

# FORUM LETTER

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## The humiliating discovery



The Christian is one who has forever given up the hope of being able to think of himself as a good man. He is forever a sinner for whom the Son of God had to die because by no other means could he be forgiven. In a sense we can say that he has given up the effort to be good. That is no longer his aim. He is seeking to do one thing and one thing only – to pay back something of the unpayable debt of gratitude to Christ who loved him as a sinner and gave Himself for him. And in this new and self-forgetting quest he finds that which – when he sought it directly – was forever bound to elude him, the good life.

No two motives could be more distinct from one another than these two, yet it is the commonest thing to find them confused. How ready we are to take Christ as our pattern and teacher only, using the words of the Gospel, and yet never allowing ourselves to face the experience of forgiveness at the foot of the Cross – the humiliating discovery that, so far from our being like Jesus, there is literally no hope for us at all except that He has forgiven us. There is a whole universe of moral and psychological difference between saying, 'Christ is my pattern, and if I try I can be like Him,' and saying, 'I am so far from goodness that Christ had to die for me that I might be forgiven.' The one is still in the world of legalism, and its centre of attention is still the self. The other is in the world of grace, and its centre of attention is another to whose love it is our whole and only aim to give ourselves. The one must always lack what the other increasingly has, the spontaneity and whole-heartedness that comes when there is the whole force of an emotionally integrated life behind action. – Lesslie Newbigin, *Christian Freedom in the Modern World* (SCM Press, 1937), 84-85.

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## God's way with Abraham



The last several years of my parish ministry, I preached from the Revised Common Lectionary. I liked it, for the most part. One thing I didn't like so much was the loss of the story of the binding of Isaac from the first Sunday of Lent in Year B. That passage from Genesis 22 has haunted me ever since I read Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* in college, and I always looked forward to preaching on it (though with fear and trembling, certainly). It seemed to me to fit rather well with Mark's narration of the temptation of Christ.

Aside from Kierkegaard's essay, one of the most powerful reflections on the text was written some years ago by William Willimon [*Christian Century*, March 16, 1983, pp. 237-238]. He told of a Bible study on the text in a suburban

congregation. The participants were a little slow to respond, so Willimon prompted them: "I daresay we moderns are a bit put off by the primitive notion that anybody would think that God wanted him to sacrifice his child like this. Can this ancient story have any significance for us?"

### Rotary Club god

Then the dam burst. One after another, people told stories from their own lives that reflected God asking them to make incredibly painful sacrifices. Many told them with tears. One middle-aged man responded: "I'll tell you the meaning this story has for me. I've decided that I and my family are looking for another church. . . . When I look at that God, the God of Abraham, I feel I'm near a real God, not the sort of dignified, businesslike, Rotary Club god we chatter about here on Sunday mornings. Abraham's God could blow a man to bits, give and then take a child, ask for everything from a person and then want more. I want to know *that* God."

People of faith have always been astonished by God's way with Abraham. Luther commented that he could not have been an observer of these events, let alone a participant. Rather, he says, he would have had to stay at the bottom of the mountain with the rest of the donkeys because he just could not fathom what it all means.

Perhaps we feel the same way. What kind of God would make such a demand? Many modern commentators try to soften it by explaining that, after all, God never really intended for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. Yet I suspect such an explanation misses the point, and muddles things hopelessly. The story is carefully crafted to be difficult, even impossible.

It is precisely the difficulty that draws us to it, that draws us to this God who is, indeed, no "dignified, businesslike, Rotary Club god." But he is the God of Abraham, the God of Jesus Christ, and the One who would be our God. So we have to come to terms with him. As I reflect on this text, there are two things that stand out to me – difficult things, to be sure, but then, as I said, it's a difficult story.

### Wintery spirituality

The first is that this God is the only God who makes sense in a senseless world. Martin Marty, in the months following the death of his wife, wrote

about the difference between summery spirituality and wintery spirituality. [*A Cry of Absence: Reflections for the Winter of the Heart* (Harper and Row, 1982)] Summery spirituality is the optimistic, bubbly variety that sees goodness in everything. It is the kind of religion, he says, that is proclaimed by television evangelists and not a few churches, the kind that repeats, endlessly, even mindlessly, "God loves you and I love you." It's the spirituality whose greatest advocate was Norman Vincent Peale with his "power of positive thinking."

The wintery spirituality, on the other hand, faces the troubles of life, the pains, the deaths, the difficulties, and struggles with them. This wintery type of faith does not paste on a smile and say all is fine. Rather it grieves, it mourns, it groans, and it even sometimes fights God. Yet it does so with faith. It knows, indeed, that "in everything God works for good," but it doesn't pretend to explain how that can be understood in the face of events that don't seem so good. It is content to affirm Paul's words that "nothing can separate us from the love of God," but it won't sugarcoat the other words in that passage: hardship, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword, death.

Marty's distinction is very useful, seems to me, because I think most of us know what winter is like (even those of us who live in California). Who has not faced it? Who has not suffered? Who has not wept because life seems out of control? Willimon calls the scene of Abraham's testing a "wild and wooly mountain." Who is there who has not walked up that mountain, at least a ways?

### Questions like an icy wind

It is a story that only speaks to those who have experienced winter, who have wondered why God would do this. Why did my child die? Why does my friend suffer with this dreadful disease? Why has my spouse left me? Why can't I find work? Why can't I believe the way others do? These are the questions of winter, the questions that blow through our hearts like an icy wind.

The genius of the story is that it gives no answer. What we see is the struggle. We see Abraham, trudging up that hill, and we know, we *know* what is in his heart. We know there is a struggle not seen on the surface, but we feel it, we sense it. It is the struggle of believing and trusting God when we find the

pain of doing so almost unbearable. We who have been through the winter, who have felt the chill wind, we know that struggle.

I had a friend who endured more than anyone should have to endure. Two marriages ended in difficult divorces. Her father suffered for years from dementia and did not know her. Her only son was diagnosed HIV-positive. A back ailment caused her unrelenting pain for months. Why does God allow such things? Why does God demand so much? In the story of Abraham and Isaac, a quite unsatisfactory answer is given: we have no answer. We have only the assurance that even in this suffering, God is there, somehow, somewhere. He is not a God who says, "Cheer up! Live, love, laugh and be happy!" But he is a God who walks with us on that wild and windy mountain, and who provides for us just in the instant when we thought we could not go on.

### How many steps?

My other observation is that the story teaches us we sometimes are asked to walk a good long way on a difficult path. Think of that three-day journey up Mt. Moriah. Wouldn't it have been bad enough for God to say, "Sacrifice Isaac, and I want him right now!"? But God wants a three-day journey. Do you know how many steps one takes in a three-day journey? My Fitbit would be going crazy! And with each step, the pain, the wondering, the questioning, with each step up that mountain.

So often we think of temptations, testings, as one-shot affairs. In Matthew and Luke, Jesus is tempted three times by Satan — as if temptation could actually happen in three separate and discrete moments! Mark's version is more lifelike: "He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan." It sounds like an ongoing, even a constant thing. It sounds like Abraham, who struggled not just when

God made the demand, not just when he raised the knife, but every step of that three-day journey up the mountain.

And it sounds like us, who so often face not just single, isolated troubles, but tests and trials and tribulations that go on and on. So-called grief experts tell us it takes at least two years to work out the death of a loved one. Sometimes people feel there's something wrong with them because they can't "get over it" (whether "it" is a death or some other difficult experience). But with all the trials and griefs we face, there's no quick fix. Abraham had to walk every step of the way up that mountain, every painful step. With us, too, there's no way around our temptations and tests. They must be taken step by step. But again, with us on that mountain is the God who provides. He may not always be seen; sometimes for reasons unknown to us he hides himself. But he is there, in the shadows, leading us on, walking with us.

### Another Moriah

"The sky darkens," writes Willimon, "the wind howls, a young man walks up another Moriah, driven by a God who demands everything and who stops at nothing. Unlike Abraham, [this young man] carries a cross on his back rather than sticks for the fire; like Abraham, [he is] obedient to a wild and restless God who is determined to have his way with us, no matter what the cost."

A wild and restless God indeed. But in that wildness, in that restlessness, there is a strange peace. For it is only that wild and restless God who can promise to be with us through the wild and windy journey that is life. It is only that God who can provide.

*--by Richard O. Johnson, editor*

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## When the ordinary isn't

by Jeremy Loesch



We know the ordinary. We are very familiar with the common. And maybe that makes our everyday life seem so bland. The ordinary has no oomph. There is no pizzazz with what is plain. Does anything rise to the

level of marvelous when all you can muster is a shoulder-shrugged "Meh?"

The ordinary can be detested for its drudgery. We long for something different, something new, something that will move us out of the rut we

have gotten ourselves into. We may know the saying that variety is the spice of life yet too frequently all we find most mornings is ordinary oatmeal.

There are times when I desire something different. But the ordinary can be very comforting. It is nice to know the routine and to have a reasonable expectation of what will come next. When there is too much chaotic variety, the ordinary can become a refuge for us, as if we are returning home after a vacation, ready to get back to what is familiar.

### Ordinary time

The term “ordinary” has crept into our church lives, and the word may even predate our common usage of it today. The term may have been used when I was younger, but I never noticed it. As a child, there was no such thing as the Ordinary of the church; there was just the Sunday service and an awareness over time that things seem to repeat themselves every so often. “Huh? Didn’t we pray that same prayer on the first Sunday of Advent last year?” “Every fourth Sunday after Easter we hear something from John 10. It has to be just a coincidence.”

As I said, I didn’t know anything of ordinariness or propers or occasional services, I just knew church. We hear what the lessons are. We pray what the prayers are. We sing what the hymns are. We receive what is given to us. My father was the pastor and in the pew it was me, my mom, and my brother in that order. (And it was entirely ordinary, Sunday after Sunday, that my brother and I never sat next to each other; Mom was always the buffer zone.) We even speak these days of “ordinary time,” those “green Sundays” between Epiphany and Lent, and then that long stretch between Pentecost and Advent. Much of our church year is “ordinary.”

Aside from lectionaries and orders of worship and appointed psalms and prayers for particular days, there are other things that become a part of our ordinary church life. There are rites and rituals. Ordinations and installations become an ordinary part of the church. Baptisms, confirmations, marriages, and funerals become just as much a part of the congregational life as Vacation Bible School, the servant event, and the church picnic. While a picnic in Oregon is pretty much a picnic in North Dakota, and a baptism is generally just a baptism, whether in Maine or Colorado (all states I’ve never been to, by

the way), each of the common portions of life in God’s church has its own unique features. Some baptisms may use oil to “seal” the washing and other baptisms may make use of a very explicit exorcism feature (“Depart, O unclean spirit, and make room for the Holy Spirit!”). Some baptisms involve processions with a crucifer, torch bearer, the pastor, the parents and the baby, and the sponsors. In all of those cases we know that what makes a baptism is the use of water and the Word of God. Oil, the white garment, a candle – those may be nice and symbolically significant, but they aren’t essential to a baptism.

### Ordinary life

We do know about ordinariness in the life of the church. And there are even more ordinary things besides worship. Every church I know has a budget, though not every church has the same fiscal year. Every church I know has a constitution or governing documents, though again, they are not all the same. And every church I know has members, worshipers, attendees, believers, though not every church has the same numbers. The church is made up of people, after all. And every church I know elects some people to do various tasks. All of that is very common and ordinary.

It is good order and it is decent to install the members that have been elected to serve their fellow believers in the congregation. And so from time to time, in a very ordinary way, churches have an installation service. And I would say that this is ordinarily done at the beginning of the elected term, typically the first Sunday in January; at least this has been the traditional time at the three churches I have served in Ohio, Delaware, and Missouri.

Well, I am the new guy in Missouri, and I went through the ordinary installation service in mid-November of 2014. And I am learning all sorts of things as I begin my tenure here. The things I am learning are not new things; they are simply new-to-me things. The congregation has a budget – like every other church. They have officers – like every other church. The preschool has teachers and students – like every other church that has a school.

So the congregation had the installation of officers on January 4th. We did what a lot of other congregations do, because in many ways, we are blessedly typical. One thing that is not typical for me

is that I have been called to serve a much larger church than any I have been a part of since I was ordained. It's not a megachurch by any stretch of the imagination, but it is a big church to me. As I called the elected officers to come forward, I'm not certain what I was expecting. Perhaps I was thinking that five or six members would come forward. My experience had typically been two to four people, so I just increased that number by a couple. Well, I was in for a surprise!

The usual suspects stood up and came forward. And then some more. And then some more. They kept coming. It was the zombie apocalypse of church officers! All told, it was twenty people that came forward for the installation, to hear some Scripture passages, to give their assent to their time of service, to hear the pledge of prayer and support from their fellow members, and to be prayed for as their term began. It was so ordinary, and so not!

As I drove home from church that day I reflected on this portion of that Sunday's worship. Who would have thought that the installation of officers would put such a smile on a pastor's face? And all that afternoon I smiled at how often the ordinary functions of life are filled with the extraordinary.

### Nothing mundane with God

The ordinary is precisely that—ordinary. But how often do I find (and I hope you do too) God working through the mundane to do the miraculous? Baptism uses plain water, yet with the Word of God it is a baptism, Luther says, "a life-giving water, rich in grace, and a washing of the new birth in the Holy Spirit." Holy Communion uses common elements in order for God to give us what he wants

us to receive: forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. In hearing the Word of God, especially as the Word is read into our ears year after year after year, you may find that the familiar is opened to you in different ways through the faithful preaching of your pastor. There is nothing mundane with God, just the marvel of his mercy.

The ordinary becomes anything but, for God is working through the common and the plain. God shows up where he wants to show up. He doesn't always ask if it is convenient for him to show up or if we want him to be a part of our day. He just shows up. It's as if he says to us, in a kind way, of course, "I don't care what you think. I'm going to be there because that is my promise to you." In the ordinary times and in the celebrations of our lives, our Lord shows up.

Christmas is a special time in the church that has become rather ordinary. Christmas is what the Father has given to us, and so Christmas is now what we do and who we are. The Nativity of our Lord retains its awe and wonder, even though we go through it year after year. The same can be said about Easter. The Resurrection of our Lord never ceases to sing joy to our heart. While being the same, it is never the same. You know the life of the congregation as well as I do and in the Church, people come and people go. The special times, the feasts and commemorations, they are extraordinarily ordinary.

But the ordinary times? The common things? They rarely are.

*The Rev. Jeremy Loesch is the recently installed pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church (LCMS) in Grandview, MO. He and his family reside in Lee's Summit.*

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## Dust to dust: I'm not convinced

by Robert Hartwell



Nathan Corl Minnich's lament on funeral customs in the December 2014 *Forum Letter* was not a convincing read.

A pastor who is also a funeral director decrying new cultural habits that just happen to reduce the funeral industry profit margins strikes me as self-

serving. Moreover, Pr. Minnich does not even begin to prove his point. He writes, "If cremation has no theological justification within Christianity. . . ." "If" nothing! His selective survey of burial customs in antiquity glosses over thousands of years and thousands of miles. At the most, we might say that West-

ern Christendom in the last thousand years has been anti-cremation, but that is hardly the whole story.

The martyrs of the early Christian centuries were often cremated on the pyre. Should we say that they somehow desecrated their deaths by the flames? Minnich has also totally ignored the Biblical era funeral customs that are not practiced today by Christians. In those days there was no embalming, and bodies would be entombed within 24 hours of death. Later, Christians began collecting and reintering the bones of their deceased in ossuaries. Why does Minnich not suggest that we resume these ancient practices?

### Ashes to ashes

Pr. Minnich seems to suggest that Christians view cremains as not being the body of the deceased, and that they therefore neglect a theology of body and soul in the practice of cremation. As a pastor who has celebrated the Rite of Christian Burial both for bodies embalmed and bodies purged by fire, I know that relatives are eager to kiss and lament the receptacle of cremains just as devotedly as they do a coffin containing a body.

Funerals in my pastorate are often a day or two of visitation (with a body) and then cremation. The scriptures come alive as we commit the body to the elements with the words “ashes to ashes and dust to dust” in a way that an embalmed body in an airtight vault (a practice quite lucrative for the funeral industry) can never convey.

### Why cremation?

There are two factors that often precipitate a decision for cremation followed by a later memorial service, and they are completely unconnected with a false view of the body and soul of the human individual: family members that live long distances from the deceased, and the price of funerals.

The traditional practice of a funeral within a few days of the death can make it impossible for distant loved ones to attend, given the complication and expense of travel these days. It is entirely reasonable to postpone the service until a time when family can be present, and that is facilitated by cremation.

In my area a regular “coffin and funeral home” service can cost as much as \$20,000. This is out of the realm of possibility for many individuals

and families. State and local legislation (with complicity from the funeral and cemetery businesses) make the disposition of a body burdensome and expensive. A cremation, however, can be much less expensive and restores much of the ability of the family to control the disposition of the cremated body.

And, at least in my experience, these families are more, not less, faithful Christians in their use of the church and the liturgy. I would venture to guess that nearly nine out of ten cremations with memorial services end up with a rite of Christian funeral at my church. On the other hand, there is a tendency of those who rely on a more traditional funeral home service to be tempted to bypass the church with the only theological concern being to find a pastor, any pastor, who can “say some words.”

### Dust and ashes, and yet . . .

Finally, I believe that much of the Christian hesitation regarding cremation is the fear that cremation is a rejection of the belief in the resurrection of the body for a more “spiritual only” afterlife. Fear and reality are not the same. It is foolish to think that simple deconstruction of the atoms of the body in the element of fire could get in the way of the resurrection of all flesh. Certainly what fire does quickly, time and decay do to the same degree, albeit more slowly.

The man on whom the Biblical epic Job is based is certainly by now dust and ashes, more completely than anyone that I have ever interred after cremation. Yet by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he prophesied, “I know that my Redeemer lives, and that at the last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then in my flesh I shall see God.” [Job 19:25-26]

To decry modern practices that are *adiaphora* turns human wisdom into law, which shackles rather than frees the believer. It should not be so among us.

*The Rev. Dr. Robert Hartwell is the Senior Pastor of Village Lutheran Church and the Chapel School in Bronxville, NY. He is also Secretary of the Atlantic District of the LCMS. His congregation features an on-site columbarium in which congregational members and friends may be interred for little or no cost.*

## Omnium gatherum



**ALPB Centennial** • The American Lutheran Publicity Bureau Centennial Banquet presentations are now available

on YouTube. Go to [alpb.org](http://alpb.org) and click on the YouTube icon, and you will be taken to them. They are also set to be published in the forthcoming issue of *Lutheran Forum*. (While you're at [alpb.org](http://alpb.org), order Gilbert Meilaender's *Seven Last Words of Christ*, which should be available any minute now.)

**Where were my proofreaders?** • Pr. Dave Guderlach kindly and gently points out that when, in Peter Speckhard's essay in the last issue, it said that "carillons can peel the love of God," we likely didn't mean to suggest that we remove the rind from God's love, and that the word we should have used was "peal." The "kindly" part comes in his further comment that *Forum Letter* does a fine job of "peeling back the layers of Lutheran theology and current practice [so that] your readers are much the better for your efforts." We appreciate the comment, and we'll work at our proofreading efforts because we want to be appealing to sharp-eyed readers.

**No proofreaders necessary** • Pr. Edwin Peterman takes me to task (kindly and gently) for referring to the late Prof. William Muehl as an "Episcopalian layman." He argues that "Episcopalian" is a noun, and the proper expression would have been "Episcopal layman." After extensive dictionary research, I kindly and gently pointed out that most authorities don't seem to recognize that distinction, and that "Episcopalian" was used as an adjective as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century. But really, I love to get emails like this. It shows that people are reading *Forum Letter* closely, and that they care about what we write.

**Another critique of Minnich** • Another response to Pr. Minnich's piece on funerals, perhaps kinder and gentler than that of Pr. Hartwell published above, came from Pr. Robert Byrne: "A funeral is conducted when a body is present. That body is under a pall in whatever container it occupies at the time of the service. The nature of the body does not determine the service or its faithfulness to the tradi-

tional intents within a funeral liturgy. . . . The issue is not the form but the presence of the body and the dignity afforded to the same body. Christians believe we are formed by dust and to dust we shall return, whether God works through the creation of his making or the stewardship of one respectfully running a crematorium. God will raise us up on the last day and will not be dissuaded by the nature of any body he chooses to raise. . . . My brother Pr. Minnich makes a point in our need to 'reclaim the liturgy of the Burial of the Dead' but he is off the mark on the actions that have brought about the need for reclamation. Cremation is not the issue; rather [the issue is] poor liturgical understanding, sloppy pastoral care and a Church that fails to see the distinctions between orthodoxy and *adiaphora* to its detriment."

**Another creed** • Back in August I wrote criticizing the use of modern day "creeds" in place of the, uh, real creeds of the church. One of our readers remembered that and sent me a bulletin from a Christmas Day service at a large Lutheran congregation (LCMS) in (of course) Southern California. What they called a "Christmas Creed" began with "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, who sent His Son as my Savior on Christmas Day" and ended with "I believe in the Holy Spirit, who has brought me to faith in the Christ of Christmas, and by whose continuous work in my heart, I am ever to lay before the feet of Christ the treasures of my love, and live under Him as my King, both now and forevermore." There was a second article in the middle, too, that was big on Christmas but not so interested in Good Friday. There's an echo of the *Small Catechism* in here, and at least a stab at Trinitarianism, but the basic problem remains: This isn't the creed of the church, and it has no place in a Christian liturgy. Maybe it could serve as a sermon outline.

**But why?** • I'm always interested to follow the discussion on the ELCA Clergy Facebook page, and to see what gets people excited. A recent post by (apparently) a fairly young pastor about to be installed in a new parish asked whether it was appro-

priate to light the Paschal candle for the installation service (the service taking place in “ordinary time” in late January). The answers were all over the map, from “Just light the darn thing” to “Why would you want to?” to “Who the heck cares?” And once again I find myself puzzled at the astonishing misunderstanding of the concept of *adiaphora*. Of course it makes no ultimate difference, to God or most anybody else, whether the Paschal candle is lit at a given service or not. It is, in the truest sense, a “thing indifferent.” And yet there is such a thing as liturgical integrity. The Paschal candle has a *meaning*, and it goes beyond just being another pretty light. If you want the congregation to have some grasp of that meaning, then you have to treat it as if it has meaning. It is about the baptismal hope of resurrection, not about some nebulous “light of Christ.” So it is appropriately lit during the Paschal season, at baptisms and funerals, perhaps on All Saints Day or the Baptism of the Lord. One could make an argument for lighting it for confirmations, and maybe some other occasions clearly tied to baptism in one way or another. But not for installations, or Super Bowl Sunday, or any of the other times when we might like a more festive décor. Pull out some candelabra, or buy a few cases of pillar candles and set them around the nave. But let the Paschal candle be what it is intended to be.

**Liturgical anomalies** • You’re probably thinking about now that you’re glad I’m not a member of your congregation. Since I’ve retired and we’re worshipping in an Episcopal congregation, I have had to dial back my liturgical dudgeon to the extent of rec-

ognizing (a) that sometimes the Episcopal usage is somewhat different from the Lutheran custom, and (b) that there is some variation from congregation to congregation. For instance, it seems to be an option in the Episcopal Church to have white paraments when there is a baptism, even if it’s a “green” Sunday. Fine, I can accept that. But I did raise my eyebrows when I noticed in mid-January that the hymn board proclaimed that the coming Sunday was “Christmas 4.” Sounds like it’s time for a little altar guild training session.

**A tragic story** • Speaking of Episcopalians, maybe you’ve heard something by now about the Episcopal bishop in Maryland (suffragen bishop, actually) who has been charged with hitting and killing a cyclist while under the influence of alcohol, and then leaving the scene. Some Episcopalians have accused the church of essentially “circling the wagons” about this; it was almost two weeks before there was any coverage by the Episcopal News Service. It also turns out that the bishop had a previous DUI on her record before she was elected bishop, but that this bit of information was not shared with the voters at the diocesan convention because it was deemed not relevant to her qualifications. That’s a little odd, seems to me; there is, after all, Biblical basis for expecting that church leaders will strive to meet a fairly high behavioral standard. While there can certainly be forgiveness and amendment of life, that’s different from saying past behavior is irrelevant. Bishops (or pastors) who violate that trust bring disrepute upon not just themselves, but the church. It’s a tragic story all around. — roj

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