

CHURCH CHAT

BY

TOM SMITH

www.iamfrowe.org

Yep, that's right. The title of this Chat is a website. And, of course, I want you to go to it, read it, add your name to the petition page, and forward it to a million of your closest friends.

You may recall that over the past few months I have written a number of columns about Fr. Bill Rowe, the pastor who was fired from the priesthood by his Bishop for enhancing the Eucharistic liturgy by adding some clarifying words to some of the official texts of the ritual. Fr. Bill is also a personal friend of mine since seminary high school, which amounts to more decades than I want to remember.

I have said it before and I will say it again: Bill is one of the most compassionate, priestly servants anyone can imagine. His humble integrity, his personal dedication, his concern for others, and his inspiring pastoral leadership is outstanding. For Bishop Braxton to attack him for liturgical improprieties is like condemning Mother Teresa for leaving her convent to comfort the poor of Calcutta, or like firing Olympic gold medalist swimmer Mark Phelps for spending too much time in the water.

When Fr. Bill was removed not only from his parish but also from the priesthood by taking away all of his authority to function as a priest, some of his friends created this website to express their support for him and their outrage at the disproportionate harshness of the punishment. This overkill is even more preposterous in light of the way the Church has handled pedophile priests, Church thieves, lazy pastors, and downright mean ministers. This site invites you, - no, urges you - to join them in this support and outrage.

To indicate the kind of person Bill is: he is now volunteering as a lay minister in another city in Southern Illinois.

Here are some features of the site:

- It is a "robust" site in that, along with the specifics of Fr. Rowe's experience, there are summaries of events and church teachings that influenced him in his ministry: Vatican II, the 1998 Missal, Church history, what Catholics believe, etc.
- Under the News tab, watch the short video of an interview with Fr. Bill to get a feel for his personality, style, and courage. Check some of the other news stories to see how his situation is being reported.
- Don't miss the items in the What Happened section: Fr. Rowe's Recollections and Charges & Responses. These two entries are a log of what happened. The

charges are literally unbelievable: unsubstantiated, erroneous accusations totally unrelated to liturgical practice used as an obvious attempt to pile on canonical justification for the removal of a pastor. If Bill had not appealed the decision, these charges would have gone to the Vatican unchallenged.

- You will note in this continuing log of events that some priests from the Belleville diocese “signed on” to his removal. This testimony is part of the removal process. What you may not know is the overpowering and intimidating presence of Bishop Braxton. These priests, whom I also know and some of whom are also friends of Bill, will have to deal with their conscience as they reflect on their part in this injustice.
- The petition page makes clear that no one denies that Fr. Bill breaks the liturgical norm of not changing the explicit words in the ritual. He enhances, clarifies some obscure wordings to help his people (and himself) pray better. Many other priests do the same thing. To be consistent, shouldn't they all be fired? The petition says: you can't fire all of them!
- If you want to add a Testimonial or Comment, there is a Forum tab for that. See what others are saying.
- Please note that there is a Facebook page as well. Comment there also.

Some final, and fair, questions: what is the ultimate point of this site? What can be done with the signatures collected? Will it reinstate Fr. Bill as a priest? Will it galvanize so much support that Bishops will hesitate to punish other priests? Will it, along with other current events, help crystallize the obvious chasm between the institutional Church and the Church as community? Will it provide, as the tag line says, solidarity, courage, and priorities?

I hope so. Sign on and let's find out. www.iamfrowe.org.