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## **A Fear-Based Church?: Why So Many Catholics Are Afraid to Speak Out**

On June 1, Bishop Kevin Dowling, an outspoken Catholic bishop in South Africa, gave a surprisingly frank talk to a group of prominent Catholics in Cape Town. The other day a friend sent me a link to his address, [posted on Independent Catholic News](#), parts of which I posted on our magazine's [blog](#). Many read it, and other sites picked it up.

Then, somewhat mysteriously -- or so it seemed -- his candid talk was removed from ICN. Then it was posted again a few hours later. (This was due to a glitch involving some incorrectly deleted words, the website's editor explained in an email.) Subsequently, [the National Catholic Reporter reported that the bishop had intended the talk to be off the record](#). "Given the fact that it would be a select group with no media present," he said, "I decided I would be open and honest in my views to initiate debate and discussion."

Now, I've done some off-the-record speaking myself. But after I read his superb talk I wondered: Why wouldn't a bishop want such a carefully crafted, well-thought-out address, which would clearly be of great help to so many, disseminated more widely? Why not be "open and honest" with everyone?

Bear with me. For I've been thinking about his talk not so much to unravel the twisted skein of the on-again, off-again posting saga, but to meditate on what it might say about the Catholic church.

Bishop Dowling's blunt address was not only about what he called the "dismantling" of the Second Vatican Council, which reformed the church in the 1960s, but something else: the overwhelming "pressure to conform." Here's an irony: the one speaking out about speaking out apparently did not feel that he could speak out, at least not broadly, or at least not to everyone, or at least not publicly. His desire not to speak more publicly on the topic may have proved his point.

None of this is meant to be a slight against Bishop Dowling, whom I've greatly admired for some time. He is a terrific leader, a wonderful teacher and, in many ways, a real prophet. What a bishop should and could be.

But neither is this surprising. Today in the Catholic Church almost any disagreement to almost any degree with almost any church leader on almost any topic is seen as dissent. And I'm not speaking about the essentials of the faith -- those elements contained in the [Apostles Creed](#) and the [Nicene Creed](#) -- but about less essential topics. Even on those topics -- for example, the proper strategy for bishops to deal with Catholic politicians at odds with church teaching, the new translations of the Mass, the best way for priests to address complicated moral issues, and so on -- the slightest whiff of disagreement is confused with disloyalty.

Certainly disagreement with statements from Rome, even on non-dogmatic or non-doctrinal matters, is seen as close to heresy. As Bishop Dowling said:

What compounds this [frustration over the church's unwillingness to be critiqued], for me, is the mystique which has in increasing measure surrounded the person of the pope in the last 30 years, such that any hint of critique or questioning of his policies, his way of thinking, his exercise of authority etc. is equated with disloyalty. There is more than a perception, because of this mystique, that unquestioning obedience by the faithful to the pope is required and is a sign of the ethos and fidelity of a true Catholic. When the pope's authority is then intentionally extended to the Vatican curia, there exists a real possibility that unquestioning obedience to very human decisions about a whole range of issues by the curial departments and cardinals also becomes a mark of one's fidelity as a Catholic, and anything less is interpreted as being disloyal to the pope who is charged with steering the bark of Peter.

Even for bishops! Kevin Dowling is a bishop: Catholic theology considers him a successor to the apostles. For Christ's sake (and I mean that literally) he's not some lowly functionary. He's not simply a branch manager of the Vatican's main office. He is a teacher in his own right. And even he feels the "pressure to conform."

What does this engender? It engenders a fear-based church. It creates clergy and members of religious orders frightened of speaking out, terrified of reflecting on complicated questions, and nervous about proposing creative solutions to new problems. It leads to the laity, with boundless experience on almost every topic but who have a hard enough time getting their voice heard, giving up. It causes the diminution of a thoughtful theological community in Catholic colleges and universities. It muzzles what should be a vibrant, flourishing, provocative, innovative, challenging Catholic press. It empowers minuscule cadres of self-appointed watchdogs, whose malign voices are magnified by the blogosphere, and who, with little to no theological background, freely declare any sort of disagreement as tantamount to inciting schism -- and are listened to by those in authority. It creates fear.

Does this seem like what Jesus wanted to establish on earth? It doesn't to me. I thought he said "[Fear not!](#)" And I thought St. John said, "[There is no fear in love.](#)" And "[Perfect love casts out fear.](#)" But perfect fear casts out love.

Sometimes when I'm writing or speaking, even to small groups, I find myself thinking not "What would God want me to say?" but "Will this get me in trouble?" Again it's not surprising. Occasionally, during talks I'll spy an unsmiling man or woman furiously taking notes. The other night it happened during a talk on a particularly controversial topic: joy. Ironically, I am

probably one of the most theologically conservative Catholics you'll ever meet. Every Sunday, when I say the Creed during Mass, I believe every single word of it.

Bishop Dowling is right. There is a "pressure to conform." And it is intense, particularly within official church circles. Sadly, this is the *last* thing that the church needs right now. In the midst of perhaps one of the worst crises ever to face the Catholic Church -- the sexual abuse scandals -- what we need is not fear-bred silence, but a hope-filled willingness to listen to any and all voices. Because the Holy Spirit works through everyone.

What's the alternative? Well, for an answer I'd like to turn to Pope Benedict XVI. In preparation for some of my own writing, I've been rereading his book [\*Jesus of Nazareth\*](#), which I'm enjoying very much. At the beginning of his book the pope says something quite surprising. Benedict writes that the book is "absolutely not" a work of doctrine, but the "expression of my own personal research." "Consequently," he writes, "everyone is free to contradict me. I only ask the readers that they read with sympathy, without which there will be no comprehension."

That seemed eminently sensible, completely humble and absolutely right. How much easier it is to listen to someone who invites, rather than commands.

How wonderful if everyone in the Catholic Church could be afforded that "sympathy." Then we could listen to the voices of all sorts of people who have much to offer the church, by way of their own "expressions" of their "personal research" -- that is, the experience of their lives as faith-filled Christians. The pope's approach in his book -- about Jesus, hardly an insignificant topic! -- is the way forward.

What is needed is sympathy to the experiences and voices of all in the church. Without this there will truly be, to quote the pope, "no comprehension."

*James Martin, SJ, is culture editor of America magazine and author of [The Jesuit Guide to \(Almost\) Everything](#). This essay is adapted from a post on ["In All Things."](#)*