

# Too much secrecy in the church?

“Is your book like Scott McClellan’s?” An interviewer asked me that the other day, thereby suggesting a possible parallel between the former White House press secretary’s insider tell-all volume about the Bush administration and my new book about the issue of secrecy in the Church.

I had to disappoint him.

I haven’t read McClellan’s book, I said, but from what I’ve heard about it, “Nothing To Hide: Secrecy, Communication, and Communion in the Catholic Church” is very different. As a former information director (1969-87) of the Catholic bishops conference of the United States, I’m not out to settle scores, I’m not trying to make myself look good, and the points I make are meant to be constructive – to help the church to be more fully in fact the communion of persons that in essence it already is.

But is there really too much secrecy in the church? I’m convinced there is. The sex abuse scandal and cover-up provided the great horrible instance of that. The financial scandals that pop up now and then in dioceses and parishes are other examples. And leaving spectacular disasters aside, there is a seemingly widespread, day-in, day-out default of candid, comprehensive communication about church affairs. To put it simply, too many key decisions affecting everyone get made behind closed doors.

Not many official church documents address these matters, but those that do point in the opposite direction – away from secrecy toward openness. The clearest and best statement along these lines remains this passage from in the pastoral instruction “*Communio et Progressio*” published by the Vatican’s Council for Social Communications in 1971:

“The spiritual riches which are an essential attribute of the Church demand that the news she gives out of her intentions as well as of her works be distinguished by integrity, truth and openness. When ecclesiastical authorities are unwilling to give information or are unable to do so, then rumor is unloosed, and rumor is not a

bearer of the truth but carries dangerous half-truths. Secrecy should therefore be restricted to matters that involve the good name of individuals, or that touch upon the rights of people whether singly or collectively” (n. 121)

Since Vatican II, the Magisterium has repeatedly embraced the understanding of the church as a communion or community of persons. This goes by the name *communio ecclesiology*.

It is a rich, complex concept that I don't have the space to develop here. But open, honest communication among the members of the ecclesial community – and especially between the pastors and the people – clearly is a necessary part of it. Pope Benedict XVI several years ago got to the heart of the matter in this lapidary sentence: “We cannot communicate with the Lord if we do not communicate with one another.”

That doesn't mean the church may never practice secrecy – sometimes it should and must. But the presumption ought to be on the side of openness, with the burden of proof resting upon those who consider secrecy necessary in a particular case. When differences arise, the virtue of prudence should be exercised in deciding who's right.

In talking with people about these things, I've found that most Catholics recognize the existence of a problem. But the problem has seldom been examined closely – up to now, that is. In writing “Nothing To Hide,” newly published by Ignatius Press, my hope was to launch what seen as an overdue discussion for the good of the church. Sorry, but if you want to know what Scott McClellan has in mind, you'll have to ask him.

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