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by NCR Staff

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In a recent column, [Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese says](#) there are numerous signs that the Catholic Church is failing in Western countries. With fewer vocations, less church attendance and young people leaving the church in droves, the question we have to ask is why. Following are NCR reader responses to this column. The letters have been edited for length and clarity.

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Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese's observations all contribute to our church's decline. However, I am convinced a core problem is the church has calcified in believing the

Spirit only works through the structure of our doctrinal and established traditional assumed truths.

When Jesus said there is much I could tell you but you cannot hold them now (understand them now) we assume these future revelations will only come to God's children through the funnel of popes, bishops and theologians.



This limitation is what I mean by calcified thinking. Our living God is not restricted by the traditional structures of the Catholic Church or any other traditional religious structures. To insist God is, implies we have God cornered in our yard. But God sees no fences, no boundaries. To stubbornly insist we must not be open to continued humble openness to these promised revelations is blind and arrogant.

## **PAUL PIERLOTT**

### **Pennsauken, New Jersey**

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My family were members of a diocesan parish that received the assignment of an incompetent, insensitive curate who should never been assigned a parish.

We left to join an urban parish that focuses on acceptance, serving the local homeless, providing challenging homilies and moving music program. Staffed by five Franciscans, there are programs for children, LGTBQ people, grieving parents, bread for family members of deceased on All Souls Day, active maintenance of a Haitian sister parish and Mass on multiple internet providers since COVID-19. There are

additional programs that enjoy wide parishioner participation.

The parish draws from multiple zip codes across the state. The parish itself, St. Patrick-St. Anthony, is the result of a merger many years ago that resulted in more than the sum total of the originals.

## **DON KAUKE**

### **West Hartford, Connecticut**

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Adding to Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese's "Why is the church failing in the West?", I can't help but wonder if it's also because so many priests and bishops are making God so small that God's unconditional love and mercy are no longer allowed to unfold and evolve. God was not created in humans' image and likeness; humans are created in God's image and likeness. And because of that truth, no one is any more worthy to receive God than anyone else.

Yet, how often are we told that we're not "Catholic enough" if we don't follow every manmade church rule? Living a Christian life is about following Jesus, who taught us how to be human by being one with God and loving one another as Jesus loves us. That's it. And his path of love and mercy is through contemplative prayer and the Beatitudes.

If the U.S. church hierarchy focused on Jesus' two commandments and teachings, instead of demanding that Catholics follow their teachings, while they intentionally ignore and publicly defame their leader, Pope Francis' teachings, maybe the church wouldn't be failing in the West.

We need to start getting out of God's way so God can be God. Maybe then all of us, as the body of Christ, will better understand how kinship with everyone in and through God can finally take root, 2,000 years after Jesus taught.

## **DEBBIE DUGAN**

### **St. Louis, Missouri**

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I read this article with great interest. I have long felt that one of the major problems with the Catholic Church has been the intolerant attitude of some priests. Others are truly Christian. But some priests do not display any tolerance and are judgmental, usually showing little sign of neighborly love as taught by Jesus. It is so sad.

I know many Catholics who have been turned away by this attitude of some priests. This is the major problem though far from the only one.

### **JENNIFER HODGETTS**

#### **Petrolia, Ontario**

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A few years ago, the diocese in which I resided conducted a survey of people who had left the church. In many cases the fault was attributed to the personality of the priests who seemed incapable, or unwilling, to engage people in conversations rather than defaulting to quoting rules. Some of the responses by those surveyed were to the effect they did not leave the church, the church left them.

Although some of the bishops attribute our church attrition to rising secularism, they need to recognize that the rise of secularism is itself a reaction to the irrelevance which many people had found in organized religion. In that regard, many clerics who seem to disdain the reforms of the Second Vatican Council should be aware that had those reforms not been affected, the church would be a much smaller entity in the United States than it is now.

In my view, many of the people in the pews are more progressive than the clerics imagine and support a strong positive social justice agenda of both the church and the government. When we find some of our shepherds' rhetoric diminishing the party which promotes social justice in favor of the other, which is divisive on those same issues, the credibility of those clerics, and the larger church as well, becomes suspect. When those in the pews believe the church has left them because they can no longer relate to the rhetoric the result becomes empty pews and a church of

diminished relevance to the faithful.

## **CHARLES A. Le GUERN**

### **Granger, Indiana**

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