

## As bishop leaves diocese: 'I suspect Jesus was not all that popular'

Dan Morris-Young | Mar. 14, 2011



Bishop Robert Vasa at the September 2009 grand opening of the Powell Butte Retreat Center in the Baker, Ore., diocese.

Prior to becoming Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger sympathized with the notion of a smaller, more orthodox Roman Catholic church. In his decade as bishop of the Baker diocese in Oregon, Robert F. Vasa in effect implemented Benedict's idea, generating deep reactions of support as well as dissent.

Vasa left Baker earlier this month to become coadjutor bishop of Santa Rosa, Calif.

Many lament Vasa's exit. Many others express delight or relief at his departure and wonder out loud if the temporary apostolic administrator, William Skylstad, retired bishop of Spokane, Wash., can provide pathways to unity in a polarized diocese.

The Baker diocese encompasses 18 counties of eastern Oregon -- 66,826 square miles or about one-and-a-half times the size of Tennessee. The area's population has mushroomed since Vasa's installation in January 2000. However, the number of Catholics has dropped from 39,853 in 2000 to 32,799 in 2010, according to the Official Catholic Directory.

The directory also reports a similar 18 percent drop in the "total students under Catholic instruction" -- from 3,809 to 3,110.

Many attribute the decline to Vasa's hard-line policies, rigid theological interpretations and what they describe as a markedly top-down leadership style short on compassion.

At the same time, supporters laud his "upholding of the magisterium" and "never compromising the faith," and described him as "the best thing to happen to this diocese."

Vasa himself acknowledges polarity. He sees it as the result of strong stands he has taken and he said it is not unique to the Baker diocese.

"Routinely and regularly I receive messages from across the U.S., both positive and negative, which would

indicate that there are folks who feel polarized in their own diocese," he told *NCR*. "Some are praying that I never show up in their diocese, and some pray that I come there."

"I think when someone stands up a little more strongly, a body of people are going to be very agreeable to that, while a body of people are going to find that very disagreeable. The more mellow an individual is, the less he does, the less he speaks, the fewer people he offends on either side," he said.

"I suspect Jesus was not all that popular, push come to shove," he said. "There is always the possibility that someone is going to reject the truth, but that does not excuse me from teaching it."

In a farewell letter to the diocese, Vasa, 59, did not mention the decline in numbers. However, he did ask Catholics "not to judge me too harshly" and says he is "painfully aware that some have found me too difficult and I can assure you that I have often carried them with me to the chapel in prayer and at Mass."

"I can only pray that no one has been given true cause to abandon Christ because of me. I am sure that I have not been all that you hoped I could be for you, and I ask that you pray that I do better in the future," he wrote.

While Catholics might not have abandoned Christ, significant numbers either walked away from church participation or "were forced to go to other churches, even to the point of being told their ministries were no longer needed," said Fr. Rob Irwin. A priest of the diocese, Irwin himself sought permission to minister elsewhere last October.

He was rector of St. Francis de Sales Cathedral in Baker (1998-2005) and headed the diocesan priests' council. He is now parochial vicar at St. George Parish in Post Falls, Idaho.

He declined to discuss the details of why he relocated, except to say, "I became disappointed that I was not able to feel that I could respect and obey the successor to the bishop to whom I had made [ordination] vows."

"Actually," Irwin added, "Bishop Vasa has the potential to be an outstanding bishop if he is able to become a little more pastoral. He thinks clearly and concisely and is very analytical and good at making decisions. But he does not consult very much. He's just not the whole package yet."

Fr. James Radloff concurs, but views working with Vasa over time differently. "We did not make it easy for Bishop Vasa here in the diocese of Baker and I hope we get credit for chipping off some of his sharp edges. I believe the man has grown and learned from this experience and will be a better bishop because of it."

"It is sad that some people never let go of their initial impressions of him," said Radloff, who serves as the diocese's "promoter of vocations" and director of youth ministry. "I did and I benefited from the experience."

Skylstad said he sees "fostering a sense of unity" in the Baker diocese "with compassion" as a priority and "to be as present as I can be pastorally during this interim time" before a new ordinary is appointed.

### **Affirmation of faith**

Vasa galvanized a traditionalist support base as well as outspoken opposition in 2004 when he required that all in parish ministries -- notably in catechetics and service at Mass -- provide full assent to a dozen doctrinal statements in what was called the "Affirmation of Personal Faith."

The required affirmations included teaching on homosexuality, contraception, chastity, marriage, abortion, euthanasia, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, Mary, hell, purgatory and the authority of the church.

Objectors charged that the requirement was a thinly disguised loyalty oath devoid of room for individual

conscience. Others questioned the choice of the stipulated teachings. Some pointed to what they said was a focus on ?pelvic issues.?

Supporters praised the move, calling it timely and undiluted doctrinal teaching.

Vasa wrote at that time, ?It may happen that some Catholics claim a right to ?religious dissent,? from even the serious moral teachings of the church? but this ?does not carry with it a corresponding ?right? to hold positions of esteem as a catechist or liturgical minister.?

?Large numbers of people who had been deeply involved in the diocese and in parishes, who had given their lives to the church, began taking refuge elsewhere,? said Richard Groves. A group, Concerned Catholics of the Diocese of Baker, was formed to protest the affirmations.

Active at St. Edward the Martyr Parish in Sisters, Ore., Groves said, ?I know people in their 70s and 80s for whom the church was the center of their lives -- and they are heartbroken. They have been made to feel like outsiders. It is like if you do not toe the line, if you do not accept a very rigid, narrow approach to Catholicism, you do not have a place here.?

Leigh Casler counts herself among the diaspora. A member of St. Francis of Assisi in Bend for more than 20 years, Casler said, ?The atmosphere at St. Francis became so divisive and so emotionally charged that I felt it was necessary to attend somewhere else.?

The diocesan cathedral is in Baker, but the diocesan administrative offices are in Bend. St. Francis of Assisi there is the diocese?s largest parish.

St. Francis parish numbers have declined from more than 2,200 families a decade ago to roughly 1,700 or fewer today. Bend the city grew from 52,029 to more than 83,000 in that time.

Still, the parish recently built a \$6.4 million church plant. According to a parish financial report, the remaining \$4.1 million mortgage at 6.25 percent interest carries a monthly payment of \$29,800. The parish is tapping a ?special reserve fund? when monthly building fund contributions fall short.



Despite reducing support to the parish school and keeping the budget at 2005 levels, the parish needs an additional ?300 to 400 individuals and families to commit to at least \$100 per month? toward the building fund and parish operation, the report stated.

A new retreat center at Powell Butte has also been built. The site includes the bishop?s residence.

With major expenditures and fewer Catholics, how does the financial health of the diocese compare to the year 2000?

?I really cannot answer that,? Vasa said. ?A number of churches and parishes have worked hard to upgrade parish plants, and the retreat center represents a capital loan. So we have on the one hand, I think, properties and some facilities which enhance, if you will, the value and the productivity from a spiritual standpoint of the diocese. Financially, economically, how do you weigh the value of a retreat center against some money on account without a retreat center??

Vasa said it would have been ?penny-wise and pound-foolish? to have ?spent 15 years raising funds before building a retreat center, during which a whole generation of teens would have been born and raised without the

benefit of a retreat center.?

?I would like to think we are healthier overall and a part of that health includes the financial health of the diocese. The economic downturn of the past several years has impacted us as it has everyone, and so those factors are there, too,? he said.

Vasa himself did much woodcrafting for the retreat center, including working with two other men to build bunk beds for the 40 rooms.

Casler said she wrote Vasa ?numerous times? about the Affirmation of Personal Faith and met with him twice. She said he was polite and listened, ?but it was as if my words didn?t penetrate his consciousness at all. His mind appeared to be totally made up before I even opened my mouth.?

?During one of the audiences,? she added, ?when I asked him about the importance of an individual?s conscience in terms of decision-making, I remember very clearly that he said I had been improperly catechized. He said that if a person was properly catechized, his or her conscience would be formed by the catechism and would naturally follow all the church teaching, and that an individual?s conscience was only valid if it was in line with church teachings. It chilled me. Why did God give each of us a brain, a heart and the power to reason if he didn?t intend for us to use them??

Asked if he would initiate a requirement similar to the Affirmation of Personal Faith in Santa Rosa, Vasa told *NCR*, ?I will have to see when I take over.?

Ken Roberts said the negative impact of Affirmation of Personal Faith might have been dampened if Vasa had been ?more compassionate with those who struggle with what the Catholic church is asking us to believe.?

Active at St. Francis in Bend, Roberts said he would have advised Vasa ?to be more pastoral and less legalistic.?

?Do not pull up the good wheat along with the weeds,? Roberts said, ?let the Lord do that when he harvests. A lot of really good wheat got burned in an effort to cleanse the field. I really don?t think Bishop Vasa has a mean bone in his body ... but his heavy-handed approach lost many more than he gained.?

Eve McFarland experienced that. The psychotherapist resigned as the diocese?s Victim Assistance Coordinator four years ago. She describes Vasa?s approach to clergy sexual abuse issues as ?entirely legalistic and almost hostile and demeaning to the impact abuse had on the human psyche and spirit.?

Vasa complied with the guidelines approved by the U.S. bishops for protecting children, but ?he did not respond to the pain of the victims in an appropriate manner,? she claimed, adding that the bishop had made remarks to her ?about keeping therapy brief and costs low.?

?It is my professional belief and experience that sexual abuse by an authority figure, especially a religious figure, is spiritual abuse of the first order. When I stated that at a meeting of priests, he visibly recoiled and quickly brought my talk to an end,? McFarland said.

### **Watchdog and shepherd**

Clare Hayes views Vasa not as heavy-handed but as firmly in control. ?He has been a great watchdog and a great shepherd,? said the retired elementary school teacher and Bend parishioner.

Vasa, who was a dinner guest at Hayes? home in February, ?was sent here to clean things up, make things better. And now he is being sent to another place to probably do the same thing,? she said.

Parishioners she knows "are crying and weeping" at Vasa's departure, she said.

Radloff said Vasa "showed me again and again proof of his ability to listen to others."

"I was very invigorated by Bishop Vasa's open-door policy," Radloff said, "because the clarity this opportunity afforded me helped me to understand where he was coming from even if I did not agree with him."

"I was always amazed and impressed by how much he listened to the advice given by the Council of Priests," Radloff added. "It was also my belief that he appreciated my outspokenness at these meetings. As I grew to know him better I came to understand that I had nothing to fear by sharing anything with him."

At the same time, Radloff noted, Vasa could be "quick to form an opinion that might circumvent him hearing everything you might want to say."

Vasa made headlines last year when he declared that St. Charles Medical Center in Bend may no longer call itself Catholic. At issue, among other things, was tubal ligation which eliminates a woman's fertility.

In a joint statement issued with hospital officials, Vasa stated: "It would be misleading for me to allow St. Charles Bend to be acknowledged as Catholic in name while I am certain that some important tenets of the Ethical and Religious Directives [of the U.S. bishops' conference] are no longer being observed."

Vasa also drew national attention in 2006 when he suggested the church examine if pro-choice Catholic politicians are in heresy.

"I think there is suitable reason to consider the possibility that there is a right-to-murder heresy," Vasa told Catholic News Service, adding that the concept "could extend to other Catholics who believe that it would be OK to be pro-choice and Catholic."

[Dan Morris-Young is an *NCR* contributor.]

#### **Web sites**

Vasa's farewell homily  
[www.youtube.com/watch?v=1jgIMWvtb\\_Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1jgIMWvtb_Q)

Vasa's farewell letter  
[www.dioceseofbaker.org/DIOCESAN\\_CHRONICLE/AChronicleVol2No4.pdf](http://www.dioceseofbaker.org/DIOCESAN_CHRONICLE/AChronicleVol2No4.pdf)

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