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by NCR Staff

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Synodality is an empty exercise unless true reform of the hierarchy comes from the top, [writes former NCR editor Tom Roberts](#), adding that members of the hierarchy appear not to realize the depth to which the effects of the sexual abuse scandal have seeped into every level of the institution. Following are letters to the editor responding to this commentary that have been edited for length and clarity.

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I believe it should be obligatory for every bishop to answer Tom Roberts' question at the end of this well written article. Included in the question should be what have bishops done to their own priests when a national survey would indicate the bishop would not support their priests who are accused. Good luck with vocations!

**JANE FRANCISCO**

**Charlotte, North Carolina**



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I have always believed that the Catholic Church needs a change of heart and a fundamental conversion when dealing with the abuse crisis that continues to engulf it.

Policies and safeguarding measures can be put in place but if they are only there because of outside influences, and they are not there as a result of an institutional conversion, what good are they?

In my experience with the Comboni Missionary Order the above has always been the case. They ignored me for decades, and when they could no longer ignore me and/or the Comboni Survivor Group they attacked us. One superior, after I had asked for an apology, even went as far to say to me, face-to-face (all taped) after I had just met and forgiven my child priestly abuser in Verona: "If you are waiting for an apology, you will be waiting a long time and your wait will be in vain."

It was only after the intervention of Pope Francis to the Comboni Order that the order met with us.

Conversion, listening with an open heart and asking for forgiveness is never easy, but it is what is required in the case of clerical abuse. It is what is required within the church if it is ever to become an inclusive church of the people.

**MARK MURRAY**  
**Denbighshire, Wales**

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Reading Tom Roberts' commentary, I felt a quiet, "firm persuasion" (as Blake might call it). He confirmed my decision to leave the local parish and church in 2011 because of a sense the "spirit," not the Holy Spirit, was vapid; something had been drained from it.

There seems to be a ghostly presence of the "some bad apples" attitude haunting the hierarchy regarding the abuse crisis. They do not, as Roberts said, grasp its depth, nor do they seem to grasp the loss of their once moral authority which continues to infect the divisions within their ranks.

A ghostly presence of some bad apples has a Garden of Eden ring to it. Pushing the blame elsewhere when God came looking for them to own up to their responsibility and actions did not resolve the issue. We are left with an eternal grief, somewhere among the thorn bushes of denial, bargaining and anger. God became man to show us how to address that grief, and then Jesus was crucified as a scapegoat, a criminal.

Unlike David when Nathan said, "Thou art the man," and repented, the church sought, like Adam, to cover up its exposure. But how does an institution repent? Is the payoff in dollars really going to serve the penance, like three Hail Mary's and three Our Father's?

Perhaps the synodality is the penance, the reconciliation for a conversion of heart. That is, of course, if the hierarchy chooses to listen to those who are the church.

**DAVE MURRAY**

**Cedarville, Michigan**

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In his essay, Tom Roberts argues that because of their religious beliefs, the bishops should have known better how to respond responsibly to clerical sex abuse of minors.

Let me suggest a simpler, more damning explanation — the complete disregard for respect for human dignity which is born of indisputable human reason. Why couldn't

the bishops see what anyone can see in the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), that "disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind"?

**T. PATRICK HILL**  
**Winchester, Virginia**

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"What can synodality mean when there's been such a deep sacramental betrayal? How can it possibly work?" Tom Roberts' stirring recollections of his own part as one of a small cadre of journalists covering the progression of clerical child abuse in the U.S. is a question for us all.

As child survivor/advocate for over 30 years, I feel that the true reality and repercussions of systemic child abuse and its cover-up by Catholic Church bishops in our nation since the 1940s is only just beginning to hit home and, maybe, true synodality and reconciliation is still a bit of a stretch. A cloud of shame and confusion seems to hover over the entire institution as even more pedophile priests, their bishop protectors and a blind and/or complicit laity continue to be exposed for their parts in these atrocities while they were under the guise of maintaining the illusion of a holy priesthood and a "one, holy, Catholic Church."

At the close of World War II in Germany, Allied forces, confronted with the horrors of the "efficient" Nazi death camp at Buchenwald, felt it perfect justice to insist on "touring" nearby country folk through the facilities to encounter personally the suffering inmates and the piles of bodies waiting to be incinerated that they denied knowing anything about. Maybe a similar encounter is still necessary for the remnant of loyal Catholics still remaining in the church who want to do the right thing with whatever it takes to do it.

Just as Pope Francis has suggested that synod participants should prepare for the final sessions by reading the first four documents of the Second Vatican Council, perhaps they could also immerse themselves in the history of clerical child abuse in the U.S. and encounter personally some more of the survivors. I am certain that current and former Catholic journalists like Tom Roberts and Tom Fox as well as members of Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests and Bishop Accountability will be happy to furnish all the materials as well as recommend articulate speakers for their future sessions.

**NANCY McGUNAGLE**

**Kalispell, Montana**

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In the secular world of business closely held corporations are run mostly by their principals who have familial or social relationships with their chief officers. The appointments of personnel at the higher levels of the corporation rests with the chief executive who is usually the owner of the business. On the other hand, publicly owned corporations, those which trade stock, have boards of directors which have the authority under the law to remove a CEO for malfeasance as well as incompetence.

Our dioceses resemble closely held corporations in that the CEO, the bishop, appoints his advisors who are arguably sycophants of the prelate. If we had a board of directors in each diocese with the ability to recommend appointments or dismissal of bishops, we likely would not have had the scandals which have plagued our church. Pope Leo XIII referred to democracy in America as Americanism and was disparaging of democracy as he understood it. However, input from the faithful over selection and retention of our shepherds would engage the sheep far more than can be realized today. That is not to say that complete democratization of our church governance would be an objective but input from the faithful would make the hierarchy more accountable.

One improvement which the synod might address is governance of the local diocese to enable and involve the faithful in direct management. Although many bishops have councils of advisors, none has authority to confront the bishop over mismanagement. That mismanagement of personnel is what has led, in part, to the loss of credibility which many bishops have experienced and that also translates into a growing lack of trust in the institution itself.

**CHARLES A. Le GUERN**

**Granger, Indiana**