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Disagreement may be the key to defending the church

by Pat Perriello

NCR Today

Mark Silk has written a comprehensive review of the sexual abuse case of Fr. Michael Fugee in Newark, N.J., and the involvement of their archbishop, John J. Myers, in the case. It reviews in detail the issue of whether or not the archdiocese abrogated the agreement they had made with prosecutors regarding Fugee. For those interested in this case, it provides a clear chronological depiction of all the steps involved.

The article illustrates how quick some are (Catholic League president Bill Donahue is cited) to come to the defense of the church without making sure all facts are known. This knee-jerk reaction to defend the church and church officials time and again has not served the church well. It has enabled too many of the scandals we now see to fester and damage the church's credibility and spiritual mission.

Inside the church there continues to be the notion that it is above criticism and any form of disagreement reflects anti-Catholicism or disloyalty among Catholics. Can it be that within the church, only 100 percent adherence or blind obedience is acceptable?

As an American, I have great difficulty accepting such a dictum. I know I am free to criticize my president or any other political figure. Even more important, I know that in a democracy, what I and others have to say makes a difference. This national dialogue and diversity is what makes our nation stronger.

In some ways, of course, it makes even more sense for the church to step back from rigid insistence on every aspect of its teachings and actions. Religion is in part a personal faith journey, so it only makes sense that each of us will come to our own understanding of God's presence in our lives in different ways. Also, we tend to forget that our faith is all about mystery. As Paul says, "Now we see through a glass darkly, but then we shall see face to face." The notion that we have all the answers is foreign to the very idea of a transcendent and all-powerful God.

We are, of course, told that the church is not a democracy. Does that mean it is immune from the inherent problems of listening only to itself? Pope Francis has already made clear that there is a danger of self-referential thinking within the church.

The pages of the *National Catholic Reporter* reflect a healthy and vigorous debate about many church issues. It is only when Rome begins to recognize how this discourse strengthens the institution and provides a vehicle for the Holy Spirit to dispense its wisdom that we will see true enlightened reform come to a faltering hierarchy.

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