News



Aaron Bianco at St. John the Evangelist Parish in San Diego (NCR photo/Dan Morris-Young)



by Dan Morris-Young

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In a farewell to San Diego's St. John the Evangelist Parish, departing pastoral associate Aaron Bianco declared that his assailants' "hate and complete disregard for the Gospel message will not stop me" and pledged he would "continue to promote a church that welcomes all of God's children."

In remarks that preceded the homily of the parish's Oct. 21 evening Mass (see full text below), Bianco, who is gay, said he had submitted his resignation to Bishop Robert McElroy on Oct. 18 following months of sustained harassment dating to a 2017 Always Our Children Mass celebrated "as a way to welcome the LGBTQ community to St. John's."

McElroy and Auxiliary Bishop John Nolan, formerly St. John the Evangelist pastor, were both present at the liturgy. San Diego police, including snipers, had been assigned to the event as a security measure.

Harassment "started with letters left on my car attacking me and threatening me if I stayed here," Bianco told the standing-room only congregation. "The incidents escalated, turned into death threats and slashing the tires on my car. One man attacked me verbally and physically as Mass was ending one Sunday."

San Diego law enforcement personnel were on hand at the Oct. 21 Mass.

Mass attendees included representatives of multiple faiths and persons who had "traveled from as far away as Los Angeles," Bianco told NCR.

"I was hoping the hate would stop," Bianco told the audience, "and those who spew this hate would leave St John's and allow us to continue to reach out and welcome all in the community."

However, continued Bianco, "about two months ago, those who spew this hate decided to come after me, and this time they would stop at nothing. This included death threats, lighting the doors of the church on fire, breaking into the office/rectory and spray-painting anti-gay slurs on the wall."

"This was the point where I needed to step back and come to the conclusion that my life and those of my family are more important than any job," said Bianco, who is married to his gay partner.

Bianco attributed the attacks to "so-called 'Catholic' groups" who "decided to put pictures of my family, including my deceased mother, online and give out my home address."

Related: San Diego gay church worker resigns after months of harassment

In an Oct. 19 email to friends and associates announcing his resignation effective Oct. 31, Bianco specifically mentioned "groups like Church Militant and LifeSite News" as targeting him and McElroy.

Headlined "Bp. McElroy Defends Diocesan Employee in Same-Sex 'Marriage,' " a Lepanto Institute-generated narrative was posted Oct. 17 on its website and also carried online by LifeSiteNews.

The account focused largely on "Bianco's pro-homosexual activism," Bianco's "sodomitical 'marriage,' " and McElroy's support for Bianco and LGBT ministry.

The author of the account, Lepanto Institute founder and president Michael Hichborn , in an Oct. 19 email to NCR stated, "Someone who is in a same-sex 'marriage' has no more business working in leadership roles in the Catholic Church than does a satanist. Let's be clear, same-sex 'marriage' is a satanic mockery of the sacrament of Holy Matrimony, and those engaged in such abominable behavior should never have been hired to begin with."

In an Oct. 22 follow-up, Hichborn charged that Bianco "does NOT say that LifeSiteNews and Church Militant ***encouraged*** harassment, he said that he 'endured physical and emotional violence from groups like Church Militant and LifeSite News for the past year and a half.' This is a completely baseless lie."

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"My report was not a 'hit story,' but an accurate report of information that is publicly available and of interest to Catholics during this time of crisis," Hichborn wrote. "We reported on Bianco's sodomitical relationship because individuals living in such opposition to the Church's core teachings should never be allowed to hold any authoritative or public role in the Church."

McElroy and Bianco have been the subjects of previous LifeSiteNews articles.

As of posting deadline Oct. 22, Church Militant had not responded.

Self-described as "a research and education organization dedicated to the defense of the Catholic Church against assaults from without as well as from within," the Lepanto Institute had launched an online petition asking McElroy to fire Bianco.

In an Oct. 22 email, LifeSiteNews co-founder and editor-in-chief John-Henry Westen underscored that the organization has "no interest in attacking same-sex attracted persons" and "in fact we condemn such attacks."

"Our approach to such matters at LifeSite is fairly simple and straightforward," Westen wrote. "It's about the truth in love, or 'caritas in veritate' as we call it."

"As you likely know, the Catholic Church believes same-sex sexual acts are gravely immoral. They imperil the eternal life of the soul," Westen added. "Research and our experiences in seeing men and women suffer from the effects of dangerous sexual activities such as HIV/AIDS, along with the conviction that heaven could be lost for such acts, are what move us to speak out in this and similar cases. We believe it would hurt them to be silent about these harmful sexual acts."

Westen accused McElroy of "confusing the faithful by pretending that it is a loving stance to support same-sex attracted Catholics in a sexual lifestyle that can lead them to lose their souls."

"For the Church's leadership to allow for such confusion among the faithful is harmful. In the Scriptures, Christ is recorded as saying to the first bishops, 'It would be better for you to have a millstone tied about your necks and be cast into the sea, rather than confuse the little ones,' " Westen concluded.

In his Oct. 19 email announcing his resignation, Bianco said he is considering "hiring legal counsel to stop the slander against me."

Both the FBI and the San Diego Police Department are investigating the St. John the Evangelist break-in.



Aaron Bianco stands in St. John the Evangelist Parish's conference room, after a slur was spray-painted on a wall during an overnight break-in Oct. 14-15. (NCR photo/Dan Morris-Young)

FBI Special Agent Jeanne Schnese, who is assigned to the parish case, told NCR on Oct. 19 that the federal agency "has a one-voice policy" and that she had referred NCR requests for information to the FBI San Diego media coordinator.

In an Oct. 17 media statement about "the vandalism at the parish St. John the Evangelist in Hillcrest and the social media attacks against one of its staff members," McElroy condemned the vandalism as "vile and reprehensible" and pledged "solidarity with the staff and community of St. John's Parish at this moment."

"The hatred that lies behind them constitutes a dark and vicious corner in the life of our Church that every member of the Catholic community must reject," he stated.

"Aaron is hardly a wimp." McElroy told NCR on Oct. 18, lauding Bianco's endurance and dedication to outreach to the LGBTQ community, notably in St. John the Evangelist's gay-friendly Hillcrest neighborhood.

While he was disappointed in Bianco's exit, McElroy said he supported the pastoral associate's decision to leave the parish where he has, in effect, been in charge of daily operations since Dolan was appointed auxiliary bishop. Semi-retired Jesuit Fr. Kevin Casey is parish administrator.

"I will continue to promote a church that welcomes all of God's children. The LGBT ministry at St. John's will continue to thrive and grow. You will never stop the Holy Spirit from moving through her people," Bianco said in his farewell.

Meanwhile, the San Diego Diocese has been in the midst of eight "listening sessions" with McElroy about the church sexual abuse crisis, the sessions staged across the see of 1.3 million Catholics that runs the length of California's border with Mexico.

According to multiple sources, questions about a homosexual man in a same-sex marriage being a primary administrator at a diocesan parish were raised at all the gatherings.

At the seventh session on Oct. 18 at St. Gabriel Parish in Poway, McElroy received a scattering of boos when he said, "If the church eliminated all the employees who are not living out the teachings of the church in its fullness, we would be employing only angels."

More than 300 attended the Poway session, packing the parish hall. Each of the meetings has drawn overflow crowds.

At nearly every meeting, security personnel have had to escort someone from the room for disruptive behavior.

At Poway, a man was forcibly removed after he stood and began shouting questions at McElroy. Crowd noise drowned the questions.

[Dan Morris-Young is NCR's West Coast correspondent. His email is dmyoung@ncronline.org.]

Following is the farewell delivered by pastoral associate Aaron Bianco at the Oct. 21 evening Mass at St. John the Evangelist Parish in San Diego:

Two and a half years ago, I was very excited to get a call from Fr. Henry Rodriguez asking me if I would come to St. John's and help him build up the community, and that included the LGBTQ community. Before I was able to start the position, Father Henry unexpectedly passed away. I then got a call from Fr. John Dolan, now Bishop John, and he told me he would be assigned as the pastor of St. John's and was hoping I still wanted to join him. Within days, I started here as the pastoral associate. When we arrived, the parish was sparse. Young adults in the neighborhood weren't attending, we saw very few families with kids and the LGBT community was not present.

Bishop John was eager to get the LGBTQ ministry, young adult ministry and an active religious education program started and that's what we did.

We met with many in the surrounding community and began to reach out to those in the neighborhood.

Just after being at St. John's approximately nine months, Bishop John got the call that he was being named auxiliary bishop of San Diego. Before he left St. John's, he entrusted the everyday running of the parish to me. That included the LGBTQ ministry. We started to plan our first event, which was our Always Our Children Mass. It was a way to welcome the LGBTQ community to St. John's.

That's when the hatred began. It started with letters left on my car attacking me and threatening me if I stayed here. The incidents escalated turned into death threats and slashing the tires on my car. One man attacked me verbally and physically as Mass was ending one Sunday.

With the help of the [San Diego Police Department] the Always Our Children Mass went off without any problems.

I was hoping the hate would stop and those who spew this hate would leave St. John's and allow us to continue to reach out and welcome all in the community.

With help from other dedicated parishioners, we built up a wonderful young adult group, had our largest RCIA class in years and developed a wonderful faith formation for children and adults. The pews started to fill up again. We should be very proud of

the work and ministry we have begun here at St. John's.

About two months ago, those who spew this hate decided to come after me, and this time they would stop at nothing. This included death threats, lighting the doors of the church on fire, breaking into the office/rectory and spray-painting anti-gay slurs on the wall. Then these so-called "Catholic" groups decided to put pictures of my family, including my deceased mother, online and give out my home address.

This was the point where I needed to step back and come to the conclusion that my life and those of my family are more important than any job, and so I met with Bishop McElroy on Wednesday and submitted my resignation. As always, he supported me and the ministry here at St. John's. He didn't want to see me leave but understood that my well-being was of the utmost importance.

To those of you here and those of you who will hear what I say. Your hate and complete disregard for the Gospel message will not stop me. I will continue to promote a church that welcomes all of God's children. The LGBT ministry at St. John's will continue to thrive and grow. You will never stop the Holy Spirit from moving through her people.

To all of you here to support this ministry and myself, I am forever grateful. Your love and support in the past year and the past few days have sustained me and made me realize that the church and the community in general are made up of good and welcoming people.

Please keep my family and myself in your prayers. I now will look at the horizon and see where the loving God I know is leading me. This I know; I will never stop speaking for an inclusive church. May God bless and hold each and every one of you!

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