

I

Reflections  
of a  
Bishop





## “Dear Bishop Tobin”

If I remember correctly, it was on the old *Perry Como Show* that they sang the jingle, “Letters, we get letters, we get lots and lots of letters.” This refrain would introduce a segment of the show in which Perry would sing musical requests sent in by his fans. I think of that jingle occasionally, for in my work I too receive lots and lots of letters. I’d guess that on average I receive about 100 pieces of mail per week. Let me tell you about some of the mail I receive.

Probably half of my mail is throwaway—advertisements for office products and services, books and manuscripts people think I should read, newsletters from organizations I’ve never heard of, computer-generated appeals addressed to “Mr. and Mrs. Diocese of Youngstown.” Disposing of this mail helps to clear my desk in a hurry.

The other half of the mail receives far more serious attention and falls, generally, into a few broad categories: complaints, commendations, invitations, suggestions, and reports.

You’re probably not surprised to learn that I sometimes receive letters from unhappy customers! In our radio talk show age, everyone’s an expert, and no one hesitates to share his or her opinion. And people do complain—about the laws of the Church and diocesan policies; about pastors and members of parish staffs; about me and things I’ve written, said, or done. Really, I don’t mind getting letters of complaint because most often the letter writers have invested their time and energy and are sincerely concerned about the well-being of the Church.

Letters that are personally insulting to me or to others

receive very short shrift, for even complainers are bound by laws of fairness and Christian charity. I always get a kick out of letters that attack aggressively but end on a cheerful Christian note. For example:

Dear Bishop Tobin—I think that decision you made was the stupidest thing I've ever heard. You're ruining the Church and destroying the diocese. Why don't you go back to Pittsburgh where you belong? Sincerely yours in Christ, Ms. Jane Doe.

Anonymous letters aren't taken very seriously, either, for they are inherently unfair. It's unreasonable for a person to send an unsigned letter, make a serious allegation about someone else, and expect me to do something about it. Anonymous letters are impossible to substantiate or respond to and are discarded without a second thought.

In responding to letters of complaint, I try to follow the principle of subsidiarity. For example, if a person writes to complain about something their pastor said or did, the immediate question is, "Have you discussed this with your pastor?" Within the Church, reconciliation presumes that we have first addressed a problem with the person who offended us before we have recourse to higher authority.

Fortunately, not all the mail I receive is negative, and some letters contain beautiful personal stories or words of encouragement. It always brightens my day to receive a positive letter that praises a decision I've made, a program we've started, or the excellent work of one of our priests, religious, or diocesan staff members. We all need a pat on the back once in a while, and we would do well to say and write encouraging things to one another a little more often.

I receive lots of invitations in the mail to attend parish events, community gatherings, or personal social affairs. Of course it's always flattering to be invited and I do appreciate the thoughtfulness of someone asking me to be with them.

One of the more frustrating aspects of my work, however, is that it’s simply impossible to attend *everything*.

Parish events take priority for me, for that’s where a shepherd should be, in the midst of his flock. Liturgical and devotional activities are particularly important, because it’s good that a bishop lead his people in prayer. However, as much as I’d love to attend the wonderful spaghetti, pierogi, or roast beef dinners, and parish festivals and fund-raisers, there just aren’t enough days in a week to allow me to do so.

People often write to share ideas about how to improve the life of the Church, and these ideas are welcome. Not that every suggestion is accepted, but I appreciate the fact that people are thinking creatively and taking time to offer their suggestions. Some suggestions, of course, are beyond my authority to do anything about because they involve the laws of God or the Universal Church. I can’t change the teaching of the Church about the permanence of marriage, the ordination of women to the priesthood, or the number of sacraments. Other ideas are more helpful and receive serious consideration in the consultative process of the diocese.

My mailbag also includes lots of reports—from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Catholic Conference of Ohio, ecumenical associations, various boards on which I serve, and from our diocesan offices—reports about finances, schools and religious education programs, Catholic Charities, clergy assignments, religious communities in the diocese, and so forth. Keeping up with the river of information that flows across my desk is a real challenge and allows little additional time for more serious or even recreational reading.

The mail I receive is certainly revealing of the diversity of the Church today. I get letters from cardinals, bishops, priests, deacons, religious, and laity; from school kids and senior citizens; from people within the diocese and around

the world; from liberals and conservatives. One day a couple of months ago I received a letter from the pseudo-Catholic, extremely liberal group Call to Action, inviting me to attend their annual meeting. The very next piece of mail I opened was from a group of very conservative Catholics insisting that the Church had drifted into heresy and demanding that we return to the “Faith of Our Fathers,” that the Mass be said only and always in Latin. A bishop is sometimes like the rope in a tug-of-war!

A few other random thoughts about the mail I receive . . .

Some people, in an attempt to take a short-cut, I suppose, send mail directly to my home, thinking that there it will receive more personal attention. That’s a big mistake. I have no secretarial assistance at home and the mail I receive there is often set aside or entirely disregarded. The best way to receive a response is to send mail to my office where we are equipped to handle it, where it becomes part of a well-established routine. And by the way—I do personally read every piece of mail that is sent to me, even if I should decide to pass it on to someone else for proper disposition.

Occasionally people are dismayed that I don’t personally respond to all the mail I receive. Recently one gentleman was outraged that I didn’t personally answer his letter, suggesting that if he had been a wealthy Catholic his letter would have received my personal attention. What he didn’t understand is that my forwarding his letter to a member of the diocesan staff actually ensured that he would receive a prompt and well-informed response, far more so than if I had responded myself.

I try to keep up with the mail as well as I can, answering at least within a month, usually more quickly. But if the mail arrives at an especially busy season, or at a time when I’ve been out of the office for a meeting, retreat, or vacation, it might take a little longer to respond.

In short, I “get letters, lots and lots of letters,” and the mail becomes a significant part of my ministry. But that’s a good sign, I think, a sign that the Church is alive and well, that our people really do care and want to be involved. So, keep those cards and letters coming. I’ll be worried if they ever stop!