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by NCR Staff

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Recently, James Carroll wrote an article for The Atlantic [calling for the priesthood to be abolished](#). NCR published three different responses to Carroll's call: NCR columnist Michael Sean Winters wrote that the [idea was "misguided and tiresome,"](#) Jason Steidl responded to Carroll's critics [asking for understanding](#), and Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese wrote that the [church cannot be saved by getting rid of priests](#). Below are letters to the editor from NCR readers. The letters have been edited for length and clarity.

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James Carroll's article in The Atlantic, [Jesuit Fr. James Martin's critique of it in America](#), and Jason Steidl's sympathetic reflection on it in the National Catholic Reporter, all fail to grasp the strategic distinction between the clerical state and the Catholic lay Sacrament of Orders.

"Clericalism" and "clerical hierarchy" are legal inventions distinct from the Catholic lay Sacrament of Orders, which creates what the Greek New Testament calls *episcopoi* (bishops), *presbyteroi* (presbyters), and *diakonoi* (deacons). But the words "clergy" and "hierarchy" appear nowhere in the New Testament. Indeed, there was no "clergy" or "clerical hierarchy" for the first three centuries of Catholic Christianity, which knew only the one holy *Laos* (people).



From the Middle Ages until recently, Western lay Catholic candidates for ordination became "clerics" through the rite of tonsure, normally given long before ordination. Today, Roman Catholic *episcopoi* and *presbyteroi* may be granted permission to marry after being "reduced to the lay state." They thereby lose their clerical state, but not their lay Sacrament of Orders. Clearly, the two are distinct.

Now, following the disappearance of Western church-state fusion, the clerical state has become entirely dysfunctional and sometimes pathological. As my book *Roman Catholic Clericalism* argues, there will be no postmodern reform of the ordained or of the Roman Catholic Church until Western canon law eliminates the clerical state. That elimination will not of itself bring postmodern reform, but it remains the *sine qua non* for seeking it.

## **JOE HOLLAND**

### **Venice, Florida**

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The articles about abolishing the priesthood misses the whole point. We need more priests but under an optional married structure.

The Catholic Church is a sacramental church and requires priests to perform the sacraments. When Pope John XXIII called for Vatican II, he asked three cardinals to plan and direct Vatican II. The primary planner was Cardinal Leo Suenens of Belgium. In one of his addresses to the council, he proposed having a married priesthood. His logic was pretty straightforward. What is more important? Ministering to the people or being celibate?

The church can provide for the people in the following ways: 1) ordain deacons, 2) allow the priests that have married to return to being authorized priests in the church, and 3) open the doors to men who want to serve God, but in today's world are unable to commit to celibacy, to become priests.

The second issue is how confirmation is not working to help young people make a commitment to Christ and to accept the Holy Spirit into their lives. The young people end up going to a Protestant church and are born again. They make an adult commitment to Christ which they should have done at confirmation. Then they find a church that believes in an active and very real Holy Spirit.

Today's young people want more than a sacramental church. They want a living body of Christ. This is where the church needs to put its attention.

## **THOMAS TABER**

### **Tucson, Arizona**

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Michael Sean Winters, once again, nails it right on the head with a compelling rebuttal of the petulant and rash cry of James Carroll against the Catholic priesthood.

Carroll's context is consistently negative and wallows in his never-ending discontent with all things Catholic. Salvation history for Carroll must match his own experience and no one else's, and he is downright insulting to the many healthy and compassionate men who are priests, not least of all Pope Francis.

Let the haters hate. The very notion of accepting Carroll's argument is what's toxic here.

**BARRY FITZPATRICK**

**Ellicott City, Maryland**

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Thank you for your cogent response to the reactions to James Carroll's Atlantic article.

I was feeling a bit frustrated at the beginning, until I realized that you were summarizing responses that demonstrated the significant gender gap and you were beginning the article with the male, clerical response.

The continued refrain of "lack of empathy" illustrates a logjam of continued misunderstanding that we are suffering in the believing Gospel community.

I fear this will not be solved easily or quickly.

**(Sr.) BEVERLY ANNE LOGRASSO, OSU**

**Lakewood, Ohio**

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I am a devoted follower of James Carroll and have read most all of what he's published. His intellect and historical perspective are not to be trivialized.

I share his disillusion with ordained priesthood but approach from a different perspective: unless and until the Catholic church digs deep into the scientific research on human sexuality that has only surfaced in the last 50-plus years, and re-examines its teachings on human sexuality based on scientific evidence, any approach to [re]solving sexual abuse is simply trying to construct a building without

a foundation. Those entering seminary require serious and thorough psychological evaluation and careful monitoring throughout. A realistic future of Catholic priesthood should involve both men and women, be restricted to those of sound maturity (perhaps entry to seminary restricted to those at least 40), and celibacy restricted to those who have authentically received that charism.

## **JOSEPH B. SANKOVICH**

### **Tucson, Arizona**

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While I do not believe that the abolition of the priesthood is the answer to the myriad problems facing Catholicism, I most certainly believe that the elimination of the current form of the Catholic priesthood is an utter necessity and long overdue. Before scrapping the priesthood, I recommend the immediate inclusion of women and married persons of all genders and sexual orientation. Since the ultimate purpose of the priesthood is the preservation of the Eucharist in our midst, it is way past time to honor the vocational call of women and men in sufficient numbers to serve God's people as priests.

I have long been a fan of James Carroll. His book, *Christ Actually*, is one of the finest things I've ever read about the origins of Christianity and the scope of the current crisis that faces not just Catholicism but the entire Christian faith. Like Carroll, I am a resigned, married Catholic priest. Sixteen years ago, my large, extended Irish Catholic family summoned me to serve their sacramental needs because their disillusionment with institutional Catholicism had grown so deep and bitter. Since that day in 2003, the requests for priestly service have come from far and wide. In my retirement from public service, I am now as busy with priestly duties as I was in the 1980s.

If the very title of Carroll's essay did nothing more than capture the attention of the sleepwalking American Catholic hierarchy, that in itself would be something to celebrate. Anything that pierces the leaden hull of clericalism does vast service to the people of God.

## **STEPHEN STAHLEY**

### **Ranson, West Virginia**

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I do not get involved in theological food fights. They are mostly just ways of salting old unhealed wounds, and do not help reunite all of the world's baptized Christians.

I simply wish to make one comment that is recognized by historical critical scholarship. Nowhere in the Christian scriptures is any Christian leader even remotely spoken of as a priest. The term priest is always without fail applied to all the baptized Christians of the house churches sprinkled around the Roman world. Leaders are elders or overseers or deacon-servants.

What we call priests today, whether parish pastors or elevated to the episcopacy, developed later. Jesus knew about priesthood, and it was some of the chief priests in Jerusalem who were up to their eyeballs in getting him crucified. We have no idea whether or not Nicodemus or Joseph of Aramathea were priests or Levites or lay Pharisees connected with the Sanhedrin. Jesus knew them, but he never addresses them as temple priests. And Jesus certainly never ordained anybody to anything!

What will happen to the Catholic priesthood as a result of the huge debacle is anybody's guess. I do not wish to comment on this timely and acute question here. I am just saying that there are no priests in the New Testament.

**BILL BENDZICK**

**Hermitage, Pennsylvania**

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Thank you for printing Jason Steidl's response to James Carroll's essay in the Atlantic. I was deeply moved by Carroll's essay. I have met Carroll, read many of his books, and enjoy them immensely. He always writes thoughtfully, and often beautifully. I appreciate what his former "brother priests" feel about having someone so demean their life choice, one that he once cherished, but so few priests truly understand the pain of both a laity that is disillusioned by the sex abuse scandals and the pain of women with theological degrees who are denied full ministry in this church.

We are the ones Carroll is speaking of, and I feel that few bishops have truly grasped the situation of so many faithful Catholics, the heart of the church, who like Carroll,

have simply stopped attending worship in a Roman Catholic Church — or any other. The most critical of Carroll's essay are priests, and many are men whose work I have admired, but I believe that too often ordination gives one an additional power, the ability to avoid having to listen to bad homilies Sunday after Sunday, to have the parishes they and their families have struggled to support for decades closed. To survive, they learn to harden themselves in the face of the shattered lives of innocent children whose childhood was stolen from them, and they overlook the glaring fact that women and married men are never going to be allowed full ministry.

Carroll sees the priesthood differently from those who have stayed, but that does not mean that what he sees is not there, nor true.

**(Sr.) RITA M. YEASTED, SFCC**

**Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania**

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Today I read Jason Steidl's article about James Carroll's piece in the Atlantic, and then clicked on the link for "51 people are talking about this." Pretty astounding those first 10 or 12 tweets; to me, their flavor is reminiscent of the inquisition. I hadn't yet read the Carroll piece, so I did at that point.

I kept looking for those parts of it criticized in the tweets; I read it twice. Except for a few lines at the end? I couldn't put my finger on any part or statement that would bring out such scathing and acrimonious comments.

Well-reasoned, I thought; good points I thought; clericalism out? Great, I thought. I am a Vatican II Catholic; I attended Catholic school through my first year of college. When we had grade and high school religion classes, we were taught the ascending / descending order of who is closest to God at Mass: first the priest, then the sisters, then the altar boys, then the choir and lastly the people in the pews. Isn't this a great way to make the laity feel small?

I say to James Carroll: keep on keeping on. We all need thought provoking writing as a basis for discussion — and, let us keep to civilized discussion overall.

**JUDY SCHWARTZ**

## **Hamburg, New York**

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I'm rather disappointed in Michael Sean Winters' article responding to James Carroll's piece in the Atlantic. Carroll has too strong a record and history as a brilliant Catholic intellectual to be dismissed as is done in this article.

What do we lose when we throw out the sacrament of ordination? For Catholics, priests are the living sacrament of Christ's presence, delegated above all to consecrate the bread and wine that define the soul of the faith.

Holy Orders is the exercise of power of service to act on behalf of others in relationship to God — to serve the whole body in unity. This is the sacrament recognizing the energy (grace) to exercise the foresight of leadership for others that all Christians receive.

I have major concern with Carroll's many criticisms of Francis for not taking charge, not making things right (what Carroll says are his disillusionment with Francis). Here Carroll himself is a victim of and susceptible to papal clericalism — turning to the pope to fix everything to make it all right. Many Catholics — including today's liberals who favor this pope — are infants not weaned from the papal breast. Francis, however, is changing the paradigm from power over to power within.

Francis is going after the system — something that Pope John XXIII admitted he could not do. This is real reform — this system change goes after the heart of the evil of clericalism.

**BOB O'GORMAN**

## **Nashville, Tennessee**

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As James Carroll asserts, clericalism is a serious and seemingly church-wide problem and routing it out will not be easy. Agree or not, his article speaks for itself.

Patriarchy is a second and equally serious problem. When women are only valued for their nurturing abilities, the church denigrates them, and misses the opportunities they present for healthy leadership, consensus formation, a keen sensitivity to the consequences of actions and inactions, and an awareness of the harm done by the attitudes of protecting the church at all costs. Their lower testosterone levels are a plus for more balanced discussions and leadership skills.

The medieval structure of the hierarchy is a third problem. We, the laity, are the church, yet lay women, who by numbers are the majority of workers in the parishes, are at the very bottom of that hierarchical pyramid and most often have absolutely no role in decision making in the parish. None of the laity have any input into choosing the leadership of the parish or the diocese. Pastors and bishops are chosen from on high by others often totally unaware of the needs therein.

Thomas Reese mentions optional celibacy for both male and female priests. Let us not forget that celibacy originated not as a spiritual principle or for theological reasons, but as a way to prevent the offspring of the priests from inheriting church property. Money was the bottom line.

## **KATHRYN BARRY**

### **Middlebury, Vermont**

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James Carroll's article was reasoned and personal, and it carried a punch because not as a "former priest" as some detractors would so call him, for he is at best an inactive priest or retired priest but forever a priest according to the theology of these traditionalists. Carroll speaks from within the tradition and with a deep passion for the values of what church, ministry and gospel is all about.

Of course those whose lives are identified with the role and tag of "priest" will be questioned and perhaps threatened when that identity is exposed to examination and critique. There are those who will denounce Carroll suggesting that the pseudonymous letters in the Christian scriptures prove a connection between the priesthood and the ministry of Jesus.

I was ordained but went through the proper channels to get a dispensation, not from the priesthood, but from the exercise of the priestly function. I have not played the role, nor felt the urge to play the role, of the sacramental confectioner. I have my understanding of how it all happened, up to dispensation, and I leave it to other real scholars to do the research into why men chose the priesthood, what it did to them, and how it affected the church both as institution and as a people of faith.

I do support the ordination of women and have participated in such ordinations. However I see that matter as one of seeking equality in the church, not of reinforcing the archaic leadership structure. Such a mild reform does not address the "ontological" difficulty with the order of Melchizedek.

## **PHIL LITTLE**

### **Vancouver Island, Canada**

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Thank you Jason Steidl for your commentary. Your title couldn't be more accurate. I previously read James Carroll's article in The Atlantic and thought, here is someone who has articulated the grief and choices I am grappling with along with questions that I am asking.

I am one of the silent "wounded body of Christ." A woman and a mother. A lifelong devout Catholic, who without knowing Carroll, found that his article articulated well my grief and some of my conclusions.

Two weeks ago, I mailed a letter to the pastor which asked that I be removed from

the parish. I had not been in Mass or tithed for six months, nor given Christmas or Easter gifts. The pastor did call me asking why, saying that "the priests are suffering too, and that in the school they are protecting the students with new measures so that abuse cannot happen." I told him that God gave me faith and I made this difficult decision in prayer. That over time I got confused; that my identity as Catholic got meshed with an institution protecting itself rather than putting Jesus's two commandments first. That we toss out Catholic as identity as easily as we toss out political party as identity, rather than truly living the Gospel values. I am practicing social justice on the ground in Jesus' name with Mary as my guide.

"But you aren't getting the Eucharist."

Yes, that's a loss and a real sacrifice I am making. In fact, it is the truest sacrifice I can make as a devout Catholic and God sees my sacrifice.

## **CAROL ALSTON**

### **New York, New York**

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Thanks to Michael Sean Winters for his thoughtful response to James Carroll's sad Atlantic piece. Carroll has been fighting the father figures in his life since he began writing. One of his first books, *An American Requiem: God, My Father, and the War that Came between Us* (1996) saw his father, an Air Force general and founding director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, as one on the instigators of the Vietnam War. The book addresses their unhappy personal relationship.

Some of his novels do the same more indirectly. Several of his books take on the Catholic Church and its father figures, as does this latest Atlantic piece. His *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews, A History* takes on the church's Jesus. It argues that Christian contempt for the Jews derives from its Christology. Approaching the New Testament in the manner of the Jesus Seminar, Carroll sees Christianity's embrace of Jesus as the Messiah as making it intrinsically anti-Semitic. The only way forward demands "a revision of what we believe about Jesus."

It is difficult for a priest to respond to this latest piece without appearing unduly defensive. Thanks to Michael Sean for his rejoinder.

**(Fr.) THOMAS P. RAUSCH, SJ**

**Los Angeles, California**

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There may be historical, theological or consistency shortcomings in James Carroll's article. His point of view might well be overly self-referential and his research wanting. However, the brutal, and defensive response from Michael Sean Winters rests on the superficial level of detail and misses addressing the heart of the issue. Winters has dismissed Carroll's critique of the church and failed to address the pervasive and corroding issue of clericalism.

I love the church and can't imagine opting for an "internal exile." I have worked at a chancery office with some fine men who are wonderful priests and I know many like them. That does not change the reality of clericalism that is so pervasive that most Catholics do not perceive its pernicious and corrosive effects.

Clericalism is at the root of the sexual abuse crisis in our church. That is why so many predators were protected and the bishops who moved them from parish to parish were almost never held to accountability.

If we cannot uproot clericalism the current drift of our people away from the church will continue. If we remain defensive rather than open and willing to change archaic structures that support clericalism, we will have failed to pass on a tradition and values that our people desperately need. Let's gather the courage to hear criticism and be changed into the church that was Jesus' dream for all we could be.

**TERRY DAVIS**

**Stockton, California**

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I agree with the Jason Steidl's comments concerning James Carroll's critics. I have asked myself the same questions as Carroll does.

I am not quite there yet but he makes some excellent points that ought to be taken seriously and not dismissed out of hand by these very defensive clerics who criticize him so harshly. I was totally disgusted with some of the reactions. Actually I believe they make his point for him very well.

## **LOIS MILLS**

### **Orlando, Florida**

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I read with interest the articles around James Carroll's Atlantic article on abolishing the priesthood. I am not competent to dive into the discussion of abolishing the Catholic priesthood. However, I would like to share from my own experience.

My last 10 working years, I was a lay ecclesial minister for a priestless mission community in Northeast Mississippi, the only Catholic presence in the county. I presided at Word and Communion and gave reflections under the auspices of the local bishop. I faithfully fulfilled my role as the community's pastor.

Reflecting back on those years I have one takeaway. The baptismal birthright of Roman Catholics is the full participation in the sacramental life of the church. Obviously, based on the limitations placed on me by the hierarchical structure of the church, I was unable to provide the people of my community with that full sacramental life.

Regardless of where you stand on the issue of clericalism, it is time for the church to fully address this issue. Maybe the answer lies in another council that will concentrate on a theological reflection on who is called to ministry. What comes out of such a council would at long last answer this pressing issue worldwide.

## **JERRY WOODS**

### **Sugar Hill, Georgia**

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I have thought of Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese's quote from Acts 6 along with the next sentence in Acts 6 (We should be preaching the word) as an expression that managing the corporal goods of the community did not leave enough time for preaching the word. Or, maybe that the two areas should be under the direction of two different groups of members of the church community.

In today's world, I think of it as saying the corporation sole concept is wrong. Today, the bishop is sole owner of all of a diocese's material goods. The bishop delegates administration of the material goods in each parish to the pastor. The pastor has sole authority over these material goods. Hence, we have pastoral councils with only advisory participation in what the pastor decides.

To me, Acts 6 says we should have someone other than the bishops and pastors charged with overseeing the material goods of the church community. I think it would be much harder for the bishops to give up financial control than it will be to establish a definite process for disciplining a bishop.

I firmly believe if both of these steps were taken, we would see a major improvement in management of the church and in the public perception of the church.

## **EDDIE SHEPPARD**

### **Forsyth, Georgia**

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