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Discord with new priest floods Michigan island parish

Brian Roewe | Aug. 28, 2012

Holy Cross parishioners prepare to eat at a 2010 parish picnic. (Photos by the Northern Islander)

The second weekend in August on Beaver Island, Mich., marks the Homecoming dinner -- an 80-year tradition where the island's yearlong and summer residents come together at Holy Cross Catholic Church on Kings Highway to share a meal and each other's company as summer nears its end.

There was no dinner this year, though -- it was canceled after too few volunteered. The lack of participation stemmed not from a lack of interest but from frustration and tension tied to the parish's new pastor, Fr. Joseph Blasko.

"The Catholic church used to be the mainstay of our community here. And it's troubling to people to see what's happened, and how our church is falling apart right now," said Jeanne Gillespie, sacristan for nearly 20 years at the only parish on the 58-square-mile isle in northern Lake Michigan.

What's happened is people have left. Among a parish community that included 200-plus parishioners (about 120 year-round) in their 2010 sesquicentennial directory, some estimate as many as 70 people have left the parish in Blasko's first year as pastor. According to two parishioners still attending Mass, about 30 people fill the pews, half supporting the priest.

Blasko declined multiple interview requests for this story, including the option of answering questions in writing.

With the nearest Catholic church 32 miles and a flight or ferry ride away on the mainland, in Charlevoix, Mich., upset parishioners have limited options. Some have joined the "Catholic corner" at the nondenominational Christian church. Others, like Gillespie, soldier on at Holy Cross, unwilling to deny herself the Eucharist, but also unflinching in her opinion that Blasko must go.

She and other parishioners say Blasko, who arrived at Holy Cross in July 2011, has anger issues and a personality and pastoral approach incompatible with their island community that takes pride in its independence and isolation.

Fr. Pat Cawley, pastor at Holy Cross for 15 years before Blasko, told *NCR* that "[Blasko] just never bothered to understand the people. And on the island, you can't do that."

He met with Gaylord diocese Bishop Bernard A. Hebda in May to discuss the problems at Holy Cross, and also wrote a letter, as many parishioners have, one including 58 signatures.

The letters describe Blasko's abrasive style on the altar, where he's likely to embarrass eucharistic ministers, or grab and move an out-of-place altar boy rather than simply ask him. They see a parish without a religious education program, and steam over the miscommunication that led to a 7-year-old boy denied his first Communion.

They describe a man who's inflexible in decision-making and whose comments often offend more than comfort. One example: When Blasko solicited comments for a parish mission statement, a parishioner had written, "There's a right way, a wrong way and the Island way." Responding in the June parish bulletin, Blasko called this "a form of fundamentalism" seen in "Al Qaeda and most fundamentalists."

Parishioners also point to Blasko's eight pastoral assignments in 13 years as a sign of trouble. Ordained in 1999, he has also held diocesan posts, such as vocations director and archivist. However, in the rural Gaylord diocese, frequent reassignments are commonplace, said Fr. Duane Wachowiak, the diocese's director of the secretariat for worship and liturgical formation, who has held seven assignments in 14 years.

"It's been a shifting period in the church right now that it's not unusual for priests to be moved more often than they used to be," he said.

Blasko has supporters at Holy Cross, and they have written to Hebda, too, pointing toward the more frequent weekday Masses Blasko leads, his homilies that place the Gospels into everyday life issues (like abortion), his overall knowledge of the faith and his adult education group.

"I'm very supportive. I would be supportive of any priest that comes," said Tina Morgan, appointed head of the finance council by Blasko.

Morgan acknowledged some growing pains -- for instance, as a eucharistic minister feeling anxiety to finish the sign of peace before the priest begins the Lamb of God -- but after addressing her concerns with him, she said she has come to understand him.

She and other supporters acknowledge his gruffness -- a word almost all of the nine parishioners interviewed used to describe Blasko -- but are more apologetic toward the aspects of his personality that offend others. They recall his tearful apology to the congregation in the fall of 2011, when he asked forgiveness for any feelings he had hurt -- a moment his critics remember, too, but insist the gruffness returned the next week.

Hebda also acknowledges Blasko is gruff. But as a fellow steel-town native, he said he appreciates that quality and his priest's no-nonsense personality, saying, "Maybe that's a part of who he is at this age," which is 71.

"In spite of the gruffness, he's recognized as bringing a lot to the table," Hebda told *NCR*. "He's a very fine homilist. He's a reader. He's very well-versed in what's going on in the church. I really respect him for his intellect, as well. He's playful, in spite of his gruffness."

Hebda, appointed as bishop for the first time in 2009, said he has received more letters from parishioners supporting than criticizing and has discussed both sides with Blasko. He said he believes much of the animosity is the result of Blasko following Cawley, not only because of the latter's long tenure, but also the difference in the two priests' styles.

One example: Blasko follows the diocesan requirements of appointing parishioners to pastoral and finance councils, while Cawley, who came from the Grand Rapids, Mich., diocese, left major decisions -- such as replacing the church's roof and stained-glass windows -- to a vote by the entire congregation.

The bishop acknowledges that many parishioners are upset, but he questions how many have actually left and the extent of their previous involvement in the parish.

What's indisputable to all parishioners is the parish's changed complexion. Gillespie resigned as sacristan in February. The music director, Tammy McDonough, resigned, too, and much of the choir. Most of the young families have left, and those with children have pulled them from serving on the altar.

"It's a very, very sad situation, and I don't know if we're going to get any relief," said Elaine West, editor of the monthly *Northern Islander* newspaper and member of Holy Cross parish for 12 years.

In late July, West and a group of parishioners met with Hebda when he came to the island to celebrate Mass in Blasko's absence. While West said they entered the meeting with a great deal of hope, they left frustrated, feeling Hebda rebuffed them, having an explanation for each of their grievances.

Hebda told *NCR* the message that people aren't happy is "perfectly clear," and "by no means have I ignored the situation, and I certainly am in constant contact with Fr. Joe and with others to find out how things are going."

The bishop offered to bring in a mediator for the parish, but said the idea was flat-out rejected, as parishioners have drawn a line in the sand -- they'll come back when Blasko is gone.

But Hebda's not willing to make that move. When asked if there would ever be a time when he determines Blasko and Holy Cross aren't a good fit, Hebda said it will be an ongoing, prayerful discernment to see how Blasko feels, adding, "I'm really impressed that he's stuck in as long as he has."

For now, Hebda said the parish will continue in its minimized state, and he remains committed to maintaining a church on the isle, hoping time and prayer will heal all wounds.

"I'm hoping that even those that find it difficult, will stick with [it], will come back and come to experience that Father has a lot to offer them, and things that they need," he said.

Others aren't so sure.

"I really feel in my heart like I gave [Blasko] the best chance I could give him. And I just don't think it's a workable situation," McDonough said.

"These people, including my daughter, who's 43, and her husband and son, who's 14, want to come back to the church," Gillespie said. "They want their faith back, they want the faith that they know back. And I think that it's a matter of just getting a different priest here."

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