

The quiet storm over Bishop Zavala and his family

Joe Ferullo | Jan. 17, 2012 NCR Today

I was having some coffee with an old friend from a well-known Catholic family a few days ago when the subject of Bishop Gabino Zavala came up. Zavala, an auxiliary bishop in the Los Angeles archdiocese, [resigned in early January when it was discovered he was the father of two teenaged children](#) [1]. But, my friend said, no one was talking about it.

She was right. The story had appeared dutifully in local and national newspapers the day of the resignation announcement, but that was it. There was no outrage, no beating the drums about the hypocrisy of celibacy, no linkage to the unending pedophilia scandals. The story just fizzled.

We ordered a second cup and worked over a few conspiracy theories: The new Los Angeles archbishop, Jose Gomez, pulled strings and silenced the press. This was unlikely.

Powerful allies of the well-regarded Zavala made back-door pleas to lower the temperature to local editors who also knew and respected the former bishop. A better theory, but still out there on the edge.

Our cynical side stoked, we tried this one: apathy. After more than a decade of tawdry scandal from every corner of the globe, this story just didn't shock anybody. In fact, compared to some of the revelations of the last few years, it was downright tame.

But a better answer hit me: The story was just too sad.

Zavala was a local hero in Los Angeles. He had hard-scrabble beginnings in rural Mexico, and when he rose to power, he did not forget where he came from. The bishop became a compelling and consistent voice for workers' rights, immigrants' rights and social justice. And he did it with a warmth, humility and authenticity that made it impossible to dismiss or disregard him.

And his crime was no crime at all, at least outside the confines of the Catholic priesthood as currently defined: He fell in love. He had two children. And, by all accounts, he loved and supported them, too. The archdiocese combed Zavala's records and documents, hunting for secret transfers of church funds to this family -- and found nothing. He did not abuse his position, did become arrogant with power.

He simply fell in love.

That family is the love that dare not speak its name in the priesthood is difficult to understand on any given day; at a moment like this, it becomes Kafka-esque. As the Vatican condemns gay relationships and seeks to stand as protector of family sanctity, it forces Gabino Zavala to resign. As the church opens pathways for married Anglican clerics to join the Roman Catholic fold, it sends this one of its own packing.

But, some will say, that's the deal he made. No one forced him into it. He promised to live by these rules.

All true -- still, this is a church that can ill afford to lose any priest just because he decides that love and family

are not impediments to a holy life. It really can't afford to lose someone as dedicated as Gabino Zavala.

My friend -- we were both journalists for years -- didn't think "it's too sad" had ever stood between a news organization and a good story. Still, she said, those words fit this case -- so let's go with it, if only to feel a little better for a brief moment.

We finished our coffee, sat for a while more without ordering another. Then we left.

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