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.

American priests are not the future of global Catholicism

Both Michael Sean Winters and Fr. Tom Reese, S.J. had interesting comments on "The 2025 National Study of Catholic Priests," released this month by the Catholic

Project of the Catholic University of America (NCR, Oct. 24, 2025 and Oct. 24, 2025).

Both emphasized how out of sync younger priests are, not only with their peers but even more importantly with the majority of Catholics.

They also suggested that the future of the Church in the U.S. will be in the hands of these younger priests as their older peers retire and die.

I would argue that, unless this younger generation of priests embraces synodality and learns to work collaboratively with women (whether ordained or not) there is no future for the U.S. Church.

It is not enough that priests of all generations agree on the importance of such pastoral issues as youth and young adult ministry, family formation and marriage preparation and evangelization. Without a synodal Church where priests listen carefully to the laity and work collaboratively on ideas to address these issues, participation in parish life will continue to drop and drop more drastically.

It is not just young priests who are the future of the Church. Today's lay youth and young adults should be seen as even more the future of the Church than its priests. And the divide between Catholic youth and young adults and young priests on such issues as climate change, immigration, LGBTQ issues, poverty, racism, and social justice does not bode well.

One wonders what Bishops will do with the results of this survey. Will they take seriously the challenges it suggests as they look at their seminaries? Will they get more serious about becoming a synodal Church? Or will they just continue to merge or suppress parishes, rely more on priests from other countries and continue to insist that abortion is the preeminent issue facing the Church?

One more thing about synodality. The synodal journey is a critical strategy that is necessary to change a Church culture that has been too hierarchical, too clerical and too juridical. It is about communion, participation and mission. However, it is not a strategy that is designed to address the strategic issues necessary for the Church to achieve its mission of evangelization. What is needed in addition to the process of synodality is a strategic planning process at the diocesan and parish levels. Only a rigorous strategic planning process will honestly assess strengths and weaknesses and opportunities and threats and then design strategies that will address issues like resource generation and allocation (remembering that resources include not only

finances but also personnel and infrastructure), effective communication (evangelization), competitors (yes, even the Catholic Church has competitors), partnerships (does ecumenism have a future in the U.S. Church?), etc.

As the Peanuts cartoon character, Linus, reminded Charlie Brown: “Prayer is no substitute for doing your homework.” And while it is true that the Holy Spirit is the protagonist animating the synodal journey, it is also true that the Spirit works through the baptized and confirmed as much or more than through those ordained as priests and bishops.

As someone who has been involved in the synodal journey at the parish, regional and national levels, I have experienced the powerful potential that Pope Francis launched a few years ago. And I have seen how that process has evolved in my own diocese of San Jose, California leading to a Diocesan-wide synod and a Diocesan strategic plan. But my regular participation in the USCCB’s office of synodality monthly zoom meetings tells me that San Jose is the exception among the 250+ (Arch)dioceses in the U.S.

It is not only the younger clergy who lack support for synodality. Many of them seem to be reflecting how their own bishops view a synodal Church…with suspicion at best and outright rejection at worst.

Do I believe that the Holy Spirit will continue to gift the Church with God’s love and grace? Yes, I do. But I am not so sure that the future of the Roman Catholic Church lies as much in the United States as it does in Latin America and Africa.

JIM PURCELL
San Jose, California

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Faith and hope

This is in response to the recent article by Thomas Reese about the current state of the Catholic priesthood and the attitude of many Catholics (NCR, Oct. 24, 2025). I resonate with his thoughts. I am one of the "older priests" whom he mentions, being beyond 80. I do not always understand the drift of the younger clergy. But I also struggle with the terms "conservative" and "liberal." Life is complicated and nuances should be made. I hope I am "conservative" in things that need preserving: our life of prayer, our focus on the Eucharist as central to our worship, love of God and neighbor as central to our Christian living. That being said, I have good memories of those days during my early priesthood in the 1970's when we felt some hope and optimism about the direction of the Church. There was that good experience of what I like to call "relaxed reverence" about our manner of worshipping. We were the People of God praying in our own language not focused on the translation in our missal, actually participating rather than praying the rosary or other devotions during Mass. There were some who didn't always like "the changes," but there was a sense of participating in something that was good and life-giving. And we were aware of how our faith affected our thoughts about the Vietnam War, the civil rights struggles, and a growing concern for the planet. I can have lots of nostalgic thoughts about those years. But now we must live in this present moment and continue to live in faith and hope in the power of the Holy Spirit.

(Fr.) TOM ZELINSKI
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Conciliar formation needed

Having begun my liturgical and catechetical ministry in the Church of the 1970s, I have seen the sequence of priestly priorities from those ordained in those early days, eager to implement Vatican II, to those recently ordained, who appear determined to dismantle evidence of the Council.

This has resulted in parishes I no longer feel comfortable ministering or worshipping in.

Michael Sean Winters makes a good point, I think, in recognizing that the Catholic left failed to produce vocations, and so lost an opportunity to finish the work of Vatican II (NCR, Oct. 24, 2025). But, at least in my case, it was a married clergy I hoped would emerge from the shortage of priests (women priests seeming less realistic, given our tradition).

I also agree that the focus in the 1970s was probably too horizontal, social justice oriented, and not vertical enough; but I also think the degree to which the younger clergy have reverted to a pre-Vatican II stance is unacceptable and not based in reality. These priests and their mentors largely did not experience the pre-Vatican II church with its quasi-magical focus on the sacred host, to the exclusion of the liturgy as a whole, let alone the real presence of Christ in the assembly.

If we want to keep the faithful Catholics of the ‘70s and ‘80s, we need bishops who will educate their priestly candidates in a theology of Vatican II grown wise with the passage of these past 60 years of living with the Council.

FRANCES ROSSI
Boulder, Colorado

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