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Priest association rallies behind ousted Illinois pastor

Robert McClory | May. 5, 2012 NCR Today

An association of priests in the Belleville, Ill., diocese is supporting Fr. William Rowe in his efforts to remain as pastor at his parish in Mt. Carmel, Ill. Sixteen members of the Southern Illinois Association of Priests signed a press release in late April, calling Rowe "a beloved and effective pastor" and labeling Belleville Bishop Edward Braxton's demand that Rowe either step down or be immediately replaced "irrationally disproportionate to the supposed crime."

Rowe's major failing was his tendency to add personal commentary at some points in the Mass and to recast some prayers in his own words. He did this, he said, to make the Eucharist more meaningful for his parishioners. The matter came to a head last fall, when the new English liturgy translation was about to be introduced. Braxton said no deviations whatsoever would be permissible, and Rowe at the time offered to resign. But when no official acceptance of the offer was issued within 90 days, said Edward Barbier, a member of the priests association, Rowe's resignation offer lapsed, according to Canon 538 of church law. Rowe said he'd like to stay on, but in April, Braxton said he must go.

The bishop's ultimatum "becomes more problematic," said the priests' release, "when we recall his own issues with the diocese." Cited among the issues were a petition signed by 65 percent of Belleville priests urging Braxton's resignation several years ago and Braxton's protracted determination to fight a 2008 court decision in a priest abuse case, which cost the diocese $1.3 million in addition to the fine imposed by the court. In any event, Rowe has said he would like to remain at the parish in some capacity, perhaps as janitor.

You can see the full press release below.

SOUTHERN ILLINOIS ASSOCIATION OF PRIESTS

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

At an April 24th meeting with Bishop Edward Braxton, Fr. John McEvilly, Fr. Kenneth York, and Fr. John Myler, Fr. William Rowe learned that he will be forcibly removed as pastor of St. Mary's parish in Mt. Carmel. Fr. Rowe has served as a dedicated priest for 47 years in the Belleville diocese, the last 17 years at St. Mary's.

Fr. Rowe's reputation with his parishioners is outstanding: his service, humility, commitment, kindness, and leadership highlight his effective ministry. His parishioners want him to remain as their pastor and he, too, wants to stay. Fr. Rowe plans to appeal his removal.

The Southern Illinois Association of Priests (SIAP) fully supports Fr. Rowe in his efforts to continue his pastoral leadership at St. Mary's.

Bishop Braxton's persistent harassment of Fr. Rowe goes back many years. The focus of this attack is the way Fr. Rowe celebrates Eucharist. Bishop Braxton wants him to recite the words exactly as written in the Missal. Fr. Rowe creates his own version of some of the prayers and adds some commentary during the Mass. He does so because he believes these creative embellishments make the Eucharist more meaningful for the people and more honest to his own prayer. In the spirit of pastoral compassion, he also conducted two civil marriage ceremonies for couples who could not be formally married in the Church. As a result, the Bishop told him he could resign or be removed as pastor.

SIAP believes that the punishment for these slight additions to the ritual and pastoral concern for those couples is irrationally disproportionate to the supposed crime. Bishop Braxton's decision becomes more problematic when we recall his own issues with the diocese. For example, he misused diocesan funds. He unnecessarily remodeled his residence. Sixty five percent of diocesan priests asked him to resign for the good of the Diocese. His decision to appeal a sexual abuse case in 2008 increased the cost to the diocese by $1,300,000 and legally aligned the diocese against the victim. The Bishop has alienated many Catholics in Southern Illinois by his arrogance and lack of social skills. People boycott his Masses. Confirmandi fear him. Pastors avoid him.

And he, in turn, now wants to remove a beloved and effective pastor like Fr. Rowe for enhancing the Eucharist!

Given this action, we believe that many more priests like Fr. Rowe are likely to receive similar unjust treatment. With that in mind, along with our moral support, the undersigned members of SIAP pledge SIAP financial resources to assist Fr. Rowe in his appeal of this injustice.

Edward Barbier
Maury Beuckman
Fr. Richard Daly
Fr. Jim Dougherty
Fr. Jack Frerker
Fr. Clyde Grogan
Lester Himstedt
Fr. Stephen Humphrey
Fr. Donald Lenzini
Fr. George Mauck
Gerald Montroy
Fr. Mark Stec
Thomas Smith
Fr. Joe Trapp
Fr. Jim Voelker
Fr. Jerry Wirth

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