

Bishop Clark removes Father Callan from post

By Rob Cullivan
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Bishop Matthew H. Clark has removed Father James B. Callan from his position as administrator of Corpus Christi Church, 880 E. Main St., a position the priest has held for 22 years.

Among the reasons the bishop cited were Father Callan's continuing defiance of church law on such issues as women's liturgical roles, intercommunion with non-Catholics, and ministry to gays.

In a statement issued Aug. 17, the bishop said: "I judge these changes to be necessary for the stability of the parish, for ecumenical and interfaith relationships which honor both our church guidelines and the sensitivities of other groups to ensure that we not even appear to defy the legitimate authority vested in the Apostolic See of Rome."

The bishop also maintained that the decision to remove Father Callan was his alone — and not one he was compelled to make by the Vatican, as Father Callan stated. The bishop added that he had planned to keep the reasons for Father Callan's removal confidential, and that he was disappointed that Father Callan had gone public with what he considered a confidential personnel matter.

In an interview with the *Catholic Courier* on Aug. 18, Bishop Clark said he would like to reassign Father Callan somewhere else in the diocese. The bishop stressed, however, that such an appointment would be made only if the priest assured him that he would modify his behavior.

Yet Father Callan emphasized that — wherever he goes — he will continue to promote the practices that got him in trouble.

"Organizations are changed by certain people going beyond the rules, and later that behavior is sanctioned by authorities," Father Callan told the *Courier* in an Aug. 17 interview at the Corpus Christi rectory.

Many Catholics — including the ordained — have disagreements with the church, Bishop Clark noted. But every ordained minister of the church has a responsibility to uphold the church's teachings publicly, he said.

"We cannot, on the one hand, minister in the name of the church, and, on the other hand, undermine the teaching of the church," the bishop said.

Father Callan, 50, has been administrator of Corpus since 1976. The priest has gained a national reputation for shepherding a liberal parish famed for its outreach ministries to people who are poor, sick, dying, imprisoned or paroled, or who had left the church for a variety of reasons.

At the same time, the priest has regularly courted controversy. He was suspended from the priesthood for two months in 1976 when he refused to live at the rectory of St. Ambrose Church in Rochester because he considered it too luxurious. During his tenure at Corpus Christi, the parish skirted the law by serving as a sanctuary for Central American war refugees who were illegal aliens in the 1980s.

At weekend Masses and at a rally in the church on Sunday night, Aug. 16, Father Callan claimed that the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith — headed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger — sent a letter to Bishop Clark asking that the parish administrator be removed. The priest said Bishop Clark did not show the letter to him, but told him of its contents.

The bishop declined to confirm or deny whether or not the Vatican had pressured him to remove Father Callan, citing confidentiality concerns surrounding personnel matters. The bishop did say he had repeatedly asked Father Callan over the years to amend his behavior and bring it in line with church teachings. No one incident caused him to remove Father



Greg Francis/Staff photographer

Corpus Christi parishioners Dave Lense and his wife, Debbie, clap and stomp in support of Father James Callan (below) Aug. 16 at the downtown Rochester church.



Callan, Bishop Clark said.

"It's more just a growing realization that you can ask for adjustments for just so long before the asking sounds pro forma," Bishop Clark said.

The bishop noted, for example, that at least one local rabbi — whom he declined to name — had expressed concern about Father Callan's promotion of intercommunion with non-Catholics and non-Christians. He added that other non-Catholic congregational representatives had contacted his staff with similar concerns in the past.

Father Callan said he will remain at Corpus Christi until the end of September. No replacement has been named to administer the parish, and Father Callan said he has not been reassigned yet. He added that he would like to remain in the diocese and work with the poor.

Father Callan attributed his ouster, in part, to critics who regularly send to the Vatican materials such as bulletins and news stories detailing his practices. Among those materials, he said, was *Can't Hold Back The Spring — The Blossoming of Corpus Christi Church*, a 1998 book he wrote about his work at the parish.

The priest asserted that anything controversial he has done becomes known within the Vatican in 24 hours.

One of Father Callan's critics has been Michael Macaluso, head of Citizens for a Decent Community, a mainly Catholic advocacy group. Long an activist in the "traditional" Catholic movement, Macaluso said he had written to the Vatican on occasion complaining of Father Callan's practices.

Macaluso said he admired Father Callan and his parish's commitment to

the poor, but added, "What's that got to do with the heresy of allowing anybody in whatever state they are in, from whatever religion they're in, to receive the Blessed Sacrament?"

Father Callan also said someone apparently provided the Vatican with a photo taken from the *Rochester Democrat and Chronicle* of a woman holding up a chalice in a priest-like manner during a Communion service at Corpus Christi. He added that Vatican officials also knew that Mary Ramerman, the parish's pastoral associate, wears a stole on the altar at Masses, making her look like an ordained minister.

"I was told that the stole that Mary was wearing was a problem for the Vatican," he said.

He added that he believes the Vatican had an even bigger problem with his willingness to regularly invite non-Catholics to Communion — a practice that attracts many Protestants and non-Christians, who make up one-third of Corpus Christi's congregation, he said.

As for Corpus' ministry to gays, Father Callan noted that he was led to minister to the gay community through his encounters with gay Catholics. Many shared the pain they had experienced from discrimination in the church and society, he explained, and led him to become more open to gays.

"We (at Corpus Christi) don't try to change gay people," he said. "We encourage gay people to be chaste and faithful the way we do heterosexuals."

When asked if that meant he still endorsed blessing lifelong unions between gays — a practice he has acknowledged doing in the past — Father Callan declined to respond.

Father Callan's removal from the administrator post sparked a massive response from his parishioners. In an announcement following the opening hymn at 11:30 a.m. Mass Aug. 16, Father Callan told the standing room-only congregation that "for 22 years, I had dreaded this moment."

Although he spoke in a clear voice, he admitted that for that entire weekend, "All I've done is cry."

He then explained that he had been removed from his post, but he also explained that he held no animosity against the Vatican.

"I love the pope. I've always loved the pope," Father Callan said. "And I love Cardinal Ratzinger, even though I've nev-

er met him. I understand what they're about, and what I'm about."

Ramerman spoke following Father Callan's announcement, saying that she, too, was glad to support Corpus Christi's stances.

"Somebody asked me last night (Aug. 15) if I've felt sorry for what I've done at Corpus Christi. The answer is, not a bit," Ramerman said.

Two public meetings were held at the church this week — on the evenings of Aug. 16 and 18 — to discuss Father Callan's removal and parish strategies for responding.

The first meeting attracted more than 1,000 people who cheered, chanted, stomped and clapped for the priest and other staff members at Corpus. Many in the audience expressed shock and dismay at the end of Father Callan's tenure in the parish, and anger at the Vatican.

"Do they know about the people we take care of?" said Jasmina Ibrimovic. "Do they know about the love here?"

Although Father Callan said he would not resist his removal from his post at Corpus, he noted he supported spreading the word about why he was made to leave.

"I'm not ashamed, and I hope you're not ashamed of what we're doing here," he said. "Maybe this is going to be the moment that God is going to use to put the light out there."

Ten years from now, Father Callan predicted during his interview with the *Courier*, his removal from Corpus Christi Church will appear "silly." Everything he advocates now will someday become routine in the church, he contended.

The priest noted that Corpus Christi has had girl altar servers since the 1970s, yet it was only in recent years that the church removed its ban on such servers.

• • •

Contains reporting by Staff Writer Michael Latona.

Catholic Courier (USPS 135-580) Vol. 109 No. 48 August 20, 1998

Published weekly except the first Thursday in January.

Subscription rates: single copy, 75¢; one-year subscription in U.S., \$20.00; Canada and foreign \$20.00 plus postage. Offices: 1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, N.Y. 14624, 716/328-4340. Periodicals postage paid at Rochester, N.Y.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Catholic Courier, P.O. Box 24379, Rochester, N.Y. 14624.