News
Opinion



by NCR Staff

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May 3, 2019
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NCR recently published reader responses to a letter that rocked the global Catholic Church. Retired Pope Benedict XVI blamed the continuing Catholic clergy abuse crisis on the sexual revolution, developments in theology following the Second Vatican Council, and modern society's aversion to speaking about God. Below are more letters to the editor in response. The letters are edited for length and clarity.

Pope Benedict XVI's letter is in the end unimpressive. With all respect, I see in it the pain and disappointment of an old man who has given his life to a system that is changing and, in many ways, especially with the sex-abuse scandal, proves to be inadequate, and even under his own watch. I sense this sadness throughout.

His historical analyses are too easy — the sexual revolution, the demise of natural law, God's absence from public life. Some of his argument is surely correct, but there has been progress amidst that confusion. The soul of genuine religion has not been lost. The people I see in church are not simply making external show.



His solution is also too simple, abstract, distant from the psychological complexity of pederasty. He calls for belief in God and appeal to the God of Revelation, but what of the claimed revelation of other religions in a global society? Exalting the morality of biblical revelation, which is indeed sublime, he rejects the notion that Christianity could share a common valid morality with other religions. But such commonality must be our best hope.

He ends on an optimistic note: there truly is good in the church. I would be optimistic, too, but not through return to traditions unaware of scientific revelations. As I have argued repeatedly, natural law, yes indeed, but we need to get the natures right, and we've found that nature is much more complicated than the ancients suspected.

DANIEL A. HELMINIAK

Pittsburg, Pennsylvania

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Pope Benedict XVI, as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and Pope John Paul II both knew of clerical and hierarchal abuses that had been reported and they supported the cover-up policy and the hierarchal policy of paying money to the victims provided that they never speak out about the clerical abuse they had experienced.

Moreover, a number of the bishops moved the abusive priests to other parishes where the crimes continued. Benedict fails in his letter to criticize this key factor which enabled the abuses to continue for decades. It appears that Benedict continues to try to protect "the old boys' club."

JACK MURPHY

Meteghan Centre, Nova Scotia

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Apparently Pope Benedict XVI still does not understand what most bishops did not understand until the 2000s, that pedophilia has been with us from time immemorial, that pedophiles are master manipulators, and they never change.

JOHN COYLE

Leland, North Carolina

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Retired Pope Benedict XVI wrote a letter about sexual abuse that actually had nothing to do with sexual abuse. The letter did not address at all the psychology and motivations of sexual predators. The idea that sexual predators care about natural law theory, reference the tradition of moral theology in our church or were influenced by "liberal" interpretations of church doctrine, have simply no relevance to how sexual predators conceive the world.

Predators create a world of egocentric myths about themselves, sexuality, the desires of children, the rightness of their own desires and wants. No return to a fantasized, pure pre-Vatican II church would have the least amount of impact on those in the church (or society at large) who abuse children. The abuser's world doesn't accept that anyone or any institution can impose a moral code on them.

The goal of the church in this matter is not to correct false or weakened theological constructs. The goal for our church is to remove those who have damaged children and young people (and those who enabled these behaviors) from any position of power and leadership in our church.

(Fr.) JOSEPH A. MULCRONE

Chicago, IL

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I was ordained in 1973. My official service ended with retirement; my ministry continues as priest until I die.

The Second Vatican Council profoundly moved me. Its voice and mission inspired me to answer a call to be a priest. This was never an option. Why? As a 10-year-old boy, in 1957, I was continually sexually attacked by a priest in the sacristy after Mass. Many years of therapy, anger and confrontation with powerful elements of church authority set me free. I am a survivor, a victim no more.

Pope Benedict XVI is wrong. Vatican II reconnected me to Eucharist, to God's unconditional love. I celebrate each Mass with a profound awareness, at the fraction rite, that only God's mercy and our deepest to serve God can make the Body of Christ whole and holy. I am reconciled with my abuser. I have prayed at this grave. And I continually offer my service as a priest for glory of God alone. Healing should be our work, not blame.

(Fr.) PAUL SCAGLIONE

Louisville, Kentucky

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It appears to me that most of the clergy credibly accused of abuse of minors were trained in seminary and ordained before the so-called sexual revolution. These men were formed in a closet of darkness and a hot-house environment when the world was seen to be evil.

Like many others who have responded, the mistakes of Pope John Paul II cause many to wonder about the worth of canonization. To me, there was a rush to canonize that must have ignored evidence now made available.

HENRY MANCUSO

Lake Charles, Louisiana

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Regarding moral teaching of the church: My concern focuses on one word, enforcement. As I see it, God is the enforcer. On a temporal level, employees of the church should be disciplined within the employer-employee relationship. Volunteers and members might be better disciplined within the civilian sector.

Regarding the timeframe of occurrences of sexual abuse within the church, I read Pope Benedict XVI's view that most of the abuse occurred after Vatican II. I believe that his research neglected what occurred before Vatican II. I suspect that there has been a concerted effort to hide sexual abuse prior to Vatican II meaning that as time passes, the quality of evidence of sexual abuse prior to Vatican II degrades accordingly.

STEPHEN A. MORTON III

Rio Rancho, New Mexico

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When I read news articles and criticisms of Pope Benedict XVI's letter, my thought was "uh-oh, what did he say?"

Then I read the letter, all of it.

It is a sermon that is long overdue for the church and society. Being a Catholic convert from the Church of Christ 15 years ago, I have come to miss some of the great sermons I heard preached as a child regarding morals. Not once have I ever heard a sermon, or even a mention, about homosexuality being a sin in any Catholic homilies. No, not once. Not even when homosexual marriage became the law of the land.

I hope future homilies can take a lesson from Pope Benedict XVI's letter. I hope he writes more.

NANCY DAVIS

Spring, Texas

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In *Humane Vitae* in 1968, Pope Paul VI went against both the vast majority of moral theologians and the sense of the faithful, coming out strongly against all new means of contraception, with the future Pope John Paul II as his main support. This seemed to assume that the papacy receives directives from God contrary to the understanding of the people of God. I suggest that what Matthew 16:18 says is that the church, the Christian people, will never lose the essentials of revelation, and that the magisterium of the church, as in Matthew 18:18, is there to interpret and promulgate this ongoing understanding of revelation.

Humanae Vitae has never been the understanding of most Catholics, and it, along with the social turmoil of the 1960s, is more to blame than Vatican II for the sexual rebellion. The 60s turned the peoples' attention toward sins of strength (greed, selfishness, racial prejudice), which is in continuity with Jesus' compassion toward sins of weakness, and negative judgment on the possibility of the rich person entering the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 19:24).

The synod of bishops in 1971 determined that "action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation." This is the vision that Pope Francis is pursuing and I suggest that it is gradually getting the church back on track to implement Vatican II.

(Fr.) JOHN ZUPEZ, SJ

Hamilton, Missouri

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I write reacting to the very first letter to the editor published April 22 online that was written by Kenjiro M. Shoda. In my opinion it is an excellent example of how right-wing people feel the Roman Catholic Church should be, how it should think, and what it should require of its lay community.

These right-wing beliefs are utterly astonishing to me as a Catholic who has read or heard many of the Scriptures of Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, which describe so beautifully Jesus' life here on earth, and what in my opinion, he wants from us as his followers. But nonetheless, I do believe most of these Catholics have sincere hearts, as I believe does Pope Benedict XVI. I pray every day for people who do not understand that the Holy Spirit has been working this entire time — through Vatican II, and now through good Pope Francis.

For myself — a 75-year-old woman who was in my late teens, and early 20s when Vatican II occurred, and began to be implemented, my life since that time has been a journey of healing, questioning, connecting the dots, and going in a spiritual sense from death, through to resurrection into a Vatican II Catholic. I confess if things ever happened to cause the Catholic church to go back to the way it was prior to Vatican II, I would walk away and join the Episcopalians!

MARY E. WUDTKE

Chicago, Illinois

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Thank you for your editorial response to Pope Benedict XVI.

I am shocked and appalled that he has inserted himself into current struggles in the church. I call him to be a silent brother to Pope Francis. He had numerous years to

act in cleaning up the abuse within the church and he failed to do so. I see him now siding up to various American cardinals and the Steve Bannons of the world who would do Francis in.

Please Pope Benedict, mind your business and pray for this church in need of such great reform and rebirth.

(Sr.) ESTHER KENNEDY, OP

Adrian, Michigan

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When I read Benedict XVIs letter linking the scandal of pedophilia in the church to theological developments coming out of Vatican II (among other sweeping critiques), I went to the Archdiocese of Baltimore's website to get some facts.

Of the 126 priests and brothers credibly accused on the recently updated list, I noted that the abuses of 72 men occurred between the 1940s and early 1970s. There was even one case from the 1930s. I chose the early 1970s as a cutoff point, since the results of Vatican II's theological renewal were just filtering through in many dioceses. It is a stretch to believe that this was a major contributing factor to pedophilia urges and actions. By the way, I suspect that the statistical data in other dioceses, in the U.S. and beyond, would be similar to the data in my own.

Vatican II, with all its richness and its limitations, cannot be the scapegoat for some clergy's psychological deficits, moral sinfulness and/or criminal behavior. Nor should the church's theology be the scapegoat for structural cover-ups. An honest appraisal of the institutional structure is long overdue.

(Sr.) PATRICIA SMITH, RSM

Baltimore, Maryland

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