Opinion



by NCR Staff

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A month ago, the Vatican reiterated that Catholic parishes should normally be led by priests, stressing that arrangements for religious sisters or laypeople to head local parish communities can only be made when there is a shortage of ordained ministers. NCR columnist and board member Sr. Christine Schenk expressed her frustration with the instructions, saying that the vision is moribund because there are already too few priests. But the instructions also give hope to parishioners fighting to keep their parishes open. Below are letters to the editor responding to the instructions. They have been edited for length and clarity.

The problem remains when there is insufficient clarity, because our laity minds are clouded by the past actions of church hierarchy, which have caused us to lose trust. The only way that trust will be regained is through action, mandating that the laity must be involved in the secular operations of the church.

Our church has always been secretive, which I can only presume must be built upon invalid assumptions. Those of us of three score and more attest to a totally different awareness of our relationship with an all-encompassing loving God, rather than the one-dimensional God that tried to "keep us in line."

The best way we can all grow in our faith is to exercise the best versions of ourselves both physically and spiritually.

**RANDAL AGOSTINI**

**Satellite Beach, Florida**



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"The priest is still the boss" seems to sum up the instruction. The status quo of clericalism remains.

I believe the teaching and tenet regarding the priesthood of all the baptized needs more elaboration and emphasis. "Where two or three are gathered in my name I am there in the midst of you." Christ is present by the power of the faithful, irrespective of rank. Is this real presence less than the eucharistic presence?

This question needs to be open to debate and the question of the priesthood of the faithful.

Let us abandon the distinction between laity and clerics. Being reduced to the lay state is demeaning to all believers.

**JOSEPH CAMPBELL**

**Winnipeg, Canada**

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Limiting the role of pastor to a priest (presumed male) is poppycock. The operative word in the Vatican statement is "competencies."

In my almost 80 years as a practicing Catholic, I have met exactly three men who I consider competent in all the duties required to manage a parish. These three had the ability to practice enlightened human resource and financial management or knew how to select competent professionals for help. I won't even begin to recall the numbers who could actually preach well.

The fault lies in seminary training and the ban on women and married priests. Until there is a radical reform of this training, incompetent men will continue to be ordained and made pastors. Meanwhile, lay ministers, women religious and deacons who are competent will continue to languish in frustration watching incompetence drag down the church. Now if there are plans to expand the definition of priest to women or married men there might be room for hope.

**MARY LOUISE HARTMAN**

**Princeton, New Jersey**

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Are you kidding me? Only the priest can be in the complete care of souls? I guess we have to wait till the last priest alive drops dead until the Second Vatican Council's directive that "we are the living stones of the church" takes root.

This again is about power and control. The parish belongs to the people. Until the people wake up and find their voice, this clerical monarchy will prevail and many will

be leaving to find their place in a welcoming and inclusive church.

**JANE FRANCISCO**

**Charlotte, North Carolina**

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I wonder why I would pray for priestly vocations. Only in the face of a shortage of priests may lay people be appointed to the leadership roles envisioned, or at least postulated, by Pope Francis.

In fact, as NCR points out, the Code of Canon Law says it is "possible that, due to a lack of priests, a bishop can entrust 'participation in the exercise of the pastoral care of a parish … to a deacon, to another person who is not a priest, or to a community of persons.' " The assertion in the instruction from the Congregation for Clergy states emphatically, "directing, coordinating, moderating or governing the Parish … are the competencies of a priest alone."

Now, I may be a little foggy on my sacramental theology, but I do not believe directing, coordinating, moderating or governing are charisms imparted in the Sacrament of Holy Orders. In fact, many pastors have demonstrated conclusively that these charisms are not there. Consequently, my practical mind tells me to pray for a shortage of priests so the Holy Spirit can be free to bring about needed changes in leadership roles among the laity and consecrated persons.

**JIM HEMSCHOOT**

**Stratford, New Jersey**

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I have been a strong supporter of Pope Francis but for him to give his approval to the latest directive on parish life devastates me. It affirms clericalism in the strongest terms despite the harm it has done to women and the laity.

We clearly need structural change on the parish level but this "same old same old" is a slap in the face and terribly disappointing. There has to be a better way.

**GERARD A. WEIGEL**

**Somerset, Kentucky**

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By our baptism we are supposed to be one. I have worked for and with some priests who understood the church belongs to all, not just the clergy. In fact, without the laity how would our clerics live so high while parishioners barely survive?

Our priest with his salary and benefits receives more in income than about 70% of the parishioners, myself included. The amount of actual work he does is questionable. He didn't even celebrate Mass last Thanksgiving!

I think if clerics were married and had to pay all their bills from a set salary with no benefits other than health insurance, they would see the world differently. Being a cleric in the Catholic Church is a guaranteed income only the richest in the U.S. can afford. Most of our clerics would find it hard to survive as an order priest as they would have to take the vow of poverty.

**KAY BROWN**

**Tulsa, Oklahoma**

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