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A demoralized church

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The story I am about to tell provides yet one more indication of why so many good Catholics are demoralized these days -- apart, that is, from the ongoing sexual abuse crisis that has reached recently even to the papacy itself.

Some time ago, my weekly column, which appears not only in diocesan newspapers but also in parish bulletins in the United States and Canada, was dropped from one of those parish bulletins by order of the local bishop.

According to the pastor, some 90 percent of his parishioners were pleased to have access to the column in their weekly bulletin, while only a small slice of the congregation (1 percent was his estimate) was ?distressed? by it.

The pastor reported that a few of the critics met with him, while others phoned or sent letters. The pastor?s consistent reply was that the parish needed a different perspective on church-related issues, different certainly from the perspective available each week in the diocesan newspaper.

But the critics were not satisfied with the pastor?s response. They also wrote to the bishop, enclosing underlined copies of the column. The bishop, in turn, forwarded their letters to someone on his staff. The upshot was that the pastor was told that he could no longer carry the column in the parish bulletin.

The pastor subsequently e-mailed me to ask if he might continue to subscribe to the column (the monthly fee was $10) in order to make it available at the back of the church on an entirely voluntary basis. He also expressed his personal discouragement over the ?repression? that is happening in the church.

I e-mailed the pastor back, assuring him that I have experienced this before and have become more or less used to it. It happens particularly when a pastorally healthy bishop dies, retires, or is moved to another diocese, and his successor is a rigid, censorious micromanager.

What is disturbing about what happened in this particular parish is that the tiny minority who complained about the inclusion of the column in the parish bulletin undoubtedly felt empowered -- empowered by the knowledge that their views could trump those of the pastor and the overwhelming majority of their fellow parishioners.

They did an end-run around the pastor (which was their right), sending letters and enclosures to the local bishop. The bishop turned the matter over to one of his underlings, who proceeded to shut down the column.

In my response to the pastor, I offered to make the column available free of charge. He thanked me for the gesture, mentioning at the same time that many parishioners were upset about the abrupt act of diocesan censorship. Some of them, he said, also wrote letters to the bishop and his subordinate, but to no avail.

Even some of those who admitted that they occasionally disagreed with points of view expressed in the column acknowledged that the column made them think and often provided historical information of which they had been unaware.

Unfortunately, the story does not end there. The same minority of parishioners wrote again to the bishop to complain that the pastor was still making the column available to parishioners at the back of the church, even if it no longer appeared in the parish bulletin.

The same underling, but again with the bishop?s ultimate approval, ordered the pastor to cease doing so. In politics, business, the military or any of the major professions, the person comparable to the pastor in this case would resign, retire or move to another company.

In today?s church, however, a pastor?s options are severely limited. Even if humiliated before his entire parish, and particularly before the militant minority that had brought about his repudiation by the bishop, a pastor really has no place to go, except perhaps to resign from the priesthood and to seek another form of employment.

Although I would not presume to suggest such a course of action upon this good man, serious pastoral damage has been done, whether the pastor was to remain in office or not.

A tiny minority of parishioners now knows that it can trump the will of their pastor and the overwhelming majority of fellow parishioners simply by running to the bishop and making a complaint.

The question is, what would happen if a majority of parishioners complained to the bishop about a conservative pastor who celebrated Mass in Latin, harangued the people in homilies about their sinfulness and urgent need for the sacrament of penance, eliminated all forms of consultation, fired the staff, and made abortion the only moral issue mentioned from the pulpit?

Unfortunately, the question answers itself.

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