Opinion
News



by NCR Staff

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Last month, NCR published a three-part series by National Correspondent Heidi Schlumpf that focused on Matthew Kelly, an influential Catholic author and speaker. The series looked into his life, his finances and his program for parishes. An NCR editorial then cautioned how Kelly's "mix of motivational talk and business-speak logic" hopes to "offer a path out of what he constructs as a kind of Catholic malaise." Letters to the editor have been edited for length and clarity. To join the conversation, follow the steps listed below.

Do we need to hype up the work of the Spirit? Is the work and word of Jesus no longer stirring the heart? Is there an app for that?

Then I guess we need business men to sell the word and preach the gospel because seemingly those who have committed their lives — celibate or not — to preaching the gospel have not done the job.

How many other programs have churches bought in to excite their young people or their followers? And how come they didn't work? And American Catholic churches are full of eager parishioners? Hmm.

DAVE MURRAY

Cedarville, Michigan

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Thank you for your recent articles on Matthew Kelly. I am not sure what to make of him. I have viewed some of his Lent and Advent podcasts and find them superficial and glib. They sound like the prosperity gospels of so many TV hucksters: "be the best version of yourself."



His business dealings between his non-profit and for-profit companies give the appearance of being unethical. With increasing money and power, comes the prospect of corruption and loss of credibility. I hope that is not the case here.

STEPHEN FLYNN

Westlake, Ohio

***

"Feed my lambs, feed my sheep" and it's OK to get rich doing it?

Someone once said, "people get the kind of government they put up with" so I guess the sheep get the kind of church they put up with. Fleeced but going to heaven?

JOHN CHUCHMAN

Scottsdale, Arizona

***

Thank you, NCR, for today's editorial, "We are wary of answers for sale" and for the in-depth reporting of Heidi Schlumpf on the Matthew Kelly enterprise. You have astutely and clearly unpacked the layers and presented the facts. You also have given me the words I have lacked while standing aghast at the insidious infiltration of the "gospel" according to Matthew Kelly.

The more I read, the more I understand why church hierarchy is all about embracing Kelly: he provides the business and sales acumen, language, charisma and vehicles to support a hierarchy consumed more with the preservation of a male, top-down, hierarchal institution — and their own power and position in it — than with the Gospel.

Not only am I wary of answers for sale, I am weary of it ... all of it.

JEAN LOPEZ

St. Louis, Missouri

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Yes, you're right about answers for sale. Los Angeles Auxiliary Bishop Robert Barron, as one of those marketers, is getting very worried about the competition against his "institute." He wants to censor them, a move that's right in line with his overall

medieval mind set. Bring back the inquisition? It's laughable.

INGRID HARRIS

Hamilton, Ontario

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Your editorial is light on substance, yet heavy on inuendo and apparent suspicion of his more "orthodox" approach to the faith. You don't have any figures to convict him of being a money grabber, yet you clearly give the impression that he, in fact, is just that. He was wise not to grant you a regular interview, because you apparently had already made up your mind about his work.

I have read several of his books, and for me and many in my parish they shed a new light on applying the gospel to everyday life. I can understand that you may have a different approach to the faith based on classical church social teaching, but you leave the impression that you are envious of his unique success.

I also think it is ironic that as I navigate your web page, I'm constantly being asked to donate money to your work. It is as if it's OK for you to raise money to keep your work going, but you view Kelly's efforts with suspicion, if not disgust.

DAVID HICKIN

Cleveland, Ohio

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I find it quite disturbing that NCR finds it necessary to criticize Matthew Kelly's work. I have read many of his books and attended several talks; my faith and activity in my parish have been greatly enhanced with his positivity and encouragement.

Making money from his profitable companies allows him to promote our Catholic faith.

All your grandstanding against someone who is working to expand our reach in faith is embarrassing. I pray you give consideration to retracting your bashing and snarky remarks and be a part of Dynamic Catholic in their positive influence and faithful works.

KATHY WANDSTRAT

Cincinnati, Ohio

***

I am very happy for this article because as I read the one about Matthew Kelly's empire, I grew more and more wary of how this can influence the true message of the church. We are growing not just more corporate, using slick marketing, polished rhetoric and shiny mechanisms of media and book-selling that dazzle parishioners eyes and hearts, falsely, in a game of catch-up to the evangelical mega churches.

We prided ourselves in simply being non-commercial and now we believe we need to compete on this level in order to do the "new evangelization." Well, this is hardly new and I deem insidious for the church.

> *Kelly asks an essential question but leaves out the very difficult questions that the real church actually faces. If the video is indicative of his dream, there's not a black or brown face in his church, no undocumented persons, there are no unhappy people, only those "less fortunate," who will, in the new church, be helped in "sustainable ways." It is a "can do" campaign ad, a corporate pep talk, a gospel of smooth paths.*

The danger here is in touting a white church anew and claiming that whiteness. This is a subtle, but more insidious agenda than our president. Diversity and multi-culturalism ought to be embraced in our church as a leader.

Let's retrieve our roots of true Catholic teaching. Let's leave the circus act to those entertainers and animals outside the temple complex.

JANICE L. POSS

Claremont, California

***

Thank you for this. Very well put. Nowadays it seems that everyone in any Christian religion has something of their religion to sell, even on a small level.

I naively believed that Catholics wouldn't stoop to that. Spiritual direction seems to be the latest. One can get certified as a spiritual director and then hang a shingle. Whatever happened to just connecting with another person in a heart to heart way and then taking a walk or having a cup of coffee and discussing one's deepest experiences of genuine faith?

MARK LINDAHL

Des Moines, Iowa

***

Once upon a time, in a galaxy not too far away, we had "missions" given by mission bands of priests, order or diocesan. These men were adept at giving an inspiring homily and direction to those in attendance. Granted some were hell fire and brimstone, but many in the last two decades were fruitful.

Now we seem to have to be entertained. It is understandable that in the age of technology we have to have a program. Could we not leave our need for entertainment for an hour and tend to the technology of the soul?

JANE FRANCISCO

Charlotte, North Carolina

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Just because overworked pastors have access to the ability to "give" their congregation a "free" book does not mean it is free.

It is my experience that most faithful are looking for easy and quick insights to a faith that is rich and complex. There is a lack of critical thinking skills in our culture and a strong need to have our faith in a box. No searching for the questions. A fear of not getting it "right." No personal acceptance of the ability to encounter Jesus the Christ. No mentoring by those have lived their faith. The inability to "be still and

know I am God."

CHERI HALL

Louisville, Kentucky

***

As a longtime fan of both NCR and Dynamic Catholic, it was distressing to read your recent editorial, "We are wary of answers for sale" and the very biased series of articles by Heidi Schlumpf. What spirit possessed you to harshly (and unfairly) attack one of the best examples of the "new evangelization" in our church today? Was it really the spirit of Jesus, or rather a spirit of jealously or rivalry?

Anyone who has encountered Matthew Kelly knows he is not driven by profit, as you insinuate, but is motivated by an authentic spirit of sharing the Gospel of Jesus and re-energizing the Catholic Church. You focused on the large budgets of his publishing enterprises, but you failed to mention the huge numbers of books published and the extremely low cost (or profit) per book. Nor did you offer any financial comparisons with other Catholic book publishers (not to mention NCR's own budget). If Dynamic Catholic used any other publisher, their books would cost much, much more. In order to make his own and other author's books available to large audiences, he started his own publishing company, which allows them to offer books so cheaply that parishes can afford to give away hundreds or even thousands of copies for free. What a brilliant and effective means of evangelization!

You also harshly criticize Dynamic Catholic's "Ambassador Program." But what about the "NCR Forward" program? Don't you also ask people for monthly donations? There is nothing wrong with this style of fund raising, since St. Paul himself did something similar. He recommended putting aside smaller amounts regularly, rather than just making a one-time donation; and he appealed to people who had already been positively affected by his preaching to help extend his ministry even wider.

So I hope NCR will not give in to a spirit of jealousy or rivalry, but rather see that Dynamic Catholic is very innovative and effective in helping many people rediscover Jesus and deepen their Catholic Christian faith!

(Fr.) FELIX JUST, S.J.

San Francisco, California

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This is in response to the series uncovering questionable practices in Matthew Kelly's media ministry:

I have read several of Matthew Kelly's books and do not find them particularly inspiring. They are to me a repackaging of the same "inside the box" message the church has been trying for years. The popularity of his media is more a commentary on the absence of deep wisdom and wise teachers in our parishes than on Kelly's success.

As far as his business model, I am not a businessperson, but I work with them regularly. The mentality of the American business person is quite odd to me in its reluctance to self-examine and its eagerness to reframe all events, no matter how troubling, as "opportunities" to enhance one's image of success. The best words I have read on success come from Jesuit Fr. Greg Boyle, the founder of Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles:

> *Jesus was always too busy being faithful to worry about success. I'm not opposed to success; I just think we should accept it only if it is a byproduct of our fidelity. If our primary concern is results, we will choose to work only with the people who give us good ones.*

TRACEY HOELZLE

Cincinnati, Ohio

Advertisement

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One part of the Catholic Church primarily funds its operations with a Sunday collection.

Another part of the Catholic Church, led by Mathew Kelly, primarily funds his evangelization with book sales and video programs.

One of these parts is Spirit-filled, creative and alive. It's not the one taking Sunday collections.

This article is biased and judgmental. It assumes Sunday collections are inherently more moral than selling books. It does nothing to assess the relative effectiveness of evangelization.

The Catholic Church must change. NCR can do much better than this article.

CARL G. LONGNECKER, JR.

Tampa, Florida

***

I applaud your editorial that takes a deep dive into Matthew Kelly's efforts to re-vitalize Catholicism (while filling his personal coffers).

I especially applaud this paragraph in the editorial: "If the video is indicative of his dream, there's not a black or brown face in his church, no undocumented persons, there are no unhappy people, only those 'less fortunate,' who will, in the new church, be helped in 'sustainable ways.' It is a 'can do' campaign ad, a corporate pep talk, a gospel of smooth paths."

Exactly! When did the Roman Catholic Church become a "whites only, upwardly mobile" church?

I prefer Pope Francis' approach to evangelizing — walk with the poor, share the "smell of the sheep," love those who are different from you.

Lastly, I applaud the last sentence in your editorial: "Jesus did not commission a sales force." Amen!

MARY WUDTKE

Chicago, Illinois

***

Your editorial on Matthew Kelly, while expressing a reasonable skepticism about the motives underlying what has become something of a financial empire, nonetheless

ended on a note that gave me pause. "Beware contentment. Jesus did not commission a sales force." Catchy! Can't say that I agree, though.

"Go, and make disciples of all nations" reads like a charge to a sales force to me, and while Christianity offers no promise of riches or ease, it does promise contentment — an inner peace that is ours despite the challenges we might face.

I have observed in my life, and many others have said the same about theirs, that God prepares us for what we are called to do. It strikes me that Matthew Kelly just might be answering a call and that his background and experience prepared him for the work he is doing.

Might he be seduced by the money that has come to him? Of course. That does not preclude his being God's instrument, nor does it prevent using American business principles in furtherance of spreading the good news of god's embracing love.

JOEL GAGNON

West Danby, New York

***

In your editorial, you state, accurately I believe:

> *We have become, instead, a passive market for the latest program promising revival and new purpose. It is our obligation to understand that many, if not most, of these offerings share a basis not in Christian Scripture but in American business principles.*

With very little change, this applies to what has and has not happened to liturgy in the United States since the Second Vatican Council, where "some of the greatest beneficiaries of lay engagement [read: liturgical renewal] in the post-Vatican II era are the entrepreneurs."

The bishops refused to function as teachers after the council, depending on legislation as the only means of change. The clergy were not provided symposia or continuing education materials, nor did the bishops preach or issue explanatory documents.

Catholic publishers took up the slack, mostly for the sake of music sales, and hymnal producers added periodicals. New music, new hymnals, new banners and decorations were shared and promoted.

Writers and performers sought their own financial advantages. Liturgical artists and architects searched the documents seeking "proof texts" to support their employment without understanding the underlying principles or examining their own preconceptions and accepted practices. Everything was directed to particular market segment interest groups instead of toward re-educating the liturgical participants.

Instead of liturgy truly becoming the prayer of the people, the renewal provided profit for the professionals.

TOM POELKER

St. Louis, Missouri

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts and ideas, reactions and responses to letters@ncronline.org. The editor will collect them, curate them and publish a sampling in Letters to the Editor online or in our print edition.

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Letters to the editor should be limited to 250 words.

Letters must include your name, street address, city, state and zip code. We will publish your name and city, state, but not your full address.

If the letter refers to a specific article published at ncronline.org, please send in the headline or the link of the article.

Please include a daytime telephone number where we can reach you. We will not publish your phone number. It may be used for verification.

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