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 February 2019. If you want to respond to an article published in NCR, follow the steps listed at the end of this post.

I remain skeptical of Notre Dame President John Jenkins' explanation for the "veiling" of the Columbus murals. He claims that "Our effort is to make the story of the Native Americans part of this story, as is the story of Columbus, as is the story of wonderful

immigrants who have made this country as great as it is today. That's really the intention behind it, not to erase anything but to tell the fullest story."

In light of the ongoing revelations of systemic, hierarchical cover-ups of global clergy abuse scandals in the Catholic Church, this latest action is an artistic metaphor not of nationalistic conquest, but rather a case study of how organized religion was used to justify all types of atrocities for economic exploitation. That is a "dark side of the story" that I am certain will not be represented in this feeble foray into revisionist history — no matter when, where or how the murals are displayed in the future.

CRAIG B. McKEE

Lakeland, Florida

Peter Feuerherd's excellent article "Fraud expert pushes procedures to safeguard parish collections" provides an update on my nearly 30-year effort to convince the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops they are morally obliged to mandate the conference-wide implementation of genuinely secure procedures for protecting the church's primary source of income: the Sunday collections.



Feuerherd obtained input from two other individuals, a soon-to-retire employee of the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management (NLRCM) and a CFO of an east coast diocese. Unfortunately, the input provided contradicts known facts.

The NLRCM representative stated his belief "that three-person counting and use of serial-coded bags … is now routine." That claim, however, is contradicted by the

results of Voice of the Faithful's 2018 review of the websites of all 177 dioceses which disclosed that only 16 of the 90 dioceses that posted their collection procedures require both of the critical elements of a genuinely secure system. It hardly needs to be pointed out that a compliance rate of less than 20 percent in no way supports the claim that those safeguards are "routine."

The diocesan CFO reportedly stated that parishes in his diocese are mandated to institute proper collection procedures, including three-person counting. That claim, however, is contradicted by the diocese's own parish financial guidelines which state that "Money counters should be appointed by the pastor and their duties performed by at least two designated, unrelated persons."

While I have no doubt the U.S. bishops heartily welcome any narrative that downplays the seriousness of their dereliction, those of us who continue to financially support our parishes need to know that a clear majority of the collections within the parishes remain highly vulnerable to weekly theft.

MICHAEL W. RYAN

Milton, Massachusetts

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Having read in detail your article, it brought to my mind a problem we found in our previous parish in Melbourne Diocese about the misuse of collections at Sunday Masses.

It is not only counters and parish employees that sometimes take a "share" of donations placed onto the plates, but we also found that the parish priest constantly used collection monies to pursue his gambling habit.

There was a need, after this fraud was found out, that the finance team members together had to deposit all the collection monies into the parish's bank account themselves at the local branch of their bank.

This secure method of acting of course solved the problem and was a very safe way to look after parish funds.

JOHN B. WILSON

Victoria, Australia

Thank you so much for publishing the articles on nuns and nones. As a now 76-year-old woman who left the School Sisters of Notre Dame at age 51, after 33 years in the community, I am very interested in and concerned about the future of religious life in the church.

This pairing of nuns and nones makes much sense to me. I left the community because for me it was no longer lifegiving. This article gives me hope for the church at a time when so many other signs are not hopeful.

MARY JO FEDERSPIEL

Grafton, Wisconsin

Michael Sean Winters is not alone in misinterpreting what people who disagree with him on abortion say. In his Feb. 5 links, he takes on a New York Times opinion piece by Michelle Goldberg and misunderstands a quote from me.

Winters rushes to judgment and unthinkingly decides that sentence proves that I believe the solution to such an unlikely scenario would be to "kill the baby."

In fact, I am on record as opposing abortion in such circumstances. In a 2009 piece in Salon entitled "Can we ever say a woman can't choose," I write "When a fetus reaches the point where it could survive outside the uterus, is healthy, and the woman is healthy, and she has had five months to make up her mind, we should say no to abortion. One can and should have compassion for the woman or girl who seeks to end a pregnancy at that late date, but absent severe fetal abnormality, a threat to her life or a clinical diagnosis of serious mental or physical health consequences of continuing the pregnancy, I believe we should say: 'I am so sorry. You waited too long. I know this is a difficult decision for you to bear, but we cannot give you an abortion. I will help you any other way I can, but I cannot perform an abortion.' "

For Winters, this minor deviation from the absolutism of both pro-choice and pro-life won't mean much. That is not the point. The point is that Winters chose to interpret an ambiguous quote in the New York Times to suit his prejudice and I choose not to let it stand.

FRANCES KISSLING

Washington, D.C.

In regards to this article, Catholic higher ed wants to be 'part of the solution' to sex abuse crisis by Heidi Schlumpf.

To diminish the sex abuse crisis, the first steps all Catholic educators must take are:

1) Coordinate their efforts with their grade-school colleagues and parents;

2) Stop teaching "traditional," erroneous, misleading, blasphemous "church" sex education;

3) Teach ethics according to Mary's orders at Cana, and to Jesus' commandment to love;

4) "Through, with, and in the Virgin Mary, Our Father revealed that the reproduction of His divine image, a.k.a. The Mystical Body of Christ, has nothing to do with human sexuality (See Genesis 1:27)" in Mary, the Unwed Mother of God; available on request.

5) Abusing God's sacred gift of sex will diminish when we respect and enjoy it as he intended, a description of which is found in the Song of Solomon.

GONZALO T. PALACIOS

Kensington, Maryland

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Heidi Schlumpf and the San Antonio report on resolving clerical abuse cases is nothing more than a re-working of national and local studies, all recommending the same post-event procedures. Reporting protocols, transparency, victim assistance, are for the most part, in place in all dioceses.

What is not addressed in the study are solutions to root causes of aberrant and criminal behavior. When Catholic universities and colleges delve deep into ultimate causation and provide concrete doctrinal, systemic change, they will justify their academic role in the tragedy of centuries of abuse.

RICHARD HAHNER

Pensacola, Florida

I find this quote from the article "Catholic Social Ministry Gathering coincides with March for Life 2020" disturbing:

"This year, students from a Cincinnati-area high school were criticized after a video of them went viral. Media and others interpreted the students — some of whom were wearing 'Make America Great Again' Trump hats — to be mocking a Native American activist."

How did you interpret the student's actions? As a graduate of a Catholic high school, I found the rudeness of the student confronting the Native American gentleman, and the look of distain on his face, to be horrifying, embarrassing and without Christian virtue. The lack of substantive response from the high school and archdiocese to correct this public wrongdoing by a Catholic high school student who should know better was appalling.

I find the student's conduct reprehensible, but, somehow, you and the church apparently find it defensible, and allegedly, a misinterpretation by "media and others." This is just one more thing that makes me want to flee the church. No apology, no consequences.

At a minimum, I would expect the students to be required, by their school and archdiocese, to meet with and learn from Native American history. Does this Catholic student have any understanding that the Native Americans are the original Americans? That making America great again, to them, would require him to leave? I'm disappointed in your characterization of this encounter that seems to give the student a pass.

NANCY C. BROWN

Sherman Oaks, California

While the exploration of the value of solitude to Julia Walsh's vocation and prayer life contained much wisdom for her own God-given path, I think there was a troubling assumption made in this sentence:

"I knew it then, as certain as I know that I am alive: If I became a mother, my prayer life would have to be put on hold."

But, would it really? While it would be unfair of me to question the author's imagined alternative life and the certainty it gave her about the vocation she had chosen, I think she may perhaps underestimate the depth and wholeness of the prayer life that a Christian mother can develop. With intentional attentiveness to the holy presence flowing from an incarnational spirituality, rocking a crying baby, and sharing a lap with a toddler can become an integral part of a full and rich prayer life.

Very often God speaks in and through those "interruptions," calling a mother to deeper self-giving love, a keener sense of the holiness of a moment, and humility and awe in the face of the profound privilege it is to see the world through the eyes of little ones. Granted, opportunities for prayer in solitude may be shorter, or practically non-existent in some seasons of motherhood. But, I would respectfully suggest that the art of turning all one's attention to God is not exclusive to times of solitude.

EILEEN MCGOWAN

Whitby, Ontario, Canada

The story of Jeanne Atkinson and the work CLINIC is doing was inspiring and gave hope in for the future for our country and church. This is a discouraging time in our country the way immigrants and refugees are being treated and in the scandal of our church and their lack of leadership regarding the way immigrate being treated and in the abuse scandal.

To read of a woman in a Catholic organization leading a cause that follows the gospel message uplifts my spirit and gives me hope. I wish people from CLINIC could speak from the pulpit during Mass on Sunday so people would hear their message. Many blessings to them.

BEEDEE SOSKIN

Lilburn, Georgia

Michele Dillon has really brought it home to lay Catholics just how church officials have used euphemisms when describing events or situations that are perhaps detrimental to the church's status.

By using this system of language, it obfuscates the real meaning of their explanatory commentaries. This has been particularly noticeable with the church sexual abuse scandals, where high ranking officials try to gloss over the real facts about cases, like abuses or corruption within the church. Then often times vague descriptions and terminology, quite often leaves Catholics bewildered because explanations are seldom described in laymen 's terms.

This form of covering the real facts is often used by many bishops in their public statements to minimize tragic or sinful events. The dictionary describes the term euphemization extremely well with examples that only endorse what Dillon has stated.

DAVID J. O'CONNOR

Brisbane, Queensland, Australia

In response to Pat Perriello's article "Democratic Party needs Joe Biden to run for president," I think it would be a major mistake to support Biden.

Perriello says Biden is "knowledgeable on foreign policy," but to what end? He is another supporter of U.S. militarism: voting for the Iraq War in 2002, the expansion of NATO, increasing military aid to Colombia's repressive government, increasing military spending in general, and defended extra-judicial killings by Israel in Palestinian territories as well as Israel's war in Lebanon in 2006.

We can and must do better, especially as Catholics. Pope Francis said, "true followers of Jesus today also includes embracing his teaching of nonviolence." Biden is quite far from this trajectory of Francis and will only entrench U.S. militarism even more; which doesn't just impact other countries but our own moral imagination about how to engage conflict at home.

ELI McCARTHY

University Park, Maryland

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Evidently not a fan of Sen. Elizabeth Warren's proposed wealth tax on the very rich, Pat Perriello dismisses it as "confiscating money from billionaires." Confiscation suggests something draconian and unfair. What is unfair is the middle class paying a substantially higher rate of tax on their earned income than the wealthy do on their unearned income.

The best measure of how rich someone is isn't income. It's wealth. Warren's proposal is a modest tax on wealth, exempting one's first $50 million from the tax so no millionaire is left homeless. Warren's proposal would redress decades of regressive taxation, and is worthy of consideration and passage into law.

BRIEN KINKEL

Silver Spring, Maryland

I would like the opportunity to respond to Michael Sean Winters' comments on my statement rejecting the equation of Theodore McCarrick's dismissal with the death penalty, which I believe misstates my position.

As I explained to the Washington Post, as someone who worked with inmates on death row at Angola prison in Louisiana for more than 10 years, I strongly object to the equation of the two punishments. Inmates on death row at Angola are kept in the single cells for 23 and a half hours each day. They are not allowed unrestricted contact with other human beings, meaning that even visits with family and children are behind glass and the inmate is often shackled hand and foot. Access to visits, outside communications, television and reading materials are limited and at times prohibited. In addition, every day they face the prospect of a painful, public death filled with indignity.

Leaving aside the question of whether this punishment is deserved and appropriate, it cannot be compared to living a relatively unrestricted life in a monastery in

Kansas. If McCarrick leaves the monastery, the Catholic Church is powerless to compel his return.

Moreover, my comments reflect the difficult reality of the punishment of dismissal. The priest remains a priest with the power of orders. He can continue to say Mass validly and administer most of the sacraments. Such actions may be illicit but are never invalid. My experience has taught that priests who are dismissed find a community who oppose their dismissal and provide them with opportunities for continued ministry.

My comments were meant to draw attention to the fact that the penalty of dismissal impacts the external reality of the priest vis a vis his status in the Catholic Church. However, it does not touch the spiritual and sacramental reality. The only one who can determine the impact of the penalty on McCarrick is McCarrick, and if he is unrepentant or does not accept responsibility for his actions, the penalty of dismissal may be received more as a martyrdom.

JENNIFER HASELBERGER

St. Paul, Minnesota

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I appreciate Michael Sean Winters' call for mercy against the eruption of vitriol against Theodore McCarrick. However, no, we still don't know that McCarrick did terrible things, that he had depraved behavior' that he was capable of such crimes. We don't know the truth of what McCarrick did. And, more than sadly, we won't.

We will never know because he was denied a trial. His voice will never be heard in appeal. The Vatican decided to wind up the despicable story right there. Just in time for their summit and the worldwide spotlight. McCarrick's life is the price Pope Francis has decided to pay for the perception that the Catholic Church is taking giant steps toward cleansing.

The question asked today, "Why was McCarrick permitted to rise to power in the church?" Here's a possible answer — because nothing whispered over the years was ever credible or enough to concern anyone but a few with maybe political vendettas?

To those looking for repentance — repentance is for the guilty. McCarrick says he is not guilty of crimes. I, and others close to him, believe that.

MARIA MIJARES

Plainfield, New Jersey

"New report warns against priests placing themselves above laity" makes interesting reading, but misses the point. Let me explain. I am a Salesian of Don Bosco from India ordained in 1978. I got my first shock when my professor who taught me "priesthood" wrote congratulating and welcoming me to the "priestly class!"

The distinction between the laity and the clergy is unrealistic. Drop the term "laity" and clericalism automatically collapses. All members of the church are equal human beings. Our vocation is to grow into the fullness of humanity like Christ.

Structures of superiority support the dominator model of society and dehumanizes people. Rather than write documents about the laity, the urgent need is to start unwinding the hierarchical structures and values. The members of the community of believers have different roles, not ranks. These roles are accepted at the behest of the people. There are no roles of being clergy or laity. Vestiges of this practice of giving voice to the people are still found in the current liturgy of ordination when the bishop consults the people about the person to be ordained.

Unfortunately, people privilege the ordained and they happily lap up privileges paving the way for a hierarchical dispensation. This aberration is strengthened by the current theology which doubles as the ideological tool that maintains the Catholic hierarchy. Hierarchical models, of their very nature are dehumanizing and sinful. Rather than produce new documents to modify these sinful structures, these sinful structures must be discarded along with the theology that sustains it. "The mysterious ontological change that happens at ordination, a part of the church's doctrine" strengthens this ideology. Take up the challenge of renewal initiated by Vatican II and realize the paradigm shift launched by Jesus.

(Fr.) JOHN THARAKAN, SDB

Andhra Pradesh, India.

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The article on priestly formation, citing the report from the Boston College struck a chord with members of the Association of U.S. Catholic Priests. A group of us recently completed a white paper addressing the needs for renewal of priestly formation. In that paper, we raised five issues that we see the Boston College report affirms, namely the need to refocus on principles of Vatican II, promoting priesthood as a way of service, not of domination, encouraging formation in a context where seminarians study with lay students, women and men, improving the psychosexual formation of seminarians with aid of trained professionals and finally focusing on vocation to priesthood as a call from God, discerned by seminarians and faculty.

We were pleased to learn that the writers of the Boston College report had access to our white paper. The similarities bear that out. Our common hope is that bishops and seminary faculties serious consider the proposals that both papers offer.

(Fr.) Louis Arceneaux, CM

New Orleans, Louisiana

Advertisement

More than a decade ago around the age of 60, I left exurban, all-white parish life for the reasons you cite in your article: "The bishops' letter fails to recognize that racism is a white problem."

Most suburban and exurban parishes fail abysmally in teaching about social injustice which is shorthand for what you rightly explain as the "communal, structural, institutional, and ecclesial nature" of our collective original sin. Making white people feel uncomfortable is not something pastors, especially suburban pastors, are trained to do. And so the blindness is accepted as the comfortable position so as not to alienate those more apt to put the larger amounts into the weekly collection basket.

You state it well in saying "white folks are often blissfully unaware of their complicity and role in the very same structures of oppression." The bishops really know this, but their own institutional structure would be threatened with even more loss of revenue if they were to preach about the root of most of our collective sin — the acceptance of greed and power as near virtues in this society. Another way of stating it is "profits vs. prophets" and the profit side always seems to win in societies driven by profit at all cost.

PATRICIA DENNY

Painesville, Ohio

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Franciscan Fr. Daniel Horan's reflection on the U.S. bishops' conference 2018 pastoral letter on racism is an eloquent, on-target statement. His analysis of what is missing in the pastoral clarifies the problem.

We, the "us" of our church and our nation, don't recognize how embedded this sinful disposition is in ourselves, our church, and our nation's culture. We, individually and collectively, need to own that and then seriously undertake profound conversion. To cite Frederick Douglas, "Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference."

(Fr.) BOB BONNOT

Struthers OH

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I would like to add to the discussion on racism and our approach to it as members of the church. I worked for 12 years as associate pastor and then pastor of Christ the King Church in San Diego, California. We Jesuits had it for over 60 years until 2005, when it was returned to the diocese. I believe I can add an interesting twist to the discussion.

When I first got to the parish in January 1991, I was the associate pastor for a parish founded to serve black Catholics in the 1930s. Any black Catholic was entitled to receive the sacraments no matter what their home parish was.

When I would preach on racism and its impact, I would get many an amen, alleluia, and "preach it brother" comments. I would then go to our patio area between the church and the rectory to meet and greet all comers to the parish, welcoming them and directing them to the hall for coffee, donuts and any food a particular group would be offering. I would overhear a number of comments that, in any other circles, would be considered racist remarks.

What I learned over the months that followed was there seemed to be a disconnect between what I addressed from the pulpit and the praxis of living out in the yard and beyond. Something did not ring true until I challenged some people for their remarks in the social setting. I said, "That is a racist thing to say." They responded with, "That is not racist. We can't be racist." "Please explain how you can't be racist?" They said, "Racism can only come from the dominant race in a society toward the minority races in the society." So, in this case, racism is white to black, and white to Hispanic, but not vice-versa.

When I asked, "Then, what do you call it when a black makes a decision solely based on race?" I was told, "We call that prejudice."

That opened my eyes to what ministry and the promotion of the Gospel has to do: give new meaning to old ideas or old words. I never, ever, preached on racism again because it does not mean the same thing to all those in the congregation. Hence, I preached on the sin of racial-prejudice which now was understood as the same idea to all present. It is the decision-making based solely on race.

(Fr.) Eduardo A. Samaniego, SJ

Anaheim, California

I am writing in regard Michael Sean Winters' "Martel's Vatican closet book exposes his motives and mistakes, not truth."

Thank you for the article exposing some of the inaccuracies and wild judgments and outright prejudice (if not lies) in Frédéric Martel's book. It is a great credit to NCR

that this got published in the wake of a review that noted none of those things.

Lies and gossip are the last thing we need when looking for genuine reform. Sexual orientation is not the problem in any of this, but there seems to be rampant hypocrisy — and that will get us nowhere.

(Sr.) MARY M. McGLONE, CSJ

St. Louis, MO.

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I am a fan of Michael Sean Winters, and all the more so now that he has written his review of Frédéric Martel's closet book. Winters is right on track when he says that Martel's writing is like Archbishop Carlo Vigano's in that they both are just trying to defame good people who are trying their best to serve the Lord.

To trash other humans, through innuendo, insinuation, gossip, and distortion of what few facts there are — is Satan's work as far as I am concerned.

There are certainly people in the Catholic church who have sinned and committed sexual crimes against children and adults. There are others who have sinned (if they made a vow of celibacy) by having a sexual relationship rooted in love, and a few have fathered children. It only God who is their judge, who knows everything about them, and how and why they came to do things. Who am I to judge?

I pray for all priests, sisters, victims, their loved ones, the people they serve, or have served, and I pray for people like Martel who search for a spotlight in devious and destructive ways.

MARY WUDTKE

Chicago, Illinois

What does the grace of a happy death mean? Loretto Sr. Mary Ann McGivern's question made me smile.

One of our older nuns had the answer: 15 minutes after confession and 10 minutes after a bath.

Now, one of our younger nuns who was very goth before she entered keeps a skull on her desk and I just sent her a miniature black hearse to add to her reminders to be prepared for a happy death. The hearse idea is from a letter of Flannery O'Connor who described the new car her mother had both as "one long, rolling memento mori."

When Mary Ann said death is funny, I think it can be.

(Sr.) ROSE PACATTE, FSP

Culver City, California

This note is concerning the article entitled "Bill would lift confessional seal if penitent confesses to abuse."

As a physician trained in a Catholic medical school and Catholic undergraduate university, I must applaud this proposed legislation. I am one of the many professionals that already must report child (human) abuse of any kind and I believe that anyone who is thoroughly sorry for child, adult or elder abuse should expect civil punishment for this atrocious wrong.

The idea of the sacred secrecy of the confessional must not apply to those that abuse the humanity of others particularly but not limited to children. Atonement must not consist of saying their Hail Mary's and Our Fathers and transferred to a different parish or diocese. This has only made the rampant abuses of humanity worse.

The very idea that priests are special people that need to be protected speaks to the very black heart of the authoritarian clerical system. As a California professional, I welcome this bill making the clergy equal to other professionals. The clerics themselves should work to serve the people of God and not see themselves as princely men.

R. DENNIS PORCH

Irvine, California

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