

# Can There Be “Common Ground”?

by William A. Donohue

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*In August, Cardinal Bernardin along with eight bishops and 17 other Catholic leaders met to discuss the possibility of reaching common ground between various factions within the Church. On August 12 the Chicago Sun-Times published an exchange between Call to Action president Linda Pleczynski and William Donohue, president of the Catholic League. Here is the full text of Donohue's remarks.*

Most observers of the Catholic Church will agree that there is considerable infighting among various factions within the Church. But paralysis? No. What we have is a determined minority of elites who are profoundly alienated from traditional Church teachings pitted against those who, by and large, are relatively content with the Church the way it is.

The elites never tire of citing polls that suggest that most Catholics want a married clergy, women priests and a host of other reforms. What they don't say is that, except for them, most Catholics are infinitely more concerned about the vibrancy of their parish programs, schools and Sunday homilies than they are about the politics of reform.

Just last year, the Catholic League commissioned a survey of American Catholics. The results were startling: among those who profess a belief in reforms, 83 percent of all Catholics and 90 percent of those who regularly attend Mass said that they would be as committed to the Church, if not more so, if the Church *did not* make the changes they wanted. How can this be so?

There is a dramatic difference between preferences and demands. Catholics may prefer the Church to make certain

changes, but only a small minority are so intense in their convictions that they demand reforms. Not so for the elites: what motivates them is power and that is why they press so hard for changes. They have a vested interest, then, in seeing all preferences as demands, though the reality is that most Catholics are more troubled by second collections at Mass than they are by the issues that exercise Call to Action.

Infighting is constructive when both sides agree to the central tenets of Church teachings. But when either side takes it upon itself to rewrite liturgies and openly defy the teachings of the Magisterium, then that kind of infighting is destructive to the mission of the Church. In short, there are some aspects of the Church that are non-negotiable, and the sooner this is acknowledged, the better off everyone will be.

To take a different approach, if a reporter for the *Chicago Sun-Times* were to go on a popular local radio show and start blasting the editorial positions of his newspaper, just how long would he last? Would it make sense to label the newspaper intolerant if he were summarily fired? The point is that there is more tolerance in the Catholic Church for dissent than exists in most institutions in society. Up to a point, that is healthy. But it is downright destructive—not to say foolhardy—if dissent knows no boundaries.

The elites trumpet pluralism as a virtue, but pluralism is predicated on limits, lest it descend to anarchy. The elites who demand reforms seem not to care about this verity, and some have actually said that their agenda is to destroy the Church as we know it. Now it matters not a whit whether this segment of the Church comes from the left or the right, what matters is that they lose.

What is most right about the Catholic Church today is that it holds to moral absolutes in a culture drowning in relativism. To be sure, the role of conscience must be respected, but it must be, as the Church teaches, a well-formed conscience.

Jeffrey Dahmer followed his conscience, but precisely because it was a free-floating conscience grounded in nothing but his passions, his actions proved diabolical. Freedom, as the Catholic Church teaches and as Dahmer denied, is the right to do as we ought, not the right to do as we want.