

Opinion

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GUEST EDITORIAL

Signing away free speech

Editorial from the St. Louis (Missouri) Post-Dispatch:

President Donald Trump's disregard for the First Amendment has long been evident. Consider the multiple freedoms the amendment enshrines and protects, and Trump's demonstrated hostility toward them. Religion: During the campaign, Trump called for a "complete and total shutdown of Muslims entering the United States." Assembly: Trump has suggested deporting NFL players who peacefully protest by kneeling during the national anthem. Press: Don't even get us started.

But arguably the most important First Amendment right — indeed, the most important right in any democracy — is freedom of speech, because it underlies every other right. Once Trump starts messing with speech rights, we're all potential targets.

This is why emerging details about the nondisclosure agreements that Trump has made underlings sign are so disturbing. The Trump NDAs reportedly contain language seeking to bar ex-staffers from saying anything negative about Trump, ever. That these agreements are likely unenforceable is beside the point; the intimidation factor alone chips away at a pillar of our democracy. Nondisclosure agreements should be prohibited in government, aside from existing ones that make it illegal to disclose classified information.

Trump said during the campaign that he supports making federal employees sign NDAs. This wasn't in the context of security but ego. "When people are chosen by a man to go into government at high levels," Trump told The Washington Post in 2016, "and then they leave government and they write a book about a man and say a lot of things that were really guarded and personal, I don't like that."

Maybe Trump missed a memo, but "I don't like that" isn't grounds for suppressing speech in America. Only an insecure, thin-skinned person goes to such extremes to stifle criticism.

During the 2016 campaign, Trump insisted his staff sign NDAs promising not to "demean or disparage" him publicly, in perpetuity — which he appears to interpret as being applicable even in noncampaign contexts. So not only can they not talk about what happened behind the scenes during the campaign, they also can't talk critically about Trump today, as president.

Among the signers was Omarosa Manigault Newman, the former reality TV star who was fired as a White House aide in December. She's back in the news with an unflattering book about her old boss.

In response, Trump's campaign this week filed an arbitration action against her. To be clear, the filing doesn't challenge the book's accuracy or make a libel argument; it argues that she's not allowed to write disparaging things because of the agreement. This is, literally, the president of the United States arguing that an American has signed away, for life, her freedom of speech as it relates to him.

No court should allow that to happen, ever. Congress should take action to ensure that it doesn't.



Channeling sorrow and anger

Oh my God, I am heartily sorry, for having offended thee

And I detest, all my sins, because I dread

The loss of Heaven, and the Pains of Hell

I recited these words for the first time in the spring of 1968, to a dark screen in a cramped cubicle at Holy Child church in Logan. I believed in the depths of my 6-year-old soul that the man on the other side of that screen could grant me absolution. I wasn't sure what I was guilty of having done but I knew that when I left that curtain-draped space, I would be forgiven.

Catholics are big about seeking forgiveness. We are taught that humans error; but that there is always the hope of a new beginning. I always held tightly to that most precious of sacraments, fully prepared to sin repeatedly over the course of my lifetime. That spiritual insurance was necessary.

Little did I know that it was the church that would one day need to seek absolution. Philadelphia was the focus of a devastating grand jury report in 2005 and again in 2011. This week, the rest of Pennsylvania came under the critical lens of history.

Attorney General Josh Shapiro issued an almost 900-page report, two years in the making. If you love children, you must read this story of promises broken, innocence shattered and obligations violated.

It is hard for me to write these sentences through the blur of tears. People who have read what I have written in the past would not expect that of me, since I have often voiced my concerns over due process and the unfairness of a system that takes accusations and turns

CHRISTINE M. FLOWERS

them into legal truths.

And yet, I am a child of a church that helps me tolerate the loss of my mother with the promise of seeing her again. I have spent decades among nuns who taught me strength, resilience and kindness. The saints are not myths or stained-glass decorations for me, but rather the embodiment of mercy (St. Francis), courage (St. Thomas More), scholarship (St. Augustine), and what I can only call "bad-assery" (St. Michael). Like Father James Martin who wrote about his own relationship with the saints, they are always with me.

And now, so is this blight on my beloved church. I spent Wednesday reading the grand jury report, and it is a sordid story rooted in decades of cover-ups, predatory men and broken boys.

I have no doubt that most of it is the truth, although we will never know for sure since many of the accused are dead. But there is enough in that report to make me shudder at the way children were sacrificed so that institutions could be protected.

There is something more, though.

One of the reasons that the church failed so miserably in its duty to the children is bitterly ironic: misplaced forgiveness. The driving desire to redeem the sins of these criminal priests played a part in the shuffling around from rehab, to Rome, and to parishes ignorant of their sordid pasts.

Despite this, good priests desperately tried to bring attention to the abuse, writing letters to their superiors, only to

have the door shut in their faces.

And so the sorrow is tinged with anger.

Anger at men like Anthony Bevilacqua and Theodore McCarrick, who abetted predators.

Anger at fellow Catholics, who lashed out at Josh Shapiro on social media with veiled anti-Semitism, wondering why the "non-Catholic" lawyer is persecuting us. That is a sick echo of the attacks on Lynne Abraham over a decade ago.

Anger at the refusal to consider the role that non-celibate homosexuals played in the crisis.

Anger at advocacy groups who push for laws that will strip the church of legal protections while leaving secular institutions unscathed. Why should the wearing of a Roman collar deprive a man of his constitutional rights, as if citizenship and a certain religious identity are incompatible?

And finally, my anger extends to Catholics who, under the guise of protecting children, push for changes that are entirely irrelevant to the issue. Married priests won't make things safer for kids in a world where married men and women commit atrocities. Nor will a female priesthood. The opportunists are using our Catholic agony to gain ground.

We can't let them, even as we seek absolution.

I firmly resolve, with the help of thy grace

To do penance
And sin no more

Christine M. Flowers is a lawyer and columnist for the Philadelphia Daily News. Readers may send her email at cflowers1961@gmail.com.

Your views

Don't blame one group for all of society's problems

Blaming one segment of a society for all of its ills not only doesn't accomplish anything, it is lazy. Worse, it makes you sound ignorant. Millennials vote.

Mae Corwin
Baker City

Editor's note: This letter was originally written to Mayor Mike Downing and other councilors.

Letters to the editor

- We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Customer complaints about specific businesses will not be printed.
- The Baker City Herald will not knowingly print false or misleading claims. However, we cannot verify the accuracy of all statements in letters to the editor.
- Letters are limited to 350 words; longer letters will be edited for length. Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.

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Oregon Legislature: Legislative documents and information are available online at www.leg.state.or.us.

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Baker City Hall: 1655 First Street, P.O. Box 650, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-6541; fax 541-524-2049. City Council meets the second and fourth Tuesdays at 7 p.m. in Council Chambers. Mike Downing, James Thomas, Loran Joseph, Randy Schiewe,

Rosemary Abell, Arvid Andersen and Adam Nilsson.

Baker City administration: 541-523-6541. Fred Warner Jr., city manager; Dustin Newman, police chief; Michelle Owen, public works director.

Baker County Commission: Baker County Courthouse 1995 3rd St., Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-8200. Meets the first and third Wednesdays at 9 a.m.; Bill Harvey (chair), Mark Bennett, Bruce Nichols.

Baker County departments: 541-523-8200. Travis Ash, sheriff; Jeff Smith, roadmaster; Matt Shirtcliff, district attorney; Alice Durflinger, county treasurer; Chindy Carpenter, county clerk; Kerry Savage, county assessor.

Baker School District: 2090 4th Street, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-524-2260; fax 541-524-2564. Superintendent: Mark Witty. Board meets the third Tuesday of the month at 6 p.m., Baker School District 5J office boardroom; Andrew Bryan, Kevin Cassidy, Chris Hawkins, Katie Lamb and Julie Huntington.