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# Catholic Courier

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## Respectful divergence: Can Catholics disagree with pope?

In 1986, Father Charles Curran of the Diocese of Rochester was deemed unfit by the Vatican to teach theology at a Catholic institution due to his disagreements with church teaching on such subjects as birth control and homosexuality.

In 1994, five parish council members resigned and several parishioners signed a petition of protest at St. Ann's Church in Hornell after their pastor, Father Elmer Schmidt, announced he would permit female altar servers. His decision came one month prior to Pope John II's announcement that such a practice was permissible.

This past March, Rochester Bishop Matthew H. Clark sparked considerable debate by presiding over a Mass for gay and lesbian Catholics. Protests have also dogged the bishop for views perceived as opposed to Vatican teachings on women's ordination and the role of women in the church.

But despite their detractors' charges, all three priests maintain that they have acted as Catholics in good conscience and with no disrespect to the pope.

These are the kinds of situations that often raise the question among both clergy and laity: Is it permissible to disagree with the pope?

Bishop Clark maintained that differing opinions should not only be allowed, but encouraged. In an article he was invited to write for the August edition of *New Theology Review*, titled "The Pastoral Exercise of Authority," he referred to *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, No. 13:

"Holding a rightful place in the communion of the Church there are also particular Churches that retain their own traditions, without prejudice to the Chair of Peter which presides over the whole assembly of charity, and protects their legitimate variety while at the same time taking care that these differences do not hinder unity, but rather contribute to it."

Therefore, the bishop explained, he has the right to make decisions — relative to the uniqueness of his diocese — that may not correlate precisely with statements made by Pope John Paul II.

"This deals with the reality that every local church is different. I am simply not a branch manager of the office of the pope," Bishop Clark commented in interviews with the *Catholic Courier*.

### Obligation to submit

However, Leon Suprenaut Jr., editor of the national monthly newsletter *Lay Witness*, published by Catholics United for the Faith, maintained that any disagreement with the pope — especially public dissent — is unacceptable at all times.

"That only tends to divide and scandalize. To publicly criticize and ask for a change in church teaching is wrong," said Suprenaut, who is vice-president of CUF, an international orthodox Catholic organization.

Suprenaut cited Canon 750 in the revised Code of Canon Law: "All that is contained in the written word of God or in tradition, that is, in the one deposit of



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faith entrusted to the Church and also proposed as divinely revealed either by the solemn magisterium of the Church or by its ordinary and universal magisterium, must be believed with divine and catholic faith; it is manifested by the common adherence of the Christian faithful under the leadership of the sacred magisterium; therefore, all are bound to avoid any doctrines whatever which are contrary to these truths."

Additionally, theologian William E. May, contacted in Washington, D.C., by the *Courier*, cited *Lumen Gentium*, No. 25, in stating that the pope's word on all doctrinal matters is absolute:

"When the Roman Pontiff or the body of bishops to-

gether with him, define a doctrine, they make the definition in conformity with revelation itself, to which all are bound to adhere and to which they are obliged to submit," May said.

### Debate seen as healthy

Father Schmidt does not believe in such an absolute stance. Instead, he said his conscience led to his 1994 decision to permit female altar servers at his Hornell parish.

Father Schmidt explained that although the 1917 Code of Canon Law expressly forbids female altar servers, the 1983 revised Code of Canon Law makes no specific reference to the subject.

"I think it's all in your conscience," Father Schmidt said. "It's the ancient Catholic and Christian tradition of forming your conscience correctly, and I saw the need for the removal of a man-made law."

Father Schmidt said he'd had no knowledge that a Vatican decree supporting his viewpoint on female altar servers had been imminent. He added that his decision, at the time, took precedence "over what the pope says, because it was an injustice to girls."

Pastoral leaders in other diocesan parishes apparently shared that belief, as several parishes were already employing female altar servers at the time of Father Schmidt's action.

Ironically, Father Schmidt noted, the same critics who charged he had been disobedient to the pope also objected to the Vatican's announcement that female altar servers were permissible.

"Would you believe that some people asked me to have the pope rescind his decision?" Father Schmidt said.

When told of the Hornell incident, Suprenaut said both Father Schmidt and his detractors acted inappropriately because neither observed respect for the pope and church law.

"There are people who are agenda-driven on both sides of the issue," Suprenaut said. "If you take it to the extreme that 'being obedient to the church is wrong, and that the church has to come around to my way of thinking,' then you should go to confession right away."

Conversely, Bishop Clark said that healthy debate over papal decisions is not necessarily a divisive practice.

"In no way is it a denigration of the teaching authority to reflect critically on the context of that teaching in light of prior teachings," Bishop Clark commented.

Bishop Clark said he strongly believes "that everything the Holy Father says should be taken seriously," but noted that "not everything the Holy Father says is of equal authority."

"It's very possible not to agree with everything the pope says. But then you have to say it depends on what he's saying and the context in which he's saying it," the bishop said.

Father Curran, also, believes that there is room for  
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