogue, have come to appreciate the deep faith of many non-Catholics and indeed many non-Christians.

The greatest Christian of the 20th century in the eyes of many, including myself, was Mahatma Gandhi who was deeply moved by Christ, and the Sermon on the Mount in particular, and yet was an avowed Hindu. He, like Leo Tolstoy, considered that the Christian churches had for the most part betrayed the spirit of Christ. We are long past the anxious tribalism of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. So for those like Henneberger who maintain their faith in Christ but look outside the Catholic Church for maintaining and nurturing their faith, the appropriate response, it seems to me, is "God be with you on your journey" and not necessarily "hang in there."

Second, even within the Christian communion, a lot of ink has been spilt trying to justify the unjustifiable claim that the Catholic church is the "one, true, catholic and apostolic" church. The claims of the Roman church to be that unique church based on the Petrine principle, are, as you know, disputed by other Christian churches including the Eastern Orthodox churches, who claim their own apostolic succession.

Christ himself prayed for the unity of churches and the Catholic Church has for the most part been an obstacle to that much-desired unity.

Third, spiritually mature and humble Catholics should recognize that this moment of crisis in the church is an invitation to radical reflection, reform and metanoia (in the true sense of a conversion). That invitation is not well served by instincts of tribalism and a clinging to false sense of superiority. If we hope to have anything to offer the younger generation that is for the most part quite unmoved by the church, we had better mend our ways and live as Christians who have something meaningful and spiritually vital to offer a broken world that is also in crisis.

JOSEPH PRABHU

Los Angeles, California

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Large numbers of thinking Catholics are considering boarding Melinda Henneberger's boat, or perhaps a nearby canoe.

My prescription:

- Laicize today every living abuser, and every living bishop who facilitated that abuse by shuffling abusers from parish to parish (even though the shuffling was an order — unstated or not — from Rome).
- Invite married men to the priesthood.
- Invite women too.

Only when this trinity of prescriptions is met will many of us be ready to re-board our mother ship, so clearly hijacked long ago.

PAULA BUTTURINI

Bridgeport, Connecticut

Advertisement

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I struggled with the same dilemma. A lifelong Roman Catholic, I started feeling awful about my church, and then felt awful that I had such feelings. I finally felt that I was being called to leave this church of my youth and seek spiritual growth elsewhere. It was a very difficult decision because I left my husband behind which he did not understand. But, for my own spirituality, I had to do this.

I have found a wonderful home, a caring community, a pastor who helps all who come, and my spirit has blossomed.

Don't listen to those people who yell at you, or laugh at your "naivete," do your own growing and ignore them.

JANE BORDZOL

Wilmington, Delaware

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To stay or not to stay? I've debated this for decades, and Melinda Henneberger's "Why I left the Church" renews the internal debate. My reason for leaving differs from hers.

Every Sunday I endure Mass language that forces worship of mythical images, father and son, as if they were facts, as if they were guys we'll meet when we die. I refuse to pray to lords or recite a creed professing belief in them. What keeps me in the church so far are my cultural ties and Benedictines who understand my objections to and frustration with the patriarchal language.

Sexist God-talk maintains patriarchal control and perpetuates ignorance of the transcendent source called "God." How long can I endure what I see harming the human psyche? Catholics and all Christians need to take responsibility for justifying exclusive top-down power with male-dominant gods. These offensive God-images justify not only gender abuse, but all abusive social structures.

JEANETTE BLONIGEN CLANCY

Avon, Minnesota

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Melinda Henneberger's decision to "leave" the Catholic Church makes sense. It truly does have dithering

and doddering men in leadership.

But I wish to add: Why do Catholics continue to equate "church" with members of the hierarchy

and clerical class? Indeed, if you take Gary Wills in *Why Priests: A Failed Tradition* seriously, clergy have little or no justification for their positions at all!

The church is a human institution. It has a past and present which include both saints and sinners. It's dogmas and doctrines are attempts to take the mystical out of Jesus and fossilize it into concrete terms. And, of course, the process must have "rules" attached. Dogma must remain forever pure and unsullied.

But Christ is bigger than church.

We need room for mysticism, less dogma, more different forms of worship, and more emphasis on

meditation and orthopraxis. If clergy and hierarchy continue to behave like immature boys, why continue to fund them? Their leadership positions are human creations that are made up, after all.

JAMES J. WILLIAMS

Lompoc, California

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I fully understand Melinda Henneberger's sadness and loss.

I left the Roman Catholic Church for another reason. During the 40-plus years time that I have read in NCR the shameful tales of abuse and cover-up by the clergy I always said the actions of the bishops would not drive me from my church.

My pain has been the loss of spiritual sustenance. In my 73 years, I have heard four priests and bishops who could preach wonderful sermons, maybe a dozen who could preach adequate sermons and the rest would put me to sleep. In my career I have traveled and attended the Eucharist in at least 100 parishes. The only parish I ever felt welcome was St. Joseph's in Petersburg, Virginia. Everywhere else I felt alone and ignored.

The final cause that triggered my departure was the liturgy. In my last parish, where I was a member over 20 years, and many other parishes, the liturgy had become dead. The prayers were often rote; under some pastors there was little if any singing. When we did have music, it was two or maybe three verses with almost no congregational participation. With great sadness, I moved three years ago to the Episcopal Catholic Church.

DAN BLOODWORTH, JR.

Columbus, Georgia

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After reading the article by Melinda Henneberger, I asked myself why I stay. I stay because this is my vocation — to be a gay Catholic man in relationship with my husband and my God within the institutional church. Here I am called to holiness.

If I leave, I cannot be a witness to the hierarchy and others of the goodness of God in my life. I believe that there is something prophetic in living this life. Whether the Catholic Church approves of it or not, it is still a vocation that is living in the church, because I am living in the church and my relationship is living in the church.

JOSEPH GENTILINI

Hilliard, Ohio

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I have no thought of leaving the church. But then again, I don't consider the hierarchy to be the church. When Jesus said "upon this rock I build my church," the word he used for church was Aramaic for the body of believers, not the priesthood and the laws. The people are the church and God is calling our attention to the fact that the priesthood has become too enamored of itself.

The concept of ontological change upon ordination is being blown apart by the scandals. The idea that a bishop becomes the vicar of Christ upon ordination and thus is accountable only to Christ has been proven to be the idea of men, not of God.

Bad priests must be removed. Bad bishops must be removable and accountable. It is quite obvious that such men have not been chosen by God and he is telling us to change the system because it is broken!

DENIS NOLAN

Daly City, California

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