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Priest who denied lesbian woman Communion suspended for other reasons

Jerry Filteau | Mar. 13, 2012

GAITHERSBURG, Md. -- Two weeks after Fr. Marcel Guarnizo reportedly denied Communion to a lesbian woman at her mother's funeral, the Washington Archdiocese suspended him from priestly ministry -- but for other reasons, said Fr. Thomas LaHood, pastor of St. John Neumann Church in Gaithersburg, where Guarnizo had been parochial vicar for the past year.

At Sunday Masses over the weekend, LaHood read a letter from Bishop Barry C. Knestout, Washington archdiocesan vicar general, announcing Guarnizo had been removed from the parish and barred from priestly ministry in the archdiocese until issues surrounding his behavior are resolved.

It said his removal followed "credible allegations" that the priest "has engaged in intimidating behavior toward parish staff and others that is incompatible with proper priestly ministry."

Before reading the letter, LaHood said he had been in discussions with Knestout about Guarnizo in the last week, but he said emphatically, "The issue discussed this week did not have to do with the distribution of Communion two weeks ago. Let me repeat that: The issue discussed this week did not have to do with the distribution of Communion two weeks ago. The issue pertains to actions over the past week or so."

He did not elaborate, and Washington archdiocesan officials have declined to comment further, calling it "a personnel issue." LaHood did say he agreed fully with Knestout's decision.

Guarnizo is a native of northern Virginia who entered seminary studies in the 1990s for what is now the Archdiocese of the Mother of God in Moscow. (Following the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe until 2002, it was the Latin-rite Apostolic Administration of European Russia.) Guarnizo was one of the first priests ordained for the Moscow archdiocese.

There has been no public explanation why he returned to the United States or was given a parish post in the Washington Archdiocese in March 2011.

Guarnizo, who last August was in the news for leading an anti-abortion rally by performing a prayer of exorcism at an abortion clinic in nearby Germantown, again made news at the end of February when Barbara Johnson, a Washington, D.C., artist and former Catholic school teacher, reported that he had denied her Communion at her mother's funeral Mass on Feb. 25 because he had learned just before the Mass that she was living in a lesbian relationship.

In a statement Feb. 28, the archdiocese said it was investigating the incident.

"When questions arise about whether or not an individual should present themselves for Communion, it is not the policy of the Archdiocese of Washington to publicly reprimand the person," the statement reads. "Any issues regarding the suitability of an individual to receive Communion should be addressed by the priest with

that person in a private, pastoral setting."

Following the announcement of Guarnizo's suspension, Johnson's family said in an email, "The Johnson family continues to pray for the Archdiocese of Washington, Father Guarnizo, and all Catholics during this time of upheaval. While we understand this letter does not pertain to the events that occurred at our mother's funeral, we are hopeful that Bishop Knestout's decision will ensure that no others will have to undergo the traumatic experiences brought upon our family. We urge all Catholics to put aside political points of view, and pray that our church will remain in Christ's love."

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