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Denver Catholics fight to restore Guadalupe mural

by Dennis Coday



Detail of the mural that was covered up at Denver's Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish.

A year ago, Fr. Benito Hernandez, pastor of Denver's Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, founded to serve the Hispanic community of Denver and known for its decades of community and social activism, did what many of his parishioners consider an unthinkable, sacrilegious act.

He built a wall in front of a mural depicting La Nuestra Senora de Guadalupe -- the parish's patron -- that had adorned the church sanctuary wall for three decades. Parts of the mural not covered by the wall, he had painted over.

"We decided that the sanctuary's original background detracted from the central focus of the Holy Presence of the Blessed Sacrament in the altar," Hernandez said in a statement.

For nearly a year parishioners tried to persuade Hernandez to tear down the wall and restore the mural, but the priest rejected all such suggestions.



According to parishioners, the parish deacon,

William Martinez, preached a homily in June telling them that in their attachment to the mural they were choosing their culture over their faith.

The parishioners sought help from Fr. Jorge de los Santos, the archdiocese's vicar for Hispanic affairs, but de los Santos agreed with Hernandez that the mural was "a distraction." The mural was not destroyed, de los Santos said: "It was treated with as much respect as possible. Anyone who wants to see the mural can go behind the wall."

Meanwhile, folding chairs and ladders were stacked behind the wall. Our lady's mural was now effectively in a closet.

Instead of giving up, the parishioners got organized.

Last month, with the help of Mike Wilzoch, a veteran community organizer and former parishioner, the parishioners formed a group, called Faithful United, printed leaflets, launched a Web site (wouldjesushidehismother.com), began circulating a petition, and scheduled a press conference.

The artist who painted the mural in 1977, Carlota Espinoza, has volunteered to restore it.

Ignored and, they said, disparaged by their pastor, Faithful United decided to take their fight to Archbishop Charles Chaput of the Denver archdiocese.



In a letter dated Sept. 24, the group told Chaput:

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"The Creator, the Mother of Jesus and namesake of the Church, and her Angels in attendance [have been] completely removed from view. The face of God and the Angels were literally painted over -- whitewashed -- while Our Lady of Guadalupe was crudely hidden behind a white wall, where what remains has been defaced by construction work directly on Her image.

?The mural stood for over 30 years as an inspiring source of devotion, pride and faith for thousands of parishioners, visitors from across the globe, and the Latino community which has struggled for decades for true acceptance and respect by the institutional church.?

With the letter, Faithful United sent a petition with 435 signatures that made three demands of Chaput:

- The mural is to be fully restored to its original glory.
- Corrective action is taken towards those who mistreated mural advocates.
- Reconciliation is made with both current and former parishioners, with open and honest dialogue about the issues, with harmony and unity replacing the divisiveness being promoted by church officials today.

Chaput responded Oct. 5 with a letter that read:

"I have full confidence in Father Benito's leadership of Our Lady of Guadalupe parish. As pastor, his decision to remodel the sanctuary was appropriate. I must also frankly share with you that recourse to the *Denver Post* has weakened rather than strengthened the credibility of your petition."

When Faithful United sent Chaput the letter, they had also held a news conference that drew the attention of local print media, as well as Spanish language broadcasters Univision and Telemundo.

Responding to Chaput's criticism of the group's outreach to media, Frances Frain-Aguirre, one of the leaders of Faithful United, told *NCR*: "When you can't get a voice any place, how do you get a voice other than to rise up and say, we have to publicize what is going on."

Frain-Aguirre began attending Guadalupe parish more than 30 years ago.

The parish was founded in 1936 to serve Spanish speaking Catholics in Denver, and until recently was known for its activism, as noted in the history of the archdiocese by Thomas J. Noel. The history is published on the archdiocesan Web site.

Noel wrote:

"When the Reverend Jesse Jackson brought his presidential campaign to Colorado in 1988, he chose the humble church of Our Lady of Guadalupe as a Sunday stop. Two years earlier, Nicaragua's president, Daniel Ortega, likewise had selected it as the place to meet with area religious leaders regarding his country's efforts to rebuild following decades of repressive dictatorship.

"Few were surprised, as Our Lady of Guadalupe Church has been a center of both social and

religious activism for years ? Our Lady of Guadalupe has been a refuge and a center of hope since its founding."

According to Noel, a parish bus and the basketball backboards on the parish playground were painted with the logo of the United Farm Workers.

Noel also records the significance of the mural.

Chaput said that he would review the situation and appointed a senior deacon, Alfonso Sandoval, to convene a meeting with leaders of Faithful United, the archdiocese and the parish.

Wilzoch told *NCR* the group doesn't have high expectations for this meeting.

"We are willing to meet and we won't turn down any opportunity to dialogue; however, even in his invitation, [Chaput] is closing the door," Wilzoch said.

The archbishop has already made clear that he sides with Hernandez, Wilzoch said. No one in the group Chaput appointed to meet with Faithful United "has the power to reverse the pastor's decision. Only the archbishop has that power and he won't meet with us."

"This demonstrates to us that he is not open to having true negotiations," Wilzoch said.

What is the next step for Faithful United? Wilzoch said the organization is just getting started.

NCR contact the Denver archdiocese about this issue. Chaput responded in an e-mail: "I'm sure you'll understand that this is a parish matter. Mediating it in the press would be quite strange; and the fact that this group seeks to do so unfortunately only weakens the integrity of their case."

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