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Catholic Courier

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Critical questions

EDITORS' NOTE: In light of questions about excommunication and formation of a new faith community of former Corpus Christi parishioners, Associate Editor Lee Strong interviewed diocesan Chancellor Father Kevin McKenna March 1. This article is based on his responses.

STRONG: What is excommunication?

FATHER MCKENNA: Excommunication is the impairment of one's relationship with the church. By words and actions, a person jeopardizes his or her rights as a Catholic to full participation in the church. It's a censure. It's a penalty that's incurred by the person.

STRONG: How is someone excommunicated?

FATHER MCKENNA: It does not have to be publicly declared. The penalty can either be *latae sententiae* — a penalty inflicted automatically upon commission of certain offenses — or *ferendae sententiae*, a declared excommunication imposed by a person in authority, such as a diocesan bishop.

STRONG: Is there a difference in severity between these two types of excommunication?

FATHER MCKENNA: A declared excommunication that is made by the person who has proper authority has extra force, extra power. One of the ramifications is that if an ordinary (the bishop of a diocese) declares an excommunication, it can be remitted or removed only by the author of that censure. In the case of an automatic penalty, there may be mitigating circumstances — such as an unawareness of the law — that can diminish or even prevent incurring the penalty.

STRONG: What kinds of offenses incur excommunication?

FATHER MCKENNA: Among the offenses for which one can be automatically excommunicated are procurement of an abortion, a priest revealing what he has heard in the sacrament of confession, desecration of the Blessed Sacrament and joining a church that's schismatic.

STRONG: What are the consequences of being excommunicated?

FATHER MCKENNA: An excommunicated person loses the ability to receive the sacraments in the church and to celebrate the sacraments in the church.

STRONG: Does that mean that person can't receive Communion in a Catholic church?

FATHER MCKENNA: It's only in the most extreme situations or circumstances that they can be denied Communion at Mass — such as situations involving notorious or public sinners or a declared excommunication. For most situations, I don't believe the Communion line is an appropriate place to enter into dialogue.

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Diocese says new church has excommunicated itself

By Rob Cullivan
Staff Writer

Speaking to a hushed congregation assembled for a Thursday night Communion service Feb. 25, at Rochester's Downtown United Presbyterian Church, Father James B. Callan noted that he had been dreading the day for months.

"It happened at 3:15 p.m. today," he said in a solemn voice. "I went to the dentist, and he drilled my tooth."

The congregation responded with laughter and applause. It had been expected that Father Callan — suspended priest and ex-administrator of Corpus Christi Church — might open his sermon by addressing a far more serious matter: excommunication.

The day before the service, the Diocese of Rochester had announced that the diocesan priest, 51, and the new community of former and current Corpus Christi Church parishioners were in schism and had in effect excommunicated themselves from the Catholic Church.

"Whenever someone begins his own church and disavows any union with Rome and the local bishop, he is in schism ...," wrote Father Kevin McKenna, diocesan chancellor, in a Feb. 24 statement. "Father Callan has effectively excommunicated himself. Catholics who have joined the new church are not in full communion with the church, and have incurred the same penalty."

The diocesan statement was the latest chapter in a saga that began last summer when Bishop Matthew H. Clark removed Father Callan from his position as administrator of Corpus Christi. In doing so, the bishop cited Father Callan's ongoing defiance of church teachings on women's liturgical roles, intercommunion with non-Catholics, and ministry to gays.

In a March 1 interview with the *Catholic Courier*, Bishop Clark expressed sadness over the split between the new community and the diocese.

He urged Catholics throughout the diocese who had questions about the excommunication to consult their pastors.

Meanwhile, Bishop Clark added that the diocese is exploring ways of informing all Catholics about the legitimate need for pastoral authority in the church, the role of the bishop, and other questions that have arisen since the Corpus crisis began.

He also noted that the diocese had no plans to formally excommunicate anyone in the new community. If the bishop were to do so, every person so excommunicated would have to appeal to the bishop individually to have the penalty revoked if he or she chose to return to the church. Instead, Bishop Clark said, Catholics who excommunicate themselves need only use the sacrament of reconciliation to return to the church.

"I think it's important to leave all the room possible to make their return as peaceful and as easy as possible," the bishop said of individuals in the new community.

When asked precisely what sin an excommunicant would have to confess, especially if a person left the church for reasons of conscience, the bishop responded that any sin to be confessed would be a matter determined by a penitent and his or her confessor.

For further clarification, the *Courier* spoke with Father McKenna, who noted that a Catholic who excommunicates him- or herself incurs a censure that should be removed in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. However, the priest said, that doesn't necessarily mean an excommunicant committed a sin in the eyes of the church that must be confessed if he or she comes back.

Bishop Clark added that many members of the new community may not have made a fully informed choice about joining it, and, hence, were not as responsible for their decision as those who did make fully informed choices. On

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