Opinion
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by NCR Staff

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As one of National Catholic Reporter's regular columnists, Michael Sean Winters receives a lot of responses to his opinions published regularly on this site. Below is a sampling of just some of those letters sent to our inbox. If you would like to respond to an article published in NCR, follow the steps at the bottom. Letters to the editor are edited for length and clarity.

On the occasion of Cardinal William Levada's death, I extend my sincerest condolences to his family and friends and pray that he is at peace. But I must take issue with Michael Sean Winters' requiem celebrating him as a warm, nonjudgmental man who, relative to the current episcopal leadership and episcopal culture warriors, is to be admired for attenuating some of the more troublesome stances of the far right vis-à-vis women religious and the LGBTQ community.

My mother, along with a wonderful priest — Fr. Ray Decker — taught me early on the imperative of telling ourselves the truth.



The cardinal's doctrinal stance and political actions were deeply harmful and had serious repercussions for many Catholics and the broader community. Women, women religious, the LGBTQ community, and the broader Catholic and interfaith community all paid a heavy price for his allegiance to patriarchy, a politics of exclusion and a top-down management style closed to dialogue. He seemed to subscribe to a vision of the church heavy on clericalism and wedded to church doctrine as defined by a closed group of priests, a prelude to the efforts to undo Vatican II, with little room for the primacy of conscience informed by lived experience. He conducted a mean-spirited inquisition of women religious that caused deep suffering. Equally problematic was his exercise of personal power vis-à-vis those of us who may have respectfully disagreed with his positions.

I first met Msgr. William Levada in the early 1980s on the debate stage at a statewide meeting of Catholic Charities where we were to debate whether or not to adopt a resolution supporting the budding sanctuary movement for Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees fleeing the brutality of U.S.-backed civil wars in their

homelands.

At the time, Levada worked for the California Conference of Bishops.

I worked as a young organizer for Catholic Social Services at the San Francisco Archdiocese, and had facilitated the first declarations of public sanctuary by five congregations on March 24, 1982, the second anniversary of the death of Salvadoran Archbishop Óscar Romero. It became national news.

San Francisco's Catholic Social Services was at the forefront of investing in services for the burgeoning refugee population, and advocating for immigrant rights, the application of the 1980 Refugee Act, and a change in the U.S. foreign policy that pushed thousands to abandon their war-ravaged lands. Fr. Cuchulain Moriarty, head of the Social Justice Commission; Maryknoll Fr. Jim Curtin; former sister Joan McCarthy; Presentation Sr. Margaret Cafferty; and many other religious and laypersons supported our program, as did San Francisco Archbishop John Quinn.

I approached Fr. John "Bucky" O'Connor, the head of Catholic Charities, to explore adopting a resolution in support of public sanctuary. In his wisdom, he suggested a debate and a vote. He invited Levada and myself to debate the issues.

Levada opposed public sanctuary, emphasizing the legal and political risks. He echoed the conservative wing of the United States Conference of Bishops who were under pressure from the U.S. State Department, which denied Salvadoran and Guatemalan political asylum applications at a rate of 98%. He argued prudence.

I offered a passionate defense of sanctuary, sharing the personal stories of refugee families who had fled the systematic, state-sponsored violation of human rights I had personally witnessed. I submitted that the United States government was breaking its own 1980 U.S. Refugee Act and international law by robbing refugees of due process and their right to be received. And I emphasized the moral imperative of loving our neighbors, quoting Dietrich Bonhoeffer's reflection on the cost of discipleship. I argued faith, human rights law and the prophetic tradition.

The resolution endorsing the sanctuary movement won the day, and later went on to be adopted at the annual national convention of Catholic Charities. Levada was not happy.

Over the next several years, 500 congregations declared public sanctuary, political and legal risks notwithstanding. Quinn, Levada's predecessor, issued a pastoral letter supporting sanctuary. Dozens of women religious congregations became public sanctuaries. In 1991, the U.S. government settled the 10-year-long *American Baptist Churches* v. *Thornburgh*, reopening more than a quarter of a million political asylum cases for Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees.

Twenty years later, in 1995, now-Archbishop Levada and I met again. I was accompanying San Francisco diocesan priest Fr. Jack Isaacs, who was in the final stage of metastatic cancer. Jack, the beloved pastor of St. Peter's Parish, one of the largest Spanish-speaking parishes in San Francisco, asked me to organize his funeral. He dictated a detailed outline of what and who he wanted. Jack's liturgical vision included a procession of 12 women carrying candles onto the altar — a symbolic expression of the inclusive body of Christ. When the archbishop arrived, he shunned the small committee of women who had organized the liturgy. Furthermore, he vetoed the plan. No woman was to be allowed onto the altar. The 12 women graciously agreed to bring the candles to the altar railing rather than challenge the archbishop.

It may be that Levada softened his stance, opened his heart and mind, and grew and transformed as he stood in the halls of ecclesiastical power and later upon entering retirement. Whether or not he considered that the "church is all of us" (Romero), or that the teachings of the church include the primacy of conscience that lead to a variety of stances in addition to the official teachings promulgated by bishops, I do not know.

Brazilian theologian, philosopher and nun Yvone Gebara once wrote that we must acknowledge the contradictions within the church we love if we are to keep the dreams and the light alive. All of us live with our contradictions. But if we aspire to live the creed of love, compassion and justice, it is all the more imperative to acknowledge them, to tell ourselves the truth.

For the truth sets us free.

EILEEN PURCELL

San Francisco

How sweetly the author invites conservative Catholics, also tagged as right-wingers, to be objective. He alleges that Raymond Arroyo and EWTN media outlets have an innate bias toward close-minded conservatism. Although he too admits he is drawn mostly to liberal texts.

Not surprisingly, the author praises and raises the longstanding popularity of social justice. After all, social justice is the religion of choice and compassion, especially of American Catholics devoted to liberalism, similar to the schism he dreads could evolve in the U.S. from conservative fringes. Yes, we are knee-deep in a political battle of the right vs. the left.

If he thinks Arroyo's bent agenda shows through, so does the author's subtle progressive agenda, under the cloak of asking Catholics to be more open minded and inclusive. The goal: gently move all American Catholics from right to left. If necessary, use the pope to justify the ends. "All is good," on the left, right? Notwithstanding, we do pray for all of our popes.

REBECCA LOMAS

Weslaco, Texas

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The exposure of EWTN is what I most liked about this article. However, I too have gained much from reading some of the writings of Pope Benedict XVI and John Paull II.

I must admit that as a person with a master's degree in scripture, I was a bit disturbed by some of Benedict's writing in his trilogy on Jesus of Nazareth. My sense was that he is out of step with some of the exegesis that has come from prominent scripture scholars. I wrote to a member of the Pontifical Biblical Commission expressing my unease. He simply wrote back to this effect: "See it as a spiritual text, not a biblical expert."

I must admit that I am in agreement with Matthew Fox in his book *The Pope's War* when he listed 1) expelling or denouncing 106 theologians and 2) appointing yes men as bishops, which led to denial in dumbing down religion by silencing dissent.

DAVID JACKSON

Edinburg, Texas

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I am grateful to Michael Sean Winters for exposing the hypocrisy of the right wingers in the U.S. Catholic Church. They are a disgrace and Michael Sean shows us why they are a disgrace.

(Fr.) JOE McVEIGH

Enniskillen, North Ireland

As a university professor who has worked with unions, specifically electrical, plumber and welding and teacher unions, I realize the importance of both the Catholic Church standing up for the importance of the everyday worker.

I know there has been restructuring to benefit in many issues but there has also been an emptiness to the words we say. The cacophony of meaningless words leads to acts of violence. We need to stand up for each other in the church and in our unions. Any of the unions I've assisted in education have taken seriously their responsibility to the society in which they work. There is fairness and justice and purposefulness that lead us to rally for our "team."

Each of us needs to realize who we are and the importance of giving ourselves to others to benefit the common good. For years we called this collaboration but had little idea how to do it. Now we know what we don't want, who we are and how we can accomplish the good for the sake of all with the strength, gentleness and kindness of Jesus Christ.

EILEEN QUINN KNIGHT

Chicago, Illinois

To quote a line from your reflection in this article "Book on pagan-Christian culture wars sweeps its metaphors too far," Smith writes: "Had he been preternaturally prescient, Tertullian might have tried to phrase his proposal in Rawlsian terms."

This crosses the line from interesting cross-cultural observation into the morass of nonsensical historical anachronism.

I would say not too many people educated or not will get too far in their love for God or understanding of the "both/and" truth. I like your column and this was also interesting. Sometimes I over explain and elaborate and have to remember to stop and pause. So glad I'm not a columnist. You are. Keep up the good work.

(Sr.) THERESA YOUNG, RDC

Armonk, New York

In Michael Sean Winters' recent article entitled, "Amazon synod has set Pope Francis' professional haters on edge," the author should be expelled from NCR for accusing Cardinal Raymond Burke of being a hater of Pope Francis.

It's a lie as treacherous as Communist Party verbal assassinations, where the whistleblower is accused and condemned for bringing out the truth. It's obvious that such accusations are part of the great apostasy sweeping the western world.

RICHARD HOHOS

North Chesterfield, Virginia

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This column, "Democratic candidates must fashion an 'off-ramp' for Trump voters," is one of the major reasons I will no longer subscribe to the NCR which is quickly becoming a left-wing socialist rag sheet filled with unsubstantiated accusations about Republicans and our duly elected president.

Do you really want to go back to the good old days of Marxist Obama and the spying on American citizens, the subversion of our Constitution, and financial stagnation of a no-job economy where all citizens would have eventually been working for the government?

The author, Michael Sean Winters, would be much happier in Cuba, Venezuela, China, or Russia. One thing that socialism forgets is that poor

people and governments do not create dignity raising jobs or standards of living. In fact, just the opposite is true. Nearly every left-wing city in the United States is going broke because of inept management, nepotism, and cronyism.

The NCR, which used to be my main source of Christian influence, is now playing a fool's game following the new socialist leadership. I send these articles to all my conservative friends of all faiths who send them on to their friends. This is just one of the many reasons the Holy Roman Apostolic Catholic Church continues to lose members. Your social justice ideas have little or nothing to do with what Jesus taught.

RICHARD L. WALTERS

Phoenix, Arizona

Michael Sean Winters gave no mention of Sen. Amy Klobuchar's role in the presidential debate on Oct. 15.

From another news source:

> *Sen. Amy Klobuchar came out punching. The Minnesota Democrat wasn't afraid to criticize other candidates, in particular, Sen. Elizabeth Warren. Klobuchar, who has struggled to get a word in during past debates, went out of her way to differentiate her more moderate policies from the more progressive stances. Although she's done the same in past debates, she has never been this forceful. The tactic might pay off. Klobuchar has yet to make the November debate stage and this may be the push she needs.*

Too bad Michael Sean Winters doesn't publish his email address the way some of your other writers do.

(Fr.) JUSTIN McCREEDY

University Place, Washington

*[**Editor's note:** All of NCR's staff and contributors have contact information listed here.]*

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