News



The Mary Mother of Mankind Church was built overlooking the historic St. Michael's Mission, which was first established by Franciscan friars among the Navajo people in 1898. (Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola)

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Navajo Catholics in the U.S. southwest are expressing upset over a decision to transfer administration of an historic mission founded some 125 years ago from the Franciscan Order of Friars Minor to the Diocese of Gallup, New Mexico.

They are also voicing frustration about the process of consultation before the transferring of St. Michael's Mission, the first permanent Catholic mission to the Navajo, founded by St. Katharine Drexel in 1898.

Teresa Sells-Gorman, who has served in lay ministry since the early 1980s, wants the land and the mission to remain under the Franciscans. "What's going on here should include the voice of the people of each parish, which it hasn't, was never ever brought to us," she said in a recent interview.

Gallup Bishop James Wall first announced the move in a letter released Jan. 23. He said the transfer was made necessary as the Franciscans' Our Lady of Guadalupe Province, headquartered in Albuquerque, prepares to merge with five other U.S. provinces of the Order of Friars Minor in October.

"Like many religious orders, communities, and dioceses throughout the United States, the Franciscans have not been immune from the challenges that come with a downward trend in vocations throughout the past half-century," said Wall.

"All six provinces throughout the country are finalizing a merger into a single entity in 2023, and with this restructuring come changes, both positive and negative — including restructuring in our own diocese," he said.

In a statement to NCR, Franciscan Fr. Ronald Walters, provincial minister of the Our Lady of Guadalupe province, said that "the stark reality of a friar population depleted by age, coupled with fewer new vocations, made this decision inevitable."

"The departure from St. Michael's Mission comes with unavoidable sadness, frustration and disappointment for many — the friars included. Such emotions are part of any process of loss," Walters added, noting feelings are particularly intense because of the 125-year history of Franciscan presence among Navajo people.



Franciscan friars will soon depart this office and friary at St. Michael's Mission, located just west of the Navajo capital of Window Rock, Arizona, as the Franciscans' Our Lady of Guadalupe Province turns over the historic mission to the Diocese of Gallup on July 1. (Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola)

Wall invited Catholics to a listening session at the mission on Jan. 31. Wall didn't attend the meeting, but sent Fr. Peter Short, the diocesan vicar general. Walters presided over the encounter.

Short and Walters received an earful from Navajo people from the five Franciscan parishes on the reservation. Speakers expressed sadness and sorrow that Franciscan leaders were giving away the large mission, which is viewed as the physical and spiritual center of the Franciscan presence on the Navajo Nation.

While some people expressed resignation to accept the change as best as possible, most voiced frustration that Franciscan and diocesan officials hadn't consulted all Navajo Catholics in the five parishes before making the decision.

Since the meeting, many continue to voice their opposition to the decision, and they are writing letters to church officials and praying to Drexel, the founder of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, who purchased the mission land, invited Franciscan friars to accompany her sisters in ministry, and funded the establishment of St. Michael Indian School and the Franciscan mission.

Irma Bluehouse told NCR she is heartbroken over the loss of what she calls the "Navajo Cathedral." Although she didn't attend the meeting, she soon wrote a letter to Wall, telling him many Navajo Catholics don't agree with Walters' decision and are "praying that he has a change of heart."



Irma Bluehouse, the granddaughter of Henry Chee Dodge and daughter of Annie Dodge Wauneka, both legendary leaders of the Navajo Nation, poses with personal memorabilia that connects her to the historic St. Michael's Mission. (Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola)

Bluehouse is the granddaughter of Henry Chee Dodge and the daughter of Annie Dodge Wauneka, both legendary tribal political leaders. Her grandfather became a Catholic, she explained, after he witnessed the efforts of early friars to help Navajo people establish their tribal government, expand the reservation land base, start the first tribal census records, create a written Navajo language, educate Navajo children, and share the Catholic faith.

In 1998, Bluehouse's late husband, Milton Bluehouse Sr., was serving as president of the Navajo Nation when he and other tribal officials issued a proclamation recognizing the 100th anniversary of the Franciscans' contributions to the Navajo Nation.

Bluehouse, who said she hasn't received a response from the Gallup bishop, would like Franciscans to remain at St. Michael's Mission, with the Diocese of Gallup sending diocesan priests to assist and learn from the friars.

Sells-Gorman and Patsy Billison, who are sisters, did attend the meeting, and Sells-Gorman received enthusiastic applause after delivering impassioned remarks and requesting Walters reconsider his decision and seek the opinions of all Navajo Catholics before moving forward.

Billison, a member of St. Michael's parish and its Kateri Circle community group, said Franciscan officials had raised the issue of diminishing numbers of friars to mission parishioners in the past. But she said they hadn't been specific about when any ministry changes might occur.

"So, they were letting us know what the future plans are, but they said it wasn't going to be soon — that they were just letting the parish people know," Billison recalled.



Teresa Sells-Gorman, left, and Patsy Billison stand in front of the Mary Mother of Mankind Church at the historic St. Michael's Mission, first established by Franciscan friars among the Navajo people in 1898. Sells-Gorman's father-in-law helped quarry the stones that were used to build the church. (Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola)

Sells-Gorman said she felt disbelief when the bishop's letter was read aloud at her home parish in Ganado, Arizona. She was stunned the Franciscans would give up St. Michael's Mission, which she views as not just a part of Franciscan history, but an integral part of *Diné*, or Navajo, history.

Navajo Catholics opposed to the mission transfer are not alone. More than a year ago, three friars on the Navajo Nation wrote a letter to the provincial ministers of the six Franciscan provinces planning to unify together. Although the friars didn't offer comments to NCR, Franciscan Frs. Blane Grein, Pio O'Connor and Br. John Friebel provided a copy of their letter, dated April 18, 2022.

Describing St. Michael's Mission as the "heart and soul" of the Franciscan presence in the Southwest, the friars cited several historical pledges Franciscans' leaders made regarding their commitment to Navajo ministry.

The friars proposed St. Michael's Mission become a novitiate house for the new national Franciscan province, which would offer men a Native American ministry experience with parish, hospital, jail, school, Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, Legion of Mary and Kateri Circles opportunities. The friars also requested the Albuquerque province keep control of the mission until the newly formed province's leaders could determine how the mission might be used. The friars said they received no reply from the provincial ministers.

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In his written statement to NCR, Walters, the provincial minister in Albuquerque, said the Franciscans had consulted with Navajo Catholics about their departure from St. Michael's Mission. He said the friars' ministry would continue at four other reservation parishes.

"As painful as it might be for some, this news should not come as a shock," Walters said. "We initiated dialogue with the Diocese more than a year ago about relinquishing custody of the Mission. The Province began discussing its departure from St. Michael's as far back as 1999, and in meetings in the early 2000s with the Navajo community."

Walters didn't address questions about why the mission was being transferred just months before the establishment of the new national province, when new Franciscan leadership might decide to keep the mission and more friars may be available for ministry.

Officials with the Diocese of Gallup declined to answer any questions. They had been asked about their plans for the mission; how the diocese, which frequently describes itself as "the poorest diocese" in the U.S., will finance the upkeep of the mission property; how diocesan officials will address Navajo parishioners' concerns; and whether Short, the vicar general who was recently named pastor, will reside at the mission.

Amid the controversy, Roberta Duncan reflects the views of those who have decided to make the best of the situation. As the president of the mission's Legion of Mary, Duncan said she was aware of Franciscan discussions to eventually turn over some reservation parishes to the diocese because she sometimes read the province's meeting minutes. And as a parishioner, Duncan had attended meetings where the idea was presented. However, she described those discussions as "a little vague" and left her thinking it wouldn't impact St. Michael's and it wouldn't be soon.



Roberta Duncan, stands in front of a shrine to the Blessed Virgin Mary on the grounds of the historic St. Michael's Mission, just west of the Navajo capital of Window Rock, Arizona. (Elizabeth Hardin-Burrola)

Duncan said she is aware the priest shortage is affecting parishes around the world, so she believes Navajo Catholics shouldn't take the province's decision personally.

"OK, it's here," she said. "And this is reality. It's not anybody's fault. It's not the Franciscans' fault. They're not doing this purposefully. They acknowledged that

maybe they could have done a better job of getting us prepared."

Duncan said she is ready to support and help Short when he arrives. "We really need to step up and make this work," she explained. "And it's going to be up to us. And I think that's a challenge that we all have to embrace, and we have to accept."

Duncan, who believes God "brings good out of everything" when one trusts him, said the upcoming changes might turn into a blessing that parishioners can't see now.

"But I do feel real sad, I do feel like it's going to be hard," she said. "But I've been through this before with a lot of other things, and it always turns out OK. And I've learned to rely on God, I've learned to rely on our Mother Mary, I've learned to pray more. My faith has deepened, and a lot of it has to do with the Franciscans."

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