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My new perch

Caitlin Hendel | Jan. 6, 2014 NCR Today

On one Sunday in early November, we heard Luke's Gospel story of Zacchaeus, the stature-challenged tax collector who climbed a sycamore tree to get a better view of Jesus as he worked his way through the crowds. The effort paid off for Zacchaeus when Jesus noticed him and invited him to dinner -- at Zacchaeus' house, of course.

"If you want to see Jesus," our pastor told us in his homily, "you must climb out on a limb."

It was at that moment on a beautiful fall Sunday morning in Overland Park, Kan., that I knew not only that I would accept the job of CEO/president of the National Catholic Reporter Publishing Company, but also that I would do so with enthusiasm.

I'd been eyeing that limb with trepidation despite the encouragement of many people, including *NCR* publisher Tom Fox and my husband, John, whose opinion I value above all others. I was comfortable in my role as managing editor. It was a new job for me at *NCR*, but I had worked in that position for other news organizations for years. I was comfortable, happy, fulfilled. Or was I?

What washed over me at that moment in church was the sense that I needed to crawl out on that limb because that's what we do at *NCR*. Against all odds, despite death threats and bricks (to those who still send them: Thanks! We use them to hold up old desks) and vindictive bishops, the founders of *NCR* and those who followed over the past 49 years refused to back down, refused to join the crowds on the ground.

We are journalists. We cover the Catholic church. And we do it through the prism of the values set forth by the Second Vatican Council. Social justice issues outweigh those of the bedroom. A strong and engaged laity is necessary to help spread the message of the Gospels. And priests have no more right to hurt children than anyone else in society does.

This occasionally earns us the moniker "anti-Catholic dissidents." I encourage you to come visit and meet the *NCR* staff. "Anti-Catholic" will be the last adjective you come up to describe them. I prefer the terms caring, generous, passionate, fair, creative, diligent, resourceful and hopeful. It's a small staff made up of individual personalities all united by one mission.

Eight framed photos hang on a wall on our fourth floor: the past leaders of *NCR*. Seven men and one woman precede me in this role, including Joe Feuerherd, who died in 2012 at age 48. Joe liked to say that *NCR* was akin to a city newspaper covering city hall. "Vatican II had just concluded and it seemed that aggiornamento extended to the newsroom," Joe once wrote. "The rules were being rewritten and the editors, reporters and subscribers of *NCR* were among those doing the rewriting. The cutting edge can be dangerous, but that is where *NCR* sat."

The cutting edge, the limb of a tree -- pick your metaphor -- that is still where *NCR* sits. And it is where I now sit, too. I'm not sure I can see Jesus from this perch, but I know I can see a world of opportunity to hold the

church and the people of God accountable to the values upon which this organization was built.

Let me know how we're doing at chendel@ncronline.org [1].

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