



## Sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time C February 17, 2019

### ◆ Why Melinda Henneberger left the Catholic Church

### ◆ Fr. David Knight's response to Melinda's article

In the January 14-24, 2019 edition of the *National Catholic Reporter*, Melinda Henneberger wrote an article on why she left the Catholic Church.

Melinda is an opinion writer for *The Kansas City Star*. She previously worked as a columnist for USA Today. She currently serves as a visiting fellow at the Catholic University of America's Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies.

In case you are not aware, *The National Catholic Reporter* is regarded as a liberal newspaper. It is to left leaning Catholics, what *The Catholic Register* is to right leaning Catholics. When it comes to reporting about the Catholic Church's failure to deal with the sex-abuse crisis, *The National Catholic Reporter* reported on this story before anyone else and has continued to report on it. I used to have a subscription to the NCR. But it gradually became too liberal for this middle-of-the-road Catholic. An elderly homebound parishioner, Joan Burrough, is kind enough to share her used copy with me. Melinda's article is below.

After so many years of trying to "stay and fight" for the Catholic Church as it should be, the day finally came when walking away wasn't so much a decision as an acknowledgement of reality: I just couldn't continue to help prop up an institution that I've loved my whole life, but that's run by men who, after all this time, are dithering still in response to the devastation done by child abusers in collars.

Staying "because it's our church, too" had come to feel like complicity by another name. And even staying for the Eucharist made me wonder at what point I had to stop letting the hierarchy use the real presence to excuse the inexcusable. Does Jesus ever feel he's being held hostage?

I don't pretend to know the answer. But I do know I had started to feel I had more than I wanted to have in common with the many Trump supporters who tell

pollsters there's *nothing the president* could do to alienate them. Faith in a man and in a religion are very different, obviously. But if inaction in the face of new reports that child rapists are still being protected wasn't my cue to exit, what would be? That no one can make that call for anyone else should be obvious, but it's not.

The response to the USA Today column I wrote about leaving — or being left, really — was overwhelming in itself. I heard from two bishops, many of the priests still living that I'd known all the way back to St. Mary's Elementary School and just about every Catholic stop in my life since, including from my time as a young Holy Cross Associate lay volunteer right after the University of Notre Dame, and from the Vatican, which I covered for The New York Times at the height of the scandals in 2002 and 2003.

A lot of my friends said they were sad, and a lot of strangers said I was doing Satan's work, or must not love Jesus very much. (You'd be surprised how many Catholics seem to think the only road to Christ runs through Rome.)

Ross Douthat wrote in The New York Times that I was making a "terrible mistake." In another of the six columns on the subject of my exodus — all of them arguing against — a writer for The Federalist accused me of the heresy of Donatism. Reading it made me suspect that he was mostly excited to know what Donatism is. And never have I been more aware of the kernel of truth in that Donald M. Murray essay, "All Writing Is Autobiography."

There was also some unintentional comic relief, as from the Notre Dame alum who wrote in a letter, "A Notre Dame Grad giving up on the church? How dare you! ... Have fun in Hell."

I was also accused of leaving the church to sell newspapers, leaving the church to advance my career, and leaving Christ lonely on the cross. At a monastery in Massachusetts some Maronite monks are praying that I'm healed of my anger and realize that I'm only hurting myself.

But for every "forgive her, for she knows not what she does," there were many more heartfelt letters from Catholics across the country who said they'd come to the same conclusion, or were "hanging on by a thread." One woman said that after a lifetime of being made to feel "less than" because she was pregnant when she and her

husband married, she'd been outraged to learn that some of the very men who had "made me out to be the gravest of sinners" had done "unspeakable things to children and got excused, hidden and moved."

Many of those who wrote work in Catholic parishes or organizations, or used to. "I have lost a great part of my identity," after becoming disillusioned, said a man who'd spent his entire working life raising money for the church.

"I worked for 12 years with the Voice of the Faithful," said another, "hoping to help eradicate clerical felonies and the hierarch's insensitivity to the suffering they have caused. I left finally, discouraged that they would even be willing to listen to us, the People of God."

A pastoral associate in a parish wrote, "There's not a day that goes by that I don't ask myself, 'What I am doing? Am I doing good work here? Is God using me here? Or am I helping to prop up an institution that is ultimately unredeemable?'"

One that probably made me smile more than it should have come from a mother of five in North Carolina. "Please don't let the sons of bitches get the last word," she said, then signed off, "With sincere love in Christ."

Another affecting and very different message, from a seminarian in Tulsa, said, "The Church, my beloved Church, is on fire, and I will not run away; I will run into the building, giving my entire life, to build up the Church and to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I invite you to do the same, to be the change!"

Among those who said they themselves had been abused by a priest was an inmate on death row who still wonders what happened to "the little Cuban boy" Father also took into the church basement.

Some who said they're on the verge of leaving over the spiritually wearing, cumulative impact of the abuse scandals, too, are priests themselves. One is both a priest and a victim of clerical abuse who said he's been targeted throughout his priesthood.

It's since there are so many of us on this road to points unknown that I thought I'd write periodically about what comes now — even though the short answer at this point is that I have no idea. Why would I, when the Catholic Church is the only spiritual home I've ever known, and a former Catholic is not anything I ever really thought I'd be?

For that matter, is "former" even the right way to put it? "Recovering Catholic" is both too dismissive for me and too medicalizing, especially when I'm pretty sure it's much of the hierarchy who should be in treatment. That the faith will always be part of me makes calling myself an "ex" seem like that's a lie I'm telling myself.

It's like moving to a new country, but without knowing which one. Maybe one where I know the language? When some well-intentioned person told me

about an Episcopal church near me that's so large I could go there and be totally anonymous, I thought, well if I wanted to worship where no one ever spoke to me, I'd stay Catholic!

Of course I will check out our closest cousins, though I have to confess that I laughed a little too hard years ago when an editor told me he was a lapsed Episcopalian, "and that's like falling out of a first-story window."

The prospect of starting over after a lifetime is so daunting that I can see why many who leave the Catholic Church just give up on organized religion altogether. I need a faith community, though, and will have to find one.

My friend Michael Sean Winters says he knows I'll be back, "because you don't want to settle for a cracker and some grape juice, now do you?"

I don't, but without overdramatizing, it feels a little like when I had cancer and the doctors kept telling me this was my journey, and everything that happened now would be up to me. Oh, except that "none of the above" wasn't an option. Life as usual was not on the table, then or now.

### **Fr. David Knight's Response**

*[NCR said that Henneberger's article was a very widely read article. The paper received many responses to the article. They decided to print Fr. Knight's response because it was, in their opinion, very thoughtful.]*

*Fr. Knight has been a priest for 57 years. He is the author of many books, some of which I have read and found to be excellent. Years ago, he gave a retreat to the priests of our diocese. Now for Fr. David's response to Melinda.]*

Melinda, I read your article in NCR just when an intellectual friend was disagreeing with my proposition that more people left the church because of boring Masses than because of child abuse. She and her husband, both highly educated, deeply involved Catholics, had both felt inclined to leave the church because of the recurring scandals, although they never would.

My response was, "But you are intellectual people. You couldn't leave for a reason like that. It is totally illogical!"

You are obviously intellectual, too, but in your article I found no one telling you that you are illogical. So I want to ask how in the world a person with your education could possibly leave the church for such an unreasonable reason.

Logically, if you leave the church because the priests are sinful and the bishops worse, you are saying you belonged to the church because the priests were holy and the bishops even more so — which would be manifestly insane. (Or it would be clericalism, which is the same thing!)

It seems obvious that, for whatever reason, God has repeatedly chosen shockingly sinful people to be his public instruments. Moses was a murderer. King David was a rapist who murdered a loyal officer to cover up his adultery. One Scripture scholar described him as "an over-sexed bandit." King Solomon's wives led him into idolatry. And Peter, the first pope, had more sins and errors than anyone mentioned in the Gospels, with a right-to-wrong ratio of three to nine, and one split decision. He gave the right answer to the same question twice, when he confessed Jesus to be the Messiah (Matthew 16:16 and John 6:68), and he said he loved Jesus (John 21:15). Every other time he opened his mouth, he put his foot in it:

- He rejected Jesus' way of saving the world (Matthew 16:22).
- He misunderstood what the transfiguration meant (Matthew 17:4).
- He presumed Jesus would pay the temple tax (Matthew 17:25).
- He guessed wrong about how often one should forgive (Matthew 18:21).
- He objected to Jesus' washing his feet (John 13:8).
- He protested that he would never deny Jesus (Matthew 26:35).
- When he did deny Jesus, he "cursed and swore" he did not know him (Matthew 26:74).
- He slept during Jesus' agony in the garden, and Jesus singled him out by name in his reproach (Matthew 26:40).
- He opted for violence and cut off Malchus' ear when Jesus was arrested (John 18:10).
- The split decision was walking on the water with faith, and then almost drowning for lack of faith (Matthew 14:20-31).

Even after the Resurrection and Pentecost, Peter had the same faults. When God himself told him in a vision to eat non-kosher food, he refused (Acts 10:11). And he could still play the coward. Paul accused him of hypocrisy to his face because, as pope, he was afraid to stand up against the Pharisee party in the church (Galatians 2:11).

But this was the man to whom Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whom he chose to be the "rock" upon which he would build his church. Is there a message in here somewhere that we need to look at?

Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (Philippians 2:7) — not just when he took flesh from Mary, but even more so when he took flesh in us, making our sinful bodies his body. Now Jesus is saying, "If you cannot love me in my ugly body, the church, you cannot love me at all." To reject the sinful body of Jesus that is his church is to reject Jesus.

Ultimately, it is to reject the whole human race.

Look at how illogical your position is. Is the church today worse than it was at the time of the Inquisition, when we tortured and burned people at the stake for alleged heresy? Are we worse now than we were at that time of the Protestant Reformation? Should every African-American give up on the church because we accepted slavery, and then segregation? Even the priests and nuns had slaves. Should every parent whose child is killed by Catholics in war leave the church because the bishops aren't emphatic enough about condemning it?

At least be consistent. If you leave the church of the child abusers, you are leaving the Church of Francis of Assisi, Benedict, Dominic, Ignatius and Óscar Romero. You are giving up fellowship with Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, the steel-sweet little Thérèse of Lisieux, Edith Stein, and Dorothy Day. You are refusing to gather at Mass, to be in the same church building with them and with the poor, the peons and the persecuted who find their refuge in the house of God. With whom will you gather? Have you found a sinless church? And if you do find one, how long will it stay that way?

How logical is the person you quote who "worked for 12 years hoping to help eradicate clerical felonies and the hierarch's [sic] insensitivity to the suffering they have caused," and "left finally, discouraged [because they weren't] willing to listen to us, the People of God"? If all the prophets to whom the hierarchy wouldn't listen gave up, how many saints would we have? Should NCR stop publishing just because the bishops don't subscribe?

Look at the good side. Is there any church, even any organization that supports an instrument of self-criticism as insistent and incisive as the *National Catholic Reporter*? (Editors, leave this in; you didn't throw yourselves this bouquet, I did). Truth eventually wins in the church. Pope John Paul II supported the sex-fiend Marcial Maciel of the Legionaries of Christ more than he supported Óscar Romero. Had you left during his papacy, you would not have been part of the church that eventually condemned Maciel to a life of penance and canonized Romero. How much sense would that make?

You are illogical when you say "that the faith will always be part of me makes calling myself an 'ex' seem like that's a lie I'm telling myself. It's like moving to a

new country." We call those who move to new countries "expats." Those who leave the Catholic community are ex-Catholics. Jesus did not just teach an abstract way of truth. He founded a community. St. Paul called it his body, and an invisible body sounds like a contradiction in terms. I have no doubt you are in the "state of grace," enjoying the divine light, life, and love of God and neighbor, like my Baptist father, my Methodist grandfather, my Campbellite (Christian Church) grandmother, and my other, Quaker, grandfather. But you are an ex-Catholic as they were non-Catholics, because *ecclesia* means "gathering," and you no longer gather with us. It is about as logical for you to leave the church now as it was for the founders of all those other religions to leave it when they did.

I understand those who find it emotionally impossible to be a part of the Catholic Church. My brother is an agnostic because the God we were taught was a monster who sent people to hell for all eternity if they missed Mass on a single Sunday. He lived in terror of God and probably had to deny him to keep his sanity. I tell him that when he dies God will say, "If you had believed in the God you thought I was, that would have been blasphemy. So welcome to the house of your Father!" And I understand victims of sexual abuse by priests who cannot stand to be in a church with one or take part in the service over which a priest presides. But logic does not come into play with them. They are blocked by insuperable emotion, as those Jews would be who saw their wives and children marched into the gas chamber by German soldiers who had just been singing Christmas carols. Experiences like that can't be handled with logic.

It can be dangerous to speak reasonably to people under stress. I learned that when I told a Spanish-speaking woman in the hospital not to feel too bad that her baby had died, because the baby was in heaven. She cussed me out in Spanish words I never heard before or since — and she should have. I never made that mistake again.

But you do not come across as a victim. You seem to be dealing with this intellectually. And all I can say is that you are probably not guilty of sin, unless it is a sin for people with brains and education not to use them. There's a story of someone who was asked, when he left the church, if he was going to become a Protestant. He answered, "I've lost my faith, not my reason."\*

What I hear you saying is, "I've lost my reason, not my faith."

Could this be your personal version of the "dark night of the soul," when nothing human seems to support our faith? The purpose of the dark night is to let us experience our faith as divine by holding on to it when all the human reasons for doing so just don't mean

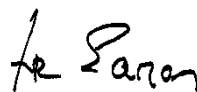
anything anymore. We see the logic in them, but they just don't affect us.

When that happens, the only advice anyone can give us is, "Hang in there!" Then we come to understand on a deeper level what faith is.

You can google Fr. Knight on the internet. Especially see his video on *Five Steps to a Fuller Life with Jesus*.

I will enjoy any reflections you wish to share on the above two articles.

Have a blessed week,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr Paran". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.