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With little warning, bishop changes leadership, direction of Berkeley campus ministry

Monica Clark | Mar. 29, 2014
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Oakland Bishop Michael Barber's decision to change both the leadership and direction of ministry at Newman Hall Holy Spirit Parish here has left the community angry and mystified.

The decision, parish leaders told *NCR*, came without consultation with the pastor, campus minister, parish council, or the broader parish and student community.

Newman Hall Holy Spirit is a 1,300-member parish that serves as Catholic campus ministry at the University of California, Berkeley. It's been led by Paulist priests for more than a century.

A March 7 letter from Barber to parishioners -- three weeks after they learned their pastor and campus minister were being removed -- did little to clarify the situation. Barber wrote: "I believe we need to do more, to totally reinvigorate our evangelization efforts for the University Community at Cal Berkeley." In a parish with 26 specific ministries for the Berkeley student community and another 44 ministries for students and other parishioners, the statement has caused great puzzlement.

"He does not know the community. He has spent no time with us," said Jean Molesky-Poz, an active Newman Holy Spirit parishioner for 24 years who teaches in the religious studies department at Santa Clara University.

Parishioners first learned of the bishop's decision during Masses the weekend of Feb. 15-16. The following evening, more than 200 assembled in the chapel for a parishioner-led meeting to pray, hear the facts and discuss possible responses.

Gina Hens-Piazza, professor of biblical studies at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, told the group that in November, the bishop asked Paulist leaders to withdraw the community from the parish, which they've served since 1907. Hens-Piazza was one of several parishioners the pastor, Paulist Fr. Bernard Campbell, consulted after he first heard the news.

The order reached a compromise with the bishop wherein two Paulists would be presented for the bishop's approval as replacements for Campbell, who's been pastor for the past seven years, and Paulist Fr. Bill Edens, student minister for the last five years. Neither had known that the bishop wanted them dismissed and a new direction taken in the parish.

Though Michael Brown, diocesan director of communication, told *NCR* the bishop had "a number of discussions with the Newman Holy Spirit parish priests" prior to the decision, Campbell called the statement "blatantly false."

When parishioners arrived for Mass the weekend of March 1-2, they learned that Paulist Frs. Ivan Tou and Dat Tran would become their new pastor and associate pastor. A week later, the letter from Barber, inserted into the

parish bulletin, said the change was necessary to "reinvigorate and expand our mission 'to the periphery,' " a reference to statements by Pope Francis. No specifics were given as to what that might mean. A subsequent meeting with Barber, Campbell and Edens did not yield any clarity, Campbell told *NCR*.

Brown said the bishop "envisions greatly increased student participation and roles in decision-making." When the replacement Paulists arrive in July, Brown added, "planning for how to achieve those goals will begin." Currently, two students, nominated by the student ministry team, serve on the parish council.

Newman Hall served Catholic students and faculty from its site on the north side of campus until 1967, when a larger complex was built on the campus' south side. At that time, it also became Holy Spirit Parish. Known for its vibrant embrace of the Second Vatican Council's reforms, Newman Hall Holy Spirit has a breadth of ministries to serve its diverse community, which includes students, alumni, faculty, young families, active and retired professionals, as well as homeless adults living on Berkeley streets.

Current and former parishioners have sent Barber numerous letters attesting to the important role the parish has played in the development and practice of their faith. One letter was written by four members of the student ministry team, the co-chairs and a former co-chair of the parish council, and a council member.

"Our parish is an extraordinary community," they wrote. Noting the large number of ministries and programs, they spoke of the value of a multigenerational parish in which students "are strengthened in their faith commitment by the witness of older adult Catholics" and non-student parishioners are "inspired by the grace, spirituality and energy of the students." They praised Edens for his work "tirelessly to reach out to students on the fringe of the parish, calling them to deeper involvement in the parish and the larger Church."

Campbell said students make up about 55 percent of the parish with about 70 percent of those students of Asian heritage. The parish spends about $400,000 a year for campus ministry.

Brown said the bishop is concerned with "declining student involvement in the Newman Hall community."

Encouraging greater student involvement has been clearly part of Campbell and Edens' plan. In September, at Campbell's invitation, the parish welcomed four young adult missionaries from the Fellowship of Catholic University Students. The missionaries live near campus and engage with Cal students in everything from basketball to Bible study.

"They're on campus finding the Catholics we don't see," Edens told *The Catholic Voice*, the Oakland diocesan newspaper. He spent a few days with the four during the summer while they were training at Ave Maria University in Florida.

The Fellowship of Catholic University Students was established by a lay couple in 1998 at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kan., in response to John Paul II's call for a "new evangelization." According to its website, the organization now has 361 missionaries on 83 campuses in 34 states.

At Berkeley, the missionaries host more than a dozen Bible study groups. "Contacts and friendships are developing," Campbell said. "Generally, I'm pleased with it." He said he believes the four missionaries, who graduated from colleges in Nebraska, Montana and Colorado, are coming to recognize that "the ecclesial moorings are different at Cal than other places."

Campbell said student involvement is actively encouraged in all aspects of parish life at Newman Hall Holy Spirit. But, he conceded, it is sometimes difficult to get students to follow through on their commitments because of academic demands and changes in their schedules.

He also said some students feel "shy about this place because it is not like their home parish." For example, the parish has a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender group for students and another for non-students. It has a dance ministry, Taize prayer, spirituality groups for men and women, and a JustFaith group, and it is a member of Berkeley Organizing Congregations for Action.

In April, Camaldolese Br. Ivan Nicoletto is scheduled to speak to the Women in Conversation group on "An Evolutionary God, the God of Mystery." The Science and Faith group, which meets monthly, brings together students and professors from Berkeley and the Graduate Theological Union to discuss how faith connects with questions of science.

For students looking for more traditional spiritual practices, the parish offers eucharistic adoration, a student rosary group and a Friday night Holy Hour. Campbell is working with a small group that wants student acolytes and cross bearers.

The Newman chapel is open 12 hours each day except Sunday, when it is open for 17 hours. Campbell said up to 200 students a week come to prayer in the Newman chapel.

Parishioner Molesky-Poz has high praise for the two "extremely good, intelligent, dedicated Paulist priests who have shepherded the parish and university community in inclusive, pastoral, deeply prayerful and wise ways. They speak and live the Gospel opening, inclusively. The Gospel is about witnessing to the love of God, not to power and prestige."

Another parishioner, John Bird, in a letter to the bishop asking that he reverse his decision said the two Paulists "have been urging and challenging us to live the Gospel. They merit our continuing support and they merit your support."

Campbell is using his last weeks in the parish to encourage parishioners. In his message to parishioners when the changes were first announced, he said, "No less an authority than Jesus would nudge us 'to think again,' moving away from the immediate reactions that lead only to more bruising and hurt and towards more patient, however hesitant, steps toward a future for Newman and the Church richer than even we and Barber can imagine now."

Barber has promised but has not yet scheduled a meeting with the eight signers of the joint letter originally sent to him. The co-chairs of the parish council have invited parishioners to tell them of their concerns and visions for the parish, so the meeting can be "the beginning of a fruitful and ongoing dialogue, hearing the bishop's concerns and also communicating the needs and identity of the parish."

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