News



A 10 a.m. Mass for Pentecost Sunday is celebrated May 19 at St. Thomas Aquinas Church in St. Cloud, Fla. Father Fidel Rodriguez, right, the parish's 66-year-old parochial vicar, was involved in an altercation at the later 12 p.m. Mass in which the priest said he bit a woman's hand as a last resort to defend the Eucharist from an act of desecration. Eyewitnesses corroborated the priest's version of the events to police. (OSV News screenshot / St. Thomas Aquinas Church via YouTube)

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Orlando, Florida — May 28, 2024
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Father Fidel Rodriguez, the 66-year-old parochial vicar at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in St. Cloud, Florida, was questioned by police following an altercation during Pentecost Sunday Mass May 19.

In body camera footage of that questioning obtained by OSV News from the St. Cloud Police Department, Rodriguez explained to officers in detail how he had bitten the woman on the hand after she had seized the hosts in the ciborium he held and seemed poised to cast them on the floor, despite his repeated requests to let them go and leave the church.

He said the woman was angry that he had denied her Communion at a 10 a.m. liturgy that morning, as she did not appear to understand the guidelines for proper reception of the sacrament. The priest had instead given her a blessing with the recommendation to first go to confession before returning for Communion.

She then presented herself for Communion at the parish's 12 p.m. Mass, and after refusing to answer Rodriguez's query if she had been to confession in the interim, the woman became irate and grasped the hosts, sparking the confrontation.

Body cam footage also shows the woman, whose name and face were redacted in both the video and the police report, at the police station telling investigators that Rodriguez had initiated the outburst.

The woman, who said she had attended the 10 a.m. liturgy for her niece's first holy Communion, displayed to police a reddish bruise in the shape of human teeth on her right forearm, the skin of which was unbroken. She was accompanied by another woman named in the police report as Olivia Santibanez. Both affirmed to police they were "a couple."

Santibanez, who said she had received Communion from the priest immediately before the woman, told police the dispute had been "over a cookie. ... We went to get the fricking bread."

The bitten woman also referred to the host as "a cookie."

Andrew Sullivan, public information officer for the St. Cloud Police Department, confirmed to OSV News by telephone that Rodriguez was not arrested.

A copy of a police report Sullivan sent to OSV News lists a charge of one misdemeanor count of battery, which Sullivan said "normally would not be an arrestable offense." He added the case has been referred to the state attorney's office "to have an impartial third party review it to make sure that it is done in a concise and proper way."

Jason Gunn, public information officer for State Attorney Andrew A. Bain of Florida's Ninth Judicial Circuit, confirmed to OSV News that his office has received the case, which is "currently under review to determine the appropriate course of action."

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The Diocese of Orlando issued a statement in support of Rodriguez, saying that he "was trying to protect the Holy Communion from this sacrilegious act," and that "the full video and the police report show the woman initiated physical contact and acted inappropriately.

"It should be noted Father Rodriguez had no prior knowledge of the woman's background. Further, while the Diocese of Orlando does not condone physical altercations such as this, in good faith, Father Rodriguez was simply attempting to prevent an act of desecration of the Holy Communion, which, as a priest, Father Rodriguez is bound by duty to protect," said the diocese.

In the footage of his police interview, which took place in the lobby of St. Thomas Aquinas Church, Rodriguez explained that during the 10 a.m. liturgy, the woman — whose name and face were redacted in the St. Cloud Police Department's report and video — presented herself for Communion but neither extended her hands nor opened her mouth to receive the host. She remained silent as he said, "Body of Christ."

The priest said he asked her when she had last received Communion, "because I see that she doesn't know what to do."

When she responded that it had been "many years ago," he then asked if she had since gone to confession and attended Mass every Sunday to receive Communion, he said.

She then refused to answer, claiming, "I don't need to explain (to) you that," said Rodriguez, who then told her he could not give her Communion; he offered to bless her and asked her to move so others could receive.

Livestream footage from the 10 a.m. Mass, which OSV News viewed on the parish's YouTube channel, seems to corroborate that sequence of events, although the audio of the exchange between the priest and the young woman — who appears to be in her 20s or early 30s, with long dark hair and slightly taller than the 5-foot-six-inch priest — cannot be heard, due to the choir.

Livestream video of the 12 p.m. Mass no longer appears to be available on the parish's YouTube channel. However, body camera footage shows one parishioner playing livestream footage of the 12 p.m. Mass confrontation for police officers.

When Rodriguez returned to celebrate the 12 p.m. Mass in Spanish, "at the moment of Communion, she came again," he said.

While he tried to give her "the benefit of the doubt," asking again if she had gone to confession between the two liturgies, the priest said she told him, "No, I don't need to explain to you. ... You don't have authority, you don't have to judge me."

He asked again if she had received absolution, but in response she "pushed me and grabbed me," the priest told police.

"I have the bowl with the holy hosts — for us, it's sacred," he said. "And she grabbed all the host in (her) hands, because she wants to receive for herself; it's not permitted. And she (broke) all the hosts and spread (them) in the bowl. Before spreading (them) in the floor, I grabbed her hand."

When she refused to release her grip despite his protests that "this is wrong, this is sacrilege," said the priest, "the only defense I can found to defend it — this is something for all of us, it's sacred — was biting her.

"I have recognized that I bite her. I'm not denying that," he told police. "Then she started pushing me, and some (Eucharistic) ministers came and grabbed her and asked her to leave."

Both the woman and Santibanez told police that Rodriguez had attempted to "ram" the "cookie" into the woman's mouth at the 12 p.m. Mass, after she had told him she had taken all necessary steps to receive holy Communion.

"I told him, 'Listen, sir, you don't get to judge me right now in God's house,'" the woman said. "I'm just here to accept the bread."

She maintained the priest had then tried to force the host in her mouth, whereupon "I went and tried to grab another cookie," she told police.

In the police report, St. Cloud Police Officer Joseph Nas wrote that he had "interviewed other members of the service who witnessed the incident, which collaborated (the) Father Fidel statement and provided video evidence of the incident. ... At the conclusion of my investigation, I determined in an attempt to defend the Communion bread Father Fidel held as sacred, he bit the arm (the unnamed woman)."

"In the Catholic Tradition, the Eucharist is considered 'the source and summit' of worship and faith," said the diocese in its statement. "The act of participation in Holy Communion therefore calls for a proper understanding, reverence, and devotion. It is not something a person can arbitrarily demand and is certainly not a mere 'cookie' as the complainant called it."

In addition, the diocese said it "believes all people of all faiths should be respected and that their religious ceremonies or services should never be disrupted."

Under Florida state law, "willfully and maliciously" disturbing a school or religious assembly or a funeral is a first degree misdemeanor that can be scaled up to a third degree felony or hate crime in certain circumstances.