

Wisconsin priest moves on after mysterious suspension

Marie Rohde | Dec. 21, 2012

Ashippun, Wis.

Fr. David Verhasselt, then pastor of St. Catherine of Alexandria Parish in Oconomowoc, Wis., was apprehensive when the Milwaukee archdiocese's vicar for clergy, Fr. Patrick Heppe, called in April 2010 to set up a meeting at the parish office.

"He would not tell me what it was about at all," Verhasselt said, speaking publicly on the matter for the first time. "I had never had such a visit before and it was mysterious."

Heppe, accompanied by Fr. Paul Hartmann, the archdiocese's judicial vicar, told Verhasselt that he had been accused of breaking the seal of confession. In a scene similar to firings in corporate America, Verhasselt was told to collect his private belongings, leave the parish and not return. As he was walked from the building, he was told to have no contact with parishioners. Placed "on leave," Verhasselt could not perform any of the functions of a priest.

"I was in shock," Verhasselt recalled. "I told them I had never done such a thing."

Deacon David Zimprich announced Verhasselt's removal to stunned parishioners at a Saturday evening Mass a day later, on April 17, 2010. Others learned of it from a television newscast.

Tim Clark, then parish council president, said some wanted to picket the archdiocese or go to Rome to make the case for their priest. A member of an archdiocesan strategic planning committee -- one that studied how to deal with the increasing shortage of priests -- Clark thought picketing was a bad idea. Instead, he met with the archbishop and the chancellor four times, arguing canon law in support of the accused priest.

All to no avail.

Verhasselt, now 65, said he was never given details of his alleged misdeeds -- he was not told who had complained or what it was that he supposedly had revealed. His canon lawyer was not allowed to question the accusers. This is the story that he has been able to piece together.

An unknown person approached Auxiliary Bishop Richard Sklba in November 2009, accusing Verhasselt of breaking the seal of confession. Verhasselt did not learn of the allegation until April 2010, when Heppe ordered him from the parish. In May 2010, the archdiocese sent the results of its investigation to the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith in Rome. The congregation responded in July 2010; it said the evidence was lacking and asked for additional information.

The archdiocese responded in December 2010, informing the Vatican office that it had found a second, unrelated violation: Verhasselt had indirectly, that is, unintentionally, broken the seal of confession. The congregation responded again in February 2011, saying it would not take action against Verhasselt, but that the

second violation could be handled locally.

Oblate Fr. Francis Morrissey and Jesuit Fr. Ladislav Orsy, prominent canon lawyers with decades of experience, told *NCR* that violating the seal of confession is among the most serious of crimes in church law, but it is also an extremely rare accusation.

Each canonist said that in his years of experience, he had heard of only one accusation of violating the seal and neither was sustained.

"There have been instances where priests have been accused of 'indirectly' (i.e., unintentionally) violating the seal by saying something that could lead to the identity of the sinner," Morrissey said. "But even these are extremely rare to my knowledge."

Orsy pointedly asked concerning Verhasselt's case: "What did he really do?"

On March 16, 2012, Verhasselt was called into the chancery to meet Archbishop Jerome Listecky -- their first meeting since this ordeal had started. The archbishop told Verhasselt that he had been found guilty of indirectly violating the seal of confession. He said he wanted the priest to spend a year in prayer at a Missouri abbey and take a course on the rite of reconciliation. At the end of the year, the archbishop said, he would consider reinstating Verhasselt, but there would be no guarantees that Verhasselt could resume active ministry.

"I asked him, what do I do about the house I own?" Verhasselt said. "The response was, 'Sell it.' " Verhasselt asked for time to think.

"The archdiocese made it very clear that they did not want me to serve as one of their priests, so I decided to move on with my life."

Listecky spoke at a Saturday evening Mass the same day. Many parishioners were visibly angry. Parishioners David Wiesehuegel and Norbert Stuczynski walked out of the Mass. Others wept.

Verhasselt resigned Aug. 1. (Three weeks later, in a story about clergy assignments, the archdiocesan newspaper quoted Listecky as saying that he had been looking for a placement that would balance Verhasselt's academic, spiritual and physical needs.)

Listecky did not respond to a request for an interview.

An excellent beginning

Verhasselt was named administrator for St. Catherine in 1994. The congregation worshiped in a brick church built by Irish farmers in the 1840s, in an area where subdivisions are taking over farm fields. Politically, it is among the most conservative parts of Wisconsin.

"It was a dying parish and I was sent to close it," Verhasselt said.

Instead, the congregation thrived, drawing members from 25 zip codes. Membership grew and an addition, including a new sanctuary, was built in 2000, the same year Verhasselt was formally named parish pastor.

"He acted as general contractor and negotiated great prices and, in some cases, donations," said Mary Sheridan, a member of St. Catherine's parish council. "The end result was a mortgage less than many people have on their

houses."

In 2003, the word was out that St. Catherine would be combined with other parishes in the area. Wiesehuegel did a demographic study of St. Catherine and neighboring parishes. In 1989, St. Catherine served 145 households. By 1997, the number jumped to 329 with a total membership of 858 and income of \$184,000. By 2002, membership surged to 1,830 and parish income was \$740,000. Wiesehuegel argued that St. Catherine was the fastest-growing church in the area and they should be allowed to remain open with their own priest.

"It was well-known that as quickly as St. Catherine's grew, participation at other churches diminished," Wiesehuegel said. "That created a sort of jealousy among priests and the archbishop."

Verhasselt had a reputation of welcoming everyone to St. Catherine.

"There were people who were turned away from other parishes and Father Dave's attitude was, 'Who am I to judge?' " Clark recalled. "Couples who were living together would come to him to be married. Mothers who were not married asked him to baptize their babies. His attitude was that if you turn away young people at this stage in their lives, do you really think they will come back to the church later?"

When other priests were unavailable to anoint the sick, hospitals and nursing homes in the area always knew that Verhasselt would come, no matter what time, Clark said.

Parishioners tell of a time when a member of a neighboring parish was dying. The family called the parish priest, Fr. John Yockey, who could not -- or would not -- come to anoint the man. Verhasselt was called and went to the dying man's bedside. The family asked Verhasselt to say the funeral Mass.

Yockey wrote a letter chastising -- and personally attacking -- Verhasselt. Yockey wrote that Verhasselt was obliged to contact him before going out on the call. Verhasselt allowed the letter to be read at a parish council meeting and he asked for advice on how to respond. The council advised that the letter was not worthy of response.

Yockey declined to comment for this story. He referred questions to Fr. Ralph Gross, a former chancellor for the archdiocese who now serves as the archbishop's representative in the area.

Gross said he did not have personal knowledge of that story but confirmed that he had been told of allegations that Verhasselt was stealing members of a nearby parish. Gross agreed that if a priest is asked to officiate at the funeral of a member of another parish, church law obligates him to call the parish priest.

Gross confirmed that a fellow priest had accused Verhasselt of "crossing the line on some of the things that the church believes and practices." But Gross, who knows Verhasselt well, said he knew of no valid accusation. "If Father Dave had done something contrary to church teaching, he would have been relieved [of his priestly duties]," Gross said.

As for Verhasselt's approach to ministry, Gross said: "Our calling is to meet people where they are at."

Verhasselt's suspension and ultimate resignation rocked not only members of his former congregation but also archdiocesan priests.

Clark said he has spoken with several priests who are troubled by Verhasselt's experience. "Some have said they are worried about hearing confessions. They say it's almost impossible to give a homily about sin and not have

someone think, 'He's talking about me.' "

Sheridan reflects the views of many parishioners: "It was apparent that the archdiocese wanted to get rid of Father Dave one way or another. There was another area priest who had a personal vendetta against him and had been trying to cause him problems."

Most parishioners believe that Verhasselt's fall from grace came because he crossed what Wiesehuegel calls "the good old boys' club."

Return to ministry

After resigning from the priesthood, Verhasselt knew he wanted to return to the ministry, he said. The 10th of 12 children reared near Green Bay, Wis., he remembered playing the priest with his siblings as a child. The call to the priesthood was there but he resisted it, working for 15 years as a nursing home administrator before entering the seminary. He was ordained in 1989.

He describes his experience with the archdiocese as essentially house arrest.

"I was not even allowed to anoint or say the funeral Mass for my brother or sister, both of whom passed away during this ordeal," Verhasselt said. "I did request a temporary lifting of the restrictions for [their] funerals but it was not granted."

He said he is speaking out now at the urging of his surviving siblings.

Verhasselt has joined the Evangelical Catholic Church, a fledgling denomination formed in 1997 that boasts seven missions in the upper Midwest and others in Ireland. With headquarters in Chicago, it accepts married men, women and gays to the priesthood. It leaves open the question of church teaching on the Virgin Mary. It bills itself as "a welcoming community of faith rooted in the Catholic tradition."

On Aug. 6, Verhasselt opened a new parish, Holy Name of Jesus, in nearby Ashippun, Wis. More than 100 worshipers routinely attend Saturday night services in the Zion Lutheran Church. Many of them are young families, and two services in November included baptisms. Sunday morning services were to begin earlier this month.

Anne Neff, whose 3-year-old daughter, Ayanna Frances Smith, was baptized Nov. 24, told Verhasselt: "We waited until you returned."

Neff, who was confirmed at St. Catherine, said her mother and sister still attend that church. Others, like Clark, said that while he admires and fought for Verhasselt, he is staying at the parish. "I was born a Catholic and will remain a Catholic."

All those interviewed said they like and support Fr. Michael Strachota, the new pastor at St. Catherine who also serves another nearby parish.

Bill Morton, a spokesman for the Evangelical Catholic Church, said a half dozen other Wisconsin priests have contacted Bishop James Wilkowski in Chicago about following Verhasselt and forming missions in the state. Like Verhasselt, they would have to go through a yearlong transition. Sexual abusers are not welcome, Morton added.

While there was some discussion that ListECKI would excommunicate Verhasselt, that has not occurred. Gross said that Verhasselt has essentially excommunicated himself by leaving the priesthood and starting his own church.

"When a man makes that kind of move he's obviously no longer a part of the Catholic church," Gross said.

The *Catholic Herald*, official newspaper of the archdiocese, noted that people attending Verhasselt's new parish could be excommunicated. No formal action has been taken.

"There is something really broken in the Roman Catholic Church," Eileen and Dennis Kester told *NCR* in a letter. "It has been for years with all the pedophile priests and cover ups. It sickens us to see them 'crucify' one of the truly kind and humble servants of God." Once parishioners at St. Catherine, the Kesters now belong to Holy Name of Jesus.

Verhasselt said he is content now that he can move on and minister in the community.

He said he met once with a member of the archdiocesan tribunal for about 10 minutes and denied the charge against him; he said he was only asked if he had violated the seal of confession. He met once with the archbishop and other officials, also for a short time, and was told that he had been found guilty.

"I said, 'I don't know about the rest of you but I know I can go to my grave knowing that I did nothing wrong,' " Verhasselt said of his parting words after meeting with ListECKI. "They just wanted me out of there."

[Marie Rohde is a freelance writer living in Milwaukee.]

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