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Oregon priest files Vatican appeal over dismissal as pastor

Dan Morris-Young | Nov. 1, 2013
Bend, Ore.

Confusion and consternation are running strong for parishioners at a Bend, Ore., church whose pastor was removed Oct. 1. Even members of the parish council, the finance committee and the stewardship organization say they have no idea why Fr. James Radloff was relieved of his duties at St. Francis of Assisi, and they want answers from Bishop Liam Cary.

Parishioners "are largely frustrated based on not knowing any reasons and not understanding how a priest in good standing could be removed without any explanation. A lot of people are angry," said Kristin Wigle, who resigned as chair of the parish finance committee after Radloff's ouster.

"We finally had the feeling that our parish was headed in the right direction," said Wigle, who was baptized, confirmed and married at St. Francis. "People were coming back to church. They were becoming Catholic. There was a very positive feel of church. That has been crushed. Sure, we hope it can be rebuilt, but it is crushed."

Wigle and others said they have heard "rumors of a lot of empty envelopes" being put into Sunday collection plates as a form of protest.

Pat Klampe also left the finance council as well as the St. Francis Stewards group because of Cary's decision to remove Radloff.

"I've actually liked this bishop," he said of Cary. "He was the new sheriff in town for the parish and the diocese" and along with Radloff was "part of our sales pitch, if you will, for people feeling more welcome, for attracting people back to the parish."

Klampe, a retired consulting engineer, called the process used to remove Radloff "dictatorial and bogus."

"I honestly do not have any idea" why Radloff was removed, he said, "which is, frankly, one of the most upsetting things."

He said part of his disappointment has been "not understanding how two highly educated adult males seemingly could not communicate ... and could not come up with a solution" for the good of the parish and diocese.

"I have heard Father Radloff tried to work with the bishop, but I have not heard the bishop's side of the story," Klampe said.

Cary has refused to discuss reasons for the dismissal, writing in an Oct. 1 letter to St. Francis parishioners [1] that he was "not at liberty" to do so. That letter also lauded Radloff for his hard work and accomplishments at the parish, declared that he remains a priest in good standing, and said the priest did nothing illegal.

According to a statement Wednesday provided to *NCR* through his canonical advisor, Radloff is asking the

Vatican Congregation for Clergy for permission to publicly divulge the reasons Cary used to justify the formal decree of removal.

Fr. W. Thomas Faucher, a canon lawyer advising Radloff, said Cary ordered Radloff to obtain the bishop's permission to celebrate Mass or do other ministry, but because the priest remains in good standing and has not been convicted of or charged with any church crime, the bishop could not make such a demand.

According to Radloff's statement:

- On Aug. 1, Cary asked him to resign as pastor;
- the priest "responded by asking for mediation and reconciliation, which requests were rejected";
- Radloff and Faucher were consequently "informed of the five reasons for my removal" by Cary;
- In response, Faucher "submitted a long legal brief rejecting all of the reasons," arguing that they did not meet the criteria for removal found in canon law; and
- Those "detailed objections were simply dismissed by Bishop Cary in one-sentence rejection of them."

On Oct. 18, Radloff filed a brief with the Vatican Congregation for the Clergy, Faucher said..

"Bishop Cary ... has forbidden me or my canonical advisor from revealing what the reasons are," Radloff's statement notes, adding:

"His statement that 'Father Radloff remains a priest in good standing and has done nothing illegal,' has resulted in widespread rumors of every type about me. I want the reasons revealed and made public. ... I am still in title pastor of St. Francis but have been assigned to a small mission to serve there without a title. I am to go there in late November."

Radloff said he had "full confidence in the Congregation" and he appreciated "we have a Canon Law system with checks and balances -- and the ability of someone who feels he or she has been wronged to seek recourse."

Faucher told *NCR* that the Congregation for Clergy traditionally has three months from the Oct. 18 filing date to respond. He said one of three responses is likely: support of the appeal and reversal of Radloff's removal; rejection of the appeal and confirmation of the bishop's decree; extension of the congregational review for another 90 days.

Regardless, Faucher said, "the speculation resulting from the bishop's move "has done tremendous harm to Father Radloff' and his reputation."

Multiple calls and emails to diocesan officials have gone unanswered except for the forwarding of the text of Cary's Oct. 1 letter to parishioners. In that email, Fr. Richard Fischer, vicar general, wrote: "Beyond that we are not able to comment further."

Fr. Julian Cassar, who had been rector of St. Francis De Sales Cathedral Parish in Baker City, Ore., was named to take over the St. Francis leadership role effective Oct. 17. While the cathedral is located in Baker, diocesan administrative offices are in Bend.

Wigle said parish collections had been "trending upward." In January, $94,227 was collected at weekly Masses, up from $83,673 in January 2012, she said. Total 2012 weekly collections was $926,600, up from $803,488 in 2011.

But she fears they now will "drop significantly and bring us back into the times of trying to figure out how to make the mortgage payment if our reserves are depleted."

The parish still owes about $3.5 million on the $6.4 million new church complex built in recent years. The monthly payment is roughly $29,000.

Members of the finance committee and parish council were invited to meet with Cary at his office Oct. 3. Wigle said she and most others "left with the same sense of frustration as when we came."

She said she followed up with a call to Cary and asked him what she and others should tell their children when they ask why their pastor is gone. Cary told her he would think about it and call her back. He did, she said, telling her that he would tell her children "that there are things that happen in life that we cannot explain."

Saying that he was "really not in a position to comment" on the pastoral change, parish council chairman Chuck Nichols said, "It is a sensitive situation. We really do not know all that is involved. I suggest you talk to the bishop."

Unlike Nichols, parish council members Rose Anne Hyman and Pete Pierce are vocal in their frustration. Both criticized what Pierce called "a lack of transparency" in Radloff's removal.

"I do not understand or comprehend this," Hyman said. "There has been no explanation whatsoever. We as parishioners have a right and duty to find out what the truths are. Otherwise, people tend to make up their own truths, to gossip, and so on, and this rips apart all the good work the people and Fr. Radloff have done, and it hurts his reputation and good name."

From multiple interviews and media coverage comments, three potential motivations for Cary's move surfaced:

- Tension between Radloff and the bishop over Cary's transfer of popular priest Fr. Juan Carlos Chiarinoti from the largely Hispanic ministry at St. Francis to another assignment.
- Focused and vocal opposition to some of Radloff's pastoral efforts.
- Parish staff friction over administrative initiatives by Radloff.

Radloff apparently openly opposed Carlos' transfer, a move that caused Cary to bristle. In a May 7 open letter to St. Francis parishioners [2], the bishop chided a petition-gathering effort backing Carlos' remaining at St. Francis as "out of place." He said it "thrust into public view matters that must be dealt with in private and whetted the appetite for an explanation that could not be forthcoming."

"From the start," the bishop wrote, "such an organized protest was guaranteed to stir up confusion and division, and it did. And it set a bad example for other parishes as well."

Cary directly chastised Radloff: "In launching this movement to pressure me to do what he wanted, your pastor made a very serious error of judgment. He actively recruited you to stand with him against your bishop. ... On the day of his ordination, a priest places his hands between those of the bishop and publicly promises 'respect and obedience' to him and his successors. ... To build up the unity of the Church, priests must be willing to walk the way of obedience; and a bishop must be able to count on his priests to be true to their promise."

According to parishioners, including Lupita Wesseler, Radloff did not initiate the petition drive.

"I personally initiated the petition on behalf of members of the Hispanic community who were distraught with the prospect of losing Fr. Juan Carlos," Wesseler told NCR in a Nov. 1 email, adding, "Out of respect for the church authorities I contacted the bishop's office beforehand. I was within my rights and I felt that it was my

duty to speak on behalf of the Hispanic community. I have been in the parish for 24 years and as a Hispanic, I have a special attachment to the community. I wanted to be a voice for them, and am concerned that this growing population does not have a Spanish-speaking priest at this time. Fr. Juan Carlos was a popular dedicated anchor to these people.

Carlos is not included on the clergy personnel list on the diocesan website.

Canon lawyer Faucher said Cary has said he consulted widely -- including canonists and other bishops -- before issuing the decree for removal of Radloff; however "he does not provide names."

Radloff assumed the reins of St. Francis in late December 2011, fewer than three months* before Cary was installed as bishop.

Cary celebrated all Masses at St. Francis the weekend of Oct. 5-6, making time after each Mass for parishioners to visit with him.

Parishioners reported the presence of visibly armed security personnel at the church. While many assumed that the guards were arranged through the bishop's auspices, one source cautioned that their presence might have been related to an incident at the parish earlier in the week when a person was allegedly escorted off the parish grounds for some type of disruption.

Calls and emails to several parish personnel for clarification were not returned as of Nov. 1.

The Baker diocese is one of the most geographically challenged in the United States, covering 17 counties and almost 67,000 square miles in eastern Oregon -- more than one and a half times the size of Tennessee. The Catholic population stands at 34,375, less than 7 percent of the area's 526,760 residents, according to the diocesan website.

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*Corrects timing of Radloff's appointment to St. Francis.

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[1] http://www.scribd.com/doc/180862725/Letter-from-Bishop-Liam-Cary-to-parishioners
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