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The halting steps of a pilgrim church

by Dennis Coday

NCR Today

Late last month, Bishop Robert Finn of Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., told readers of his diocesan newspaper that he is frustrated with *NCR*. Our offices are in his diocese, and he says he feels certain responsibilities toward us.

In a column, he wrote that as long as he has been in Kansas City he has received complaints about *NCR*, but "in the last months, I have been deluged with emails and other correspondence from Catholics concerned about the editorial stances of the Reporter."

Boy, I can sympathize with the bishop there. I get those kinds of letters all the time. I've got a couple on my desk right now that use language that I would be embarrassed to show my mother. I get pretty frustrated with that mail, too. You may have read a few of those critical letters -- not the crude or defamatory ones -- in our letters to the editor column. I don't get frustrated with the critical letters; after all, asking questions and hosting discussion is part of the *NCR* mission.

Finn's frustration, I guess, stems from our openness to questions and discussion. OK, that's probably my view of the situation. Here is what Finn wrote:

"Catholics [writing to him are] concerned about the editorial stances of the *Reporter*: officially condemning Church teaching on the ordination of women, insistent undermining of Church teaching on artificial contraception and sexual morality in general, lionizing dissident theologies while rejecting established Magisterial teaching, and a litany of other issues. " I have a responsibility as the local bishop to instruct the Faithful about the problematic nature of this media source which bears the name "Catholic." "

I think these are valid observations. Yes, we did recently call for the church to reverse its long-standing teaching on women's ordination. Is that "officially condemning church teaching"? I don't know what that means. We editorialized in a reasonable way why we think this should change. We are halfway through a series of articles looking into the deeper issues of this ordination question. We have reported that other Catholics are also calling for change. It is our role, as journalists, to report a discussion that is happening at virtually every level of the church.

Yes, *NCR* has repeatedly called attention to the fact that the overwhelming majority of Catholics in practice have rejected the church's teaching on artificial contraception. And, yes, we -- let me quote from our March editorial -- "wholeheartedly second the invitation by Australian Bishop Geoffrey Robinson for a thorough and honest reexamination of the church's teaching on sexuality." Our reporting attempts to reflect reality. We put it all on the table, from marital love to homosexuality. For years we have called upon our church to move beyond the mechanistic, rule-bound approach to sex that has thwarted an evolution of Catholic thinking.

Finn did not mention that we called for his resignation in September after he was convicted of a misdemeanor criminal charge of failing to report suspected child abuse. I know that some of the letters he received criticized *NCR* because of that. I know because I received copies of the same.

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Finn also writes, "My predecessor bishops have taken different approaches." He is correct. Bishop Charles Helmsing, who encouraged and supported the founders of *NCR*, did condemn the paper in 1968, largely because of our reporting on dissent from *Humanae Vitae*, the birth control encyclical. He asked the board of directors to remove "Catholic" from our title. The board and editors took Helmsing's request seriously. In the end, the board declined the bishop's request.

The board's response then to Helmsing continues to guide us today: The paper is independent and unofficial and not a teaching instrument of the church. *NCR* is a channel, the board said, for "probing, experiment and the expression of unofficial opinions, which can supplement the formal teachings of the church."

The board's decision was not unanimous. In fact the board president sided with Helmsing and resigned. I know that because it's all spelled out in the pages of *NCR*, Oct. 12, 1968. And *NCR* continued. Helmsing remained bishop here until 1977 and lived in retirement here until 1993. I don't know if he ever reconciled with *NCR*, but he never publicly objected again.

His successors took a different tack. *NCR* publisher and former editor Tom Fox tells me that Bishop John Sullivan and Bishop Raymond Boland had cordial relations with *NCR*. Throughout his tenure, Sullivan met Fox regularly. Shortly after his installation in 1993, Boland visited us and even blessed our offices.

Boland spoke at our 40th anniversary ceremony in 2004. "It would be my dream that in the future we may have many, many more nitpickers in the field of communications," as long as they are people who love the church, Boland said. "I never have a problem with anybody doing anything for the church as long as the people who are doing it love the church and the people in *NCR* do that, they love the church," he said.

That doesn't mean Boland or Sullivan always agreed with us.

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Let me share with you one more guidepost I have found from the *NCR* founders. In its April 7, 1967, issue, *NCR* reprinted the minority and majority reports of the papal commission studying birth control. It showed the intense theological debate of this issue at the highest level of the church. That decision to publish helped set the course of coverage on this issue and helped reveal a truth -- the majority report called for lifting the ban on artificial contraception -- that might have otherwise remained hidden. The editors noted that this was a history-changing moment. Catholics' view of the magisterium, freedom and responsibility would never be the same.

From then on, the church "is truly a church on pilgrimage," they wrote, "earning its way, moving by halting steps to a deeper grasp of truth, a fresh appreciation of human love and of God's mysteriously rich creation."

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