

LI Catholics need to play more active roles

BY DICK RYAN

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"Trust between Catholics and their leaders has been fractured and steps are needed to restore it."

This was part of a statement issued by Long Island Voice of the Faithful after representatives of both that organization and Bishop William Murphy met recently in another futile attempt to rebuild a bridge that is all but shattered.

It is easy to point fingers regarding the current mistrust in the church and single out Bishop Murphy or Voice of the Faithful.

But, if there is a crisis of trust on Long Island, the biggest culprits are the large majority of Catholics who always trusted too much and closed their eyes to the rainbow of abuses in their church and those bishops who have never really trusted the people to share in their leadership.

Most Catholics grew up with the parochial school mind-set that Father can do no wrong and that - watch your mouth! - the bishop never lies.

While they believe in their heart that they are staunch, faithful Catholics, they have become sheep who plod along, supremely indifferent to the problems in their church and blind to the dangers that still face children. They never question, rarely doubt and prefer instead to go with the flow.

Timid and apathetic, these Catholics are the descendants of all those in a long-ago crowd who stood by and watched, with their arms folded, while a man was being crucified.

The church on Long Island has little chance of recovering a mutual trust unless the large majority of Catholics wake up to an understanding that it's never enough simply to go through the knee-jerk motions of a one-hour Sunday ritual, whisper their way through a rosary and then hide under the bed when their church is suffering.

They have to come out of the pews, out of the coma and give their beliefs flesh and blood. If there is to be any trust or hope of healing, there must first be a pulse.

But, in order to restore trust on both sides, it may be necessary first to get the attention of a leadership that seems far more intent on restoring its own authority than building any trust with Voice of the Faithful, the Catholics in Oyster Bay and anyone else who doesn't first genuflect.

And, since money has long since replaced Latin as the official language of the bishops, a suddenly revived majority of Catholics could decide to skip the collection basket and instead give their money directly to their pastor (with the provision that it is "for parish use only"), since 8 percent of all Sunday collections go directly to the Diocese of Rockville Centre.

Voice of the Faithful members are already doing this, but most Catholics in the diocese are not. The "trust" would come sailing in from the chancery in a heartbeat if the money were withheld from the diocese.

They might also want to dramatize the contradiction of a church without unity or trust by occasionally holding quiet prayer vigils outside St. Agnes Cathedral and the chancery in Rockville Centre. Those prayers would be heard in places where God reigns and where people think they are God.

In the end, average Catholics have to look in the mirror and decide whether to continue in a lazy, out-to-lunch comfort zone or to become truly Catholic, truly united and collectively articulate on issues such as the abuse scandal and the bishops' efforts to control elections.

And finally, if there is to be any trust at all, Catholics should insist that, unlike the bishops' meeting last week in Denver, the bishops must open their meetings to the public and the media and discard the medieval mentality of secrecy, control, mistrust and a misguided sense of royalty.

The Bishop Murphys of this world come and go, and today's Voice of the Faithful may be tomorrow's Knights of Eternal Trust. But it would be the worst kind of tragedy for the Catholic Church on Long Island if the majority of Catholics again shamefully shut the door, closed their eyes and went back to sleep.