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Argument over Berkeley parish escalates

Monica Clark | Jul. 5, 2011

Parishioners gather in protest outside St. Joseph the Worker Parish in Berkeley, Calif., June 19. (Photos courtesy of Pat Brock)

BERKELEY, Calif. -- A conflict over styles of pastoral leadership at a parish here escalated last week when the Oakland diocese posted a statement on its Web site claiming that a retired former pastor, who had recently been asked by the current pastor to leave the rectory, had caused ?many pastoral difficulties.?

The statement said these included ?failure to observe the necessary steps to insure the valid and licit celebration of the sacraments (especially marriage)? and other liturgical deviations.

Fr. George Crespin, pastor emeritus at St. Joseph the Worker Parish and the priest in question, replied that the statement is ?filled with misstatements, questionable assertions, and in some cases lies.?

While acknowledging that he may not have ?as rigid an approach to sacramental ministry? as the current pastor, Crespin, in a letter to fellow priests, said he resented ?the questioning of the validity of the sacraments that I celebrated? and was writing ?to defend my good name and to refute attacks on my 49 years of ministry.?

Fr. John Direen, pastor of the parish for the past two years, told *NCR* that he stands by the statement against the pastor emeritus.

St. Joseph the Worker Parish is well known for its social justice ministry. It provided a safe haven for Cesar Chavez, founder of the United Farm Workers, when he was receiving death threats, and was a sanctuary church for Central American refugees.

Crespin, 75, had lived at the parish for 30 years while serving as diocesan chancellor and later as pastor and pastor emeritus. Early last month Direen asked him to vacate the rectory, saying the two men had different leadership styles and that he wanted to take the parish in a different direction.

This became the breaking point for some parishioners unhappy with Direen?s leadership. They say the move is arbitrary, detrimental to parish life, and is just one of several that have sparked controversy at the parish.

They also cite the disbanding of the pastoral council in March, limiting participation of *El Consejo Latino* (the Spanish-speaking advisory council), and turning a conference room adjacent to parish offices into a religious book store without parish consultation.

To call attention to their concerns, parishioners organized demonstrations June 19 in front of the church during a visit by Oakland Bishop Salvatore Cordileone to administer Confirmation and say weekend Masses.

The diocese says the June 28 statement on its Web site is a response to inaccuracies in media coverage of these demonstrations. Besides clarifications to the news reports, however, the statement contains allegations of liturgical problems as well as an assertion that Crespin had called for Direen?s removal during previous Masses and had suggested that parishioners find another parish.

For the full statement of the Oakland diocese, see this PDF file [1].

Crespin vehemently denies the allegations. Speaking with *NCR* June 29, the former pastor said that no one from the diocesan administration had ever contacted him to inquire about the supposed violations.

Mike Brown, the diocesan director of communication and the man who issued the statement against Crespin, told *NCR* it was based on communication with Direen and admitted that the former pastor had not had an opportunity to review the allegations.

In a June 21 interview, Direen said there had been ?tension? between the two men and that the former pastor ?disagreed with some of my decisions and resisted changes I was making.?

Crespin acknowledged the disagreement, but said, ?I never resisted doing what he asked me to do.? One of their disagreements, he said, was over Direen?s decision to move infant baptisms to 9 a.m. on Saturday mornings.

Twenty-nine priests of the Oakland diocese previously signed a letter to Cordileone opposing the manner in which Crespin had been asked to leave the parish. In a letter to those priests following the June 28 statement, the former pastor wrote: ?I love being a priest. I have tried to follow faithfully the direction set by the Second Vatican Council.?

Direen said he is open to meeting with anyone to ?explain what?s been going on from my perspective. And I?m open to hearing other points of view. I?m committed to staying to build this parish up.?

At this point, Crespin believes the only way the parish will survive is with a change of leadership: ?What?s needed now is someone new and neutral who can bring about peace and be an agent of reconciliation.?

Meanwhile, leaders of the group who demonstrated outside the parish June 19 have written a ?letter of regret? to Cordileone for actions which inadvertently disrupted preparations for an afternoon Mass and resulted in a call to the local police.

Up to 150 demonstrators, many wearing white T-shirts with an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, had stood outside the parish all morning holding signs, waving banners, and chanting prayers.

They were seeking a meeting with the bishop, whom they said had been unresponsive to letters they sent protesting Crespin?s removal and other actions by Direen.

The bishop had finished saying his third Mass of the day and was greeting parishioners in the rear of the church when some of the demonstrators, upon hearing that a fourth Mass was about to be celebrated, entered the church and began filling the pews.

Believing their presence might lead to a disruption to the liturgy, Direen called the police to help him ask them to leave.

The group had come into the church because they thought they were welcome to attend the Mass, said Ralph Nagel, a parishioner involved with the demonstrators.

?It was a terrible misunderstanding and miscommunication,? he said.

The group has also sent an apology to Fr. Ghebriel Woldai, the celebrant of the Mass, which was said in the Ge?ez rite for a small Eritrean and Ethiopian Catholic community that meets in the parish.

Marilyn Mackinnon, who had taken the 30-minute drive from neighboring San Lorenzo to show support for the demonstrators, said she had wanted to attend the Ge?ez Mass and was upset that Direen and the police insisted that she leave.

?I was told I must leave because I was disruptive, but I was not. I had not said a word, nor did I intend to do so,? she said.

Cordileone had met with three members of the group the previous evening, but news of the meeting had not filtered to many of the parishioners and former parishioners demonstrating outside. The three in the meeting said the bishop listened attentively to their concerns.

Direen has appointed a new ?interim? pastoral council, which had its first meeting with him in early May. He had attended the meeting with the bishop and the upset parishioners, which he described as a ?frank and honest? exchange.

?It was their time to be heard,? he said.

Brown, the diocesan communications director, said the bishop is willing to meet with parish representatives again, but leaders of the protest group say they are instead now focused on drafting a rebuttal to the June 28 statement and its allegations against Crespin, which they say are ?error filled.?

[Monica Clark is a west coast contributor to *NCR*.]

For more reporting on St. Joseph the Worker Parish, see Clark's earlier story:

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