Opinion
Spirituality



by NCR Staff

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Two recent columns by Franciscan Fr. Daniel P. Horan received mixed reactions from NCR readers. The first column, "The church is suffering from Holy Spirit atheism," talks about how the ongoing presence and action of the Holy Spirit should be the founding principle of how we think of the church. The second column, "The problematic rise of armchair theologians," discusses how professional theologians and ethicists are needed to help people — both lay and ordained — understand what it is we say we believe. The following letters have been edited for length and clarity.

Franciscan Fr. Daniel P. Horan's column on the topic of Holy Spirit atheism inspired two strong reactions within me.

My elementary school Catholic education was fed by stories of how all I had to do was be open to God and God would direct my life. Do you have any idea how catastrophic that was? I was left motherless (at age 4), a child who was hungry for love. The promise of God's love guiding me was irresistible.



Wanting to "do God's will," in my mid-20s I entered the convent (but left after 10 years). I continued wanting to "do God's will" — to the point that failure after failure had me seriously thinking that God was watching me and laughing. It took decades to heal, to rethink my faith, to understand that indeed I was the one who had to make decisions, find my own way.

My first response to the title of the article was that it is God the Father who is ignored. We do focus on Jesus and (I thought) the Holy Spirit. God the Father is, I figured, too identified with the Old Testament.

What I have realized is that since the Holy Spirit and Mary begot the Son of God, that changes the "God the Father" image into a "God the Mother" image. Mary, in fact, stands in for God the Father in our religion.

Explain to me the allergic response of the Catholic Church to a female divine person. God is neither male nor female, but don't tell me divine "gender," however metaphorical, does not influence us. So you have a divine male bringing forth a son. That's not faith; that's severe allergy to a feminine God.

Look around you at the difficult time women have around the world being accepted as equal in intelligence to men, as equally necessary for the good functioning of this planet as are men. Look around you at the world created by men (with the deliberate exclusion of women) which is run almost entirely by war and profit.

GENEVIEVE BEENEN

Sheboygan, Wisconsin

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At last, the hierarchy is getting a slap on the back of their collective heads. Theologians have been doing Christology from the beginning of the Christian era, but very little pneumatology.

After the New Testament, the most influential book on my spiritual life is *The Sanctifier*, by Archbishop Luis Martinez. Also, to paraphrase the priestly prayer of Jesus in John's Gospel. "I have to go now, in order that the Holy Spirit might come. And when the Spirit comes you will be taught all things."

(Fr.) MICHAEL CHAMPLIN, OP

Webster, Wisconsin

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I did not understand a relationship with the Holy Spirit until after I began practicing meditation. Sadly, this beautiful discipline has become suspect among Catholics. Hindus believe that the divine life force is present in the breath, and Jesus knew this too when he breathed on the disciples and said "receive the Holy Spirit." Not knowing the Holy Spirit deprives Christians of experiencing the immanent presence of God in each moment, each breath, of their lives, but the blind are leading the

blind. Theologically impoverished homilies are a regularity come Pentecost Sunday, and surrender to the divine presence is a concept lost on most clerics.

In regards to clerical bans on discussion and change: Does the Holy Spirit only speak reliably through males? Does the church believe it has nothing new to learn and exists only to re-teach what is already known? Is tradition too fragile to withstand the challenge of new understandings? What relationship with the Holy Spirit is this?

The Holy Spirit is breath and also fire. The seed cones of the Southwestern Ponderosa Pine do not open until burned hotter than 500 degrees by forest fire. The paschal mystery contained in a pinecone: life emerges only after great destruction. Come, fire of the Holy Spirit, destroy the dead tree of clericalism and power structures, so that the seeds of new life may be released into the church and the world.

TRACEY HOELZLE

Cincinnati, Ohio

Franciscan Fr. Daniel P. Horan's warning about people practicing theology without a license is true as far as it goes, but it doesn't go very far.

To be sure people on the internet and in other media make pronouncements about politics, theology, etc., that are uninformed and just plain wrongheaded. Horan compares it to practicing medicine without a medical degree. But here's the thing: every person is a theologian to himself or herself, weighing the theological message being proclaimed and either assenting or dissenting. We call this conscience or the internal forum. We call it human freedom. It's only when we canonize our personal beliefs and make them a norm for others that we run into trouble.

It's a crime to practice medicine without medical training, yet I am absolutely in charge of my own care. I don't give that control to any physician.

This is not to say that all theological truth is relative. We still have a tradition which must be accounted for — a tradition hammered out in dynamic community. But my personal belief is likewise absolutely true for me.

DON BROPHY

New York City

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This article is why NCR and Catholic journalism in general is in the tank. Tell me where have the professional theologians got us? The good guys like Kung, Schillibexx, Rahner, Baer, Marcus, Haring are all gone.

The Catholic Theological Society won't even let nonmembers read their works online without a fee. The Apostles were illiterate. Now NCR does not allow comments while it drifts into atrophy.

BILL MAZZELLA

Ardsley, New York

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I remember as a child the local priest telling us not to read the Bible because we might make an error in its interpretation. Years later I read the Bible through for the first time and was overcome with the grace and beauty of the words on each page. God was speaking directly to me without the intercession of the priests of the Roman Catholic Church.

After retirement at the age of 65, I began reading dozens of books on Christian theology and discovered that for all their flowery words they knew nothing more than me. I also discovered that all the theology is nothing but mere theory and speculation about a divine mystery that no one really understands. Now as a contemplative, I have given up the study of theology and spend many silent hours in the presence of the mystery and I am free to be in a universe of surprise and beauty.

The church will never understand what is happening within the hearts of so many on this planet, especially among the youth that hunger for a new spirituality. The church has lost its way in the name of power and control. We have had 1,700 years of doctrine creation about subjects that Jesus knew nothing about nor was it important to the father. I pray for the church to become a spiritual guide to all

humanity but I cannot see it ever happening. The need for self-perpetuation has become more important than the people of God.

RICHARD L. WALTERS

Sun City West, Arizona

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Critical thinking is more important than ever to decipher truth from fiction. There is an increasing need in our world to scrutinize issues, stories, marketing pitches, present and past including religions, their creeds, and theologies. History is often slanted by the politicians and the powerful.

The Catholic Church, in particular often considered in the past as a gold standard in matters of morals, creed and theology has shown the world that it too, must be held to account in all matters as it too has been found seriously wanting. The faithful are feeling duped, disillusioned and confused and now know that trust is not too be given so easily. Armchair theologians have every right, for that matter the responsibility to review, question and accept/discard what no longer makes sense to them.

The danger of trusting this to any group is that they will get it wrong. Armchair theologians may be the remnant that carry the essence.

We must think critically and carefully about the actions and lack of, of the church from a no-holds barre' position as well as from armchairs of the world. This may be a problem for the maintain the status quo members of the churches.

DICK BERGMAN

Calgary, Alberta

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The thinking behind this piece would have objected to translations of the Bible into a text that any reader could understand. "No need for you to read this, we can tell you what it means." How is this not elitist?

The enduring brilliance of the gospels is that it is easily understood by all people, in all nations, through all centuries. Theologians like to complicate the simple, let the rest of us believe we are not smart enough or versed enough to get it right.

Case in point: while I get the drift of the article ("trust me") there are just enough highfaluting words to impress a schooled theologian but that I needed to look up.

GENE MURTHA

Easton, Pennsylvania

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"Armchair theologians" are problematic? You should be rejoicing they are out there! They are thinking and exploring their faith, and expressing it the best they know how. Sometimes we all need help coming up with answers that seem logical and just.

The problem facing the church is engaging with us during those struggles in a dialogue that connects the lay life experience with sound Catholic teaching and thought. I think we run the risk of thinking that the Christian faith is a matter of dogma and logic, rather than a living relationship with God expressed in today's world.

The teachings of the magisterium are the lane markers that should keep us and our brothers and sisters together and safe in living out that faith. Herding the cats and keeping folks on the reservation is important, but it must take new forms and address new means of engagement and be done with lots of grace, with an authoritative rather than authoritarian approach.

STEVEN F. CHAPMAN

Tallahassee, Florida

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Franciscan Fr. Daniel P. Horan targeted one contemporary problem and opened the door to several others. To his main point, it is not simply a problem of individuals skimming religious terminology and summaries from the internet for self-aggrandizement, or worse, for service to the wide varieties of parish ministry and catechizing.

The more pernicious issue is what they are skimming. There is a distinct lack of visibility of sound professional theology on the internet and other sources for college educated and/or motivated Catholic readers and novice researchers.

It is a stretch to assume that in our church pews there are not many believers who can grasp the principles of cutting-edge theology for the enrichment of parochial life. I encounter many devout Catholic who are embarrassed by their own elementary grasp of theology as adults, and what is worse, many of them are immersed in providing adult education in their parishes. There is a tone in Horan's essay — dare I call it an academic clericalism? — that the career theologians alone can handle the deep thinking. The danger here is that academics are not by and large the ones passing the Catholic faith from generation to generation.

The Catholic online world is replete with defenses of the catechism and ad hominem attacks upon its critics, but this is, after all, how official present-day catechetics is conducted. If those in the armchairs look smug, it is because they have been told they enjoy that right by virtue of literal fidelity.

The greatest gifts that Catholic scholars can bring to the church are twofold. The first is recognition of the challenges faced by "amateurs" who desire to know what "the experts" know. The second is recognition of the role of Catholic academia in catechetics.

Provide a church "historiography" of reputable, peer-reviewed authors, publishing houses, and publications. Make the armchair a respectable seat of learning again.

THOMAS J. BURNS

Apopka, Florida

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My experience tells me, indeed from my own armchair, that the idea that the faithful are plagued by wannabe theologians among us is unfounded.

I have lived through many phases of the church. It is an improvement to have us amateurs discuss our relationships with God. That is not only our prerogative but our duty as baptized members. Gone are the days when we were told not to read scripture lest we make a mistake. Being aware of the spirit in our daily lives is surely worth the risk.

BARBARA KNORR

Bristol Pennsylvania

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