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Priest heading controversial Cleveland community threatened with suspension

Tom Roberts | May. 31, 2012

The congregation sings as Fr. Robert Marrone and Alan Klonowski break consecrated bread for Communion at the Community of St. Peter Feb. 12 in Cleveland. (Photo by Peggy Turbett)

Cleveland Bishop Richard Lennon has issued a "Declaration of Loss of Canonical Office" to Fr. Robert Marrone for refusing to step down as pastor of the Community of St. Peter, a congregation that defied the bishop and remained together after its parish, of the same name, was closed in 2010.

Often referred to as a ?breakaway? congregation, the community is made up of a majority of the members of St. Peter Parish, one of more than 50 closed by Lennon in a restructuring of the diocese. It also is one of 11 parishes that the Vatican ordered Lennon to reopen, a reversal of his ruling that resulted from legal proceedings at the Congregation for the Clergy.

In an interview with *NCR*, Marrone said he understood the document to mean he was suspended. In a letter to his congregation, Morrone explained that in a May 22 meeting with Lennon, the bishop expressed his wish that Marrone reconcile with the diocese and then read a statement containing a number of ?whereas? clauses ending with the ultimatum that he remove himself from the community within seven days or face suspension from ministry.

In a May 30 interview with *NCR*, Marrone said he asked Lennon for a copy of the document. The bishop refused, telling him, according to Marrone, ?that he didn?t want to see it on the front page of the paper? the following day.

In his letter to his congregation, Marrone explained to his congregation that the basic charge in the declaration was that the Community of St. Peter was not in communion with the Roman Catholic church and consequently Marrone?s association as its pastor placed the priest outside communion with the church.

?I will not comply with this decree and I intend to remain in solidarity with this community and will not remove myself as pastor of the Community of Saint Peter,? Marrone explained in his letter.

In a different letter to Lennon, obtained by *NCR*, Marrone said: ?I will not comply with your decree to leave the community of Saint Peter because I must, before all else, follow what my conscience dictates.?

What effect the possible suspension -- which would mean Marrone can no longer legally act as a priest -- will have on the Community of St. Peter, which has existed in a kind of canonical, or legal, limbo to this point, remains an open question. A number of community members have expressed a wish that some manner of reconciliation with the diocese would occur, and others have voiced uncertainty about what they would do if Marrone were officially sanctioned.

Marrone has called for a meeting the evening of June 4, limited to registered members of the community, to discuss what options remain. Those who attend the community liturgies in a renovated warehouse on Euclid Street and who hoped that Rome would reopen the parish will now have to decide between the two communities.

The community is among the most vexing problems Lennon has faced in his tumultuous six-year tenure.

When he closed St. Peter Parish, Lennon sent the congregants a letter telling them to find another parish. Members of the congregation, which had undertaken several inner-city ministries and had a deep attachment to the place and each other, decided during several months of discernment to stay together. Unlike other splits, the group was not angry about a matter of dogma or pushing for women?s ordination or taking up any of the other hot-button issues that are often the sparks for contention. They simply did not want to be disbanded as a community, so they set out on their own.

In his letter to the community, Marrone made it clear that ?since I now know that I will neither be invited or allowed to return to Historic Saint Peter Church as its pastor, I will not nor cannot be involved in any aspect of the supposed reopening of the parish, or in its future.?

The move against Marrone, long expected, comes as Lennon, who has a reputation as a solitary and aloof figure, engages in a complex strategy to connect with his priests on a personal level while reaching out to those parishioners waiting for their parishes to reopen.

The day before his meeting with Marrone, Lennon sent a letter to priests acknowledging ?the growing disconnect? between him and the diocese?s priests and expressing a ?desire to remedy this situation.? He announced a series of nine two-hour small group gatherings with priests to be held between June 7 and July 2.

NCR, meanwhile, obtained letters from three priests [1] -- two current pastors and a retired priest -- to the papal nuncio describing a desperate situation clouded by distrust of Lennon and disagreement with his decisions. All three asked that the bishop be removed.

NCR also obtained a copy of the minutes of a recent meeting between the bishop and his presbyteral council -- a group of priest consultors -- during which the priests openly expressed their frustration with Lennon, claiming he did not consult with priests on major decisions, including budgetary matters. They also voiced deep disagreement with his recent decision to close the diocese?s pastoral planning office without any consultation with priests.

Marrone, widely regarded as a stirring homilist and gifted liturgist, spoke in his letter to Lennon of his ?immense gratitude? for the many priests who helped mentor him over the years. ?They were remarkable men who taught me compassion and care, not by words, but by their total and loving commitment to the people of God,? he wrote.

They were patient with his mistakes, he said, and ?treasured and respected the legacy of their priesthood, while

realizing the need for change and new directions.?

Marrone recalled his years at St. Peter, a parish that was moribund with a building in disrepair when he was named pastor in 1991 and that was transformed during his tenure into a model parish with a thriving congregation that remodeled the church and engaged in a number of urban ministries.

?Few priests I know have had the privileges I have had, the kind of mentors who guided me, or the unusually creative, peaceable and fruitful years of ministry,? he wrote in the page-and-a-half letter.

In the years since Lennon arrived as bishop and began the downsizing of the diocese, Marrone said, everything he had learned, worked for or ?held as sacred and meaningful, has been challenged and in so many ways devalued. I have felt marginalized and dismissed by the very institution to which I have given practically my whole life. My trust has been shattered by the cold, legalistic and rigid attitude by which much of my life and my life?s work were rendered irrelevant, and by actions which I have always believed were both invalid and vindictive.?

Marrone, who this year celebrates 39 years as a priest, said the difficult past five years have ?proven to be the most life-changing as well.?

In the letter to Lennon, Marrone said that he was forced to reexamine all that he had taken for granted: ?What it means to be church, what is required of authentic ministry, what are the limits of authority and obedience, and the difference between unity and uniformity. I have had to listen to my conscience and listen to my heart. Thirty-nine years ago, I could have never imagined being in the place I am today, but I am not sorry that I am where I am.?

He said Lennon, instead of fostering healing, ?became both my judge and jury and now it is up to [Lennon] to pass sentence.?

At ordination, Marrone told Lennon, ?I made promises which I am sure you believe I have now violated.?

But the most important promise he makes to himself, Marrone said, is to be true to his conscience. ?No earthly authority, civil or ecclesial, can force me, by whatever means, to go against that promise,? he concluded.

Around noon on May 31, a letter signed by Lennon was emailed to priests and deacons of the diocese denying that Marrone had been suspended. Lennon noted that articles had appeared in the press stating that he had suspended Marrone. ?I have not done so to date,? Lennon said in the letter.

Marrone, contacted again by *NCR* following release of Lennon?s latest letter, said he had not received that letter, had not been called by the diocese, and was puzzled by the claim that he had not been suspended. He said he recalled from the reading of the document and the bishop?s conversation that he had seven days to comply with Lennon?s wishes or he would be ?stripped of my office.?

Marrone said he is ?at a disadvantage? because Lennon would not give him a copy of the document he read.

Lennon explained in his letter that he had met with Marrone on May 22 and had read to him ?a document entitled ?Declaration of Loss of Canonical Office?? that listed the actions that Marrone had taken that resulted in his first canonical warning in January 2011.

At that time, Marrone has explained in earlier interviews with *NCR*, he was given the ultimatum to leave the community or face a canonical penalty. He responded then to Lennon that he would not leave the community. He also said he had since heard nothing from the bishop until Lennon?s request for the May 22 meeting.

Marrone said it seemed clear to him and a lawyer, Robert Valerian, a member of the board of trustees of the Community of St. Peter, that noncompliance with the demands of the bishop within the seven day period would result in suspension. ?I certainly would not have announced my suspension for no reason,? Marrone said.

After saying in the letter that he had not suspended Marrone, Lennon concluded: ?However, as I stated to Rev. Marrone at the time of the 22 May 2012 meeting, I have begun an investigation to determine whether a canonical penalty is to be imposed.?

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Editor's Note: Since it's original posting, this story has been updated with new information.

Previous *NCR* reporting on the Cleveland diocese:

- **Cleveland priests doubt Lennon's leadership, call for removal** **[1]**, May 25
- **Cleveland Catholics demand Lennon reopen parish immediately** **[2]**, May 23
- **Cleveland parish remains a community of a different sort** **[3]**, March 5

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