News
Opinion



by NCR Staff

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NCR's recent editorial "Pietà offers meaning amid the betrayal of the abuse crisis" elicited some strong reactions from our readers. The editorial goes hand-in-hand with Jason Berry's three-part commentary on look at how the sex abuse crisis has reached this point. You can read all three parts of Berry's series here. Following are some of those letters. They have been edited for length and clarity.

Thank you for the wonderful editorial "Pietà offers meaning amid the betrayal of the abuse crisis."

For me, it couldn't have been timelier, as the news of Cardinal George Pell's conviction was made public Feb. 26 here in Australia, which has sent shockwaves from here to the Vatican, leaving in its wake anger, disbelief and confusion. A number of our parishioners know Pell personally and some were at school with him.



As child safety officer for my parish, I spoke at each of the three Masses that weekend to reassure parishioners of the policies and procedures that have been set in place for the protection of our children to ensure that abuse will not happen again.

The policies also include a more pastoral approach in the ongoing support of victims and a less formal and traumatic process for claimants making a claim against the diocese.

At the conclusion of each presentation, I suggested they read the Pietà editorial online.

This parish has suffered at the hands of two infamous pedophile priests in the 1960s and 70s, but thankfully we are now served by two of the most selfless and dedicated priests I have known.

The Pietà resonated with me because we have a beautiful replica of this statue in a prominent place in our church and the opening paragraph brings the pathos of the image to life.

We need new prayers and liturgies to help us with our grieving, for it is now more than ever, that we need to cling to our sorely tested faith.

CHRISTINE SLATTERY

Mildura, Australia

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After reading the editorial, I spent some time meditating on the picture of my favorite expression of "Mother and Child." I identify with the grief mothers feel over the slow death of the church that I have been a part of for 75 years.

Having devoted 45 years of my life to educating young children in Catholic schools, I am deeply disturbed by the seeming unwillingness or confusion of many hierarchy and their fear of losing power over the people of God. Justice must be demanded.

When preparing second grade children many years ago for Eucharist, I first had to prepare them for penance. I was very new to teaching so I naively used the words in my manual, which said the children were to begin with "bless me father for I have sinned." One of my students asked in disbelief, "Will father bless me for doing something wrong? When I do something wrong at home I get punished!" When will our guilty hierarchy and clergy say, "forgive me children I/we have sinned against you."

Jesus' love lasts forever. What about the love of those who claim to be his representatives on earth? How long until they stop thinking that they have the authority to set the laws but are above and over those laws?

Until the hierarchy and clergy teach by living the example of Jesus and welcome all to God's table, the moral authority they think they alone have will continue to die due to disbelief. Perhaps that is what is needed for a resurrection to take place.

GRACE A. BYERLY

Baltimore, Maryland

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Your piece is most moving. I disagree however.

It seems to me this is the time for more than prayers, as powerful as they surely are.

This is the time for us faithful, who pay the settlements, who fill the collection baskets, who suffer the humiliation, to stand up and say "No more."

No more sanctimonious words, apologies, renting of cloths, breast beating and ashes in the hair by these same bishops who negligently or intentionally covered up years of criminal, and/or immoral activities committed by other bishops, and, of all people, those once so revered and respected cardinals, princes of the church.

In the business world, these perpetrators would be thrown out on their ears immediately. In the church they have some prayers of forgiveness?

Are the U.S. bishops actually listening? I do not think so.

Enough.

FRANCIS J. TEPEDINO

San Diego, California

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I have read so much of the angst of sexual abuse within the clergy, so many *mea culpas*. I am impressed with what I read and angry at the same time. The editorial about finding solace with the message and image of the Pietà really made me angry.

Why? Because throughout all of this, the suggestions and views of women have not been addressed. Even the most liberal church voices — all male of course — see this problem only through the eyes of themselves and now run to seek the answer through Mary.

Do you know how insulting this is to women? Wanting her help and at the same time denigrating us to second class status in the church? Being the first disciple but not worthy of ordination? Presenting Mary as the sorrowful, all accepting, meek, who is the repository of the present situation the church finds itself? She will save the malodorous males from themselves.

Any man who wishes to become a priest during these times must also do so alongside any woman who has the same calling.

TONDALAYA GILLESPIE

Kailua-Kona, Hawaii

I am a regular reader of NCR and appreciate your great reporting. I am also a fan of Jason Berry and have read almost all of his writings and deeply appreciate his courage and thoroughness.

But in the series of three articles in the recent NCR, he made a comment about the religious orders and their superiors that was seriously mistaken. He said that the religious orders are not covered under the charter of the U.S. bishops. Many newspapers around the country have also made this comment even saying that the religious congregations are a "black hole" in the abuse crisis with no one looking at them.

The priests in the clerical orders of the U.S. are indeed specifically covered under the charter and norms of the U.S. bishops because no priest in this country, religious or diocesan, can exercise his priestly ministry except with the permission or faculties of a bishop in a diocese thus placing him clearly under the charter and norms. Their provincial superiors are covered as well because they must follow the norms and charter in their assignments of their priests. The rest of the men's major superiors (provincials) at the 2002 assembly of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men agreed to hold themselves under the statement of that assembly which covered congregations that are not clerical.

Based on the agreements made at the assembly, the men's religious orders have also placed themselves under the highest standards applicable to childcare agencies in the U.S. through praesidium by a process of accreditation that assures that no men who have abused are in ministry in any diocese in this country. This accreditation process is the work of this resourcing and accrediting company. They are experts in the field of lowering the risk of child abuse in childcare agencies around the country. For the first time, the religious congregations in 2004 placed themselves for accountability to an outside accrediting agency and also outside of the church itself to verify and demonstrate their compliance with the highest national U.S. standards for dealing with children and minors.

One of the standards under which they are accredited directly covers this area of prohibiting men religious who have abused from any ministry in the United States. They are accredited (or not) in their internal operations as religious congregations (admission of candidates; formation for celibacy; continuing education of membership on the latest insights on dealing safely with minors; adequate policies for avoiding and preventing abuse of minors in their ministries similar to child care agencies; supervision of those policies; compliance with civil law on reporting cases; assessing the credibility of allegations; supervision of religious who have abused and continue to live under strict procedures with designated monitors/supervisors in community including regular checks of communities with high risk members under supervision; pastoral care with persons coming forward with allegations, etc.). These standards are all subject to intensive, evidence-based accreditation. These areas are also under the watchful eye of individual review boards for each congregation.

The accreditations process includes consultation with the review boards; evaluating actual files to assess objective compliance with the above areas; interviews with members of the congregation inquiring about their knowledge of compliance; letters to the bishops involved informing them of the congregations being accredited for any problems they have seen. Finally, they require this evidence of compliance with documented files presenting to them for evaluation.

So, in summary, the men's religious orders are being held accountable for their dealing with minors in the same way as child care agencies in this country. This accountability includes a standard for assuring that none of them are in priestly ministry in the United States and even overseas for their men under the jurisdiction of a U.S. major superior states.

No "black hole," no operating beyond accountability, clearly under the charter and norms for their priest members and their congregations, and clearly being monitored like any childcare agency in the country.

(Fr.) Ted Keating, SM

Washington, D.C.

[Fr. Ted Keating was executive director of the Conference of Major Superiors of Men's Institutes from 2002-2005.]

Advertisement

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For me the key words of the third part of Jason Berry's excellent account of the crisis facing the Catholic Church come right at the end when he urges Pope Francis to introduce one specific reform.

''What is so desperately missing from this bizarre species of political silence is maternal grace — the wisdom of mothers who have borne and raised children — and the feminine grace of sisters and daughters, excluded by fact of gender from their rightful roles in rebuilding institutional honesty and integrity.

The pope has the power to elevate women as cardinals if he so chooses; John Paul offered a seat to Mother Teresa, who declined. That is a power Pope Francis should forcefully use.''

I have long believed that we will know that we have a pope who is serious about reforming the structures of the church when we have female cardinals in the Vatican.

(Fr.) BRIAN PASSMAN

London, England

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