

By staying silent, Bishop Murphy isn't leading

BY DICK RYAN

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March 19 figures to be a huge success for the Long Island Voice of the Faithful for a number of reasons.

That's when it hosts its second major convention, this time featuring two heavyweight speakers, John H. Allen, the renowned Vatican-based correspondent for the National Catholic Reporter, and the Rev. Thomas Doyle, a highly respected lawyer on church issues. There will also be a special panel to discuss the priesthood and the laity and a 3 p.m. Mass.

Naturally, these people won't be anywhere near the inside of a Catholic Church, banned as they are by Bishop William Murphy from even breathing outside the nearest bingo hall.

But for all their planning and preparation, the Voice of the Faithful goofed in one crucial area. There should have been a special invitation to the man who was the inspiration and impetus - along with his old friend Cardinal Bernard Law in Boston - for the creation of Voice of the Faithful. There should have been a special place at the table for a third speaker with the perfect credentials for the occasion: the leader of the Diocese of Rockville Centre.

The sad thing is that even if he were asked, he probably would have refused in a heartbeat.

Even sadder is the loss of what would have been a golden opportunity for the church on Long Island to come together, at least for a few hours, to air certain issues that, if left unaddressed, will leave the church divided and in disarray. There will be an open wound that may never heal - at least until the next bishop shows up.

But let's face it. Murphy is not very good at public appearances. He seems to prefer to stand in front of a television camera in his own diocesan studio at Telecare and expound on cerebrally theological issues that are as far removed from life for Catholics on Long Island as life in Tibet.

And he is apparently much more comfortable in the solace of his own room, writing his weekly column for the diocesan newspaper, where controversy is a hushed no-no and bland is beautiful. His famous "listening sessions" of a year ago only underlined his preference for listening, and listening some more, and then walking away.

And he's not alone in this. A large majority of bishops and cardinals around the country is apoplectic that the people in the pews have dared to raise their voices. The bishops' response to the cries of Catholics for simple dialogue has been to dismiss the faithful with still another cynical desertion into more secrecy and silence.

It doesn't seem to matter much to Murphy that Catholics generally - not just Voice of the Faithful - would like to hear his convictions about a whole rainbow of issues: diocesan accountability, the resolution of the abuse scandal, the future of the laity and its possible leadership role in the church, and the shrinking number of priests and vocations.

But it seems to be his unspoken strategy that a deafening silence from his office on issues of crucial concern to all Catholics will precipitate the demise of the Voice of the Faithful, the Voice of the Ordained and other suddenly vocal groups within the church.

Such groups have finally managed to toss aside the old pre-Vatican II commandment to "pray, pay and obey." But they aren't going anywhere, and March 19 will be another shrill bugle call.

The longer the bishop remains aloof, out of sight and, yes, out of touch except for the few required rubrics of confirmations, celebrity funerals and another bash with the Knights of Columbus, even ordinary, uncommitted Catholics will have to begin wondering where he is and why he isn't he talking. About the abuse scandal and the names of recently accused priests that he refuses to reveal. About the 2005 church instead of the 2007 Long Island Synod. About his frosty CEO relationship with his own priests.

And the longer Murphy continues to treat the large number of caring, concerned Catholics as if they were invisible, faceless tenants in his diocese, the more Vatican officials will have to begin wondering about what exactly is happening on Long Island.

Has the laity taken on the leadership? Are lay people the only ones speaking? Why isn't the bishop being a bishop?