

Complaint Department

I received the following email from Delta airlines on August 5th. It read, “Dear , We are very sorry that your flight was delayed on August 1, 2011. Your feedback on this experience is important to us. We ask that you please provide feedback on your experience in (ZZZ) using the survey at the link below. The survey is between 4 and 12 questions, targeting your specific circumstances, and should only take a couple of minutes to complete. We thank you in advance for your feedback and again offer our deepest apologies for this inconvenience.”

I promptly went to the suggested link given to complete the survey. What prompted the email and survey was a frustrating delay I encountered at J.F.K. airport in New York on my way to vacation. After enduring a five hour layover at the airport before my next flight, I was ready to complete the final leg of my journey home, As we got ready to board according to “zones,” we anticipated a smooth five and an half hour, middle of the night ride. Then it happened. Without warning, the departure time went from 11:35 p.m. to 2:30 a.m. on the gate board. Everyone let out a gasp of frustration. The gate attendant confirmed the delay a few minutes later and promptly offered vouchers to appease the frustrated travelers. The trouble was that Dunkin Donuts seemed to be the only restaurant open at that ungodly hour. Some time later, a traveler shouted out that she just received a text message that the flight was changed back to its original departure time. Travelers began to clap but the gate attendant asked that folks not jump to conclusions until he could verify it. Minutes later, he did and the level of anticipation arose, only to be dampened by the reminder that we had to change planes and gates. At least, there was progress, we thought.

Everyone rushed to the designated gate in anticipation of boarding. Nothing began to happen. No one appeared at the gate desk. People anxiously watched their watches and the departure time noted at the gate. Minutes later, the departure time has pushed back thirty minutes. When the extra thirty minutes was up and there was no news, personnel or boarding, another thirty minutes was added. Were we becoming puppets on a string? We wondered.

Finally, we boarded, after being given the excuse that the cleaning crew to clean the plane did not show up. Wheels up finally took place at 1:45 a.m.

I did fill out the survey. There were more “poor” comments than “excellent.” Of course, it did contain a box where one could add one’s own comments which I duly did. Previously, I had talked with fellow priests who made the same journey on the same airline over the summer and they told me of some frustrating experiences they experienced.

On the same day that I received the email from Delta airlines, I saw comments a priest made in his homily the previous Sunday regarding some of Ireland’s recent clerical abuse revelations and scandals.

He told his parishioners, attending their Sunday Mass, about the “disgust” of the nation “at the abuse of children by some priests, as well as the actions of those in authority in putting the reputation of the institution ahead of the protection of children.”

“Great damage has been done to us all” indicated the priest.” You are wonderful people to be here at all, given the serious betrayal of trust by the institutional church.”

He concluded by saying that the attendance in Mass on Sunday was “not the institution, not the Vatican, not bishops or hierarchies” but instead the faith of the people.

Both stories – the email from Delta and the comments from the priest about the clerical sex abuse – may not seem to have anything in common, but they do. Their common denominator is both loyalty and commitment. Both loyalty and commitment go much deeper than frustrations, inconveniences, lack of communication and even sins of the fathers.

Maybe I am glad that they have replaced the “Complaint Department” with “Customer Service.” Maybe that service, because of loyalty and commitment, will continue to provide the best service both on the ground below and in the heavens above.