

CHURCH CHAT

BY

TOM SMITH

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LOYALTY TO...?

I have known him since high school and his name is integrity. Unassuming, humble, intelligent, compassionate, courageous, servant, pastor, dedicated – some of the adjectives that fit Fr. Bill Rowe. What doesn't fit is retired.

And yet, this summer, retired is what he will be. Unwillingly. Unnecessarily.

Bill was “forced” into retirement not by any moral issue (sexual abuse, stealing, degrading parishioners, laziness, etc.), or by any heresy (denying the existence of God, divinity/humanity of Jesus, rejecting sacraments, etc), or even over social justice protests (civil rights, war, women's ordination, etc.)

He was backed into a tiny liturgical corner over celebrating the Eucharist and changing some of the bizarre Latinized English words and phrases in the Missal. He kept the basic meaning of the text in his ad-lib prayers but used words that were more understandable and meaningful to his parishioners.

And you all know what I mean by “bizarre Latinized English words” in the prayers at Mass because you have heard them for years, especially since last November and the introduction of the ridiculous “New Missal.”

Bill's Bishop, his Excellency, the Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, PH.D, S.T.D., insisted that he say the prayers as literally written in the book. Bill said he couldn't do that, and that he would resign before he would comply because that would be more pastoral than a prolonged public fight over his non-compliance. His Excellency, the Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, PH.D, S.T.D. said, in effect, I accept your resignation.

Other columnists, commentators and letter writers have come to Bill's defense on a number of fronts. My comments deal with two underlying issues: loyalty and proportionality.

How does a Vatican II priest remain loyal to the current version of the institutional Catholic Church that rejects the main themes of Vatican II? That is not just an academic question; it is one that haunts thousands of priests (religious and lay people also) every day, personally and pastorally. Many of these priests suck it up, talk about it only among trusted friends, do their pastoral work as best they can, try to ignore the broader, institutional Church, love God and their parishioners, and hope for the best.

They remain loyal enough in their external behavior and words to avoid a confrontation with their bishop because they either don't have the stomach for that fight, fear punishment, or because they figure it is better for the people if they maintain enough loyalty to avoid public confrontation.

They are in a very difficult situation. They have Vatican II (the most authoritative teaching of the Church in centuries) to back them up but the current hierarchy is clearly not following the teachings

and initiatives of Vatican II. Besides, there is the example of Jesus – it is obvious what Jesus did and would do in similar situations. Bill Rowe is in good company when personalizing rituals. (See Mark, chapter 7, for just one example)

Loyalty is slippery. In the Church, there are multiple loyalties: loyalty to a bishop, fidelity to Church teachings like Vatican II, allegiance to the gospel, faithfulness to current administrative policies, and personal integrity. Sometimes for some people, these varied loyalties conflict.

So, to whom or what are these priests loyal? Bill Rowe drew the line at the words of the Eucharist.

Well, some say, what's the big deal? Just follow the book, do what the boss says, recite the stupid words, and keep doing good in the parish. I suspect that many priests simply don't care that much about the words they read from the Missal anyway. For Bill, that approach would violate his personal integrity so he chose insubordination and resignation. That's how much he *does* care about those words. He is more concerned about providing a meaningful, understandable worship experience for his parish community in rural, Eastern Illinois than about the Church's institutional mandate to use only prescribed words in a book.

For this he is forced to resign? He is when you throw a bully Bishop like his Excellency, the Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, PH.D, S.T.D. into the mix. Frankly, I can't recall any priest anywhere who was forced to resign because of liturgical irregularities. There are many moral and some theological reasons why some priests should be forced to resign, or just plain fired, but not for clarifying archaic liturgical prayers. The consequence is monumentally out of proportion to the "crime".

I told you Fr. Bill Rowe is a man of integrity, courage, and compassion.