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16 years after excommunication, Call to Action group still at crossroads

Joshua J. McElwee | Nov. 10, 2012
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The meeting doesn't come across as anything abnormal.

Eleven people sit on couches and wooden chairs in a friend's front room. The furnishings are typical, if a little orthodox. On one of the walls, painted a cool purple, hangs a painting of Mary and Jesus, Christ wearing a crown of thorns, blood flowing down his face.

As you enter, across from the doorway hangs a silver crucifix. It features an emaciated savior, a miniature replica of the style seen grasped by Blessed Pope John Paul II in photos from around the world.

These are not details that would immediately indicate that several people in the group have been deemed by their bishop to be excommunicated from the Catholic church.

The 11 in the room are members of Call To Action Nebraska, the state-level affiliate of the 25,000-member national church reform group. They come from each of the three dioceses of the wide state, marked by rolling hills in the east and the open fields of the plains to the west.

Assuming no other marks on their record, those in the room from Omaha, about 60 miles northeast, or Grand Island, about 90 miles due west, are in the ecclesiastical clear.

Not so for those from Lincoln, the second-largest of the three dioceses.

In 1996, Fabian Bruskewitz, then Lincoln's bishop, now its apostolic administrator, issued a blanket decree excommunicating anyone in the diocese who was part of Call To Action -- including the local, state and national groups -- or 10 other organizations he described as "totally incompatible with the Catholic faith."

The decree resulted in nationwide publicity, with extensive reports on national news shows and talk radio. It also raised public criticism from a number of other U.S. bishops, some of whom were members of Call To Action themselves.

Following a flurry of initial coverage, the issue largely fell off the radar until six years ago, when a letter from the then-head of the Vatican's Congregation for Bishops responded to a request by a Lincoln Call To Action member for an official ruling on the legality of Bruskewitz's decree.

That letter, sent from Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re to Bruskewitz in November 2006, assured the bishop that "the Holy See considers Your Excellency's ruling ... was properly taken within your competence as pastor of that diocese."

Six years later, members of Call To Action in Lincoln remain at something of a languishing crossroads.

Bruskewitz, who had headed the diocese since 1992, formally retired in September. His successor, Bishop James Conley, an auxiliary bishop in Denver, is to be installed Nov. 20.

Although an October visit to two of the homes of the Lincoln group's leaders found their members stating clearly that the situation doesn't rule their lives, 16 years after the excommunication decree they were also openly questioning what happens from here, what it means for the wider church and, in the words of one, "if this will ever be made right."

'Who owns Jesus?'

The agenda for the Call To Action Nebraska meeting in Lincoln, one group members said they hold two or three times a year, wasn't exactly explosive.

For the better part of the two-hour gathering on the northeast side of Nebraska's capital Oct. 7, Joan Johnson, a longtime member, led the others in deciding how to fill out a form from Call To Action's national office in Chicago asking for details about the group's activities.

The questions Johnson asked were rote: How much lobbying does your group do? Does it host speakers?

But some evoked pause, followed by laughter. One asked how the group relates to local parishes.

"With some difficulty," deadpanned James McShane, another longtime member who authored the request to the Vatican for an official ruling on their excommunication.

"Half the parishes I go to know exactly who I am," laughed John Krejci, a former priest who was a co-chair of the Nebraska group when Bruskewitz issued the excommunication.

Like several of the other members of the Lincoln group, Krejci continues to go to Mass and still receives Communion, despite direct, and sometimes acerbic, warnings from Bruskewitz and some diocesan priests that he shouldn't.

In one flare-up, Krejci received a formal warning from a diocesan lawyer in December 2011 after he attended Mass at a diocesan parish the month before and took the host from the ciborium on his own when a minister refused him Communion.

The letter warned Krejci that he was "henceforth forbidden to enter any Catholic Church, chapel or the worship space" of any Catholic property in the diocese.

"If you are recognized on Catholic Church property, my client will contact law enforcement and bring charges of trespass," the letter states. "If you should again take, without permission, the Most Blessed Sacrament, law enforcement will be informed that a theft has occurred."

One member at the October meeting responded to Krejci's comment by referencing that letter.

"John, do they put your picture in the sacristy as a warning for who they can't serve?" asked Patty Hawk, a former chairperson of the Nebraska group and a former co-president of the national Call To Action board.

That question's humor is mired in its reality.

John Krejci and his wife, Jean, live in a small two-story house not far from Cornhusker Highway, the rural thoroughfare that connects Lincoln with Omaha. Inside, they too have crosses and crucifixes adorning the wood-paneled walls, next to pictures of their three grown children, aged 37, 39 and 41.

In an interview there, Krejci mentioned that although he still goes to Mass daily, he sometimes receives warnings from friends to stay away from certain parishes. Sometimes, he said, the priests there will actually have given ministers pictures of him so they know who not to serve.

But, Krejci said, he normally goes to a parish where the pastor has asked him just not to step into his Communion line.

"I just make a point not to go to him," said Krejci, a retired professor of sociology at Lincoln's Nebraska Wesleyan University. "We don't have a problem. But [the priest] said if the bishop says to me I can't serve you, if he calls me in, I have to be obedient."

Joan Johnson, sitting on the Krejcis' couch with her husband, Jerry, has had similar experiences. Once, she said, she received a letter from a younger priest warning that he wouldn't be offering her Communion anymore.

"I wrote back and told him I wouldn't walk in his line, but I assume since [the pastor] has not signed onto the letter, [the pastor] would not deny me Communion," Johnson said. "That's the way it was. I just didn't go in his line."

Rachel Pokora, another member, responded differently. She said she hasn't been going to Mass regularly.

"That's a huge shock for me," said Pokora, who is also a former chairperson of the Nebraska group. "I was never a lukewarm Catholic. I can count with two fingers how many times before ? that I missed Mass on purpose."

If she's sitting at Mass with the Krejcis or others she knows well, Pokora said, "I could do it. Otherwise, I felt like I would look around the congregation and feel judged, or like I was somehow endorsing the structure of this excommunication."

Jean Krejci responded to the 2011 warning to her husband from the diocesan lawyers with incredulity.

Referring to the warning that John could be charged with "theft" should he take the host without permission during the Mass, Jean Krejci asks, "Who owns Jesus?"

"That part's so funny," she said. "Who owns Jesus that you can say, 'You're going to be stealing Jesus?' Think what that means. Somebody isn't thinking right. If we believe that the Eucharist is Jesus, who's in charge of Jesus? Who owns Jesus?"

Pushed aside

Among the members of the Lincoln group, Pokora is something of an outlier. She wasn't actually in Lincoln when the excommunications were decreed, but moved to the city that year, after taking a position in the communications department at Nebraska Wesleyan.

Although Pokora said she's "never regretted" the move, she also said it's been fraught with difficulties.

"I was 28 when I moved here," she said. "Though I didn't change, suddenly everything I believe makes me not a Catholic."

Before, while she was a graduate student at Purdue University in Indiana*, she sponsored people who were joining the church and was a eucharistic minister at Mass, she said.

"And then to come here and basically be pushed aside? It was horrible," she said. "But it forced me to reconsider. I could no longer fall back on just what the church taught. I had to ask, 'What do I really believe? If the church can treat you like that, what does that mean?' "

Those are questions Joan (pronounced Joanne) and Jerry Johnson say they have been asking for some time. They first came to Lincoln in 1968, after finishing graduate studies at the University of Minnesota.

In 1981, they were founding members of a precursor to the Call To Action group called Catholics for an Active Liturgical Life, which they started in part because then-Bishop Glennon Flavin, now deceased, prohibited women from serving as lectors at Mass.

When Bruskewitz succeeded Flavin in 1992, Joan said, the members of the earlier group disbanded, thinking the new bishop might bring some changes and "that was a good time to maybe call an end to that."

History didn't quite work out that way. While Bruskewitz allows female lectors under some circumstances, the Lincoln diocese remains the only diocese in the country to not allow female altar servers.

With the Krejcis and others, the Johnsons held the first meeting of the Lincoln Call To Action group in February 1996. Bruskewitz had warned in the diocesan newspaper that the group's members would be under interdict if they did not repent by April, and then be excommunicated.

For Pokora, who is working on a book detailing the excommunication and its effects on her group, the feelings left behind by that separation still seem a little raw. Asked if there's something she would want to warn her younger self about coming to Lincoln in 1996, she responded that the question "makes me want to cry."

"I think about how naive I suppose I was about the institution [of the church]," she said. "Working on this book, I'm reminded over and over again that it appears the institution does not care about me at all. Individual people do. God does. But it feels like the institution would rather I just go away.

"It feels like people in the hierarchy know what happened here and they just don't care. And I find that shocking because that wasn't the church I was raised in."

As the long conversation in the Krejcis' front room came to a close, things turned to the positive. A broad question hung in the air: What are you hoping will happen with the new bishop?

Joan Johnson took a moment. Mentioning that she suspects Conley will have a meeting with the senior priests of the diocese early in his tenure, she ventured that the new bishop may ask his priests, "What are your hopes for this diocese?"

Tentatively, she continued, referring to the Call To Action group: "I'm hoping that some of the senior priests will say, among other things, 'Let's get this right.' We'll never know if they do, but if some of them say that ? " she trailed off.

But after all this time, what would "getting it right" entail? How do you set 16 years of confusion aside?

Johnson responded again. "Maybe we can reach out to each other, and talk about the issues," she said. "And maybe we can come to some sort of understanding."

Pokora jumped in. She mentioned she doesn't think it's realistic to believe Conley will overturn Bruskewitz's excommunication. "I don't see it happening while he's living next door to this bishop," she said, referring to Bruskewitz's intention to stay in Lincoln and help Conley adjust to his new diocese. "I think that bishops are very, very careful with each other."

But in a perfect world?

"What I think is really needed, not just in Lincoln, but in the entire church, is a look at the structure of the church in a very significant way, so that the people who are ordained in the church are not prioritizing the institution over the people," Pokora said.

"The only way to make it right is to invite diverse voices into conversation, in a structural way," she continued. "I'm not saying we have to vote, but at least, for God's sake listen to what people's lives are like and how they experience the world. Because the spirit is moving everywhere, not just in ordained ministers."

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**The original version of this story incorrectly referred to the location of Purdue University.*

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