News
Opinion



by NCR Staff

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NCR readers had a myriad of reactions to the Feb. 21-24 summit of bishops at the Vatican to discuss the clerical sex abuse crisis. You can find all of NCR's coverage here. A sampling of letters from NCR readers reacting to the summit are below. They have been edited for length and clarity.

Pope Francis and church leaders emphasized the need to deflate expectations regarding the meeting at the Vatican Feb. 21-24. It is a given that the hierarchy must root out the global sexual abuse problem and its causes.

What is being done to ensure a viable priesthood for all who have been baptized? It is long overdue that the vocation crisis in first world countries be addressed. A vast majority of dioceses in the U.S. are now staffed by priests who are from third-world countries. At 82, I am one of the 32,000 priests in our country who resigned from the canonical priesthood in the last 60 years to marry.

I loved being a priest and all it entailed — preaching, teaching and coaching high school students, giving retreats, working Cursillos and pastorally reaching out to parishioners in need.



Then one day the light went on. I did not believe that God willed for me a lonely celibate life. I had to deal with what happens emotionally and psychologically when you that you are enslaved to a way of life you can no longer accept.

It is only through prayer, discernment and, in my opinion, a deep spiritual life that one is able to transcend the circumstances. The Vatican is opposed to the ordination of married men and women. Marriage is not a panacea for the problems in the priesthood.

The question remains. What does Pope Francis plan to do to address an inclusive and adequate priesthood for all God's people?

LEE KASPARI

Ellensburg, Washington

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When will we begin to address this issue in the manner it should have been handled?

These are crimes. We continue to refer to sins. God is the arbiter of sin. The laity is the arbiter of crime. If this happened in a secular institution, its leadership would be fired and prosecutors brought in. A new governing body would emerge.

This cannot continue with perpetrators judging the guilty. We need to get out of the way of the Holy Spirit who is leading us in a different direction. The structure needs to be modified. Church members need to open their mouths and step up. God will do the rest.

JANE FRANCISCO

Charlotte, North Carolina

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It's shocking to read about the extent of clerical abuse; as an aged (88) Roman Catholic, I wonder where the hell the church is headed. I suggest the following solution: married priests of both sexes, as quickly as possible. This would probably take care of the shortage of priests that has been ongoing for some time.

And I'd go a step further: To be a bishop, cardinal, or — yes — pope, the candidates should be married. We've gone for centuries with unmarried priests, let's try something that makes more sense. It may seem that we're penalizing unmarried priests, but I suspect they'd take it as a reasonable change.

THOMAS F. MADER

Walnut Creek, California

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It is important that we try to understand the pain and points of view of the victims, the laity, those who have left the church, theologians and the clergy, and of course, Christ's views as expressed in the Gospel.

I'd add to this list the point of view and pain of Catholics like myself, who want to remain Catholic and who struggle to stay despite their disgust, embarrassment and worry that they are enabling hierarchical abuse and cover-ups by their continued presence and financial support.

I only hear the cardinals talking about "new" structures to police themselves. They don't seem to understand that it's too late for that. Millions like myself no longer trust their ability to conduct investigations and punish criminals, thereby protecting children, within the church. Criminals should not and cannot be priests, although like everyone else who sins, they can be forgiven. Protecting current and potential victims must take priority over everything else, and it hasn't, for decades.

The church needs to instruct all its parishes to immediately refer credible accusations of both sexual abuse and the cover-up of such abuse to civil authorities, and to voluntarily turn over any relevant evidence without a statute of limitations.

If abuse is suspected and notified clergy do not take this action, laity should be encouraged to report suspicions to civil authorities themselves.

The church must address the root causes that explain why this abusive culture has flourished within the church for so long.

HEIDI FIELDING

Alexandria, Virginia

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I am an 86 year old woman with several children and grandchildren. I have followed the many bishops' meetings and now the latest Vatican meeting with lifelong interest as an ex-Catholic.

For many years I couldn't understand why no changes were made in the church's structures or laws despite many promises and hand wringing. I finally realized that they don't want change. With this realization it all made ghastly sense. The public relations rhetoric, the obstinacy, the intense debate over trivialities, the lassitude.

With this lens my views are finally clarified — the church is a pedophilia ring and will remain as such always because the church leadership wants it that way.

SHIRLEY FREDRICKS

Los Angeles, California

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The special summit on child abuse in the church has now ended. Leading up to the meeting, some were rehashing so-called "fundamental truths" while calling to submit peacefully to the clerical hierarchy that looked the other way for so long.

In Rome, many polite words were preached, but little of substance was promised.

We are told Pope Francis will soon issue concrete steps to be taken. But whatever he says will mean nothing when it is to be enacted by bishops who have lost the trust of the faithful.

To have change demands sweeping out the old. All the U.S. bishops should offer their resignation to the pope. He should consult with the laity before making any decision (reviving an old fashion practice), including reappointing those he may wish.

Only a dramatic action will give the church-at-large a reason to believe in the leadership of the Catholic Church.

E. BRUCE PITMAN

Amherst, New York

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I desperately want to believe that the church will be transparent in approaching abuse in the future. I have no confidence in that, since a significant number of bishops, archbishops and cardinals still serving were involved in the cover-ups. I find the cover-ups more appalling than the actual abusers. Those who covered the abuse up to protect the church from "scandal" facilitated repeated abuse by those engaged in it.

The only thing that would convince me that the church is serious about dealing with abuse would be if every member of the hierarchy who protected or hid abusers, who destroyed or suppressed records, was removed from ministry and engaged in prayer and penance. It wouldn't be necessary to laicize them, just make impossible to exert any power or control in the church.

RONALD ZARAZA

Portland, Oregon

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If talking was progress, the abuse mess would be behind us. Sadly, the mess is still at the entry to the church. While the Dallas Charter was some progress, there are still dioceses that are going their own way and the absence of any personal accountability for ordinaries has again been revealed.

The talk now is about process, with little honest conversation about cause. The root cause is the failed theology that ordination bestows upon the ordained a divine power that changes them. They have a power no one has, which we have seen betrayed and manipulated almost since the beginning of the organized church.

Priests are pastors, no more of an extension of God than the faithful. They have not undergone an ontological change. They have been called to serve the church, just I have been called to have and raise a family. The bread and wine becomes the body and blood because "when two or more are gathered in my name, I am with you."

If we strip away this abused teaching, the priest lose leverage. As long as they can say I am a direct agent of God and only through me can you can revive the body and blood of Jesus, the abuse will continue.

PAUL D. MCLAUGHLIN

Seabrook Island, South Carolina

Tom Roberts' article, "A long, difficult grind toward reform" attempts to show that there was "significant merit" at Pope Francis' meeting with the world's bishops in Rome. Roberts goes on to accuse the left and the right of trying to discredit Francis' approach to confronting the sexual abuse of minors by our clergy.

This is another distraction and evidence that my church still doesn't get it!

Rather than hold the left and the right accountable for criticisms of the pope's approach, Roberts would be more credible holding bishops and popes accountable for 34 years of impotent responses to the rapes of innocent and trusting minors under the care of clergy.

I do agree with Roberts on his points recognizing the culpability of the laity. For the full 34 years, many if not most laity have in fact "cordoned off the ugliest realities" of the rape of the innocents. But, a "tipping point"? Again, I would argue that there had been numerous tipping pointes over the decades. The laity might be as complicit in avoidance, minimization, denials and cover-ups as our bishops. We, after all, are the church.

Roberts' pondering that, "maybe there's only so much we can take in at one time" falls hollow and short. We all have had decades to prayerfully and painstakingly process through the realities of the sexual abuse of these holy innocents.

The survivors of clergy sexual abuse deserved and continue to deserve better and more significant action responses from the bishops and us, the laity.

JOHN M. SEYAK

Reynoldsburg, Ohio

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Tom Roberts touched on probably the most difficult issue facing Catholic laity who want the reform but do not want to submit themselves to the unreformed and unrepentant male hierarchy responsible for the devastating child sex abuse scandal

threatening the church throughout the world.

I grew up in Kansas City and have lived in Australia for the past 45 years. The involvement of the Catholic Church in Australia in the child sex abuse scandal was thoroughly investigated by our Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sex Abuse and publicly reported in 2017. Although there were other institutional players, the dominant involvement was by the Catholic Church's supposedly celibate priests, brothers and now, one archbishop.

So far, no priest involved has been defrocked. Nor have any of the bishops complicit in the abuse who protected the church and did not protect our children stood down or apologized or showed any sign of repentance. Meanwhile this same all-male unreformed hierarchy seeks the involvement of the laity in Australia's planned 2020 Plenary Council. Why would we be involved while this hierarchy that caused the problem remains in charge?

I am a lifelong practicing Catholic. After much prayer and thought, I have come to believe this Plenary Council must be postponed until our hierarchy humbly and publicly acknowledges its failures and responds appropriately to their wrongdoing. They must reform themselves before they can expect the laity to join with them in a Plenary Council where they remain in power.

MARY ANN YEATS

Perth, Western Australia

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As Tom Roberts stated, the need for church reform is broader than evinced by comments from both conservative and liberal edges of our community.

I am moved by the Ash Wednesday reading from Joel to proclaim that I have sinned. I have not stood up with my sisters and brothers and cried aloud for a policy of Zero Tolerance of abuse.

I trust that God will forgive me for this sin and inspire more people — both clergy and lay — to demand immediate reform, not in a slow grind, but in a torrent. An outpouring of the love of God's church has been withheld from these, God's precious children, for far too long. Further delays, of even one small step towards justice, cannot be countenanced or supported.

This torrent I plead for cannot be achieved by building a consensus. It cannot wait for policies, procedures, definitions, or commission reports. When Jesus was approached by people seeking healing, He did not study the problem. He acted with torrential grace. So must we.

The church can find God's grace to act more quickly on this matter. I am reminded of the hope that while "for man it is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

The Lenten call to metanoia is one we all need to respond to with generosity and immediacy.

RICHARD KIRK

Spencer, Massachusetts

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Delegates at the recently concluded Vatican abuse summit in Rome, hopefully took cognizance, as I did of the suggestion by Australia Archbishop Mark Coleridge about the possible establishment of a new Vatican high level office to tackle abuse and clerical culture. The archbishop spoke plainly and clearly about how this office could operate and investigate reported abuse claims.

The current situation with senior clerics has had no real guidelines to follow, except to hide the true facts. The archbishop mentioned the possibility of the pope having a direct interest in this office and there may be Catholic lay person groups who would like to be part of this initiative too but of course this would not necessarily be

acceptable by a clerical office. The archbishop's suggestion was a sound, practical concept coming from the leader of the Australian bishops' conference who is obviously well informed due to the scandal that has permeated the Australian church.

At the pope's Mass that concluded the summit, Coleridge was invited to deliver the final homily. He spoke and acknowledged, "the misused power" and "that the church showed too little mercy by the bishops' actions." He concluded by stating, "we will not go unpunished." He admitted that the whole scandal had become a culture within the church.

These were frank and honest words from a courageous and highly respected archbishop.

DAVID J. O'CONNOR

Brisbane, Australia

Jamie Manson's article, "Why the sex abuse summit accomplished nothing," had exactly the opposite effect on this reader from what Manson undoubtedly hoped. Her commentary left me unexpectedly sympathetic to what Francis is trying to do. For it betrayed a certain smug incomprehension of the church in the global south that underscored the challenge the Vatican has in moving a vast multicultural church together as one body.

I have no doubt that many bishops from around the world are in denial about sexualized abuse in their countries and cultures — falsely blaming "homosexuality" and writing it off in distressing ways as merely a Western problem. But when the author simply waves away the questions of "bishops from Africa and Asia [who] were confused about why they were called to Rome," because in their context "child soldiers and child enslavement" are more obvious forms of child abuse, she is demonstrating an unwillingness to listen to Catholics across the global church.

With a similar insensitivity, the author dismisses Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi's desire to think through the definition of zero tolerance carefully, as though he thinks it is simply a "problem of semantics." But enacting policies that work across vastly different legal systems across the globe is a real conundrum. It may work in the United States or Europe or other countries with a well-developed sense of the rule of

law to insist on a blanket policy requiring bishops to immediately turn over any credible allegations of crimes to the police.

Framing the whole article is the author's disdain for Francis' language of spiritual warfare by and against the forces of Satan. The author may not share a sense of that reality with Francis, but it is the norm for Catholics, Pentecostals, and even mainline Protestants in many parts of the world. Framing the matter as a spiritual battle could well have been exactly the way to get and keep the attention of crucial church leaders in the global south.

Finding consensus across the global church always takes too long, but that does not mean there is a shortcut. After all, it is evident here that Catholics in the global north still have some listening and learning to do themselves.

GERALD W. SCHLABACH

St. Paul, Minnesota

Advertisement

Thank you for the article by St. Joseph Sr. Christine Schenk, "How long, O Lord, must we wait to reform the clerical system?" It is an understatement for me to believe that the clergy will clean house. This should have happened in the early years of this never-ending scandal.

For me the easy way to demand change is to stop giving money to the church and to make it known to the bishop and my pastor why I stopped giving money. I understand that very good work is accomplished with the money contributed by the laity. However, drastic measures must be taken and the clergy needs to experience the laity outrage in a measurable manner that will send a powerful message.

It will be generations before the clergy regain trust. Since I am 65, I may never see the day that the clergy are trusted members of the church.

MICHAEL THOMAS

Cypress, Texas

For me, that does it. I love Pope Francis and think he's our last, best hope. But his performance and the apparent outcome of this historic meeting just doesn't cut it.

As columnist Michael Sean Winters writes:

> "Have new canons been recommended so that the procedures and protocols are clearly known? Has a case been opened against, for example, Bishop Richard Malone of Buffalo, New York, about whom there have been credible allegations of negligence? If not, why not? What role do nuncios play in this process? This will be the first test of this meeting's success going forward: Will the curial congregations publish their policies or protocols and disclose the cases they are currently handling?"

Maybe there's a set of time limits on guilt that we poor laypersons don't know about. Maybe Buffalo gets a pass because the city isn't doing well. Maybe Malone gets a pass because he didn't read all that "stuff" the Vatican sent. (It did send some guidance, didn't it?)

My bishop says there's a whole set of guidelines about sex and the clergy and we're not to worry. The church is taking care of it, he says. But by golly, he says, this sort of behavior will be rooted out and gotten rid of.

I'll still attend and pray. And pray. But now I hold the least possible amount of hope.

Dennis D. Maxwell

Charleston, South Carolina

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While true in both instances, using the terms crime and sin exclusively to refer to the extremely complex matter of the sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clerics will not lead to any serious credible results. Until there is the introduction of established criteria of male sexual and psychic maturity and a recognition of the pathological nature of immature dysfunctional sexual behavior — and that that kind of behavior cannot be isolated from other behavior in the patient's life — then the clerical system that operates in the abuse of power will remain unchanged and unchallenged.

As long as there is the remotest possibility of blaming this whole thing on the devil and on fantasy notions of sexual orientation and identity, the clerical system will work overtime scapegoating gays, Satan, Pope Francis, creeping secularism and so forth and nothing will change. As with many things in the Catholic orbit of late, they only want this to be about sex and not human maturity and spiritual and psychic health of the Catholic ordained ministers.

(Fr.) CHARLES NIBLICK

Dyer, Indiana

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I very much hope that Michael Sean Winters is right and I'm wrong in seeing such a positive result from the recent summit on abuse. But haven't we heard all these promises before? If the bishops can and will clean up the mess they have made, why haven't they?

Read Matthew 18:6. Pretty clear, right? Then ask yourself how many canon lawyers you need, and how much time they need to prove that Jesus doesn't really mean what he's saying, and you can safely ignore his words — because we churchmen, not you simple sheep of the flock are the (divinely?) recognized experts on such subjects. And surely you're not so ignorant as to think for a minute that simple obvious Christianity (don't harm children, don't lead them into sin) can prevail over the decrees and decretals and traditional practices of the church?

NICHOLAS CLIFFORD

Middlebury, Vermont

In response to the column by Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese and the fact that women speakers were the ones who eloquently called the Vatican Church leadership to task — a task they still have not dealt with.

Roman Catholic Women Priests are living a renewed church and offer healing to all during the sexual abuse crisis.

We women priests continue to offer a new structure with new inclusive communities and a new way of being church. All are welcome to attend our worshiping communities and to receive communion.

Women as priests offer Roman Catholic worshiping communities that are led by the people of God.

We have over 15 years of experience offering a new kind of priesthood that is Roman Catholic, egalitarian, evolving, mystical and social justice driven.

We are a growing witness in a more modern sign-of-the-times church that will eradicate any future sexual abuse.

Our women bishops do not control the people they serve but the people make the decisions and obviously women are an integral part of the leadership.

Our women priests are accountable to their communities so sexual abuse by priests is not present in our new model.

To put it very simply, the sexual abuses that have taken place in the church and are still taking place would never have occurred to the degree they have if women had been involved in priestly ministry and equal leadership in the church. It is long overdue that the male leadership of the church acknowledge our wisdom as women priests who are already serving the people of God and ask for our help to solve the mess these men have gotten themselves in.

SUZANNE THIEL

Portland, Oregon

[Suzanne Thiel is the Western Region Bishop of Roman Catholic Women Priests-USA.]

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Every conference stresses the need to police the prelates and the priests in the matter of abuse.

It is simple to do it if the will is there. Two words summarize the necessary steps: term limits. We have such a system here in America, mainly for politicians, and not universal. But we can do it.

Simply establish term limits for every office in the church, with the possible exception of the pope. Four years or five years, with the possibility of one extension and a single transfer for good reason or as a promotion. All extensions to require an evaluation of the performance in the previous five years.

The evaluation should be made by the lay council in a parish, a mixed lay and clerical council in the case of a bishop. All such councils to include both male and female members. Incoming pastors or bishops present a detailed report of the performance and behavior of the former office holder within 30 days of their appointment, prior to their formal installation in office.

Simple, straightforward and universal.

WILLIAM T. KEANE

Leesburg, Florida

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