Opinion
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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. Part two of the responses can be found here.

I read both Melinda Henneberger and Fr. David Knight's articles with interest. I, too, am a "runaway Catholic" in contrast to how the church refers to ex-Catholics as "fallen away." I was an active, devout Catholic for 60 years. My faith in the Catholic Church was stressed by the abuse scandal and further squashed by the church's increased political activity.

Knight's article enlightened me as to the regular behavior of leaders of the Christian community through the ages. Knight's argument reveals the truth — the Catholic Church, as many other Christians, ignore sinful behavior when needed to achieve their goals. At this point in time it seems the goal is to replace democracy with autocracy in the United States as it is practiced in the Christian community — harshly judging the transgressions of the masses while concealing and ignoring the sins of its leaders.

JOAN RUPP

Seattle, Washington

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I wonder whether the editors of NCR were blinded by Fr. David Knight's compliments of their publication. Otherwise, I can't imagine why they would print his rebuttal of Melinda Henneberger's thoughtful perspective. I did not find his writing to be smart, thoughtful, or witty, as promised, but rather degrading and condescending. He did not seek to understand Henneberger's concerns or to entertain any sort of dialog with her.

Rather, perhaps to validate his own choice to stay, he chose to lecture her for, in his opinion, not using her brain and making poor decisions. I was dumbfounded by how many times and ways he chose to call Henneberger's intellect and logic into question.



Those of us who are struggling to stay in the Catholic Church do not need rebuttals that belittle us. We don't need lectures about how we are misinterpreting Biblical or church history. We need people to listen to us, to try to understand what we are feeling, to try to see through our eyes. We need honest discussion about our concerns from someone who seeks to grow with us, not arguments trying to "correct" our mistakes. And we absolutely don't need the NCR publishing tone-deaf responses to our heartfelt perspective pieces.

NCR and Fr. David Knight owe Melinda Henneberger an apology. And then they owe her the consideration of listening to her.

KATHLEEN BARTEMES

Austin, Minnesota

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I found Fr. David Knight's memo to Melinda Henneberger to be typically clerical: patronizing, condescending, dogmatic, offensive, lacking understanding, inside the box, traditional, irrelevant, a product of pre-Vatican II brainwashing and post-Vatican II protest.

My faith is not in the church, the hierarchy, canon law, seminary training/brainwashing, the Bible or Roman Catholic interpretation of the Bible. I have not "left the church" because of some clerics and protective bishops who can't figure out that taking advantage of subjects as objects is immoral. My faith is in God, the

unknowable, the incomprehensible, the neither male nor female being.

I am not impressed by his 57 years of priesthood, nor how many books he has written. I am impressed by his lack of understanding of the human condition. I find particularly offensive his decision that Melinda is "illogical" while conceding that both he and she are "intellectuals."

MARY JANE SCHUTZIUS

Florissant, Missouri

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I was uncomfortable as I read Fr. David Knight's "Hang in there" article start to finish. I felt I was reading an almost glib response to Melinda Henneberger's treatise of her personal struggle.

Laying out a few of the Catholic Church's darkest deeds — led by males, recorded by males and translated by males — as evidence that all is well and one only need to trudge forward, left me with dissonance that I can't yet sort out. It did not feel Christian. It felt almost truculent instead.

My optical experience with clerics includes a slow, almost complete jettison of alter girls from services, and a return to a "performance" Mass (priest's back to the people; incense enough to fill the sanctuary). My spiritual status is one of ambivalence, fed by the repeated message that the human condition is "dark" and that confession and an intimate relationship with God is my only salvation. Logical or not, Knight's essay did not reassure or comfort me in any way.

PATRICK DICKERSON

North Vernon, Indiana

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Thank you for Melinda Henneberger's moving article. Fr. David Knight's response confuses the issue. Henneberger isn't questioning her faith; she is questioning an institution that continues to protect those who have violated children. Knight's problem is that he so completely conflates faith with the institutional church, albeit he rightly recognizes the church as imperfect, that for him, leaving the church

equates with a "dark night of the soul," or Henneberger leaving her faith.

Her faith, in fact, seems robust and healthy. The inability to tolerate the outrageous act of pedophilia and its cover-up is a courageous faith with an ethical core. Knight's recommendation to "hang in there" with a church we allow to move as slowly as it chooses on the issue of pedophilia, as well as sexism, seems a puny faith, not a faith in the God who calls us to holiness, in the Jesus who condemned violation of anyone, especially the "little ones," and in a spirit who calls us to a discipleship of equals.

The pain Henneberger shows us is a longing for an institutional church, not the one she has known and loved all her life and now her faith requires she leave, but the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church she does not yet find to be present. And, until she does, "life as usual," is not possible. Henneberger, rather than Knight, is the faithful one.

Please continue to print her perspectives. Her pain is shared and paradoxically brings hope.

DARLENE PEITZ-HILLENBRAND

Sacramento, California

***

I appreciated your inclusion of complementary essays by Melinda Henneberger and Fr. David Knight. I left a wonderful Roman Catholic religious order 30 years ago to marry, and in time became an Episcopal priest.

I love — and miss — the breadth and dynamism present in many Roman parishes. Now retired, I still attend one occasionally, especially during the Triduum. I love the poetry and polity of the Episcopal Church — and it is hard for me to imagine being part of a church community where women are not priestly colleagues and the laity is marginal.

So to Henneberger I say: it'll be a big change, but the Episcopal Church may well nurture your spirituality as it has nurtured mine, bringing you much closer to Jesus Christ and the god of love he proclaims. To Knight, I would pray for a larger heart. Gathering with the church of Rome is a lovely ideal, but in a broken and sinful world, we should not mistake any church for the kingdom or imply that one church

possesses the saints (as you seem to do).

May we all find communities of faith — whatever their denomination — where Christ is present so that we can grow into communion with him and all the saints.

(The Rev.) STEPHEN MARTZ

Glen Ellyn, Illinois

***

Fr. David Knight makes a compelling argument for staying in the church.

There are three actions that would redefine Christianity in the modern world. One, declare universal salvation. Two, women in all ministries. Three, get rid of transubstantiation.

Of all the sins of the Catholic Church, past and present, the greatest is its own lack of faith as evidenced by the need to control almost all aspects of life. Let God be God. In the meantime, become servants and learn to celebrate the incredible holiness that is everywhere.

JOHN SEIFERT

Oshkosh, Wisconsin

***

Thank you Melinda Henneberger for your insightful NCR article. After reading Fr. David Knight's article in the same NCR issue, my feeling is, "The logical thing is to trust your instincts and stand your ground." As Fr. Hans Küng and other priests have indicated, "the Roman Church is not the essence of Jesus."

At the hierarchical level, the Roman church is essentially what remains of a corrupt Roman empire. With your decision, you have been guided by the "essence" and teachings of Jesus.

Based on what Knight describes starting in his fifth paragraph, you made the right decision. Approximately 300 years separates Jesus from Constantine and the Roman church. From Constantine, to the Inquisition, and beyond, the number of Christians killed by the Roman church for not bowing to its questionable dogmas and methods is enormous.

Knight states, "truth eventually wins in the church." Yes, it does, but not "in the church." We have the continuing financial and sexual abuse scandals that go way back. The truth keeps flaring up around this church as a testament to the corruption that starts at its own foundations. Roman Catholicism pays lip service to Jesus, but does not embrace his teachings.

You have a high level of integrity Melinda. Your decision may not make you feel good right now, but it will make you feel much better, eventually.

GEORGE O'CLOCK

Waconia, Minnesota

***

I'll stay with the church but understand Melinda Henneberger's point. At some point we just get tired of trying. Fr. David Knight writes from a comfortable place. My experience since leaving the priesthood is that clergy are not interested in listening — except perhaps in a fawning way to power or wealth. I don't think this of priests and religious who hunker down and get the smell of the sheep on them.

After the Pennsylvania expose, our monsignor indicated he'd like to talk with me about clericalism. We set a time for lunch only to have it forgotten. When he returned to the rectory, we had a cup of coffee in the kitchen and he told me his thoughts. I felt "clericalized" and wondered at his invitation.

Subsequently, in correspondence with a priest in Australia, I learned of his unpublished article on laity and clericalism. It was magnificent and cut through many layers of fog. I shared it with monsignor along with an email message that

focused on several points of the article. He considered my email fueled by angry and dismissed it out of hand.

So much for listening, for sitting in judgment, for failure to dialogue. Clericalism is alive and well in North Carolina. Fortunately, there are many laity — including many former religious and priests — who work hard at living the gospel. Perhaps one day the spirit will zap us and we, clerics and laity will come to an appreciation of the *sensus fidelium*.

DENNIS B. KELLER

Garner, North Carolina

***

Melissa Henneberger offers powerful, heartfelt, and compelling witness to the case for leaving the church. Fr. David Knight's well-meaning but patronizing and singularly weak response only adds strength to her position.

I remain, however, because Catholicism, if not the church, is my spiritual home, and I feel responsible for helping maintain that home. If I abandon it, I will be aiding its inevitable occupation by forces of darkness. The zealots of authoritarianism and reaction, after all, are only too happy to see Vatican II Catholics leave. And when that happens, God forbid, the church truly will have become irredeemable.

RAMSAY M. HARIK

Bloomington, Indiana

Advertisement

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Fr. David Knight's judgmental response to Melinda Henneberger's poignant letter is much like the response I received from two pastors when I left the Roman Catholic Church half a lifetime ago. At age 76, I can look back with a clear conscience and few if any regrets. There is life after Catholicism.

As a young man I believed God was calling me into the priesthood but without the charism of celibacy. I wanted a wife and children. God blessed us with three amazing daughters.

I believed the Catholic Church's man-made rule requiring celibacy for ordination had blocked my "Yes" to God. I believed the church's denying ordination to women to be sinful and to raise my daughters in a church that could potentially block their "Yes" to God would also be sinful. I still believe this.

I also believe refusing ordination to married people to be sinful, and to be inhospitable to homosexual persons is to commit the sin of sodomy.

I believe the body of Christ is much larger than the Catholic Church. So, I left. I believed and hoped God would be there for me at the end of the dark tunnel I was entering, if God is love, which I believe.

But the dark tunnel I had anticipated was filled with life and grace. I continued to read NCR and noted with chagrin and sorrow how often the Catholic Church failed in charity and truth.

I won't recount here the almost miraculous way God led me into another Christian church that is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. I know how annoying that is to Roman Catholics. I will only say to Melissa Henneberger, "Be ready for the time of your life."

PETER HULL MEYERS

Vicksburg, Mississippi

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Twenty years ago, I left the church and declared so in a letter to NCR. I continue to read NCR. In 20 years, nothing has changed.

A Catholic woman, Melinda Henneberger, declares her position. A priest, Fr. David Knight, responds telling her she is illogical, with the patronizing tone that I found so disturbing when I was yet a Catholic.

That is why I left, the way women are treated by the all-knowing men.

KATHERINE KELLY

Pinedale, Wyoming

***

There is an alternative to David Knight's advice to Melissa Henneberger that she should "hang in there" instead of leaving the church. We invite you to join an alternative Catholic community like "The Spirit of Life: A Catholic Community of Justice and Joy" which my wife and I co-pastor near Boston. These intentional eucharistic communities are much like the early church communities.

These communities are the building blocks for rebuilding our church from the ground up. Joining such a community has two advantages: it is more proactive than just "hanging in there" and more importantly, it meets the need that all of us have for Eucharist with a supportive community of kindred spirits who also value the inclusion of everyone's gifts for wisdom about how God is calling us now to reach out in service to others.

The institutional church may eventually change, but change can't wait. Joining an alternative Catholic community can be life-giving and spirit-nourishing now. Heaven knows we all need that for the journey in and the journey out.

(The Rev.) RONALD HINDELANG and (The Rev.) JEAN MARCHANT

Framingham, Massachusetts

***

I beg to differ with Fr. David Knight who felt leaving the Roman Catholic Church meant, among other things, "leaving the church of Francis of Assisi, Benedict, [and] Dominic ..." I think they lived before Christians began grouping themselves in denominations that better fit their different understandings of the faith. So Episcopalians and Lutherans and Presbyterians have as much right to claim these holy people as we Roman Catholics do.

In referring to the church, wasn't "catholic" first used by Ignatius of Antioch in 107 C.E. to mean any church adhering to the concept that Jesus Christ was both human and divine? Today, doesn't "catholic" still mean a "universal" church, transcending all boundaries of time and space, including denominational ones? Sometimes I feel our Roman Catholic concept of "catholic" pinches like shoes we've outgrown.

BETSY REIFSNIDER

Sacramento, California

***

Fr. David Knight's article responding to Melinda Henneberger's article about why she is leaving the church speaks to the root of the problem in Catholicism. His "there, there dear, you're just becoming emotional" appeal to "logic" embodies the misogynist clerical culture that is at the root of her decision to leave.

He suggests that only unintelligent people can come to the conclusion that they can no longer support a church that excludes women from leadership and hides sexual predators. His, "at least it's not as bad as the Spanish Inquisition," defense rings hollow to anyone with half a brain.

I'm a 62-year-old church-going dyed-in-the-wool Catholic. Like Melinda, I went to Catholic schools and worked in Catholic mission. I have two master's degrees and practice medicine. I too struggle with the question of whether it is time to leave. For now, I'm staying, but I have deep respect for those who choose another path.

BARRY LINEHAN

Spokane, Washington

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Considering the nasty letters Melinda Henneberger reports receiving I make this plea with regard to thinking and writing about the abuse crisis. Please remember the certainty of God's love for leavers, stayers, danglers by a thread, leadership ditherers, victims, even the abusers — and all 7.7 billion of us. Please remember Jesus command to pray for our enemies. Surely if we could aspire to do this, we could aspire to at least respect each other and have a more civil and sensible discussion about this and other contentious issues.

Regarding the response of Fr. David Wright, I think he completely misses Melinda's point. She writes "I just couldn't continue to help prop up an institution." Perhaps her premises and conclusion could be summed up this way:

1. Leavers are refusing to prop up the institution.

2. I'm a leaver.

3. Therefore I'm refusing to prop up the institution.

There's nothing illogical about the conclusion.

DON RAMPOLLA

Redondo Beach, California

***

You exhort people writing letters to be civil, courteous. Do the same standards apply to Fr. David Knight? He asserts that Melinda Henneberger's reasons for leaving are "totally illogical." He compares her to Trump voters (which seems intended to be as strong an insult as allowed in the paper), suggesting that she is either "manifestly insane," or guilty of "clericalism." Strong words.

He says Christ took on our ugly sinful bodies. Aside from misrepresenting our bodies that are made in God's image, Christ has a sinless body, from the womb of a sinless Mary. Church doctrine.

He says that God will say: "If you had believed in the God you thought I was [sending people to hell for missing Mass], that would have been blasphemy." Recently, our clergy reminded us that missing Mass on Sundays is a grave sin. We can believe church doctrine spelled out in the catechism, or be "blasphemous" (also a mortal sin) according to Knight.

I am OK with a church with all sorts of sinners, being one myself. I am not OK with Knight implying that because there will always be bad people in the church there's no need to address sex abuse and the hierarchical coverups.

He says that she might be in the dark night, which allows us to experience faith as divine. The point of the dark night is exactly that it's not logical. Neither is much of what Knight says.

TERI WHITE CARNS

Anchorage, Alaska

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