Opinion
Letters to the Editor

by NCR Staff

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Following are NCR reader responses to recent news articles, opinion columns and theological essays with letters that have been edited for length and clarity. These "Letters to the Editor" appear in the March 1–14, 2024 print issue.

Not the same

Michael Sean Winters seems to equate aid to Ukraine with aid to Israel: "Both are engaged in bitter struggles against, respectively, a thugocracy and theocracy" (ncronline.org, Feb. 12, 2024). Putin and Hamas may be equally evil, but this does not mean that Ukraine and Israel are equally deserving of our aid. Ukraine needs our aid to hold off Russia's nakedly aggressive land grab, but Israel does not need any more help from us to continue its genocidal campaign against Gaza.

The only leverage the U.S. has to force Israel to work seriously for peace is to withhold aid, not give more. No cajoling is of any use while unconditional support continues.

Sadly, though, the political state of affairs in our country is that our aid to Ukraine is in greater peril than our aid to Israel.

MARK J. GEORGE
Detroit, Michigan



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Lip service

One expects a Catholic publication to pay at least lip service to the teachings of Jesus (ncronline.org, Feb. 12, 2024). Did Jesus ever complain that we are not shipping enough bombs to our allies? Did Jesus ever say that the way to make peace is to arm one side in a fight? Did Jesus ever suggest that a "just peace" is when your guy wins? Foreign Affairs routinely publishes articles based on these premises, but I was appalled to see them in a purportedly Christian publication.

PETER C. REYNOLDS
Palo Alto, California

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Partisan not pastoral

Considering the Republican Party and the USCCB have many of the same benefactors, it is not surprising the church will play a role in our politics (ncronline.org, Feb. 9, 2024). What is unfortunate is that many of our clerics engage in political support which ostensibly violates federal law regarding not-for-profit enterprises.

The quadrennial document Faithful Citizenship has since its inception appeared to minimize the importance of issues and policies which benefit the vast majority of the American people, particularly the poor. Their emphasis has been the preeminence of

abortion and their mandate that only those politicians whom the clergy regard as sufficiently anti-abortion are worthy of the votes of Catholics.

The members of the Catholic Church in America are no more divided than the population of non-Catholics. As Fr. Reese alludes, our parishes are likely divided similarly so our pastors need to take care not to alienate half their congregations. The only way for our shepherds to play a positive role is to give equal time to different issues such as climate change, the social safety net, fair taxation, etc. If the bishops fail to show evenhandedness toward all candidates they will define themselves as partisan and not pastoral. Their credibility will not survive that reputation.

CHARLES A. LEGUERN
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The Catholic vote

If the choices for president in the next election are President Biden or President Trump, who in conscience can we vote for (ncronline.org, Feb. 9, 2024)? Both are supporters of more military aid to Israel. There will be others on the ballot but elections are structured so they do not have a chance of winning. The same goes for votes for many representatives and senators who support more defense spending. How can the Catholic vote make a difference in this type of election structure? Do we override our conscience to vote?

BOB GRAF
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

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Needless legalism

I'm a non practicing Catholic, but my faith is important to me. Rome's publication of *Gestis Verbisque* underscores why I distanced myself from the institutional church: I'm tired of needless legalism (ncronline.org, Feb. 7, 2024).

I understand the point the Vatican—and Winters in his column—is trying to make: the sacraments are a treasure and ought not to be messed with. However, particularly in the case of baptism, the trinitarian formula needs to be the non-negotiable verbal element. Surely God was not prevented from acting by the mere alteration of the pronoun! If the Vatican expects "I" going forward, fine, but it shouldn't expect all those baptized with "we" to believe that their baptisms (and other sacraments received thereafter) never counted. How demeaning for them (and for the clergy who acted in good faith)!

Instead of stipulating that the entirety of the text or rite in question has to be followed to the exact letter for a sacrament to be valid, intent should matter most. After all, the directive to baptize as recorded in scripture (Mt 28:19) only mentions the trinitarian formula. Our Orthodox kin don't use a pronoun at all, and Rome has no issues with their baptisms.

Stop putting God in a box! The spirit of the law should always triumph over the letter.

LUKE JENSEN-CROSS
Farmers Branch, Texas

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Magic words

Michael Sean Winters writes that failure to adhere to the precise words the church prescribes to administer sacraments such as baptism is a big deal because the "words in the baptismal formula were given to us by Christ himself" (ncronline.org, Feb. 7, 2024). Actually, the words used are not Christ's but rather a translation of a translation of a translation of something written down years after Christ's death (and in fact differ depending on the church rite). That said, Winters is absolutely correct when he states that the sacraments must be treated with all the reverence we can. But rather than regarding them as a commodity that God will withhold unless the correct magic words are recited by a human, the sacraments are instead a gift freely given by the loving God. For them to be effective, what is most important is whether these gifts are accepted not only with reverence but also with all the humility, faith, hope and, most of all, love (for both God and our fellow human) we can muster.

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