



Diocese of Belleville
Office of the Bishop

February 14, 2012
Sts. Cyril, Monk and Methodius, Bishop

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus Christ:

Peace be with you.

It is not my practice to make public comment about private conversations between me and one of my priests. This is especially true when the conversations concern sensitive matters such as fidelity to the *magisterium* of the Church or the need to be faithful to the disciplines of the Church regarding the proper celebration of the Eucharist. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, as every priest knows, is the public worship of the Church. It is not the priest's personal, devotional prayer. All Catholics have the right to expect to experience the same rites and prayers when they participate in the Eucharist. They should not be startled by novelties created by the priest-celebrant.

Father William J. Rowe, 72, has not resigned from his position as Pastor of St. Mary Parish in Mt. Carmel because I am unwilling to allow him to continue celebrating what he has called "an improvised liturgy," which has been his "custom." He resigned because, as he has told me forthrightly on several occasions, he simply could not and would not pray the prayers of the Mass as they are translated in the new Roman Missal. I did not "fire" him from his pastorate, as some statements have indicated. I believe that, from his unique point of view, he has resigned in good faith. This happened after I, also acting in good faith, repeatedly and over several years asked him to pray the Mass as it is presented in the Sacramentary and, currently, in the new Missal. At the time of his decision, I made no public comment. I was aware, however, that certain individuals would release this decision to the secular media and it would be made into a news story. (I understand that a secular newspaper has taken a survey asking its general readership if they believe that a Catholic Bishop has the "right" to oversee the proper celebration of the liturgy in his Diocese.)

I am currently in Rome on my *ad limina apostolorum* visit to the Holy Father and the Vatican offices that assist him in his ministry, including the Congregation for Divine Worship. I have been praying for all of the priests and people of the Diocese of Belleville, including Fr. Rowe and his parishioners, at the tombs of Sts. Peter and Paul. I have recently learned that a Catholic news outlet has given this story national attention and published a telephone interview with Fr. Rowe about this matter. This has made it necessary for me to make this public statement.

Fr. Rowe has stated publically that many years ago my predecessor called to his attention the fact that he was celebrating the Mass in an improper manner. Nevertheless, he continued to do so. He has stated that “some” of his parishioners wrote to me expressing dismay about the manner in which he celebrated Mass. However, it was not “some” but “many” who expressed dismay. Many of his parishioners have ceased to worship at St. Mary Parish over the years. Several of these brought me audio and video tapes which showed the many changes and omissions Fr. Rowe makes in the Mass. These changes consist of far more than “a few words.”

In my last meeting with Fr. Rowe, in October 2011, Fr. John W. McEvilly, my Vicar General and Moderator of the Curia, was present for the discussion in anticipation of the initiation of the new Missal on the First Sunday of Advent. Fr. Rowe said that he had known for a long time that he was on a collision course with me over the manner in which he celebrated the Eucharist. I understood this to mean that he was aware that his personal “ecclesiology” and “liturgical theology” were not compatible with the ecclesiology and the liturgical theology of the Catholic Church, which I, as a Bishop and a Successor of the Apostles, am committed to teach and preserve. In this meeting I reminded him of what I had written in a letter to every priest on June 6, 2010, the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ. In that letter I wrote:

On the day of our ordination to the priesthood, we who are priests each solemnly promised to the Bishop who ordained us that we resolved “to celebrate faithfully and reverently, in accord with the Church’s tradition, the mysteries of Christ, especially the sacrifice of the Eucharist...for the Glory of God and the sanctification of the Christian people.” I join with every priest who has faculties to celebrate the sacraments in the Diocese of Belleville in demonstrating that resolve by the commitment to prepare well for the use of the new English translation of the Missale Romanum. We will do this for our good and for the good of our people. If any priest in the Diocese has been departing from the rubrics and prayers of the Mass in the Roman Rite in the parish where you serve, the implementation of the new translation is the appropriate opportunity to begin anew by praying in union with the whole Church without departing from the rubrics or the texts. Anything to the contrary will no longer be permitted after the initiation of the new Missal. It will not be acceptable for any priest or any parish to refrain from using the new prayers due to their personal preference. I am sure that you understand that this is essential for the unity and spiritual welfare of our parish people, whose full, active and conscious participation in the Divine Liturgy we all seek.

At the end of the conversation, Fr. Rowe indicated that he felt that he would have to resign from his parish. While I deeply regretted his decision, I verbally accepted his resignation and I asked him to put his resignation in writing in a letter to me. When his letter arrived, it contained the request that he

would be allowed to continue serving until the regular June transfer of priests, in order to prepare the parish better for the transition. After discussing the matter with the Vicar General, who had been present for the entire meeting with Fr. Rowe, I somewhat reluctantly agreed. However, I did not immediately acknowledge his letter because I held out the hope that upon prayer and reflection, Fr. Rowe would think and act with the Church about this important matter. During the months after the Missal was published, it became evident that Fr. Rowe was not praying the prayers of the new translation. At this point I wrote to him formally accepting his resignation, indicating it would take effect in June 2012 as he requested.

I believe that Fr. Rowe is a good and sincere person. I also believe that he is faithful to the priesthood as he has come to interpret it. Elements of this interpretation, however, are not consistent with the teachings of the Church. I am aware that, among those who have remained parishioners at St. Mary Parish, there are many who admire his generous service to them. Some of them even applaud the liberties he has taken with the liturgy over the years since, in their view, “He makes the Mass relevant.” Others, who say they have “suffered in silence,” chastise me for not “removing” Fr. Rowe the day they showed me their videos of the “many abuses” in his Masses. Finally, I realize that there may be priests, deacons, religious and lay people in the Diocese who will form opinions about this matter even though they have no direct knowledge of the conversations that have led to Fr. Rowe’s decision.

I regret very much that Fr. Rowe could not find in his heart the docility needed to put the clear mandate of the Church above his personal likes and dislikes with regard to his vocation as an ordained minister of the Church’s public worship in communion with the whole Church. As a Bishop, it is not my desire to ask any priest or member of the Christian faithful to do anything other than what the Church asks us to do. I have no desire to impose my personal point of view on the People of God. I believe that Fr. Rowe will acknowledge that I have only asked him to do what the Church asks me and every priest to do. I also believe that he will acknowledge that during our many conversations about the way in which he celebrates Mass, as well as other pastoral practices in his parish in direct conflict with the teachings of the Church, I have never said an unkind word to him or about him. Hopefully, I never will. I have never repeated or commented upon our private conversations until he and others spoke about them in public. I regret very much that circumstances beyond my control have made it necessary for me to make these comments about conversations which, in my judgment, should have remained a private conversation between a priest and his Bishop.

It is my hope that these observations place this matter in a more complete context.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Edward K. Braxton". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

The Most Reverend Edward K. Braxton, Ph.D., S.T.D.
Bishop of Belleville