

Geneva Sun
March 21, 2007

In God we trust - I hope

C'mon now who do you, who do you, who do you, who do you think you areHa ha ha! Bless your soulYou really think you're in control? -- **Gnarls Barkley**

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A group calling themselves the "Registered and True Parishioners of St. Peter Church" held a press conference avowing, "The opinions of a few do not constitute a divided parish ... Our parish is strong." Perhaps the irony of this edict coming from only 15 parishioners went right over their heads.

Yep. If you repeat it often enough, you might actually start to believe it. That this statement was even issued belies the very message of cohesion this band of believers attempted to deliver. And clearly, the need to say it reveals that Geneva's St. Peter Church remains divided.

Sadly, small factions of the congregation wield far more attention than their meager numbers merit. One extreme believes Monsignor Joseph Jarmoluk knew about former priest Mark Campobello's 1999 sexual abuse of an eighth-grade girl at St. Peter School long before he reported it. The other side is convinced the monsignor disclosed it immediately and that he shares the pope's infallibility.

Campobello is serving eight years for that crime as well as for the abuse of an Aurora Central Catholic High School student. Both victims filed suit against Campobello, Bishop Thomas Doran and the Rockford Diocese with Monsignor Jaromoluk being deposed last week.

The clarion call for the monsignor to admit to and apologize for a perceived wrong baffles me. That's not going to happen with lawyers involved. However, that ultimatum pales in comparison to the venom and vitriol spewed by both sides including some of father Joe's most ardent defenders -- specifically those who have commented on a New York-based Web site that curiously has decided to focus on this issue.

A third group, The "Friends of Father Joe," held a press conference a few weeks back to set the record straight about the state of the parish. Exactly what percentage of the St. Peter Church community they represent is unclear.

Frankly, I'm not comfortable with any of these groups, and I'd hazard a guess the vast majority of St. Peter's members aren't either. From similar personal experience, any man so vilified and idolized typically deserves neither. So I phoned Father Joe. And I was surprised by his return call.

Before lawyers and bishops go into conniptions, I had no interest in when he knew of the abuse or any details of the lawsuit. My concern lies solely in how the fallout has affected him and St. Peter.

Considering I've been rather blunt about the parish and previously penned a revised Ten Commandments, we had a very pleasant conversation. He certainly wasn't a villain or a hero. In fact, Father Joe is the kind of guy I would love to have a theological debate with over a few Bass Ales. I certainly don't blame him for erring on the side of caution, but there was so much I wanted to ask him.

I don't understand why he violated the spirit of Bishop Doran's direction by re-hiring his personal attorney. Believe me, anyone who walks into a deposition without a mouthpiece is nuts. But, for Father Joe to seek sanctions against the opposing lawyers on the slimmest of pretenses? I can't guess his motivation, maybe it's just bad advice, but it does seem as if he's trying to avoid the deposition altogether.

I also don't understand why he won't take a stand against the carpetbaggers and wannabe documentary filmmakers from New York who only foment discord for a fast buck. I don't understand why he doesn't denounce the blatantly un-Christian conduct of the most zealous of his supporters. Father Joe's silence appears to be tacit complicity.

My biggest question, though, is why he allowed this parish civil war to become all about him?

But, upon further reflection, expecting Father Joe to be anything other than human is patently unfair. And I think that's the mistake his detractors make. We're all so desperate to believe our spiritual leaders have attained perfection that we crucify them when we discover they haven't. And who does the man responsible for the spiritual well-being of 9,000 parishioners turn to when he loses his way?

It's certainly ain't the diocese. Believe me, I'd rather have the bishop come down on me or lend his support -- anything's better than twisting in the wind.

Conversely, for the monsignor's supporters to make him more than human is as great a disservice. Father Joe himself wrote "humility is difficult for me," and that path to enlightenment often involves someone willing to catch you when you do fall -- someone capable of tough love as well as forgiveness. Yes, true friends keep their leaders off pedestals. There's no betrayal in constructive criticism.

Too often we confuse the man with the message. Belonging to a church is never about the pastor, the priest or the minister -- it's about your relationship with the Big Dude. Being part of a congregation isn't about you -- it's about putting aside your needs for the betterment of the whole.

Bruce Springsteen, a very wise man, said, "Trust the art, not the artist." And until both sides of this debate are willing to let go of the monsignor, no amount of press conferences will heal St. Peter.

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