

CHURCH CHAT

BY

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CHURCH, INC

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The on-going conflict between Fr. Bill Rowe and his Excellency, the Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, PH.D, S.T.D. raises many questions.

For those of you who don't know the basic story, here's a very brief summary: Fr. Rowe ad-libs some of the prayers for the Eucharist, and adds some commentary during the Mass. He does so because he believes these creative embellishments make the Eucharist more meaningful for the people and more honest to his own prayer. His Excellency, the Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, PH.D, S.T.D., warned him not to deviate at all from the prescribed text and then forced him to resign this coming June when he refused.

There are more nuances to the story which is being reported widely and changes periodically as it unfolds, but those are the basics.

In the Diocese of Belleville IL where this conflict is taking place, there are many letters to the editor, personal conversations, and wide-ranging discussions about this clash between a generally popular pastor and a generally unpopular Bishop. One theme that often emerges is what I call the "Church, Inc" perception which is usually advanced by those who support the Bishop in this matter.

The argument goes something like this: a manager in a company or agency is expected to follow policies and guidelines as determined by upper management, owners, or the Board of Directors. Not following those policies runs the risk of unwanted inefficiency, loss of brand identification, and the disruption of product or service reliability. A Bishop can reasonably expect the same compliance from his pastors especially when the policy originates from the Vatican. Disciplinary action is necessary in all of these situations, including the Church, in order to maintain clarity of mission and quality of the product or service provided.

Since almost everyone works in an environment that operates under this core governing system, most people are familiar with and basically accept this sensible approach to managing large and complex organizations.

Why would the Church be any different? Why shouldn't Bishop Braxton force the retirement of Fr. Rowe for not complying with the prescribed, liturgical texts?

Because the Church is not a corporation, and the punishment is not proportioned to the deviation.

Chapter One of *The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* from the Second Vatican Council is titled "The Mystery of the Church". The title itself gives us a clue that the Church is more than a corporation, even if it has a hierarchical structure. The Church is about God-among-us. A company is about making money. An agency is about a specific service. While there may be some common qualities in all three, the Church is qualitatively and essentially different.

Well, you may say, if Fr. Rowe does his own thing at Eucharist, then anyone else can do their own thing and we end up splintered and in a mess. We have to draw a line somewhere or the commonality of the liturgy is lost completely. Uniformity prevents chaos.

I agree up to a point. And we could discuss where the line could be drawn. My point is: it should not be drawn at Fr. Bill Rowe.

Here's why: he does not violate the structure or intent of the Eucharist. It is a valid, intact liturgy. He adapts the three assigned prayers (opening prayer, offertory prayer and closing prayer) to his homily and the hymns. Quoting Fr. Rowe: "In the Eucharistic prayer I sometimes insert a phrase to continue the theme (e.g. for Ash Wednesday, I inserted the idea of changing our hearts and return to the Gospel and also, from the ashes of our failures God promises to give us a new life and Spirit."

That's what he does. He enhances the liturgy. He not only prepares a homily, he prepares for the whole Eucharistic experience and integrates the additional elements into the prescribed ritual. He doesn't take away; he augments, clarifies, and makes the rich themes of the liturgy more accessible to the community.

Sounds like a creative, devoted, intelligent, prayerful presider to me. Would that everyone in every parish be so fortunate! To punish him when other priests mumble through the ritual, or cannot be understood, or preach insulting, irrelevant drivel, or who simply paraphrase the gospel and call it preaching, is picking out one of the best and calling him the worst. Absurd!

Not only does the punishment not fit the crime but, as St. Matthew reminds us, "Remove the plank from your own eye first; then you will see clearly to take the speck from your brother's eye." (7:5)

