Opinion
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by NCR Staff

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National Catholic Reporter followed the U.S. bishops' conference fall assembly closely as usual, with national correspondent Heidi Schlumpf and columnist Michael Sean Winters representing our publication in Baltimore. Winters provided daily commentary and Schlumpf wrapped up the meeting with a piece discussing the evident divide between the bishops' political motivations. NCR's editorial stated that the U.S. bishops probably constitute one of the most resistant episcopal audiences Pope Francis faces in the global church. All of the stories can be found here. Letters

to the editor are edited for length and clarity.

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Michael Sean Winters has hit the nail on the head: "Better a glass of clean, clear water than a cup of weak tea, but the conference has substituted weak tea for leadership. Unable or unwilling to bridge the divisions within their ranks, they reach consensus by offering bromides. They are firm in their commitment to rhetorical mush, steadfast in the defense of compromise, decisive about their indecision, bold in their proclamation of the banal. This is not moderation, a stance that can be defended from a variety of perspectives. This is a vacuum of leadership manifesting itself in mediocrity. And, they wonder why no one listens to them anymore?"

It has been at least 30 years since I heard anything resembling leadership from our national conference.

I'm from the archdiocese of Baltimore. I remember Cardinal Lawrence Shehan during and after the Second Vatican Council. I served on a board with his successor Archbishop William Borders. He was the last archbishop to speak with leadership. What did he get by way of recognition from the Vatican? The only leader of our archdiocese not to get the red hat for his efforts for a few more terms. Until, that is, our present archbishop who would never utter a true word of leadership and stick his head above the trenches. Sigh.



I thought bishops were to be a symbol of unity. At least, that's what Baltimore Bishop P. Francis Murphy used to say. I would suggest that, when a priest is ordained a bishop, he exchanges his name tag for that of his "holy" father, namely,

the bishop of Rome. The bishops of the national conference owe allegiance to their pastor, in this case Pope Francis, first and foremost. His exhortations should be their exhortations. His blueprint for the church should be their blueprint. His path is the true path of the church until he dies or retires and another is elected to take his place. What the hell is wrong with these bishops anyway?

**DON HENDERSON**

**Frederick, Maryland**

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Michael Sean Winters needs to remember that the U.S. bishops' conference is about appearing to do something while actually doing nothing.

It is just as well. They have no special competence about politics. As long as people kiss their rings, they will be happy.

The rest of us will get on with our lives without their opinions. The U.S. bishops' conference is another example of why some future iteration of Catholic Christianity will be one without clergy. Only the clergy need the clergy.

**JOHN BARBIERI**

**Delray Beach, Florida**

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In response to "Bishops' priorities and plans: A nothing burger":

Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron YouTubed a new video on discernment. Neither he, nor the majority of prelates, seem to have practiced what he preached, however.

I so agree with you on Barron's enterprises, which have, in my honest opinion, the early earmarks of nothing other than another Catholic money-grubbing cult, like those that we have seen recently, and we know where they led.

Is Barron building another ecclesiastical walled garden, where those gather to hide, those who are challenged by change? Those walls are as laughable as President

Donald Trump's, however. They are not impervious to truth.

Barron's hero, Bob Dylan, talked about deep cultural change, as does a prophet. Too bad this bishop never got the message. The time, the kairos is passing, and the U.S. bishops are missing the ark.

**INGRID HARRIS**

**Hamilton, Ontario**

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I have two issues with "U.S. bishops' conference clearly divided between Team Francis, culture warriors":

First, Michael Sean Winters uses a nonsense term, "serial pedophile," to describe Fr. Marcial Maciel. A pedophile is someone who is preferentially or exclusively sexually attracted to prepubescent children. Attraction, not act, is what defines pedophilia. Winters should read the relevant peer-reviewed literature.

If Detroit Archbishop Allen Vigneron is a friend of Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò and his seminary is a hotbed of opposition to the Successor of St. Peter, then Vigneron neither interprets or applies Catholic teachings on papal primacy conservatively and he is therefore a liberal.

**JEFFREY JONES**

**Hamburg, New York**

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According to the National Catholic Reporter, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops just voted to declare "abortion is our preeminent priority" saying that the threat of global warming is important but not urgent.

This was in direct opposition to the pope who cautioned against the "ideological error" of believing that "the only thing that counts is one particular ethical issue or cause. … Our defense of innocent unborn needs to be clear, firm and passionate. … Equally sacred, however, are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly … the

victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery and every form of rejection." In a later letter, the pope declared our care of the environment to be a preeminent priority.

By a vote of 143 to 69, led by Philadelphia Archbishop Charles Chaput, the bishops' conference voted to exclude the teaching of the pope that these other issues were "equally important." I am not minimizing the serious issue of killing unborn babies, but Chaput and you 142 other bishops, you should be ashamed of ignoring or subjugating the other equally important problems. Global warming threatens the entire human race, especially the poor and defenseless.

By your vote, you are implying that the life of an unborn baby is more important than the life of a baby who has been born into poverty and exploitation. By your vote, you are implying that the greed, exclusionism, nationalism and abuses so rampant in this country are subordinate to your "preeminent priority." You have lost your way; it is time for the body of Christ to take back our church!

**JIM HEMSCHOOT**

**Stratford, New Jersey**

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Heidi Schlumpf's report on the bishops' conference sadly points out our hierarchy's small-minded and myopic understanding of the crisis facing our nation. Their continued singular obsession with abortion as their preeminent concern sees the re-election of President Donald Trump as a guarantee that *Roe* v. *Wade* will be overturned.

But to what avail and at what price? We suffer a demagogue who would be king. All the things we opposed during the cold war are now the policy of the US: control of information, manipulation of the news, encouragement of corruption, lies, intimidation. We are losing our democracy to tyranny.

So what if *Roe* v. *Wade* is overthrown (along with our democratic way of life). Will abortion decline? Look to Russia. The record shows that there are less abortions under Democratic administrations than Republican. Under our current administration, our national debt has increased by $4 trillion and removes restraints

on corporate greed. Poverty and inadequate wages, which are increasing, will result in more abortions, more contraception, more pollution, and corruption.

Woe to the bishops who encouraged some 61% of Catholics to vote for Trump in 2016 and who seem to have no idea of how lives are lost and destroyed in so many other ways than abortion. A start would be a visit to our prisons and the Mexican side of the US border.

**SYLVESTER BRETSCHNEIDER**

**Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

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This is a comment in regards to this article on what the bishops have voted on to include in "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship." I am a practicing Catholic woman, Cuban-American, and a faithful follower of the church. In the last decade or more, I have slowly realized the bishops of this country are far from the reality of people in the pews. Yes, there are many Catholics who follow the directives or "teachings" of the bishops, but there are also a large group of Catholics who totally disregard their directives.

Unfortunately, those that have not formed their own conscience but rely only on what the pastor or bishop tells them, will follow them blindly and vote accordingly on one issue only, abortion. Like Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister states, they are not "pro-life", they are "pro-birth," and couldn't care less for those already born and in need of our help.

I pray for Pope Francis, that God gives him many more years to appoint bishops that can read the signs of the times and really follow Jesus Christ, not their own interest.

**SILVIA MUÑOZ**

**Doral, Florida**

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Since the U.S. bishops' conference evidences no desire to form or inform consciences for the common good in their alleged voting guidelines, NCR and the laity should consider simply using the conference's "Ethical and Religious Directives

for Healthcare," available at the U.S. bishops' conference website.

The ERDs detail how to make a formed and informed ethical decision, which is what voting requires.

**DONNA ZUROWESTE**

**Manchester, Missouri**

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It is not a coincidence that the first readings at Mass during the bishops' meeting were from the Book of Wisdom, calling religious leaders to higher responsibilities for the community.

Reports about bishops' discussions and decisions regarding what agenda they would advance to form American Catholics' consciences greatly disappointed me and many Catholics with whom I work.

As a philosopher, I have taught my students how to make an argument, gather objective data, provide rational analysis, and be able to distinguish between alternative positions.

We often discussed the rationale behind posing either/or and both/and solutions. The bishops' final statement on what issues Catholics are to focus failed the test of making an adequate argument.

Rather than identifying life as the preeminent issue, and grouping other life challenges under that domain, the majority of bishops chose once again to isolate abortion as the one issue which is preeminent.

Granted, it is a prior condition for living, but is it truly the preeminent concern as viewed from the perspective of Jesus' ministry?

Access to food, housing, education, medical care, and needed reform of criminal justice systems, environmental standards and immigration policy are among the social issues which define "living more abundantly" once one is born into this world as a child of God, created in God's image, and thus entitled to the dignity of being treated well as a human person.

I am not alone in believing that this is what Jesus called all of us to provide to each other, especially as we fulfill his one command: "Love one another as I have loved you."

**MARY HINES**

**Timonium, Maryland**

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There are worst things than abortion. Let's start with pedophilia, bishops' cover-up, war, torture, destroying the planet, gun violence, etc. Abortion should not be the bishops' or anyone else's preeminent concern. If men could get pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament. I am so tired of every presidential election being decided on this one issue. It's time the bishops got their priorities in order.

On the top of their list should be ordain women and make celibacy optional.

**HILARY HUTCHINSON**

**Beaverton, Oregon**

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Thank you for Heidi Schlumpf's insightful article on the bishops' discussion. Speaking as a member of the pew and as a Francis supporter (full disclosure), I am appreciative of the arguments that arise. It helps inform my own conscience, thinking, and political action.

While I would like to see a stronger stand from the bishops on the value of all lives, as a Catholic, I am not waiting for our U.S. bishops to get out in front to lead us. Sadly, as a group they don't, as individuals some do.

**THERESA "TERRI" SETTEDUCATO**

**Butler, New Jersey**

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I am saddened by the fact that in their recent meeting the U.S. bishops did not decide to include more of Pope Francis' thoughts on the importance of all life issues when contemplating reissuing of the "Faithful Citizenship" document. I believe that to stress abortion as the only "preeminent" issue is to fail to see the big picture of what Jesus taught. Yes, abortion is important but so is immigration, help for the homeless, and care for the earth.

I believe that the emphasis on abortion over all other issues is short-sighted and betrays a lack of trust in the power of prayer to change hearts and minds and disregards God's compassionate love for his people. I would rather see the bishops concentrate on providing avenues of help for those women who are facing difficult pregnancies to enable them to choose to have their babies. That is the real solution. We need to put our money where our mouth is — in providing viable alternatives so that women and families can save rather than kill the unborn.

**JERILYN E. FELTON**

**Tigard, Oregon**

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Can we even expect the bishops to be united in opinions in a divided world? Communication from all ends of the spectrum influence people's thinking. Let's admit that the church is no longer the sole authority on life's dilemmas, what we should think, and how to live our lives. Partly because the church has abdicated its responsibility to deal with the modern world. It has been stuck in rules that no longer are relevant to many of today's problems and has not expanded its teachings to deal with the world as it is today.

Have some of our bishops even considered the evils of war, which, besides the killings and destruction, is a major contributor to poverty through its prioritizing of weapons over people's needs; a major contributor to climate change through its predominant use of fossil fuels and other toxic polluters of the earth; a major contributor to refugees as people migrate to seek safety and a life of dignity?

Have some of our bishops ever considered the effects of political systems that emphasize individualism over care for others, consumerism over a frugal lifestyle that preserves the world's resources and distributes them equitably? Have they confronted the plague of gun violence with teachings on alternative ways to solve problems and strong emphasis on nonviolence? Have they condemned the use of hate language and ideas that destroying our "enemies" is the way to keeping us safe?

It seems to me that the time is ripe for the church to address the social message as well as the individual message of Jesus and of many of the prophets of other faiths who have preached love and care for all creatures and for the earth. We now live in a small world, and we are all connected to each other. Hopefully, even the Catholic bishops can unite in this basic message as the way to reach the unity that evades us all. It is the message that must be evangelized and that can perhaps lead to other priorities falling into place.

**SALLY McMILLAN**

**Iowa City, Iowa**

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The NCR editorial article about the lack of leadership of the U.S. bishops has touched me deeply, because I am waiting for a long time for a clear voice from the leadership of the Catholic church against important items in the policy of the present leadership of your country. But I barely hear anything!

We, I mean a number of religious congregations in Europe, of one of them I was for 12 years superior general, are so concerned about the climate, the refugees, the growing gap between rich and poor, the trafficking of human persons, and many other items and we do not hear any encouraging example of what is called the most powerful country of the world.

I am grateful that at least NCR has the courage to mention these shortcomings and give relevant and concrete information that makes matters alarmingly clear. In view of the upcoming elections this is very, very necessary.

**(Br.) JOHAN MUIJTJENS, FIC**

**Maastricht, The Netherlands**

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The editorial " The failed leadership of US bishops is clear" underscores the concept that very little has changed since the time of Jesus, as regards the priestly class of his day in comparison to the bishops of our day. Those bishops plagued by the tunnel vision of prioritizing the moral issue of abortion above all other moral issues called to mind, for me, the priest and Levite in the parable of the good Samaritan who pass by the person who had been robbed and beaten.

I imagined a similar modern scenario in which a bishop and priest on their way to a rally to protest abortion, fail to stop and help a homeless person in their path in obvious need of physical assistance. Many readers might protest that this would never happen.

I would suggest, however, that those bishops who fail to speak out forcefully within their own dioceses against racism, following events like those occurring in Charlottesville, are not unlike the priest and Levite in the parable. Similarly, bishops who failed to publicly condemn the separation of children from their parents at our Mexican border are also like the priest and Levite.

Many of our U.S. bishops, as was painfully obvious in the priest pedophile scandal, are guilty of sins of omission due to their failure to prophetically speak out in defense of those being abused and treated unjustly within our society.

Also, bishops should not hide behind white papers on these issues coming out of their conferences that nobody reads. Catholics in each diocese want to know what their bishops' positions are on these topics, not what other bishops think.

**THOMAS SEVERIN**

**Connellsville, Pennsylvania**

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It has long been my opinion that Pope Francis does not really know what goes on with the American bishops. They are thrilled about that! I have written to the papal

nuncio regarding the leadership in our diocese. A canned letter followed.

What the bishops do seem to respond to is empty collection baskets. Abortion is horrific but it is not the only justice issue that defiles our church. Never are the real social issues addressed in a homily. I cannot imagine Jesus talking about the loaves and fish or Jairus' daughter when innocent children are being caged or elderly can't afford meds or lying goes on daily by our politicians.

It is time for a spiritual revolution where laity step up and do what our silent bishops will not.

**JANE FRANCISCO**

**Charlotte, North Carolina**

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In your editorial, I was with you and cheering all the way until nearly the end when you inserted the following: "the continuing ordination of legions of permanent deacons, another thick layer of male clericalism." As a 19-plus year ordained deacon, I take personal offense at that statement. I learned a very long time ago that "all generalizations are stupid" (including this one).

I and many of my sibling deacons have spent, and continue to spend, many hours daily listening and ministering to those some of the priestly ranks think not worthy of their time. We minister alongside saintly women who are more "diaconal" than we are; we acknowledge our poverty in the face of their witness. We pray for the day we can all minister together as recognized, ordained, deacons in the Catholic Church.

I understand and painfully recognize that some of my brother deacons are married "priest wannabes," and perhaps part of the clerical culture that we need to rid ourselves and the church of, but to be lumped in as part of the problem is an unacceptable stab. In fairness, some of those "priest wannabes" found the diaconate a way to serve God's people in ways that were not allowed via the mandatory celibacy of the (Roman) priesthood.

There are many of us toiling in the Lord's vineyard, happy to contribute to the harvest. Please don't lump us all with the greedy landowner!

**(Deacon) DICK CURRIE**

**Trenton, New Jersey**

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