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Parishioners protest bishop over pastor's changes

Monica Clark | Jun. 20, 2011

Bishop Salvatore J. Cordileone of Oakland, Calif., delivers the homily at this year's Red Mass Jan. 18 at St. Mary's Basilica in Phoenix. (CNS photo/ J.D. Long-Garcia, Catholic Sun)

UPDATE

BERKELEY, Calif. -- A crowd of about 150 parishioners, former parishioners and community leaders demonstrated outside St. Joseph the Worker Church in Berkeley, California June 19 while Oakland Bishop Salvatore Cordileone celebrated Mass inside.

The group is frustrated with the bishop?s refusal to meet with them to discuss actions by their pastor, Fr. John Direen, that they say are detrimental to parish life. They have sent hundred of letters and a delegation to the chancery without results.

They mounted the protest to coincide with the bishop?s weekend visit to administer Confirmation and preside at the Sunday liturgies.

NCR learned on June 21 that Cordileone did meet for an hour June 18 with two leaders of the group and the former parish council president, who aired their concerns.

"It was a very neutral meeting," said Aurora Meerjans, who resigned from her parish council post last June. "He listened very patiently and asked good questions, but didn't make any promises. I left with the impression that he does care about our community."

During his homily June 19, Cordileone spoke about the call to ?live in communion and harmony,? referring to the day?s Second Reading, but he did not make any specific reference to the growing conflict within the parish.

Nor did he come outside after Mass to address the assembled group. In fact, when some of the demonstrators entered the church after the Spanish-language liturgy to speak with him as he greeted other parishioners, the police were called.

At issue are a number of actions taken by Direen since he became pastor two years ago. These include disbanding the parish and finance councils, limiting participation of *El Consejo Latino* (the Spanish-speaking advisory council), removing the social justice committee from a list of parish ministries, turning the parish?s

primary meeting space into a religious gifts store, and asking a respected resident priest to move.

The breaking point came three weeks ago when he told the pastor emeritus, Fr. George Crespin, to leave the parish by the end of the month. Crespin has lived at the parish for 30 years, first while serving as diocesan chancellor and later as pastor. He retired in 2005, but continued to minister to the parish?s large Latino population.

Unhappy parishioners insist that Crespin?s eviction is just the latest example of the pastor?s arbitrary decision-making. In meetings held at a community center blocks from the parish church, parishioners said they want a pastor who respects them, involves them in discerning the direction of parish life, and has an open style of communication.

?We want a good pastor,? said Vivian Zelaya. ?We don?t want to lose our church.?

Some English-speaking parishioners, including several parish lay leaders, have left the parish in the last 18 months because of their unhappiness with the pastor and there is fear that many Hispanic parishioners will also migrate to neighboring parishes.

St. Joseph the Worker Parish has a long history of civic involvement. It provided a safe haven for Cesar Chavez, founder of the United Farm Workers, when he was receiving death threats, and was a sanctuary church for Central American refugees.

Parishioners have played a key role in Berkeley Organizing Congregations for Renewal and the parish is known for its hospitality to numerous educational and community groups.

Such welcome and involvement are no longer supported, say many parishioners. They want them restored and believe this can only happen if the current pastor is replaced.

In the meantime, they plan to continue to push for a meeting with their bishop.

[Monica Clark is a west coast contributor to *NCR*.]

Editor's Note: This story was updated June 21, reflecting that Bishop Cordileone met June 18 with a group of parishioners from St. Joseph the Worker Church.

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