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Got a complaint? Chicago Catholics want to listen

by Jackie Walker by Religion News Service



Fr. John McGivern speaks to a parishioner at St. Edmund Parish in Oak Park, Ill. (RNS/Peter Sachs)

CHICAGO -- The ads ask Catholics to return to their pews. But some churches in suburban Chicago want to take it a step further. They're ready to listen to complaints about the church from inactive Catholics -- and prepared to apologize for any hurt the church has caused.

As part of the "Catholics Come Home" initiative and similar efforts, churches in Chicago, Joliet and Rockford, Ill., have reached out through television ads, special classes, and social nights to attract inactive members before Lent.

The Catholic church certainly has cause to do whatever it can to bring inactive members back into the fold. According to the "religious landscape survey" conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in 2008, a full 10 percent of Americans are former Catholics. Their reasons for leaving vary: from intermarriage with spouses of other faiths, to apathy, to sharp disagreement with church tenets. For those former Catholics who split because they felt slighted by the church, some Chicago parishes are handling the apologies.

Dave Philipps, a deacon at St. Margaret Mary Parish in Algonquin, Ill., said misunderstandings and hurts can happen because "the church is people, and people can hurt one another by what they say, what they don't say, and how they react or care for one another."

St. Margaret Mary Parish has issued a blanket apology on its Web site for people who may have felt snubbed by the church.

"No one should be unjustly hurt, especially if that hurt comes from the very organization that was created to live the life of Jesus," reads the letter written by Fr. Michael Tierney, pastor at St. Margaret Mary. "We would like [to] apologize to you for any hurt that has come from the church or her leadership."

For those seeking face-to-face interaction, St. Margaret Mary also offers a parish-based program of meetings for inactive Catholics to discuss the reasons they left. By listening to complaints, the church may also learn how it can be more welcoming and attentive.

St. Edmund Parish in Oak Park, Ill., is offering a similar "listening night" for its lost sheep.

"I don't think that my role on this night is to solve the problem, because that would be arrogant to think I could watch over someone's concerns or hurts or anger in an hour-and-a-half conversation," said Fr. John McGivern. "But dialogue opens the possibility of relationship."

McGivern said it's not about filling pews. It's about unity and the very identity of the church. The church belongs to the members, McGivern said, and even inactive members should take ownership of their church family. But that family remains broken as long as that member is estranged, he said, so it's the job of Christians to reconcile.

This type of local reconciliation is both appropriate and responsible, according to the Rev. Cynthia Gano Lindner, director of ministry studies at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Lindner said it makes more sense for the local pastor to do the job of listening -- and addressing grievances -- than the Vatican.

"There may be folks ... who will find some redress in being able to speak their piece to a group of their friends or neighbors," said Lindner. "There will also undoubtedly be people who were hurt at the hands of the institution. ... Those people might not feel completely healed without a final definitive statement from the pope."

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Blanket apologies, like that offered by St. Margaret Mary, have been issued only rarely by the Vatican. In 2000, the Vatican issued "Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and Faults of the Past," a document that apologized for the past sins of Roman Catholics. In December 2009, Irish bishops issued a blanket apology to victims of clergy sexual abuse.

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