News



ST. FRANCIS XAVIER NEWS & UPDATES

From Fr. Drees' Desk

Update on Music at St. Joseph and St. Francis

We are so blessed with such talented musicians at our parishes whose talent adds to the weekly liturgies. Over the next few weeks, you may notice a change in the music and those playing it. Bob Bernard, our employed musician, served his last Mass with us last week. Dominic Mitchell, one of our accompanists, and Travis Loeffler, one of our cantors, will also no longer be playing music at our Masses. If you or anyone you know is interested in participating in this beautiful ministry, please contact: Sandy Greene at 651- [illegible] or [illegible].

Thank you Bob, Dominic, and Travis for sharing your gifts with us!

REPORT ABUSE

If you or someone you know has been abused, exploited or harassed by a priest, deacon, or a Church employee or volunteer, you are encouraged to contact Victim/Survivor Assistance at (651) 291-4475.

PARKING LOT & FIX-IT FUND

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Dec. 10 - 2nd Sunday of Advent
9:15 am Mass, Faith Formation
SJ - Christmas Tree Sales Sat. & Sun., last weekend
Dec. 14 - Confessions 11 am - noon
Dec. 16 - SJ - Confessions 9 am - 10 am
Dec. 17 - 3rd Sun. of Advent
9:15 am Mass, Faith Formation

PRAY THE ROSARY!

The Rosary is prayed at 9:10 am at St. Francis Xavier Church on the second and fourth Sundays of each month. Come join us!

CATHOLIC SPIRIT ONLINE

You can access the Catholic Spirit online at thecatholicspirit.com

GOD IS GOOD, ALL THE TIME!

Clip from page 3 of the St. Francis Xavier and St. Joseph Catholic Church bulletin for Dec. 10, 2017.



by Brian Roewe

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The music during the second weekend of Advent at the Churches of St. Joseph and St. Francis Xavier north of Minnesota's Twin Cities had a different ring to it than it did the week before.

Rather than leading the small parish communities in song from their usual posts in the choral section of the church, two of its longtime musicians, Bob Bernard and Travis Loeffler, instead sang loudly from the front pew as part of the flock. Earlier in the week, parochial administrator Fr. John Drees fired them, along with fellow accompanist Dominic Mitchell, after the priest learned of their same-sex marriages.

Their termination led to their relocation in the pews, from where they worshipped at each of the parish's four Masses surrounded by supportive family, friends and fellow parishioners.

"We wanted to make sure that we were present," said Bernard, 59, an accompanist at the small parish for 15 years. "We didn't want people to think that we were afraid, and we didn't want people in any way to be upset or despairing that they weren't going to see us again."

After each of the four Masses celebrated at St. Joseph Church, in Taylors Falls, Minnesota, and St. Francis Xavier Church, in Shafer, Minnesota — part of the St. Paul-Minneapolis Archdiocese — many parishioners approached the men expressing concern and compassion, but also confusion and in some cases, shedding tears. The only announcement of their removal from the clustered parish's music program was a vague notice in the day's bulletin being handed out around them, in which the priest, who arrived in July, stated simply the three would "no longer be playing music at our Masses."

Loeffler, a 30-year-old volunteer cantor at the parish for six years, said, "We wanted to be sure that if people had questions, that they knew it's not because we wanted to leave."

The three musicians were dismissed from the parish's music ministry Dec. 5. Bernard was informed of his termination after morning Mass that day.

"I was scheduled to have a meeting with Fr. Drees about plans for Advent and Christmas music. And then when I sat down, he said that's not what I really wanted to talk to you about," Bernard told NCR.

Google Satellite view of St. Francis Xavier Church in Shafer, Minnesota

According to Bernard, the priest said the longtime accompanist could not continue in that role because his marriage to his husband, Dave, presented a situation that "was confusing to the parishioners."

Drees, 31, told NCR in an email he would not comment publicly on parish personnel and employment issues out of respect for all involved and affected, nor comment on private conversations between him and parishioners.

Bernard, who married in September, said he had informed the priest of his marriage recently, after receiving a payroll form that included a question about his marital status. Bernard's final paycheck included a note stating, "Dear Bob, a follow-up on our previous discussion. You resigned as an employee on Dec, 5, 2017. I thank you for sharing your musical gifts with us and for your dedication and service to the parish. Your music was an inspiration, I wish you the very best in your journey."

Later on Dec. 5, Drees told Loeffler and Mitchell — who married one another in January — of their terminations by phone, but did not offer an explanation as to why, both told NCR. When either asked the priest what was the reason, he replied, "I'm not prepared to say."

What also remained unclear was how Drees knew of their marriage. Unlike Bernard, the two never disclosed their marriage to the parish. And while they regularly played together, with Mitchell on the piano and Loeffler providing vocals, they were intentional in avoiding any outward signs of their relationship.

"I was very careful about it. We barely even shook hands," Mitchell said.

Leading up to the personnel decision

The unanswered questions added to the pain of their dismissal; they saw their participation at Mass not as a gig but an expression of the gifts God had given them.

"It took me a while to realize that God made me the way I am on purpose. To be out of the closet, to be homosexual, to also have these gifts of music to share," said Mitchell, 35, who has sung in churches since he was a kid.

He added he could see why the archdiocese might not want to compensate them, but had a hard time understanding why they still couldn't voluntarily share their

musical talents. "That's really where I think it seems particularly unnecessary and kind of hateful," Mitchell said.

Advertisement

The musicians' status was a point of tense discussion in the weeks before Thanksgiving among Drees and the parish's four trustees.

The priest held separate meetings in mid-November with each church's pair of trustees. At each meeting, Drees asked the trustees — advisors to both the priest and the churches' pastoral and financial councils — if they knew the musicians were gay and married. Three of the four responded that they knew, to which Drees expressed surprise that no one had alerted him.

"He seemed disappointed with the parishioners that nobody thought this was a bad thing and brought it up to him," said Chris Hudspeth, a trustee at St. Joseph where she has been a parishioner for four decades.

She and others described the St. Croix Valley, which encompasses the two churches, as a small, inclusive and close-knit community (Taylors Falls has a population of approximately 1,000 people), and one that wouldn't view a person's sexual orientation as a big deal.

Hudspeth said she was "taken aback" when Drees then told her and Larry Julik-Heine he would have to dismiss the three musicians because their marriages represented a public demonstration of beliefs contrary to church teaching. She said the priest indicated that Bernard's contract included a code of conduct agreement, but she did not review the document.

Both trustees said they opposed the musicians' dismissal, with Hudspeth pointing to gay-and-married members of her own family and saying, "I would not turn my back on them."

"I thought it was wrong, discriminatory, and I just could not agree," Julik-Heine told NCR.

According to the trustees, Drees responded to a question about how he found out about the musicians' marriages by saying someone had informed him, which led him

to conduct his own online inquiry. The priest also indicated he noticed Loeffler and Mitchell arrived at Mass together in the same car and departed at the same time. At the St. Francis trustee meeting, Carol Schwinghammer said she noticed a photo of Bernard and his husband in the stack of papers in front of Drees.

When asked if he conducted online research into the marital status of any of the three men, Drees told NCR in an email, "Social media and other online outlets are public. We teach our schoolchildren and our employees to be careful what they post online, and, as employees, we all must adhere to Catholic teaching in our postings."

Google Streetview of St. Joseph Church in Taylors Falls, Minnesota

Schwinghammer, who also opposed the musicians' firing, requested a second meeting for all four trustees and Drees to continue the discussion and perhaps find an alternative solution. "But to me, it became apparent that that wasn't going to happen," she said.

The trustees told NCR that Drees said no one had approached him with concerns about the musicians. At one point, Schwinghammer referenced Pope Francis' calls for a more inclusive church, to which she said Drees replied that a lot of people find the pope's message confusing, and went on to reference three passages from St. Paul that he said condemn same-sex marriage.

The firing of the musicians led Julik-Heine to resign as trustee, a position he had held almost the entirety of his two decades at St. Joseph. After making that decision, Julik-Heine told NCR that Drees informed him he could also no longer serve as a lector or eucharistic minister in the parish, and that he would likely refuse him the sacraments; days later, the priest said he would still offer him the Eucharist, but the bar on liturgical roles stood.

"I felt like I was basically kicked out of the church," Julik-Heine said. "… That put a big hole in my heart, to be honest. Because I've done so much at St. Joe's over the years and it's a big part of my life."

Outpouring of support

The three trustees were among those who joined in sitting near the musicians at Masses during the second weekend of Advent. Of the roughly 50 to 100 people in attendance at each, it was estimated close to half were present in support for their

former musicians. By all accounts, the circumstances at the Saturday night Mass at St. Joseph that landed Loeffler and Bernard in a pew rather than the regular choral spot — two female cantors filled in — resulted in a beautiful harmony filling the church.

Even more moving to the two men was the overwhelming support they felt from their parish community, including people they didn't know well or from whom they had expected a different reaction to their dismissal.

"There were a lot of tears, a lot of hugging," Loeffler said.

"Everybody loved them," Hudspeth said. "… They brought a music ministry to this church, to these parishes, that we have not had in years."

Asked about the show of support, Drees said, "As a priest, I am always happy to see people attending and participating in the Mass." He said he has heard from "few parishioners" since the musicians' firing, and "they have expressed their concerns but also their support and understanding."

Bernard described many "raw feelings" at the Masses, and several people approached Drees afterward to discuss the priest's decision. One of them was Jamie Manzi-Moore, the former music director at St. Victoria Catholic Church, in Victoria, Minnesota, who was fired in 2014 after 17 years in the position after his own same-sex marriage was reported to then-Archbishop John Nienstedt.

According to Schwinghammer, during the first meeting Drees said that while at a prior parish he had addressed at a similar situation at a nearby church. When Bernard confronted Drees about whether he had informed Nienstedt of Moore's marriage, he told NCR that the priest "was shocked to hear me ask that question, and he said, 'Yes.' "

Drees, in response to a question from NCR, denied that he had informed Nienstedt about Manzi-Moore's marriage. He did not respond to a follow-up question whether he had any involvement in the archbishop or archdiocese learning about Manzi-Moore's marital status.

Manzi-Moore, after a brief exchange with Drees following Mass on Dec. 9, emailed the priest and Archbishop Bernard Hebda stating in part he believed his and the other musicians' firings were "completely wrong, unjust, and it is not Christian in any

way shape or form."

"It isn’t simply 'remove them from their ministries and all will be well.' There is so much pain, so much sorrow, and so much unnecessary harm inflicted upon not only those who are 'let go' but also upon their families, loved ones, and their parish families," he wrote.

Drees responded to Manzi-Moore on Thursday in an email, a copy of which NCR obtained, where he again said he did not contact Nienstedt about him. The priest, who at the time of the former music director's dismissal was associate pastor of nearby St. Hubert Catholic Community, explained he received a phone call from an anonymous St. Victoria parishioner "who had some concerns about the music ministry at the parish."

"I asked my pastor him [sic] for direction on what to do with the information, and he suggested relaying it to our dean," Drees wrote, referring to the head of the regional deanery. "I did, and that was the last and only thing I did. I cannot speak to what the Archbishop knew or didn't know, or how he knew."

Moving forward

There's worry within the St. Francis Xavier and St. Joseph Churches, the trustees said, that the situation with their ousted musicians will become a wedge that divides the parish. Some parishioners have begun talking about withholding financial support of the parish, or withdrawing from it entirely. Others fear that showing support for the musicians could lead to their own removal from roles in the liturgy and parish, as well.

"I really am concerned that it is going to negatively impact the community. And I see it personally, I see it as discriminatory," Schwinghammer said. The situation with the musicians reminded her of her own experience as a child, with her parents divorced, of feeling not welcomed in the church.

Julik-Heine and Schwinghammer have written to the St. Paul-Minneapolis Archdiocese expressing their concerns. Schwinghammer said she spoke Dec. 9 with Fr. Michael Tix, vicar for clergy and parish services, who advised her to keep talking.

The archdiocese did not respond to specific questions from NCR, saying it does not comment on individual parish personnel decisions.

In a statement, Tix said, "Decisions regarding personnel in a parish setting rest with the pastor or parochial administrator of the parish and the Archdiocese recommends that he work in tandem with parish leadership and consult legal counsel. It's the pastor or administrator and his lay leaders who are best able to assess what is necessary for building a team that can give a credible witness to the Gospel in that community. We urge our pastors to be both fair and consistent in the applications of rules and standards."

For the three musicians, the outpouring at the Masses two weeks ago showed them the parish body still welcomed them, even if they were restricted from formal ministerial roles.

"If anything, I am reassured from this community that there were a number of people that said 'I would love for you to sit and sing by me,' " Loeffler said.

To Bernard, the outreach meant one thing: "I'm going to stay there."

While Mitchell said he plans to attend Mass elsewhere for the foreseeable future, Bernard and Loeffler were back at St. Joseph on Sunday morning. "We sang our hearts out from the pews," according to Bernard, and afterward, met friends they didn't know they had. Drees even greeted Bernard after Mass.

"People were delighted to see that we had not been driven away," he said, adding they hope to remain a part of the parish community, however that might look.

For Bernard, who attends daily Mass when able, the Eucharist kept him from ever considering abandoning the Catholic faith altogether. By staying in the parish, he hopes he can show strength to other gay people who might feel unwelcome.

"I feel like my gifts and talents are a calling, and I would like to be the change that we seek, as far as the Catholic Church goes. And I feel like if I leave it, I'm not fulfilling my calling," Mitchell said.

Loeffler said leaving would feel "like the easy way out." He hopes the support they've received can show other homosexual men and women who feel driven from their communities that there are Catholics who "knowingly and openly support gay men and women. That they're not afraid of them, they welcome them."

"We don't want this to be another story for people to dislike the Catholic Church. We are still parishioners of the Catholic faith after this. This didn't drive us away,"

Loeffler said.

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