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Maverick Australian priest sacked

by Penny Edman

A Catholic parish wish list: The liturgies are vibrant. The homeless and the wealthy pray side by side. Families with young children and teenagers flock in. The parish has an active commitment to social justice.

A small inner-city church in the third-largest city in Australia has all of this and more.

But the priest administrator of St. Mary's, in an Australian first, has been sacked by his archbishop for "harming ecclesiastical communion."

Fr. Peter Kennedy, a priest of 44 years, refuses to go, and his community is up in arms and the wider church is divided.

Although his appointment as administrator had effectively ended Feb. 19, when Brisbane Archbishop John Bathersby issued him a "decree of removal from office," ousted pastor of 28 years Kennedy celebrated Mass on Sunday, Feb. 22, for more than 1,500 people. The overflow congregation stood several deep outside.

The interim administrator, Fr. Ken Howell, dean of the nearby St. Stephen's Cathedral, was to have celebrated weekend Masses at St. Mary's but was advised by police to stay away.

The standoff escalated as Kennedy refused to hand over the keys. Bathersby allegedly received a bomb threat on Friday -- although the community denies that is the way it operates -- and Kennedy replied to an offer of mediated talks with threats to seek redress in the civil courts.

The previous week, Kennedy likened Howell to a "religious scab." He publicly apologized the next day.

St. Mary's, in South Brisbane, draws congregations from across the Queensland capital. Many of the 900 people who attend the weekend Masses would not attend any church if it were not for St. Mary's.

The maverick Kennedy, 71, has built the congregation from a handful of people into a thriving community. Lay leadership has been encouraged and non-clerics often give the homily.

Gay and lesbian activities, a Buddhist meditation group using church facilities, political action, informality in church services, aboriginal artifacts in the church -- these head the list of grievances that has made St. Mary's a thorn in the flesh of the Catholic church in Brisbane for many years.

The validity of sacraments received there has been questioned to the extent that Bathersby, in a letter to Kennedy on Feb. 6, said that he would set a date soon when baptisms could be performed at the cathedral for people concerned about the validity of a baptism conducted at St Mary's.

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Bathersby has been flooded with reaction to his handling of the situation, from hate mail to the setting up of a Facebook support group by young people.

St. Mary's continues to declare that it is a strong, healthy Roman Catholic community.

"People who are not part of our community will make judgments about us because of our so-called unorthodox behavior, but we can take heart from the words of Jesus, who himself was judged harshly for his unorthodox behavior. 'By their fruits you will know them,' " Kennedy said.

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