

Bishop explains limits on independent actions

Many priests, pastoral ministers and lay people wrote to thank me for publishing my recent pastoral letter "We All Need Redeeming," which was distributed in the parish bulletins. They found it very helpful. More than a few of these letters asked if I would take the time to clarify some other issues that have appeared in the media of late that they have found confusing. I am happy to do that and thought it would be appropriate to devote this week's column to comment on the doctrinal and pastoral issues raised that you have asked me to address.

Nineteen years ago, by the imposition of Pope John Paul II's hands and the grace of the Holy Spirit, I was ordained a bishop of the Roman Catholic Church to "take the place of Christ himself as teacher, shepherd and priest." (*Lumen Gentium* 21) As a successor of the Apostles, I was joined to my brother bishops, including the Bishop of Rome, in a college that has "supreme and full authority over the universal Church" (*LG* 22) and whose solemn task is to join diocesan churches together in a bond of unity, charity and peace.

There is nothing closer to the heart of a bishop or more at the core of his responsibility than the unity of the church. While never neglecting his duty to maintain the unity of the church universal, he has a particular responsibility to see to the unity of his own local church in faith and love because he is "the visible source and foundation" of its unity. (*LG* 23)

1. Norms that protect our unity.

In bearing my responsibilities as bishop, I need to attend to such matters as the full and faithful preaching of the Word of God, appropriate formation in our faith tradition, the integrity of our sacramental life, concern for justice and care for the poor and vulnerable. All of these are treasures passed on to us by our mothers and fathers in faith. They nourish the community, give us life and strengthen us for mission. We need them whole and entire. No bishop, no diocese, no parish, no pastor has the authority to change them on their own initiative; nor do any of us possess the authority to engage in pastoral practices that convey some contrary understanding.

Rules, regulations or norms of any kind bother some people. Some consider them somehow contrary to the will of Jesus. But Jesus sent out apostles with a set of norms to guide their dress, their manner of ministry and the content of their preaching. For good order, for guidance, for good relationships within and among the churches, we must have norms — local, national and universal — by which we live our life together. In most cases, there is considerable room for flexibility built into the norms themselves, and there is a process for changing them. In addition, our pastors are well aware that the complexity or urgency of some cases require quick, on the spot judgments.

The pastors of our diocese (and, I hope, all pastoral ministers) know that I well understand that mistakes can be made in such circumstances and that an honest review at a more peaceful time will indicate that a specific decision may not have been a good one. They also understand that the same judgment in similar circumstances ought not be made again. In other words, there is flexibility in the application of our norms as well as room for honest error.

Not all our norms are ancient, but the more foundational of these norms have grown out of and embody our 2,000-year-old tradition. This is not to say that the church does not or cannot evolve, grow or change. Indeed, the Second Vatican Council recognizes that the church is "semper reformanda," always reforming, always in

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BY BISHOP MATTHEW H. CLARK

need of reform. The concern is how we go about such changes. We need to do it together when it is within the authority of the local church. We need to do it with all the churches when it is not within our local competence. But the fact is there are norms. They are to be observed. No individual or parish has the right to change them.

Sometimes individuals or communities, in order to justify moving beyond agreed upon norms, appeal to justice, or the Gospel, or to the intention of Christ himself as the ultimate norm. Vatican II foresaw that one group's "Christian vision will suggest a certain solution in a given situation. Yet it happens rather frequently, and legitimately so, that some of the faithful, with no less sincerity, will see the problem quite differently." (*Gaudium et Spes* 43)

The bishops saw the solution not in claiming the Gospel to be on one side or another, but in "sincere dialogue in a spirit of mutual charity and with anxious interest above all in the common good." (*GS* 43) And the common good never unilaterally sets aside norms and declares victories.

2. The Eucharist is our sacrament of unity.

The Second Vatican Council taught that the Eucharist is not a private affair but a "celebration of the Church" gathered and united everywhere with its bishops in "the sacrament of unity." (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 26) This unity of the people of God with their local bishop is so important that the council restated the ancient ideal that there be in each local church but one Eucharist where God's holy people "in one prayer, at one altar, at which the bishop presides, surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers" (*SC* 41) manifest the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church. As beautiful as this ideal is, it is almost never practical. The council recognized this:

But as it is impossible for the bishop always and everywhere to preside over the whole flock in his church, he must of necessity establish groupings of the faithful; and, among these, parishes, set up locally under a pastor who takes the place of the bishop, are the most important, for in some way they represent the visible Church constituted throughout the world. (*SC* 42)

The council, then, recognized in its theology that the diocesan bishop, as a successor to the apostles and as a vicar of Christ, is the proper pastor of every parish, the legitimate presider at every Eucharist, the authoritative teacher of every community. This is why the council urged that "the liturgical life of the parish and its relation to the bishop must be fostered in the spirit and practice of the laity and clergy." (*SC* 42)

But I have tried to be a bishop who encouraged unity, not uniformity. Within the liturgical guidelines issued by the Vatican and the American bishops, I have always encouraged the various local communities of the diocese and the pastors I have appointed in my stead to make full use of legitimate variations and adap-

tations of the sacred liturgy. In this way different groups and ages within our local church may fully and fruitfully participate in a manner fitting to their situation.

However, one community in our diocese had set aside the substantial unity of the Roman Rite in order to introduce alternative eucharistic prayers and multiple presiders over various aspects of the Sunday liturgy in the mistaken notion that, by doing so, it would foster the ministry of women. Such practices, wherever they exist, are to cease immediately. No one has sought my permission for these radical changes. Women are not helped by them. The liturgy, prayed in union with John Paul our pope and me your bishop, which ties us to one another and with our brothers and sisters throughout the Catholic world, is done a serious disservice. And my role as pastor, teacher and liturgist of this local church and its parishes is simply set aside.

In this regard, it is my clear and express desire that the Eucharist be celebrated in accordance with the Roman Rite and the norms outlined in the General Instruction to the Roman Missal. Furthermore, it is my desire that alternative celebrations for Sunday (such as a Liturgy of the Word with or without Communion) be scheduled in parishes of the diocese on a Saturday evening or a Sunday only with my explicit permission. Wherever these services take place as the result of a genuine, immediate emergency, I ask to be informed of this in a timely manner.

Finally, lest there be any hint of confusion created, I ask our deacons and our delegated parish lay presiders to follow exactly the norms for such services laid down in the "Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest" and as recently reiterated in the "Instruction on Certain Questions Regarding the Collaboration of the Non-Ordained Faithful in the Sacred Ministry of Priests."

3. The Eucharist is our celebration of the unity already achieved.

My reflection on our unity in the Eucharist leads me in one further direction. The Second Vatican Council taught that the very life of Christ is communicated to those who believe and who, through baptism, "are united in a hidden and real way to Christ in his passion and glorification ... Really sharing in the body of the Lord in the breaking of the eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with him and with one another." (*LG* 7)

But this communion is not an act in isolation. It is not something that we effect by ourselves, by means of our own faith. Each Eucharist is the action of the church; it is the action of a celebrating community, "carried out within the community, signifying the oneness in faith, worship and life of the community." (*Ad totam ecclesiam* 55) Consequently, when those who are not members of the Catholic Church are present at our Eucharistic celebrations, they cannot be called forward formally to receive Eucharist because they do not yet share our unity in faith, worship and life. As uncomfortable as this reality is, it is this pain that forces us to redouble our efforts to fulfill Christ's command that all be one.

Nevertheless, since the Eucharist is both a sign of unity and a source of grace, the church does allow baptized individuals to receive Holy Communion in our communities in order that they be nourished by grace. This hospitality is extended to one who is "unable to have recourse for the sacrament desired to a minister of his or her own church or ecclesial community, ask(s) for the sacrament of his or her

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