News

Bishop Peter Jugis of Charlotte, North Carolina, prays during the formal opening and blessing

Bishop Peter Jugis of Charlotte, North Carolina, prays during the formal opening and blessing of St. Joseph College Seminary near Mount Holly, North Carolina, Sept. 15, 2020. (CNS/Catholic News Herald/SueAnn Howell)



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Religion scholar Maria Lichtmann felt a strangeness overcome St. Elizabeth of the Hill Country Parish in Boone, North Carolina, four years ago.

Fr. Matthew Codd, the then-pastor at St. Elizabeth's, was joined by a group of seminarians who went through the church's theology library and removed books deemed heretical, including those of spiritual writers Henri Nouwen and Thomas Merton. The books were later burned, she was told by a parish staff member.

Lichtmann, a retired religious studies professor at Appalachian State University, left the region in part, she told NCR, because of the changes in the parish. She now lives in Georgia.

"I felt it was a lost cause," she said about St. Elizabeth's.

The spirit of hyper-orthodoxy in parish leadership continued, noted Lichtmann, after Codd was replaced in July 2019 by Fr. Brendan Buckler.

Nearing 18 months since Buckler arrived, on the edge of Boone, a college town and popular retirement community in the mountain foothills, a few dozen now gather every other Sunday at a car restoration shop shared by a hospitable non-Catholic, the husband of a parishioner.

"Who sent you?" newcomers are asked, in part to assure that the gathering does not grow too large and violate the state's social distancing pandemic regulations. Another reason is that Massgoers fear that the leadership of the Diocese of Charlotte and of St. Elizabeth's will make life difficult for two visiting priests who celebrate the Mass or for parishioners who might want to return to St. Elizabeth's.

And then a common ritual is repeated. Mass is said, in English, with a priest facing the tiny congregation. A few popular hymns are sung. Communion is distributed in the hand, both because of a safety provision during the pandemic and because congregants like it that way, even if that approach is discouraged at St. Elizabeth's. Masks for protection in the pandemic are used, much in contrast to St. Elizabeth's, where the parish website proclaims that while masks are allowed, they are symbolic of anti-Christian attitudes not conducive to authentic Catholic life.

The informal Mass in the auto shop is necessary, parishioner Karen James told NCR, because "people have no alternative," as the nearest Catholic parish is at least 45 minutes' to an hour's drive away. In the hill country, there are relatively few Catholics, and some of those who remain experience a kind of spiritual homelessness. Many parishioners — she estimates about half of 300 active churchgoers who were there when Buckler began — have fled to local Protestant congregations or remain at home, sometimes catching a livestreamed Mass from Charlotte or former hometowns in the Northeast or Midwest. Many Catholics in the Boone area have roots in other parts of the country.

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St. Elizabeth's parish now features three Masses in English each week, one in Spanish, and four in Latin and celebrated in the pre-Vatican II style, with the priest facing the altar instead of the congregation. While some have left, others, enamored of the traditional style liturgy, are now regulars. James notes that many of the cars in the parking lot have plates from out of state or out of the region.

During his tenure as pastor, Buckler has preached that parishioners had the moral obligation to vote for former President Donald Trump, skirted North Carolina pandemic regulations, and attracted a new set of parishioners from other parts of the diocese who now contribute to the support of what has become a traditionalist parish.

Buckler is among a number of pastors in the Charlotte Diocese who are dubbed restorationists, traditionalists, or, in some cases, rad-trads. They are often younger than other priests — Buckler was ordained in 2011 for the Raleigh Diocese — and they are trained in a liturgical tradition foreign to most Vatican II Catholics. Bishop Peter Jugis of Charlotte has invited them into his diocese and they now lead a number of parishes, much to the chagrin of some older clergy, who, mostly quietly, question their bishop's judgment. Jugis recently opened a junior seminary to help train future pastors in a similar mold.

The Charlotte  Diocese is not alone. While Pope Francis preaches an accompaniment for all spiritual seekers and castigates clericalism — he once described young priests who put a premium on enforcing church regulations as "little monsters" — seminaries in the U.S. continue to graduate priests for ordination who look not to Francis, but to Pope John Paul II for inspiration. It is a quiet, awkward and uneasy kind of schism in church practice and discipline.

Many traditionalist seminarians seek training in regular seminary classes. But on their own time, they follow leaders such as Taylor Marshall and Church Militant, both anti-Francis websites.

"It's an alternative magisterium," Fr. Tim Kelly, a pastor in the Diocese of Tyler, Texas, told NCR. Kelly was formerly a teacher of homiletics and patristics at St. Mary's Seminary in Houston, where he observed how seminarians, after classes, would flock to social media for instruction on liturgical rubrics and moral doctrine.

Bishop Peter Jugis of Charlotte, North Carolina (CNS/Courtesy of the Charlotte Diocese)

Bishop Peter Jugis of Charlotte, North Carolina (CNS/Courtesy of the Charlotte Diocese)

While the faculty at St. Mary's offers a curriculum much in line with Vatican II teachings, said Kelly, seminarians are often inclined to go online, where they are

presented with an alternative vision. There they are told that Francis is failing to proclaim church teaching, that most bishops are lacking in orthodoxy, and that it will be up to new, younger priests to rescue the church from its shortcomings.

"This thing has been coming out of the cult of John Paul," said Kelly, who noted that many of the seminarians discount the focus of Francis and his efforts to renew the church.

Franciscan Sr. Katarina Schuth, professor emerita at the Seminaries of St. Paul in Minnesota, has spent decades analyzing seminarians and authored numerous articles and books on the subject.

She said the faculties of most seminaries now have few professors, much less students, who have a lived experience of Vatican II. That transformation in the church is seen as something for the history books.

Seminary rectors are appointed by their local bishops, many of whom were formed during the John Paul II era. With a premium based on loyalty, many of those rectors were moved up to become bishops themselves during the John Paul and Benedict eras, noted Schuth.

While bishops became more conservative and tradition-minded, so have their seminary students, said Schuth.

"They want certainty. They want answers," she said, noting that they prefer to gloss over complicated issues of moral theology and other concerns. They also prefer the power granted to pre-Vatican II clergy and look forward to running parishes on their own terms.

Today's seminarians, said Schuth, are part of an overall generational cohort that is more likely to be liberal and secular. These conservative seminarians are set apart in many ways from their peers, with a strong focus on evangelizing their age group members into traditional Catholic ways. They latch on to traditional modes and symbols, such as the wearing of elaborate cassocks. She said they will exert influence on the church as more are ordained.

"It's a small number, but they are not insignificant because they tend to be active," she said of today's more tradition-minded seminarians. They immerse themselves in conservative Catholic media sites such as EWTN, Life Site News and Church Militant.

Their politics also tend to the conservative. Many supported former President Donald Trump. Their vision of church social teaching is limited, said Schuth.

"It's all about abortion, nothing else matters," she said about their politics.

Once ordained, they receive support from a number of bishops, including Jugis of Charlotte, who has welcomed priests from outside the diocese to implement a more traditional approach in parishes. Some run into conflicts with their parishioners, used to having input on church ministry. In areas such as metropolitan Charlotte, there is heavy "parish shopping," as Catholics wander around seeking out a liturgical and church governance style best suited to them, said diocesan priests interviewed by NCR.

In some diocesan parishes, there is a stickler approach to church rules and regulations, far beyond what is normal practice, said one diocesan priest who requested anonymity to avoid a public disagreement with his boss, the bishop. For example: Codd, now pastor at St. Thomas Aquinas Church in Charlotte, has asked that all who were baptized in his church in recent years be rebaptized because the proper Vatican mandated formula — the preferred saying is "I baptize" — was not used. Previously a deacon in the parish might have used a formula that began "we baptize."

But parish shopping is not an easy matter in isolated Boone. Parishioners who seek out the liturgy they have grown up with since Vatican II have few alternatives. A number have joined the local Lutheran and Episcopal churches.

While the complaints largely focus on differences in liturgical styles, they also spill over into disputes about how the parish is run, the role of laypeople, particularly women, and the transparency of financial information about the church. St. Elizabeth's parish hasn't released a financial report in five years, said James, and the parish council hasn't met since Buckler became pastor.

"He is taking us back to pre-Vatican II," Mary Benson Farthing, a former parishioner, said. She now goes to Mass at another Catholic parish 25 miles away.

For those parishioners raised during the advent of the Mass in the vernacular experienced in post-Vatican II parishes, there is opposition. Farthing was in her 20s during the Vatican II years.

"Having lived through the 1950s, I don't think I want to go back to that," she said.

A parishioner who wished to remain anonymous for fear of alienating parishioners supportive of Buckler, said, "There is no joy in going to Mass anymore. So many of our parishioners have left."

Buckler has intruded on the spiritual development of parishioners, Farthing said. A parish Bible study group, using the Little Rock guide popular in many parishes, was told to cease. The series was not orthodox enough, they were told.

Jack Hellenbrand came to Boone 16 years ago from Wisconsin. Buckler has disturbed aesthetic sensibilities through his changes, he told NCR. Many older parishioners were part of renovating the church and establishing a simple wooden altar, created to blend visually into the landscape of the Appalachians.

Buckler put in giant candles on the altar, in what Hellenbrand described as a "Counter-Reformation" touch, common in German churches (Hellenbrand, 53, is a teacher of German). "It is not the look of a modern church which melds with the natural beauty of North Carolina," he said.

"It all goes back to the Counter-Reformation. I have a huge problem with that because I have an historical sense," said Hellenbrand.

Lichtmann noted that Buckler made sure there were no more girl altar servers, and at times he was accompanied by six male servers, setting a sign that pre-Vatican II ritual was to be the norm among the Catholics of Boone.

Soon after he arrived, the incense was so intense that the fire department was called as a church smoke alarm got tripped, she said. Lay ministers to the sick and homebound were eliminated, replaced by Buckler.

Letters of complaint have been sent by James and other participants in the informal alternative Mass group. Recipients included Jugis, Archbishop Gregory Hartmayer of Atlanta, the metropolitan for the region, and Archbishop Christophe Pierre, the apostolic nuncio. No one responded to her letters, said James. Buckler, Codd and Jugis declined to speak to NCR for this article.

Andi Peters, another former St. Elizabeth parishioner, said the parish has ceased to be a friendly, supportive environment.

Buckler, she said, "would prefer to speak in a dead language. It was a welcoming place, and it has become an unwelcoming place." During the pandemic, the lack of masks during Mass has become a kind of cultural symbol, a position popular with some right-wing groups who question methods used to deal with the coronavirus pandemic.

"It shows a brazen lack of awareness that the rules don't matter, that keeping people safe is not what matters," said Peters. The preached theology is often strange, said Peters, who noted that one Christmas, Buckler explained that the incarnation did not include Jesus actually being birthed but that he arrived into the world in a non-physical way.

Not everyone at St. Elizabeth's is opposed to Buckler's approach. Parishioner Tom Trueman credited the pastor for being meticulous with liturgy. "There's more piety that I've ever seen shown to the Eucharist," he said.

Julie Trueman, his wife, said there is too much discord in the parish and there should be more unity shown by those opposed to Buckler. St. Elizabeth's is the only Catholic church in the community, surrounded by dozens of Baptist congregations of various sorts. Parishioners note that Catholics in the region remain a small minority, despite a growth in transplants from the Northeast and Midwest over recent years.

"The Catholic Church does not need this in this day and age," she said, citing those who have chosen to worship at the local Lutheran and Episcopal congregations.

Fr. John Hoover, who ministers from a small monastic community in Mount Holly, North Carolina, is one of two priests who occasionally come to Boone to celebrate Mass with those who have fled St. Elizabeth's. They meet in the garage, amid some half dozen 1950s remodeled cars, gathered around a simple sewing table decorated with candles and flowers. After the homily, Hoover invites participants to talk about their own spiritual struggles, sometimes hearing about the issues raised at the parish. Social distance is maintained and a collection is taken up to pay the expenses for Hoover and another priest, who travel more than two hours each way to celebrate the Mass.

Hoover told NCR the Mass is "a regular Vatican II liturgy with good hymns and a happy atmosphere." It's not so happy over at St. Elizabeth's, he said, as some parishioners choose the garage Mass with its familiar tone over what they perceive

as a liturgical blast from a distant past now ensconced in the structure they helped build overlooking the Appalachian hills.

Peters is among those who miss the community, which she has been a part of for more than 18 years. She now watches a livestream Mass from her hometown parish in Illinois.

"There is no community," she said about the situation at the Boone parish. "We no longer have that. With the pandemic, it's another factor of grief in our cap. We have lost our community."

Lichtmann, from her new home in Georgia, also expressed regret, noting that she needed to escape the region to find the kind of post-Vatican II liturgical life taken for granted in most of the country. That is no longer possible in Boone and in many places in the Charlotte Diocese.

"It's beyond the one parish," she told NCR. "It's the diocese."

***Editor's note:*** *Two photographs originally published with this article have been removed due to mistaken crediting information.*

A version of this story appeared in the **Feb 5-18, 2021** print issue under the headline: Charlotte's rad-trad pastors.