

Ten years later, controversial New York church still thrives

Jamie Manson | Nov. 30, 2011 Grace on the Margins

Ten years after her historic ordination, Mary Ramerman rarely makes it into the papers anymore. Watching her minister as a priest today, it may be hard to believe that she was at the center of a highly publicized, painful battle between the diocese of Rochester, N.Y., and the parish then known as Corpus Christi in the late 1990s.

Back then, Corpus Christi was a Roman Catholic parish on the fringe. Led by Fr. Jim Callan, a charismatic priest with a radical commitment to the poor and marginalized, the church was known for taking risks.

They invited everyone to Communion, they blessed the unions of gay and lesbian couples (though never on diocesan property) and they allowed Mary Ramerman, the parish's lay associate pastor, to preach and to stand with Callan at the altar during the Eucharistic prayer. Eventually, she was also invited to raise the chalice during the consecration.

In time, all of this radical inclusiveness caught up with them. Diocesan officials moved Callan to another parish. They replaced him with a group of pastoral administrators, including two women, who fired Ramerman in October 1998. Most of the rest of the staff were let go just before Christmas of that year.

A large part of the community regrouped and, with Ramerman's leadership, renamed themselves Spiritus Christi. Callan joined them for a service and, as a result, was automatically barred from serving the Rochester diocese. After that, he joined the community, too.

The 400 people who gathered for Ramerman's 10-year anniversary Mass and dinner on the evening of Nov. 17, 2011, have moved far beyond those difficult memories. They cherish their identity as Catholics, love the sacramental tradition and are grounded in the theology of the preferential option for the poor. They don't think much about Rome or the hierarchy of the diocese of Rochester anymore.

"I have found it so immensely freeing to not have to hang on to that mode of thinking that says, 'We are Catholic, you are not Catholic,'" Ramerman told me in an interview earlier this week. "When I became free of that system, it opened up such a greater understanding of God and the people around me."

Ramerman admits that, initially, Spiritus Christi did hope to be welcomed back into the institutional church. "A lot of people don't realize that after our split with the diocese, we continued as a parish led by a celibate, male priest. We thought that maybe in a year or two they would miss us and welcome us back."

As the parish gradually realized that this invitation would not be forthcoming, they also realized that they had a newfound freedom to create the church for which they had longed. They began to contemplate whether Ramerman should become an ordained member of the community.

The discernment began in late 1998. Ramerman was ordained in November 2001.

This form of parishwide dialogue and decision-making has always been the hallmark of this group's process,

even before they split from the diocese. It was the style of leadership envisioned by Callan, who had a remarkable gift for empowering the laity to develop ministries that responded to the needs of the community.

When Ramerman and her husband, Jim, arrived at the vibrant but dirt-poor Corpus Christi Church in 1983, they found a kindred spirit in Callan. He had a uniquely nonclerical willingness to allow the Spirit to flow through the work of the laity. He understood and accepted his own limitations. He trusted the staff and encouraged their gifts.

That spirit of mutual trust and the commitment to creating a loving, supportive environment continues to guide the members of Spiritus Christi to this day. Ramerman serves as pastoral administrator and Callan is associate pastor. The community's senior pastor, according to the church's bulletin and website, is Jesus Christ.

The pastoral team meets weekly for staff meetings and, each month, gathers for a "state of the heart" session where they speak openly about the happenings in their personal lives, their families and the effect of their ministries on their own emotions and spirits. These sessions foster mutual affirmation among the pastoral team.

"We have a lot of lay people who preach and lead lay Communion services," Ramerman explains. "The laity take over all of the liturgies when Jim and I are away. It's not something they want to do every week, but they love telling us how great it was. We are thrilled by that."

But it is the cutting-edge ministry to the poor and marginalized that has defined this community since Callan arrived in the mid-1970s. What began then as a small ministry dedicated to responding to the community's most pressing needs for food and clothing today looks more like a moderately sized social service agency.

Spiritus runs a mental health center; two rehabilitation houses for formerly incarcerated women and men; a safe home for men recovering from drug and alcohol addiction; an active prison ministry; and outreach centers in Borgne, Haiti, and Chiapas, Mexico.

Construction is currently under way on their latest endeavor, a supportive housing apartment building with 37 units.

In addition to their own ministries, the community has also remained committed to supporting outside organizations. Since the 1980s, the parish staff has allotted a certain percentage of their parish collections to be given to other outreach programs. Over the past three decades, this tithe has grown from 5 percent to 15 percent.

In the midst of so much extraordinary work, Ramerman's day seems strikingly similar to the average day of an ordinary priest or pastor. Throughout the week, she celebrates several of the daily Masses offered by Spiritus. These liturgies are held either at the site of their offices at Downtown United Presbyterian Church or at a local Baptist church.

Much of the rest of her week involves hospital and home visits, anointing the sick, planning and officiating weddings, and performing funerals.

"Those are really defining moments in people's lives," Ramerman says. "In the structure of the church, the sacraments are very important to what a priest does, and I've found that's even more important than I thought it would be."

"I think I've grown in my understanding of the role of the priest," Ramerman reflects. "Fundamentally, my role is to love people and to forgive people. I don't think there is anything more powerful than when I do that. And if I don't do that well, it is harmful to people. They need to know that they are loved and they need to know that they are forgiven."

Ramerman admits that Spiritus is sometimes criticized for being too traditional.

"They ask me, 'Why do you wear an alb?' or 'Why do you allow people to call you reverend?'" she said. "Given our size, we can grow quickly in terms of preaching or social action, but other areas, like changing these traditions, have to move a lot more slowly."

Spiritus currently has 1,500 active parishioners, including 250 families, with 1,100 people attending one of the parish's three weekend Masses every week. They are the largest non-Roman Catholic-identifying congregation in the country.

This is part one of a two-part series. The next part can be found [here](#)[1].

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