Opinion



by NCR Staff

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More NCR readers responded to the recent Vatican instructions that Catholic parishes should normally be led by priests. The Vatican also announced that changing the words of the formula for baptism renders the sacrament invalid, causing a bit of a theological debate. After the Aug. 6 announcement, one pastor, Fr. Matthew Hood, had to re-receive the sacraments — he was baptized, confirmed and received the Eucharist on Aug. 9 and was ordained a transitional deacon Aug. 15 and a priest on Aug. 17. Below are letters to the editor. They have been edited for length and clarity.

I have read with excitement the Vatican's recent statement on parishes. And, contrary to one commenter, there is a big difference between "where two or three are gathered, Jesus is there" and having a Catholic priest.

A Catholic priest is "in persona Christi." Jesus literally works through his Catholic priest sacramentally. Too many want to downplay not only the necessity of having a Catholic priest, but also having an all and only male Catholic priesthood.

As a convert to Catholicism, each parish needs to see how crucial this is, and ought to be praying for more vocations to the priesthood and religious life either before or after every holy Mass. There's nothing wrong with being a member of the laity. There's nothing demeaning about playing a supporting role for Christ's Catholic priesthood. If one has been made to feel that way, that is wrong.

In the New Testament, we also must lovingly trust God — that he knows what he is doing. And, one must also trust and respect Christ's Catholic Church. If not, why even be a Catholic? To have things "your way," is the Protestant way of thinking. It is also Satan's way of thinking. Let us love humility.

MICHELLE PINGEL

Branson, Missouri

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I was disheartened to read the responses to your article concerning the Vatican's directives for parishes. They represent the thinking of a parallel church, not the Catholic Church. Luther himself speaks through them.

CAROLYN KIMBERLY

Littleton, Colorado



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Once again, it is easy to see the lack of catechesis on the part of people responding to this subject. The Catholic Church is not a democracy. A person can "feel" however they want regarding the hierarchy of the church, but the bottom line is the papacy was formed by Christ and the pope acts as Christ's vicar on earth.

Whether we like it or not, we are called to obedience, not complaint. We are called to strengthen the church, not tear it apart. We are called to pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit when a situation arises that we don't understand. If you are following what the culture says and not the church, you are being lied to, for Satan lives in the world. Come back to the freedom guaranteed only by Jesus Christ, himself.

LINDA McKNIGHT

Blairsville, Georgia

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I believe a change in parish leadership is long overdue.

The Vatican should give up its control on running parish organizations and focus on its primary mission of spreading the word. Leave the earthly duties of managing the

parish organization to qualified, lay people so priests can do their job of doing their spiritual duties and do it well.

Women both clerics and lay should be given meaningful, expanded roles in the church. There are no shortage of qualified women.

PERFECTO B. FAJARDO

The Woodlands, Texas

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I have lived in six or more dioceses in my adult life, and the quality of those dioceses had been very inconsistent, especially when there was a change of bishop. Most of the time was spent in dioceses in upstate New York, suffering from the egress of population and the aging of the priests, and the sometimes debacle of church closures. That whole process upset parishioners, or those that were mostly Christmas/Easter parishioners.

No, I don't think seminaries do an adequate job of preparing those that enter the seminary, especially right out of high school, to run the "business" of a parish. The newly ordained may at best have a couple years under a pastor's guidance before taking over as a pastor, although many seminarians now have worked jobs before entering the seminary.

But with fewer ordinations comes, especially in certain areas of the U.S., priests covering multiple parishes, and not all of them are small parishes, leading to priests suffering "burn out." We can't have the Eucharist without priests, but we can have weddings, funerals and baptisms with deacons. Deacons can lead a prayer liturgy and distribute already consecrated hosts. If the shortage/aging of priests continue, we need priests for liturgical reasons more than administrative ones.

ROBERTA MICKEY

La Plata, Maryland

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The first half of the instruction is enlightening and heartening, fully (in my opinion) in accordance to what should be. The document seems to deteriorate in the second

half, reinforcing the past in a time of declining clergy and younger Catholics. I found little to address the increase in Catholics who were not born in country where they reside. In short, it doesn't address what is, just what is hoped to be or what was.

And what about virtual parishes? We are reaching Teilhard de Chardin's Omega Point and McLuhan's "global village."

MIKE DOELLMAN

Pocatello, Idaho

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I was brought up in the Catholic faith. Its male dominance made me question whether women had any meaningful role at all in the church.

Many years later, I have found a faith community that embraces women and married men as leaders. Without a full life experience and adequate training (theology, counseling, leadership, business management) male priests are poorly equipped to lead a community and it is insulting to refer good men and women who follow Christ's teaching as second stream faith leaders.

The Catholic Church hierarchy needs to wake up and equally accept the contribution of all faithful otherwise it's at risk of alienating those who seek to follow Christ's teachings within the church. This parish instruction shows that alienation is already a reality.

YVETTE WILLIAMS

Adelaide, South Australia

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All letters published seem to be of one mind — the mind to diminish the authority within the Catholic Church.

Everybody knows that without authority, the church will quickly freefall into chaos and eventually be destroyed.

Perhaps that is the plan of the devil working through some thoroughly misguided Catholics.

Just as Peter and the early church decided on important matters relating to the church, we need to allow the Vatican to make the call.

The more pressing problem today within the Catholic Church is empty pews. Catholics are leaving the church because of a lack in the belief in God.

And this is not because of Vatican authority but the general trend of secularization of the world. Perhaps that is where we the laity needs to direct our energies.

I appeal to those innocently being misled by people intent on destroying the church, say "Get behind me Satan." Alternatively, you can join the hundreds or thousands of other churches that seem to function perfectly well without the Vatican telling them what to do.

WALTER GOMEZ

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

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As a lifelong Catholic in my eighth decade, I have often watched with amusement about the arguments regarding sexism and leadership in the church.

My amusement comes from the fact that the arguments fail to ask the basic question about the foundation of our Judeo-Christian religion

Is God sexist? If not, why did he not create Eve before Adam? Why did he not send his only begotten daughter instead of son?

Secondly, was Jesus sexist? If not, why was none of his chosen apostles a woman in spite of the fact the he tacitly acknowledges the role of women?

These are probably mysteries which only God can address.

Our focus should be on the life above and not the squabble for temporal power based on whether it is man and why not woman.

The greatest female saints of the church served the church without seeking to be popes. They worked in humility like their master.

So, let us concentrate on the followership of Christ in seeking the things above rather than the vainglory of earthly power.

DANIEL IMOEDEMHE

London, United Kingdom

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When we compare the Catholic Church in Nigeria to that in the United States, about 90% of the parishes are found in the rural areas. These parishes barely survive on their own. They need external support for the priest and the church development projects. The issue of wealthy priests doesn't exist. We still have high levels of celibate priestly vocations.

To the argument of clericalism, there must be a reason why Christ built his church on male priests whether married or celibate. The church cannot remain the same if women are brought into the priesthood to head parishes. We must jettison this idea for so many cultural reasons. This will create an entirely new set of values different from the current order established in the Vatican II.

For anybody to aspire to head a parish other than a priest is not to be encouraged as that will lead to the destruction of the fabric of the Catholic Church. It is neither by charisma nor knowledge but by divine providence that the priests are able to accomplish their work as shepherds of the flock.

DON NJOKU

Port Harcourt, Nigeria

Advertisement

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As many letters attested, I was caught off guard with this latest document about priests being charge of parishes. I felt the same way as I did when *Humanae Vitae* was published.

We expected a change around methods of birth control and the status quo was stated.

With this document, changes were happening in parish ministry and then this affirmation of the status quo. What I see is definitely a shortage of priests. Who are the bishops listening to? Themselves? That's frightening!

MARK SCANNELL

Minneapolis, Minnesota

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I understand people wanting to keep the church the way it has always been but we need to look at it realistically. All things change. I agree with a comment relating to Christ telling us "I am with you when you gather in my name." He doesn't say there must be a priest. And he said we are all disciples. We need to listen and practice what Christ tried to teach us.

VIVIAN D SWIBEL

Chicago, Illinois

Concerning the priest who thought his baptism was invalid because of the words used — do they actually think that God is as narrow minded and legalistic as they are?

ED HOEFFER

Cincinnati, Ohio

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As a lifelong Catholic, I was baffled and bewildered how the church invalidated all the baptisms done by a deacon who used "we baptize" instead of " I baptize." How

can you get so narrow minded, so hung up on the "letter of the law" to say that all those people are not "officially" church members? Their marriages are not valid in the church because their baptism is invalid? Really?

We wonder why people leave our church. They wonder why the letter of the law is more important than the intent of the law, the action.

Note to Archbishop Allen Vigneron, who enforced this ridiculous decision: Do you really think Jesus cares if "we" is used instead if "I"?

JOE THILMAN

Troy, Michigan

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Over the centuries, the Roman Catholic Church has mastered the use of guilt and scrupulosity to assist in controlling its members. While we mostly associate these tools with sexual matters, the tale of Fr. Matthew Hood is an alarming example of how deep these tentacles can extend. Imagine what appears to be his needless pain and suffering because he somehow believes he is estranged from his faith merely because of the use of "we baptize" rather than "I baptize" at the time of his baptism!

That the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith ruled his baptism "invalid" should come as no surprise. Intent, mercy and common sense can be very foreign to that group. And what about all those now questioning their confirmations and other sacraments from Hood and all the hoops they now have to jump through to receive "valid" sacraments?

In all my 75 years of life, I have never once met a Catholic who is scrupulous about being racist or homophobic or xenophobic. But jots and tittles of Catholic doctrine — their numbers are legion. Folks like Hood deserve our deepest empathy. I can only imagine his suffering.

BILL KRISTOFCO

Parkville, Maryland

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In a universe estimated to contain at least one hundred billion galaxies like our own Milky Way (and possibly as many as a trillion galaxies, according to astronomers), it is hard to fathom the creator of it all is concerned with someone using the wrong pronoun in a sacrament.

However, apparently God is a stickler for details, at least according to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Pity the poor soul that got last rites from this priest and made their confession that included a "mortal" sin! Think of the nasty surprise at the pearly gates. (This reminds me of the church excommunicating Origen of Alexandria posthumously. I've always tried to imagine the scene in heaven when the excommunication papers were delivered to him.)

SIDDIKA ANGLE

Berkeley, California

***

Josh McElwee's story about the proper form for sacramental baptism disingenuously downplays the issues at stake in the recent Vatican declaration and Fr. Matthew Hood's case in Detroit.

An unnamed Vatican commentator's pooh-poohing of "fundamentalist" does not reverse the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's more serious declaration that "baptisms" conducted using deficient formulae are invalid: either a sacrament occurred or it didn't, which is hardly "fundamentalist."

Furthermore, this disaster — like the previous baptismal bowdlerization of "Creator, Savior, and Sanctifier" — represents the worst of real clericalism, the idea of some celebrants that the liturgy is their improv hour. Catholics have a right to the liturgy as the church has provided for it, not as clerics with (almost always wrong) theological agendas deign to provide it.

JOHN M. GRONDELSKI

Falls Church, Virginia

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If this is supposed to be the only way we can truly get into heaven, what has happened to the millions of non-baptized people who did believe in a supreme being long before Christ came to earth?

And as was pointed out, there are already various interpretations of the sacrament being administered in the various rites within our holy church.

I have always understood that there is also the "baptism of desire" for those who do believe in a supreme being but never had a chance to hear the good word spoken by a missionary, as they were living in small inhabitable parts of the world.

As we are the church, the faithful who are gathering in his name, aren't the hierarchy taking a single word a bit too seriously? I am sure one word will not make the person receiving the sacrament any different as he or she has also had that ultimate desire of having had a real baptism.

GERARD BAKKERS

Bradbury, Australia

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You mention that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had said in an Aug. 6 instruction that such baptisms (i.e. mentioning "we baptize") should not be considered valid.

Honestly, haven't these Curia officials got anything better to do than to make such silly stupid proclamations? So God invalidates a baptism because the correct "holy" words weren't used? Idiotic!

I at first thought that such Curia officials should be removed from their cozy sinecures and sumptuous lunches and dinners and sent out to parishes to do some proper work. Then I considered that that would be unfair to parishes to have these men inflicted upon them. God knows what we can do with them.

BRUCE STAFFORD

Tascott, Australia

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Why is the difference in one word so important to the Vatican? In the theology of the sacrament, isn't the individual being not only freed from sin, but also being welcomed into the Christian community (a "we")?

ROBERT MARZULLO

Shoreline, Washington

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