News



Protesters rally for Terry Gonda, a married lesbian who was fired from her role as music director at St. John Fisher Chapel University Parish in Auburn Hills, Michigan. (Between the Lines/Ellen Shanna Knoppow)

by Matt Jachman

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Major changes at a small and active parish in this wealthy suburb north of Detroit have longtime members rethinking their commitment and others looking for new places to worship.

St. John Fisher Chapel University Parish, with about 700 member families, is known for a welcoming atmosphere, busy social justice and community outreach ministries, and the special touches that parishioners, working with two previous pastors whose combined tenures stretch back more than 35 years, brought to Mass. The parish serves as the Catholic campus ministry for nearby Oakland University and attracts some students and young people, but many churchgoers are well into middle age and beyond and have shared each other's joys and sorrows for decades.

"The sermons are relevant. The people that go there get it," said Jim Dalton, a 24-year member of St. John Fisher (SJF) along with his wife, Rose. "We're all friends. We're all a community."

"We liked the fact that there were a lot of opportunities to do outreach," said Paul Borucki, a 25-year member, about what drew him and his wife, Louise, to SJF. "We liked the fact that the homilies challenged us to be better Christians."

Now, longtime parishioners at SJF have experienced abrupt changes, including the sudden replacement of the pastor, the arrival of two priests who are establishing an oratory — a place where priests live communally to support each other in work and prayer — and the dismissal of the church's popular music director, who is married to a woman.

Dalton, Borucki and other SJF members are wondering whether their parish will keep its progressive character. They're also wondering whether to remain and work toward maintaining the church they love or look for a church that might reflect better their preference for a more relaxed liturgical style and their desire to put Catholic social teaching into action.

'They took my church'

"They're just chasing people away," said Dalton, a retired General Motors executive. Dalton said he's heard rumblings from parish friends that they're thinking about leaving.

"I can communicate with my God and my Jesus in a lot of different ways," they tell him, Dalton said.

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"I think this is a big shift to the right," he added.

"They took my church," said Sharon Cukras, an active member who's been acquainted with SJF since the 1970s. "This, to me, is a huge betrayal," she added.

Msgr. Michael LeFevre, the SJF pastor for five years, was replaced July 1 by Fr. Daniel Jones, a diocesan priest and an associate professor of theology at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit. Joining Jones as associate pastor was Fr. Andrew Mabee, who was ordained in June.

Ned McGrath, director of public affairs for the Detroit Archdiocese, said the new pastoral assignments and the oratory-in-formation do not change the status of St. John Fisher. Jones and Mabee plan to "carry on and reinvigorate" SJF's evangelistic work among Oakland University students, and "Fr. Jones has told parish leadership that he is trying to foster continuity rather than discontinuity," McGrath wrote in an email.

Jones and Mabee did not respond to requests for comment for this story; McGrath wrote that he was answering questions on the priests' behalf as well as for the archdiocese.

A Detroit Oratory

The priests, McGrath said, are forming what is to be called the Detroit Oratory, with the goal of it eventually becoming part of the Congregation of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri. The oratory concept was begun by Neri in the 16th century, and the congregation is a Rome-based society of priests and lay brothers (the Oratorians) who do not take formal vows but have, as McGrath put it, a "bond of charity."

The Detroit Oratory, McGrath said, is a separate project from the parish, though lay men and women are welcome to associate with it.



A young worshipper at St. John Fisher on a recent Sunday. The church serves as the Newman Center for students from nearby Oakland University. (Matt Jachman)

"Living, as they will, with a 'bond of charity,' the Oratorians themselves consider charity — to the poor, the sick, the needy, the marginalized — as a leading thrust to the New Evangelization," McGrath wrote.

LeFevre, who was transferred to St. Owen in nearby Bloomfield Hills, had been living in the rectory at St. Andrew in Rochester while serving as SJF pastor. LeFevre had taken over, in 2015, for the now-retired Fr. Jerome Brzezinski, who had been the pastor for more than 30 years and is still a parish member.

Jones comes from Our Lady of the Rosary, a small parish on Woodward Avenue in Detroit, north of Wayne State University and the redevelopment and gentrification movements that have pushed northward from the city's downtown. His three years at Rosary, where he had also begun an oratory, caused dissent among some parishioners there who said the environment became less welcoming, the homilies less relevant and the parishioners' mission of helping people in a troubled neighborhood less important. That oratory folded.

LeFevre's transfer, Jones' arrival and plans for an oratory were announced at SJF during weekend Masses in March, just before Detroit-area churches were shut down for public worship because of the coronavirus pandemic. The churches have since reopened with social distancing guidelines.

Critique over communications

Some parishioners said they were taken aback by the abrupt nature of the announcement and the fact that parish members had not been consulted; even LeFevre, who had one year left on what was to be a six-year stint at SJF, was surprised.

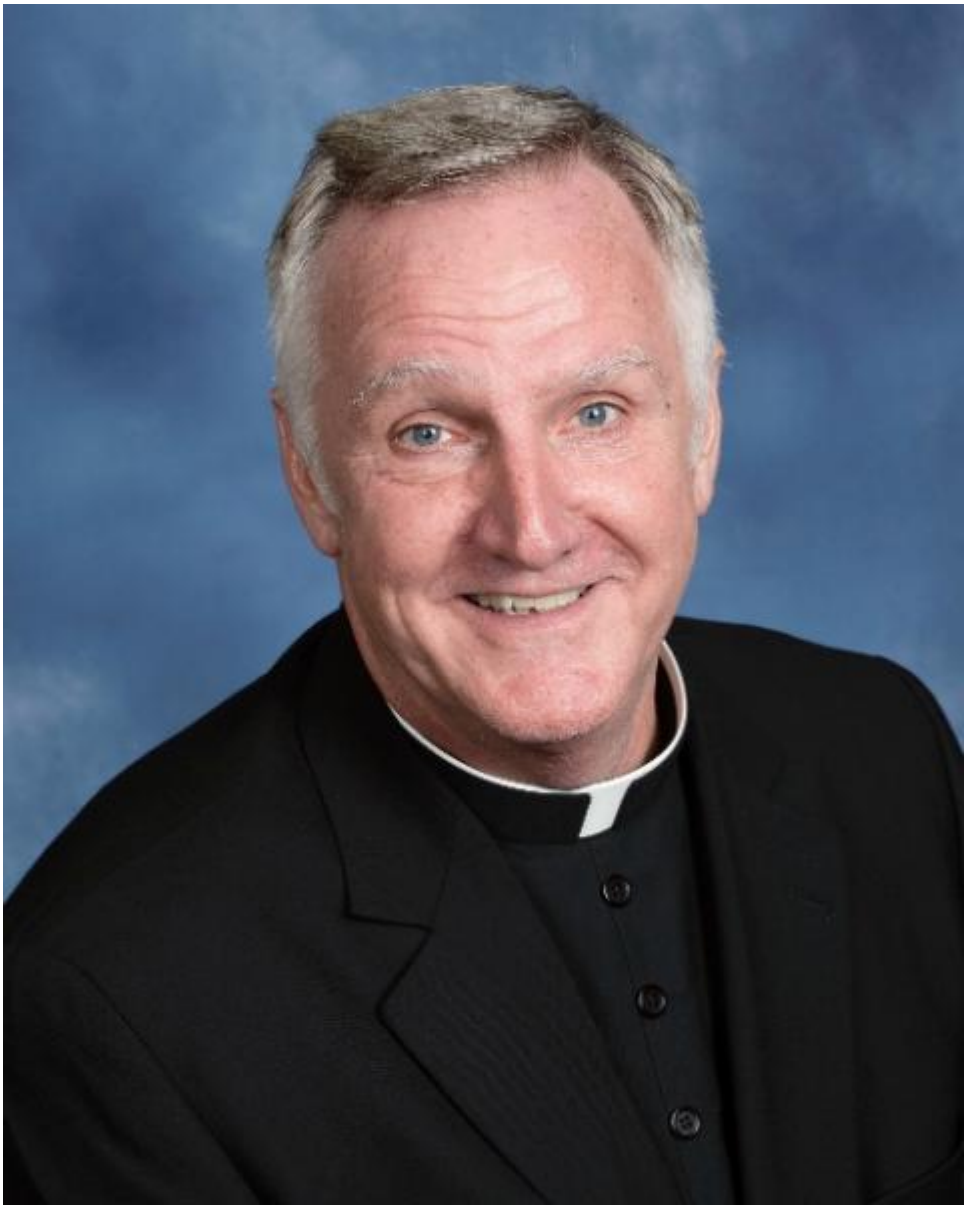
"This is not a new situation. They really seem to operate in a vacuum in a lot of ways" at the archdiocese, said Dalton.

Dalton said that the more he researched and tried to understand the oratory concept, the more confusing it became.

"If it's all about priests living together, they were already doing that," with LeFevre staying at the St. Andrew rectory, he said.

"A lot of people didn't know what that meant," said Borucki. "They thought it was going to change the tone of the parish."

"There are a lot of older people at St. John Fisher. These people take their faith seriously. It's been with them their whole lives," Dalton said. "To have them treated like this is just, like, 'What are you guys thinking?' It makes you start questioning the Catholic Church."



Msgr. Michael LeFevre (Detroit Archdiocese)

Shortly after the announcement, the Boruckis hosted a dinner with the aim of letting parish friends vent their frustrations. They invited 12 parishioners, Borucki said, and 17 showed up; soon, he said, a list was drawn up of about 60 members who wanted to keep informed about the impending changes.

The mid-March church shutdown and a dearth of information about the changes added to parishioners' frustrations, some said. But SJF members were able to worship remotely for more than three months, as LeFevre and others put together socially distanced Masses that were recorded on video, complete with music (each musician and choir member recorded his or her part separately) and then mixed,

edited and made available online. Between them, SJF music director Terry Gonda, her wife, Kirsti Reeve, and another parish member, Kevin Verbrugge, put in dozens of hours each week in preparing each Mass for more than three months.

"The virtual Mass was so important to many people because they still felt part of the community," Gonda said.

Music at St. John Fisher Masses had included both contemporary praise music and more traditional hymns, and the instrumentation was piano- and guitar-based, Gonda said.

Firing a 'gut punch'

However, on June 24, just days before Jones replaced LeFevre, the archdiocese dismissed Gonda, the music director for six years and an assistant director for 30 years before that. The church teaches that LBGTQ people should be accepted and welcomed as Catholics, although it also expects that they be celibate and not enter into same-sex marriage.

The moved sparked much anger in the SJF community.

"It's just wrong," said Rose Dalton. "She [Gonda] kept me in the church. I was ready to leave. I was done. She's the reason I stayed with the church."

"The Terry thing was really a big gut punch," said Borucki.

Gonda, a St. John Fisher member since 1979, when she was an Oakland University freshman, said her year-to-year contract was to expire June 30, and that she would have left quietly had the archdiocese not renewed it. She said she and Reeve recognize that devout Catholic lesbians who are civilly married present a conundrum for the archdiocese.

"There is clearly some broken thinking going on that is causing great damage to the church. We are in a black-and-white, either-or situation here," Gonda said.



Fr. Daniel Jones, left, and Fr. Andrew Mabee (Detroit Archdiocese photos)

LeFevre, she said, knew of their marriage. "He had accompanied us," she said, noting that the priest provided spiritual counseling to the couple.

McGrath said the archdiocese has a longstanding policy of not commenting on personnel matters.

Gonda said she refused to sign a severance agreement with the archdiocese that offered minimal compensation and would have barred her from speaking publicly about the firing and also from working or volunteering for the church.

Parish members say the entire SJF musical ensemble — choir members and musicians — was ready to quit in protest after Gonda's dismissal, but that she and Reeve urged them to stay, see how the new priests run the parish and begin a dialogue with the goal of a greater understanding.

A call for dialogue

The wait-and-see approach that Gonda and Reeve are taking includes, Gonda said, not taking Communion at SJF, for now at least, because of their status as married lesbians. Jones had advised them against seeking Communion there, she said.

"We started with dialogue, met with Father Dan," and are going through a discernment process, Gonda said. "Until that matures a bit more, we are not presenting ourselves for Communion."

Gonda said she has also begun a dialogue with the archdiocese over its conflicts with the Catholic LGBTQ community, particularly the prohibition on having Masses said in the archdiocese for Dignity Detroit, an organization for LGBTQ Catholics, and the expulsion of Fortunate Families Detroit, a support group for family members of LGBTQ Catholics.



There were about 50 worshippers at a recent Sunday morning Mass at St. John Fisher Chapel University Parish in the Detroit suburb of Auburn Hills. It was the second Sunday at St. John Fisher for the two priests there, Fr. Andrew Mabee, pictured, and Fr. Daniel Jones. (Matt Jachman)

"My goal is a healthier archdiocese, and people across the divide coming together in a bridge," Gonda said. "This behavior is not how Jesus would act."

Some SJF parishioners, including Gonda and Reeve, in early July started a "house church" movement in which worshippers, in their own homes, watch a weekly online video that includes prayers, music, readings and reflections, and add their own reflections for a Liturgy of the Word service.

'Kind of torn right now'

Jim Dalton is part of the Catholic Community Response Team, in which members of churches in the Pontiac Area Vicariate coordinate efforts to offer help — food, clothing, utility payments and more — to struggling people. Dalton is one of the team's Movers and Shakers, who collect donated furniture and household goods, sell them at nominal cost to those in need — people coming out of prison, escaping abusive situations or rebuilding their lives after a house fire, for example — and deliver the items. Proceeds from the sales go toward emergency bill payments in order to help needy people avoid utility shutoffs.

The Movers and Shakers helped Jones move from Our Lady of the Rosary's rectory in Detroit to his new oratory home near SJF. "We took an attitude of, 'Give the guy a chance,' " Dalton said.

But Dalton wants to see Jones embrace Catholic social teaching and the community outreach programs that St. John Fisher has developed over about 35 years. With the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting economic fallout, "people need help today like they've never needed help before," Dalton said.

Borucki was a pastoral associate and the business manager at SJF for 16 years, retiring at the end of 2018. He and Louise volunteer through the church for the South Oakland Shelter, which serves Oakland County's homeless population, and Louise Borucki helps run the parish's alternative gifts market, which offers products from local and fair-trade businesses.

Borucki took a class taught by Jones at Sacred Heart, from which Borucki earned a master's degree in pastoral studies in 2011. "He seems to be a very, very thorough scholar," he said of Jones. "I admired him for his knowledge."

But he's on the fence about whether to remain at St. John Fisher, while his wife is ready to leave, he said.

"I love the parish. I worked long hours there" raising money, managing projects and overseeing finances, said Borucki. "It's the best job I ever had."

He added: "To see it just kind of being destroyed is gut-wrenching."

"I am just kind of torn right now. ... Do I want to see if I can help make change, or do I just leave and forget it?" he said.

[Matt Jachman is a freelance writer and a former reporter and copy editor for a chain of Detroit-area newspapers.]