

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

May 31, 2012 at 1:50pm

Open letter to American priests

by Mary Gordon

I am watching my 2-week-old grandson sleep. It is my time to be on watch so that his mother can sleep. When he wakes and cries, I will bring him in to her to nurse.

You may find this an odd opening sentence for a letter to American priests, arguably as far as any imaginable cohort from the day-to-day realities of newborn babies, nursing mothers. But it is the presence of this little boy, so new to the world, that has broken through my paralysis, my despair, because nothing breaks through paralysis and despair like a new birth.

I have been silent in the face of my outrage at the latest enormities committed by the hierarchy, because I have no hope that any words of mine could have any impact upon them. But I have also been silenced by a disappointed sadness at what I feel as a failure on the part of a group of men whom I have greatly admired, respected, often loved, who have been important sources of strength and inspiration to me.

That is to say, I am writing to priests whom I think of as "the good guys," often heroic in their steadfast perseverance in living a Gospel life of service to the people of God.

I think I understand (though there may be no more obnoxious phrase than, "I feel your pain") the isolation and loneliness that priests of good will and a progressive disposition must experience, an isolation that has been exacerbated by the shortage of priests. But I fear that this very sense of isolation is working against you. I know that many of you must be as disturbed as I am at three recent actions by the official church.

First there were the changes in the liturgy -- most important, the change from "all" to "many" at the consecration. Then there was the behavior of the hierarchy in regard to the controversy surrounding the funding of contraception -- and the cynical political use to which it is being put. I am even more sure that the grossly insulting behavior of the official church towards American nuns must be abhorrent to many of you.

My sadness and disappointment, then, stems from the fact that you have not come together to protest these bad behaviors, publicly, as a united cohort. The bosses and bullies who, for the most part, are now in charge of the church have succeeded in creating a climate of fear that has silenced you.

Many of you are at an age where the youthful enthusiasm for risk-taking has vanished -- like a full head of hair or a flat belly. I understand that there are economic anxieties that could contribute to your silence; it's fine for me, with a salary, health insurance, social security, to take a stand. I can very well appreciate the anxiety that would attach to losing your only economic security, and facing an old age with no economic or social safety net.

Yes, I understand, and indeed sympathize. But the way of the Gospel is not the way of risk avoidance. Nor is it the way of isolated individualism. I am afraid that the very structure of the priesthood -- each pastor the lord of his own demesne (however poor and paltry it might be) -- does not contribute to a habit of mind that leads to collective action.

In this as in so many areas, you might take a leaf from the book of the nuns, your sisters. There is a way in which the shortage of priests could serve to your advantage: if you all stand together and form a critical mass, they can't afford to lose you. They can pick you off if you stand alone -- but if you stand shoulder to shoulder, hundreds of you -- well, either they have to massacre you (which would certainly make the evening news) or they have to contend with your witness.

I am writing to you because I and many people who share my views feel newly and radically abandoned. We are used to turning our faces away from the hierarchy saying, "The Vatican, the bishops, are not the church." But you, in your connection to the people are the church, and the people, suffering and scandalized, require your witness and your leadership.

A child is crying. I have said what I wanted, and so I close, with sadness and in hope.

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[Mary Gordon is an American writer and the McIntosh Professor of English at Barnard College.]

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