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by NCR Staff

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Last month, NCR published letters to the editor responding to an article by James Carroll for The Atlantic [calling for the priesthood to be abolished](#). NCR published a [response from Fr. Donald Cozzens](#) that asked just how much corruption we can tolerate in the church before we leave. Below are letters to the editor from NCR readers. The letters have been edited for length and clarity.

This question can be countered with a more positive one: How much prophetic energy can be imagined by the People of God in order to reform the church?

Prophets of old were called out from their very ordinary lives to proclaim by their words and actions the fundamental change of heart that must occur in order to realize our creator's vision that all may be one. And that prophetic calling set them apart from the current structures of their times.



The Roman Catholic Women Priest Movement has envisioned such a kinship. We love the church and are energized to witness to the prophetic changes that are needed to reform the church. This is a proactive approach, one rooted in a distinct calling requiring courageous action, clear vision, and holy contemplation.

We embrace circular leadership where no one has power over another. All decide on issues and policies that affect the membership. Bishops are elected to perform a function, not to establish lordship. Member-led inclusive faith communities are formed where the ordained serve the People of God. All are welcome to the Eucharistic table, extending the practice from the early church to the present day.

Our calling is to live what we profess and envision to live what the spirit has empowered us to become. It is prophetic. As of old, future generations will reap the rewards.

MARY EILEEN COLLINGWOOD

Boston Heights, Ohio

"The superior status and lofty identity the church claims for its priests, cultivated and sustained by clerical celibacy and the withholding of meaningful leadership roles from the laity, especially women" is a mouthful for the soul to swallow.

When I was a chaplain trainee (Lutheran) at a state-run institution for the criminally insane in 1980 near Tacoma, Washington, I saw up close the mental agony of men and women who had committed crimes of a sexual nature. The personal testimonies of some of the incarcerated were stark: I know I cannot help myself. When I get out, I will do it all over again, said one who was medicated with psychotropic drugs and on the cusp of release back into society.

It appears to me now that I am a Roman Catholic who finds great joy in the eucharist and who goes to Mass as often as my old body will allow, I regard this scourge as it is so often called in NCR as a spiritual problem in full.

When I hold up my memory at the state institution and my very new experience as a practicing Roman Catholic, I see the scourge as spiritual corruption of the body that can only be redeemed through the gift of the body and blood in the Eucharist.

I question why James Carroll would deny himself the one true promise of redemption there is: the Holy Eucharist.

JAMES R. ROGERS

Wenatchee, Washington

Fr. Donald Cozzens' article speaks directly to my own dilemma as a permanent deacon. It gives me yet another perspective to consider as I walk through the fog, and a tsunami of rage, that has engulfed my ministry as a result of the abuse and cover-up. Yet I feel that it is not the corruption that disables me as much as the hypocrisy of it all!

In the Gospels, I am always struck by Jesus' response to people in their various existential situations. Jesus understood and accepted that people make mistakes, including moral transgressions, such as the woman caught in adultery. He was even able to see beyond acts of corruption such as that practiced by the tax collectors

including Matthew himself. He was even able to look beyond denial by friends. But what he was not able to tolerate was hypocrisy, especially when practiced by the religious leadership of his day.

Clergy, me included, stand before congregations every day and preach, exhorting the People of God to live according to gospel values. We stand as dispensers of moral truth and do so with our ordained authority and in the name of the church. Yet this same leadership has failed miserably to live what it preaches and exhorts.

Many clergy are fine and good men but we are all immersed in this institutional hypocrisy, this hyper-hypocrisy. What must Jesus think?

And how indeed does one go on?

ROBERT F. COLEMAN

Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada

I wrestle with the same anguish as Fr. Donald Cozzens and James Carroll. The corruption and sins of the church overwhelm.

Unfortunately, however, so much emphasis is given to the sexual abuse that the equally evil sin of institutional racism is ignored. Last November, the bishops issued a document

on racism. It took a back seat to sexual abuse.

Once again sex wins in this church of ours. The abuse of racism affects far more persons

than the abuse of children. I suggest that we do not so emphasize the one that we ignore the other.

THOMAS F. HINSBERG

Detroit, Michigan

We admit that we are powerless and that our wellbeing is at risk. Out of energy to live in an unhealthy manner, we finally hit bottom. These are words spoken by members of twelve step recovery programs everywhere. In those programs persons who hit a bottom take the first step and admit a powerlessness over a reality which has drained energy and serenity and a sense of wellbeing. After efforts to change some person or place or thing or event, those efforts are turned over to the God of their understanding.

For many years I have ministered to and with persons who work 12-step programs. I have maintained my own wellbeing in a 12-step program. Many have discovered the benefit of detaching from the promises of a person suffering from an addiction. They hit bottom and began recovery when accepting that a dysfunctional friend or relative had no power to cure themselves.

By working the steps, I am moving from being a heart broken and betrayed Catholic. Today I am a grateful recovering son of dysfunctional mother church.

Recovery is never about getting back to how we were before we had a problem. It's always about becoming what we never imagined as possible.

I pray that mother church chooses recovery someday. I pray that my sisters and brothers in our church family find recovery. Meantime, I have given myself permission to be a happy, recovering member of the church family.

(Fr.) BILL STENZEL

Cedar Lake, Indiana

I have witnessed with horror, anger, and great sadness, the unveiling of the extreme corruption in the church. The cover-up in my diocese of Lincoln, Nebraska, has gone back decades, lied about and hidden by the last two bishops.

I have been admonished by my "devout" friends that all we need to do is pray about what's happening. I've been told that leaving the church is the devil's plan. I beg to differ. If we do not make changes in our church now, the devil will have indeed won.

I have stepped away from attending Mass. My faith in God has never wavered, but my faith in the human hierarchy has.

MARY ANDERSON

Lincoln, Nebraska

I stopped attending my local parish eight years ago for a number of reasons, but the sex abuse issue was not the straw that broke the camel's back. Arrogance, power, patronization and a stilted spirituality I was witnessing in the church and parish were part of the bale of hay. The gilded imagery of papal liturgies and Vaticanese said out loud: this is not what Christ meant.

I do miss what I used to know as the Catholic Church. However, nothing since I left has compelled me to return. The "new evangelization" programs are for lapsed Catholics. I'm not lapsed. I do miss the Eucharist.

I'm an unnoteworthy sinner, corrupted. Yet, somehow Christ said the kingdom was within. I needed to leave the institution to find the kingdom. My Catholic background enabled me to know that. My heart enabled me to see that.

I have one life to live out the kingdom within me to the full. I heard the call in a gentle breeze. If I am wrong, may God have mercy on me.

DAVID MURRAY

Cedarville, Michigan

The biggest problem with the priesthood is that it is a limited demographic that feeds on itself starting in Rome with old white men who stopped listening to their congregations decades ago. Few young people have an interest in continuing this mindset. Allow women to become priest and the congregations interest will be heard and listened too. The priesthood demographic must be expanded and include others. The alternative is a much smaller church with primarily an old demographic.

MIKE FITZ-GERALD

Phoenix, Arizona

Yes, there is a need for someone to call the community to worship and to preside when they pray together. But some serious research should be done to determine when the idea of an "ontological difference" became a part of priesthood, and when the priest began to "confect" the Eucharist.

The practice of the Eastern Church to require for validity a recitation of the narrative of the last supper plus an epiclesis, or calling down of the Holy Spirit by the praying community to consecrate the bread and wine, and the community into the body of Christ, would be a healthy antidote. The priest would be one of the community and the Holy Spirit would effect the consecration.

ED HOFFER

Cincinnati, Ohio

James Carroll has composed an essay by which he argues for a church without the current structure. He takes the reader back to the earliest days of Christianity during which the notion of "One Holy and Apostolic" was becoming manifested via bishops coming together in order to become somewhat coherent in matters of faith; that is to say just what is it that we can agree to hold as factual.

This developmental process was no easy task as history informs us of the issues regarding heresies and what have you. Although Carroll places this process as an effort to develop power to be distributed among a chosen few, an early form of "clericalism" he seems to fail to acknowledge the role of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church.

To be sure there was a period of time when church and secular authority lived in a congruent state. The trappings of power, wealth, and prestige occupied the minds of imperfect human-beings some bishops along with emperors.

Moving along in his essay, Carroll has maligned over two millennia of bishops, deacons, and priests who have served the "people of God." He is very willing to throw the baby out with the bath water.

The "church" being the "people of God" is human and therefore subject to human weakness and failings. That being said, Catholics struggle with developing a process along with a mechanism to bring a billion plus faithful into what can be called one church. Millions of splinter groups comprised of so called house churches simply will not provide a vehicle for recognizing the "sense of the faithful," let alone comprise one universal church.

(Deacon) JAMES GRAHAM

Bluffton, South Carolina

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Perhaps we ordain men to the priesthood before they really know and understand what life is about. Life is a process of growing in love and understanding of ourselves and those around us. The men who were a witness to me were capable of listening, understanding and guiding me on my own journey.

The priests who were problems were men who were immature in their own relationship with God and church. I had priest friends who were just beginning their ministry and I had helpful priests who knew what life was about and helped to grow in relationship with God. I think too much emphasis is put on clericalism in training men for the priesthood instead of tools to help them to know and love themselves and then to serve.

JOAN GRIESER

Federal Way, Washington

Virtually every problem scandalizing the Roman Catholic "laity" (used here only to distinguish the faithful from the ordained) and the public at large, has an ordained man in the middle of it. And, those of us who have worked inside the church since the Second Vatican Council have seen up close how the corruption works. Virtually all the ordained sign on to this sense of entitlement as they go about their ministry. Some, indeed, more humanely than others. The word "ordain" itself cannot be simply excised from this ministry as it is presently perceived.

The singularly most offensive example is the fact that communities not located within a regularly reachable distance by a priest cannot "confect" Eucharist. That's how powerful priesthood is! It can and does keep the Eucharist from these isolated communities. It's time to lay these burdens down and take 10-20 years to prayerfully re-create all our sacralizing structures â?? particularly, priesthood.

This moment in the church's life can be used for contrition, penance, and conversion by all leadership from the very top down.

The age of priesthood must be put behind us.

ED MURRAY

Charlottesville, Virginia

As a lifelong Catholic (74 years) and former priest, I am no longer angry at the church. There was a time when the prohibition against birth control and the abuse of children and its cover-up and the hierarchy's siding with the Republican Party and the hierarchy's attitude toward the LGBTQ community angered me. No more. I am now firmly indifferent to the organization.

Why the change? Because the hierarchy will not listen to its members and our needs. There is no *sensus fidelium*. Question celibacy? Nope, that's not even open for discussion. Women as deacons? We'll form a committee and let that issue die. Women priests? Nope. Jesus had only men. Contraception? Nope. Every act of sexual intimacy must be open to procreation. Condemn our government putting immigrant children in cages at our borders and senseless gun violence as strongly as we condemn abortion? Nope. People leaving the church in droves? Can't be us! Must be our secular society.

So have at it, hierarchs! You want all the power and make all the decisions? No sweat off my back!

BILL KRISTOFKO

Parkville, Maryland

There is no need to abolish the priesthood. Just restore the first two century practice of laypersons celebrating Eucharist without clergy. Ordination and priesthood were third century innovations. A variation of the most ancient practice might include:

1. Recognizing that the "mark" incurred at ordination was invented as an incidental theological hypothesis in the fourth century by Augustine as a rationalization for why baptism and ordination could not be repeated. Over centuries his statement was indiscriminately cited as if it were dogma.
2. As with extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, the bishop could appoint suitable laity, say three to 10, in each parish as extraordinary ministers of baptism, eucharist, extreme unction, and matrimony for a term, say four years, subject to

renewal. Requirements would include: recommendation by parish council and pastor, background check, and professional psychological testing.

3. More extensive training would be required for laypersons appointed as parish administrator or to provide the sacrament of penance or to be preachers.

Ordained clergy could continue to provide the sacrament of confirmation, to be deanery resource persons, to represent the bishop to local communities, provide parish on-going training, and occasional deanery-wide eucharistic celebrations.

The benefits of this approach include retention of the historically valuable sacramental system, diminish the temptation of clericalism, recognizing the valuable charisms existing throughout the church (people), and functionally recognizing the priestly character of baptism in all the faithful.

RAYMOND SPATTI

Payson, Arizona

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