Opinion



by NCR Staff

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Each month, NCR gathers up a sampling of letters to the editor from our readers in response to articles and columns that appear on NCRonline. This week, we will focus on letters received in May 2020. To join the conversation, follow the guidelines at the end of this post.

Joshua McElwee writes in "Cardinal Pell's release stokes concerns about Australia's plenary council" that "A plenary council is essentially a formal gathering of all the

Catholic bishops of a national territory, so that they can assess and plan for pastoral needs across their various dioceses together."

This is not correct. A plenary council is not a gathering of bishops. Rather it is a gathering of all the particular churches of a nation, and the highest expression of their communion with one another. Consequently, others must and can be called to participate, including priests, deacons, male and female religious, and lay men and women.

Of the 256 participants so far called to the Australian Plenary Council the make-up is: 144 ordained clerics (56.3%), 30 (11.7%) lay religious men (4) and women (26), and 82 (32.0%) non-religious lay women (51) and men (31). There are 179 men (69.9%) and 77 women (30.1%). A total of 38 bishops have been called.

PETER WILKINSON

President of Catholics for Renewal

Doncaster Heights, Australia

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Cardinal George Pell is right, but not in the way he thinks. There's a culture war alright, being waged against the pedophile culture in the church, which protects and promotes based on suspect criteria that badly need revealing and revision.

Putting aside the necessary discussion of necessarily deep and radical change within the hierarchical structure along with the metaphysical flummery that supports and sustains it will only serve to exacerbate the rejection of the church by outsiders and insiders alike.

The roots of corruption in the ecclesiastical structure are deep and rhizomatic. Only turning the soil deeply and thoroughly will reveal what needs to be done to renew trust. Nothing less will stop the pew emptying process.

INGRID HARRIS

Hamilton, Ontario

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I am surprised by Joshua McElwee's article.

The tone of the article, is that the release of a wrongfully convicted and wrongfully imprisoned man is a setback for the church.

Am I the only person who finds this line of reasoning truly amazing?



I do not know Cardinal George Pell. I have not met him. I do not know what he might have done.

But I do know this much in respect of the allegations that resulted in a wrongful conviction:

- A conviction requires guilt beyond reasonable doubt
- There was one witness who alleged a criminal act
- There were some 20-plus witnesses, unchallenged, who stated this criminal act did not or could not happen
- Twenty say no, one says yes
- This is reasonable doubt
- There should not have been a conviction

This summation does not address the sheer improbability of the alleged crimes. The first allegation that an assault took place in an impossible time in an impossible place heaving with people. The second allegation that an assault took place in front of 50 other choir members, none of whom saw anything.

Without going into the improbability, the six bullet points above indicate to me that this is a case that ought not to have got past the first committal hearing, the first jury, or, the appeal court. It is surprising that it took the High Court to fix the miscarriage.

And McElwee's reaction? That the correction of a miscarriage of justice is a setback for the church.

This is truly an amazing perspective.

JOSEPH PHILLIPOS

Mount Waverley, Australia

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This is not a comment on the specific Cardinal George Pell charges or the legal process followed. I leave that to others.

As an Australian Catholic (pretty much ex-Catholic now), I am hugely conflicted by what has transpired in my church over the last 10 years or so. While I am appalled by the sexual abuse perpetrated by individual priests, I am not totally surprised. Priests are not immune to the evils humans are capable of.

What absolutely appalls me is the sheer scale of the abuse, the time span of the abuse and the wholesale cover-up by the church hierarchy. This simply could not have happened over such a long time at such a large scale without hierarchical knowledge, protection or cover-up. A cover-up that today continues in the form of obfuscation, legalistic blocking of victims and backdoor politicking to protect the institution above all regardless of how that conflicts with the values, principles and morals of our faith.

I am not surprised that Pell is such a lightning rod for all that is rotten in the Australian Catholic Church. He has dominated it for the last two decades.

Even his supporters acknowledge that he is arrogant, pugilistic, domineering and often described as a bully. Because of my work, I was in the room when Pell and Dennis Hart, Archbishop of Melbourne, gave evidence to the Parliament of Victoria enquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other non-government organizations. Their attitude was detached, annoyed and out of touch. Pell was

aggressive, condescending and arrogant.

He has pushed, cajoled and bullied the Australian Catholic Church into an amazing financial position with a vast network of schools, hospitals, nursing homes and social enterprises. He has managed the church like a business delivering much social good. But in the process, he has established a closed culture of cover-up, clericalism, "defend the institution at all costs" and let the victims and the laity be dammed. His influence has seen his proteges take the highest roles in the church and perpetuate this culture albeit with a veneer of carefully drafted statements of concern, care, sorrow and reconciliation. Never repentance.

PETER LOCHERT

Ivanhoe East, Australia

The article on the "Armed mobs: the grim apotheosis of libertarianism" by Michael Sean Winters was excellent. By extension, if you read all of the links Winters included, one could learn a great deal about libertarianism: its roots and possible negative effect that it can have on our country.

I cannot help but wonder that when the social distancing is done what kind of a world will we be going back to? I am in hopes that we know our history well enough so that we don't make the same mistakes that history has already told us we should avoid.

(Fr.) CHRISTOPHER SENK

Fort Myers, Florida

Joan Chittister's "What are we looking for? Power or leadership?" states:

> For the real saints of every system, leadership is not about strategic planning and decision-making skills, about team building and delegation of authority, about communication techniques or innovation. Those are leadership tools that can be taught to anyone. They are not what defines a

> real leader. Real leadership is about the quality of life the leader shapes for the entire society.

Certainly such "tools" can be taught to anyone. But these are skills and not simply tools. They must be mastered. One might learn how to write, but this does not mean one can write well, or with real effectiveness. A real leader will possess these abilities in order to achieve the desired result — with integrity.

Chittister could have made her point without this sentence. It should have been omitted.

MIKE KURZAWA

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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Sr. Joan Chittister's article points out clearly the pivotal fact about what is wrong with today's social mythology, where large sections of the population falsely believe they live in a "democracy."

What the writer outlines about power replacing leadership is what I have been thinking and saying for years. However, this basic insight does not get mentioned often in the mainstream media. American and other societies are on a dangerous blinkered path to authoritarianism that will probably be far more destructive to humanity than the fascist regimes of the early 20th century, because they will have paralyzed the public's ability to judge and criticize, while at the same time hastening humanity's path to its own extinction, together with over 99% of all species that ever lived.

CYRIL NORTH

Brampton, Ontario

I don't know what this piece, "'Digital Jesuit' Robert Ballecer reflects on life in Vatican quarantine," was meant to convey. It did remind me though of the old "nuns playing volleyball" photos of yesteryear. Cute but harmless.

I still don't know what "the new evangelization" is supposed to mean. This especially after reading that Ballecer was summoned to Rome to — OMG — set up three video studios! Sounds like they're still finishing up a very "old evangelization."

Besides selfies, video games and political tweeting, what is Ballecer actually evangelizing? Seems like the "new evangelization" so far as I can tell, is just pleading "see how cool we are?"

STEPHEN CONNOR

Cobourg, Ontario

The article, "Naming the dehumanizing agenda of some Christians" by Fr. Daniel P. Horan is accurate and a needed corrective of endemic unchristian behavior. Would that a bishop had penned it!

I have vague childhood memories of 1950s impassioned harangues from the pulpit about the personal faults and sins of those present. I marvel now how the adults (including my parents) were infantilized as witless miscreants. Nevertheless, something like those threatening diatribes, but directed against sins like greed, defamation, racism, bigotry, etc. might be called for in 2020, but probably would be too offensive to the donor class.

I have recently been encouraged to get out of my silo and learn from exposure to the views of those with whom I disagree. How sad that not always, but all too often, the corn in another silo is found to be verminous and rotted.

What a challenge for faith, love and charity is 21st century America! Perhaps it was ever thus.

CHAD DONOVAN

Cheshire, Connecticut

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This article hits on something that has been bothering me for a long time. It seems that many Christians have made abortion their singular issue when it comes to choosing who to vote for. They call themselves "pro-life" but, aside from unborn

babies, their actions, words and attitudes towards others are anything but pro-life. I think it would be far more accurate if they called themselves anti-abortion and left it at that.

Sadly, we are all suffering the consequences of the closed mindedness of Christians who have ignored some of the most basic of Christ's teachings, not to mention the like-minded leaders those Christians have helped put into positions of great power.

JOANNA RYDER

Hermosa Beach, California

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This article concludes with the statement, "This failure was on full display recently in the behavior of some American prelates whose sycophantic relationship to President Donald Trump, arguably the least Christian U.S. president in modern history, lacks the necessary self-awareness expected of Christian leaders."

If NCR agrees with this statement, then why is it not taking the lead in submitting a petition to Pope Francis to defrock New York Cardinal Timothy Dolan for pursuit of such a dehumanizing agenda by throwing in his lot with our divider-in-chief and his narcissistic, megalomaniacal agenda?

The hypocritical scandal of having leaders like Dolan (assuming he gets defrocked) leading the American church plays a major role in driving true Christians away from the church in droves! This is particularly true of younger Christians.

Given its current leadership, it's difficult to view the U.S. Catholic Church as a Christian church.

KENNETH R. JONES

Silver Spring, Maryland

I'm writing to commend Sarah Salvadore's superb piece on problems with faith-based health cost sharing programs, "Health cost sharing ministries leave many out in the cold, critics say." When will the U.S. bishops' conference wake up and realize that universal healthcare is a foundational pro-life issue?

I'm deeply grateful to NCR for promoting a truly Catholic vision for our church, our nation and our world. Your courage, creativity and faithfulness gives me hope that our badly deformed institutional church may yet be healed.

MARY ELLEN SINKIEWICZ

Dorchester, Massachusetts

Tara Isabella Burton's very interesting article on "Christianity Gets Weird" affords Jamie Manson an opportunity to issue a diatribe against her version of "the deplorables," i.e. traditional Christians in her article "Are 'Weird Christians' really 'punk,' or just elitist?."

Burton distinguishes between "alt-right" traditional Christians and Weird Christians who are searching in older forms of liturgy and belief for an alternative for the religious emptiness of secular culture, even though they may be progressive in their political views. Manson, however, will not tolerate any such distinction. She contends that Ron Dreher is the "architect of Weird Christianity" and that his very politically incorrect views can and should be attached to the Weird Christians. This, even though Dreher is only briefly mentioned in Burton's article in support of the view that aesthetics matter in worship. Manson asserts that most millennials also are longing for some sense of tradition that connect them with something older and greater than themselves. How, then, does she explain why so many of them are "nones"?

I'm in my 70s and a member of what most would consider to be a progressive Catholic intentional community. I have only been to a Latin Mass once. I suspect that Manson and I would agree on most topics. However, I recognize unfair bias when I see it. If Manson is looking for "spiritual elitists" she has only to look in the mirror.

NEIL JENSEN

Baltimore, Maryland

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I read both Tara Isabella Burton's New York Times piece and Jamie Manson's NCR response and think that each missed an important part of the story about these new

traditionalists.

While the movement (I'm being generous) proclaims its return to practices and pieties of the Middle Ages, neither article addresses their ecclesiology. This is an important point because those whom I have encountered show a clear preference for an old-fashioned type of clericalism.

The truth of the matter is, as Manson so clearly articulates, Weird Christians want to escape the challenges facing modern faith by retreating into past practices. It is also clear from conversations with members of this cohort and some Catholic seminarians of this group that they do not want to think for themselves. They appear to want the pope (of their choice) and bishops (of their choice) to tell them what and how to think and believe. Good luck not becoming a cult with that kind of an attitude.

They are choosing to stay spiritual infants for life.

CHRIS COUNTRYMAN

Indianapolis, Indiana

Advertisement

While I think Sr. Joan Chittister has a point about "demassification" of news in "Is it news or propaganda, and how do we know?" and her assessment of how we got to that point is stellar, I would point out that our culture has moved to support a childish definition of one of the basic building blocks of democracy — freedom. I believe that what has happened over the last 200 years is that the definition of

"freedom" has actually morphed, becoming in actuality, "license," for one can do anything one wishes because "it's all about me."

This insidious lie justifies the individual and supports his belief that his view is reality, what she thinks is true whether or not it jives with what is happening. This backs the human person into a corner where "anything I say goes." Thus, it would seem that besides the things Chittister mentioned, we also have to look deeper at the shifting cultural definitions and redefine concepts that more accurately reflect reality. Just because I say it, it does not make it so.

JERILYN E. FELTON

Tigard, Oregon

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Sr. Joan Chittister's essay expresses a wish for truth. We are not likely to know all the truth from one or three media, but we can consider the Media Bias Chart. This chart, which has a static as well as a changing format, shows that several news media can be relied on for little or balanced bias.

Some analysis and opinion sources will show more left or right bias; and some will diverge more into propaganda with lies, incomplete treatment, unfairness and inaccuracies. The graphics of the chart, small print and large number of sources make the chart somewhat challenging to read. The company offers other resources, perhaps useful to educators.

GEORGE MARSH

Tiffin, Ohio

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As always, Sr. Joan Chittister hits the nail on the head. In this age of news bombardment, especially cable on demand, we are saturated with news. What is frustrating to me is the bias and slant of the reporting.

As for having a national news outlet or government news outlet that presents truth and facts, I think Chittister will have to start praying for a miracle.

JANE FRANCISCO

Charlotte, North Carolina

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I like Sr. Joan Chittister, but am afraid I didn't get her point. It seemed she was in support of a national/governmental news media as is seen in Ireland, England, Russia and Italy of which private news stations can offer a critique for the result of a balanced informational picture.

I am afraid I don't get the point here since it will essentially be someone deciding what is not the truth, what is or is not propaganda. Bias is universal and spin is inevitable.

We can change the structures but it is still peoples' opinions that get presented. I don't see how adding the stamp of the state as in state-run news agency will make any difference.

It does seem to me that getting entertainment out of news would help a lot.

GEORGE ECKENRODE

Phoenix, Arizona

I totally agree with Colman McCarthy's article "Is there a doctor in the house who can stand up to Trump?"

But unfortunately, we live in this world, and in this time, with this malignant narcissistic president.

And it's a sure bet, that if either Dr. Anthony Fauci or Dr. Deborah Birx ever tried to take the mic away from Trump, and spoke actual truth — or — waited until their five minutes of mic time and used that to tell the actual truth, Trump would have them fired. And we desperately need both of them because that's the only way we are going to get the honest truth. I do not want to see Fauci or Birx gone.

Their departures would frighten everyone who's left in the administration even more than they already are — and we've lost way too many decent, honest, good people

already.

MARY WUDTKE

Chicago, Illinois

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Colman McCarthy is one writer who speaks the truth about the vital need for many more "truth tellers" in Washington, D.C., particularly in such critical times.

Keep going, Colman! We need your wisdom now, more than ever!

JIM LICHTMAN

Santa Barbara, California

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I disagree with the two options Colman McCarthy proposes for Dr. Anthony Fauci and Dr. Deborah Birx in the face of the president's constant barrage of misinformation during the so-called briefings, more correctly called campaign rallies.

Directly confronting President Donald Trump and calling out his misstatements and lies would surely result in immediate dismissal and their no longer being able to provide correcting guidance to the public. The doctors would probably also lose access to important information which is the basis of the advice they provide to the public.

I believe it is rather the responsibility of the media to point out the president's self-aggrandizing and misleading statements, while accurately reporting the excellent guidance given by the two doctors. Surely they do not return to those briefings because they enjoy them. We the people owe them big time.

ED DILGEN

Glenmont, New York

I appreciated Michael Sean Winters' column "Has the conservative Catholic project exhausted itself?" What I appreciated the most but I fear will not be appreciated as widely as it should be is the title.

What younger readers and even some others might not realize is that Winters is making a reference to an event 21 years ago when in a homily at Old St. Pat's Church in Chicago, then Archbishop Francis George preached that "liberal Catholicism is an exhausted project."

Sitting in the pews at that Mass happened to be Peggy O'Brien Steinfels, the then-editor of Commonweal. Steinfels invited the archbishop to further elaborate on that thought and from that conversation came an incredibly good symposium at Loyola University with the presentations published in Commonweal (November 19, 1999). All of the panelists were insightful, kind, thoughtful, charitable and left a contribution to Catholic thought.

KURT VORNDRAN

Washington, D.C.

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Michael Sean Winters' article on the apology of Ron Dreher to the editor of First Things journal reflects accurately the often incomprehensible perspectives of many conservative Catholic thinkers today. One thinks of earliest days of the church when such unnecessary divisions caused so much distress to St. Paul.

I wonder what we will do when we at last get to heaven and need to apologize to God for our selfishness and blindness to the brotherhood Jesus required of each of us.

KEVIN PLUNKETT

Mountain View, California

Shanon Sterringer, as featured in "Path to priesthood leads Ohio woman to create community at Hildegard Haus," and the 300-plus other ordained Catholic women priests in Europe and the U.S. teach us so much about the faith given us by Jesus

Christ. Our faith isn't about the minister; it's about the lessons of Jesus Christ.

The Catholic Church hierarchy places the focus on the messenger. Does anyone seriously doubt that if Jesus Christ was walking the streets of the world today, he would admonish any woman who wanted to be a priest?

The ordination of women is about power not religion. It is about the church not the faith.

ROBERT WEDL

Minneapolis, Minneapolis

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Great and heartwarming story. This will be exactly how we build the Catholic Church here on earth, when we get past the clerical hierarchy of men and into the business of doing Jesus' work.

My only question is how do we get someone to bring this type of Catholicism to the Denver area? How can we enlist women and build a community that we might even pay for/support the woman's education so it isn't so onerous for an individual? We in the Denver area are particularly disenfranchised due to the ultraconservative bishops and the evangelical dominance in Colorado Springs (think Focus on the Family). We could really use a breath of fresh air and a new and welcoming vision of scripture!

BILL SARGE

Aurora, Colorado

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I found it heartening to read Don Clemmer's article about the woman priest who operates Hildegard Haus in Fairport Harbor, Ohio. Shanon Sterringer was ordained in Austria last year under the auspices of the Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests (ARCWP). The article points out that despite condemnation by the Vatican,

women priests continue to do Christ's work in the world. ARCWP affiliates include 19 inclusive Catholic communities in Canada and the United States. Hildegard Haus is one of them.

Readers wanting to know more about ARCWP and Inclusive Catholic Communities can visit the association's website at https://arcwp.org.

ED DILGEN

Glenmont, New York

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What a wonderful article! I wish there would be more women like Shanon Sterringer willing to follow their dream and calling to be a priest. I have met many wonderful women, well-trained, caring and fully committed to working for the kingdom of God, that would have made excellent priest.

It is sad that at this age, we are still leaving half of humanity out of fully participating in the church. And to add insult to injury, to be excommunicated for following your call to serve God, while pedophile priest are just given a slap on the hands, is beyond my understanding. But it is all about power, power insecure men don't want to give up.

Congratulations Sterringer! May God continue to bless you and your community.

SILVIA MUÑOZ

Doral, Florida

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