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'I suspect Jesus was not all that popular'

Dan Morris-Young | Mar. 21, 2011

Bishop Robert Vasa at the September 2009 grand opening of the Powell Butte Retreat Center in the Baker, Ore., diocese

Prior to becoming Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger sympathized with the notion of a smaller, more orthodox Roman Catholic church. In his decade as bishop of the Baker diocese in Oregon, Robert F. Vasa in effect implemented Benedict's idea, generating deep reactions of support as well as dissent.

Many lament Vasa's exit from Baker as he traveled early this month to California to fill his recent appointment as coadjutor bishop of Santa Rosa, Calif. Many others express delight or relief at his departure and wonder out loud if temporary apostolic administrator, retired Bishop William Skylstad, can provide pathways to unity in a polarized diocese.

The Baker diocese encompasses 18 countries of eastern Oregon, a land mass of 66,826 square miles -- about one and a half times the size of Tennessee. The area's population since Vasa's installation in January 2000 has mushroomed. However, the number of Catholics has dropped from 39,853 in 2000 to 32,799 in 2010, according to the Official Catholic Directory.

The directory also reports a similar 18 percent drop in the "total students under Catholic instruction" -- from 3,809 to 3,110.

Many attribute the decline to Vasa's hard-line policies, rigid theological interpretations and what they describe as a markedly top-down leadership style short on compassion.

At the same time, supporters laud his "upholding of the magisterium" and "never compromising the faith," in the words of one.

Another described him as "warm, friendly and down to earth" and "the best thing to happen to this diocese."

Vasa himself acknowledges polarity, but said it is not unique to the Baker diocese.

"I would say the polarity here maybe has been emphasized a bit because I am standing in a position and in a

way which has not been stood in as strongly before," Vasa told *NCR*.

"I suspect Jesus was not all that popular, push come to shove," he said. "There is always the possibility that someone is going to reject the truth, but that does not excuse me from teaching it."

"Routinely and regularly I receive messages from across the U.S., both positive and negative, which would indicate that there are folks who feel polarized in their own diocese," he said. "Some are praying that I never show up in their diocese, and some pray that I come there."

"I think when someone stands up a little more strongly, a body of people are going to be very agreeable to that, while a body of people are going to find that very disagreeable. The more mellow an individual is, the less he does, the less he speaks, the fewer people he offends on either side," he said.

"So it seems to me the more clearly we teach there is going to be an initial polarizing effect, but ultimately if we teach the truth" and "we teach that truth with compassion," he continued, "people have to make a decision about that teaching. They can accept it, or they can reject it, but their acceptance or rejection is not the criterion for its truthfulness."

In a farewell letter to the diocese, the 59-year-old prelate does not mention the decline in Catholic numbers. However, he does ask Catholics "not to judge me too harshly" and says he is "painfully aware that some have found me too difficult and I can assure you that I have often carried them with me to the chapel in prayer and at Mass."

"I can only pray that no one has been given true cause to abandon Christ because of me. I am sure that I have not been all that you hoped I could be for you, and I ask that you pray that I do better in the future," he wrote.

While Catholics might not have abandoned Christ, significant numbers either walked away from church participation or "were forced to go to other churches, even to the point of being told their ministries were no longer needed," said Fr. Rob Irwin. A priest of the diocese, Irwin himself sought permission to minister elsewhere last October.

The former rector of St. Francis de Sales Cathedral in Baker (1998-2005), Irwin headed the diocesan priests' council at the time of his leave. He is now parochial vicar at St. George's Parish in Post Falls, Idaho.

He declined to discuss the details of why he relocated, except to say, "As we are ordained to the diocesan priesthood, we take a vow that we will remain obedient to the bishop and to his successors. I became disappointed that I was not able to feel that I could respect and obey the successor to the bishop to whom I had made those vows," Irwin said.

"Actually," Irwin added, "Bishop Vasa has the potential to be an outstanding bishop if he is able to become a little more pastoral. He thinks clearly and concisely and is very analytical and good at making decisions. But he does not consult very much. He's just not the whole package yet."

Fr. James Radloff concurs, but views working with Vasa over time differently. "We did not make it easy for Bishop Vasa here in the Diocese of Baker and I hope we get credit for chipping off some of his sharp edges. I believe the man has grown and learned from this experience and will be a better bishop because of it."

"It is sad that some people never let go of their initial impressions of him," said the popular priest who serves as both "promoter of vocations" and director of youth ministry. "I did and I benefited from the experience." Skylstad said he sees "fostering a sense of unity" in the Baker diocese "with compassion" as a priority and "to be as present as I can be pastorally during this interim time" before a new ordinary is appointed.

Affirmation of faith

Vasa galvanized a traditionalist support base as well as outspoken opposition in 2004 when he promulgated a diocesan requirement that persons involved in parish ministries -- notably in catechetics and service at Mass -- provide full assent to a dozen doctrinal statements in what was called the Affirmation of Personal Faith.

The required "affirmations" included teaching on homosexuality, contraception, chastity, marriage, abortion, euthanasia, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, Mary, hell, purgatory and the authority of the church.

Objectors charged that the requirement was a thinly disguised loyalty oath devoid of room for individual conscience. Others questioned the choice of the stipulated teachings. Some pointed to what they said was a focus on "pelvic issues."

Supporters praised the move, calling it timely and undiluted doctrinal teaching.

Vasa wrote at that time, "It may happen that some Catholics claim a right to 'religious dissent,' from even the serious moral teachings of the church" but this "does not carry with it a corresponding 'right' to hold positions of esteem as a catechist or liturgical minister."

An overnight letter to the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith protesting the Affirmation of Personal Faith by a group calling itself Concerned Catholics of the Diocese of Baker reportedly went unacknowledged.

"Large numbers of people who had been deeply involved in the diocese and in parishes, who had given their lives to the church, began taking refuge elsewhere," said Richard Groves, one of the letter's signers. He is a former priest of the diocese and holds a degree in canon law from Catholic University in Washington, D.C.

Active at Church of St. Edward the Martyr Parish in Sisters, Ore., Groves said, "I know people in their 70s and 80s for whom the church was the center of their lives -- and they are heartbroken. They have been made to feel like outsiders. It is like if you do not toe the line, if you do not accept a very rigid, narrow approach to Catholicism, you do not have a place here."

Leigh Casler counts herself among the diaspora. A member of St. Francis of Assisi in Bend for more than 20 years, Casler said "the atmosphere at St. Francis became so divisive and so emotionally charged that I felt it was necessary to attend somewhere else."

The diocesan Cathedral is located in the diocese's namesake, Baker, but diocesan administrative offices are in Bend. St. Francis of Assisi there is the diocese's largest parish.

St. Francis parish numbers have declined from more than 2,200 families a decade ago to roughly 1,700 or fewer today. The City of Bend grew from 52,029 to more than 83,000 in that time span.

Still, the parish recently built a $6.4 million church plant. According to a parish financial report, the remaining $4.1 million mortgage at 6.25 percent interest carries a monthly interest and principal payment of $29,800. The parish is tapping a "special reserve fund" when monthly building fund contributions fall short.

Despite reducing support to the parish school and keeping the budget at 2005 levels, the parish needs an additional "300 to 400 individuals and families to commit to at least $100 per month" toward the building fund and parish operation, the report stated.

A new retreat center at Powell Butte has also been built. The site includes the bishop's residence.

With major expenditures and fewer Catholics, how does the financial health of the diocese compare to the year 2000?

"I really cannot answer that," Vasa said, "A number of churches and parishes have worked hard to upgrade parish plants, and the retreat center represents a capital loan. So we have on the one hand, I think, properties and some facilities which enhance, if you will, the value and the productivity from a spiritual standpoint of the diocese. Financially, economically, how do you weigh the value of a retreat center against some money on account without a retreat center?"

Vasa said it would have been "penny wise and pound foolish" to have "spent 15 years raising funds before building a retreat center during which a whole generation of teens would have been born and raised without the benefit of a retreat center."

"I would like to think we are healthier overall and a part of that health includes the financial health of the diocese. The economic downturn of the past several years has impacted us as it has everyone, and so those factors are there, too," he said.

Vasa himself did much woodcraft for the retreat center, including working with two other men to build bunk beds for the 40 rooms.

Casler said she wrote Vasa "numerous times" about the Affirmation of Personal Faith and met with him twice.

"The bishop was polite to me when I visited his office to discuss matters, and I was polite to him as well. He allowed me to speak of my concerns, but my feeling was that nothing I said made any difference. I spoke to him about the repercussions of his Affirmation of Faith and I tried to discuss the concepts of love, mercy and compassion, but it was as if my words didn't penetrate his consciousness at all. His mind appeared to be totally made up before I even opened my mouth."

"During one of the audiences," she added, "when I asked him about the importance of an individual's conscience in terms of decision making, I remember very clearly that he said I had been improperly catechized. He said that if a person was properly catechized, his or her conscience would be formed by the Catechism and would naturally follow all the church teaching and that an individual's conscience was only valid if it was in line with church teachings. It chilled me. Why did God give each of us a brain, a heart and the power to reason if he didn't intend for us to use them?"

Asked if he would initiate a requirement similar to the Affirmation of Personal Faith when he succeeds Santa Rosa's Bishop Daniel Walsh, Vasa told NCR, "I will have to see when I take over."

Vasa said he regrets that a "better system of communication" was not in place when he issued the Affirmation requirement and feels at least part of the resistance stemmed from "lack of information" about his intent.

"I still hold very firmly that the bishop has a responsibility of oversight and accountability," he said, "and that everyone who works in the diocese, and particularly in those ministries of teaching in the schools and teaching

catechetics in the parishes, teach in the name of the bishop. It is hard for me to imagine sanctioning someone to teach in my name when they are teaching something that is either by word or personal example absolutely contrary to what I want them to be teaching."

If Vasa had been "more compassionate with those who struggle with what the Catholic Church is asking us to believe," the negative impact of Affirmation of Personal Faith might have been dampened, say parishioners like Ken Roberts.

Active at St. Francis in Bend, Roberts said he would have advised Vasa "to be more pastoral and less legalistic, to be more about the spirit of the law vs. the letter of the law."

"Do not pull up the good wheat along with the weeds," Roberts said, "let the Lord do that when he harvests. A lot of really good wheat got burned in an effort to cleanse the field. I really don't think Bishop Vasa has a mean bone in his body... but his heavy handed approach lost many more than he gained."

Eve McFarland experienced that. The psychotherapist resigned as the diocese?s Victim Assistance Coordinator four years ago. She describes Vasa's approach to clergy sexual abuse issues as "entirely legalistic and almost hostile and demeaning to the impact abuse had on the human psyche and spirit."

"While Bishop Vasa had put into place The Charter for Protection of Children, the Virtus Training and had submitted to an audit, he did not respond to the pain of the victims in an appropriate manner," she claimed, adding that the bishop had made remarks to her "about keeping therapy brief and costs low."

"It is my professional belief and experience that sexual abuse by an authority figure, especially a religious figure, is spiritual abuse of the first order. When I stated that at a meeting of priests, he visibly recoiled and quickly brought my talk to an end," McFarland said.

Watchdog and shepherd

Those like Clare Hayes, however, view Vasa not as heavy-handed but as firmly in control. "He has been a great watchdog and a great shepherd here in the Baker Diocese," said the retired elementary school teacher and Bend parishioner.

Vasa, who was a dinner guest at Hayes' home in February, "was sent here to clean things up, make things better. And now he is being sent to another place to probably do the same thing." she remarked.

Parishioners she knows "are crying and weeping" at Vasa's departure, she said, adding: "Then there are a few who wanted the church to be what they want rather than standing on the 2,000 years of this holy church."

Youth ministry director Radloff chides Catholics who either believe Vasa was removed from Baker for alienating too many Catholics and running up debt, or that he is being sent to Santa Rosa to pull it back into line.

When Vasa replaces Walsh -- who in fact requested a coadjutor -- he will become the sixth ordinary of Santa Rosa, a diocese with five times as many Catholics but less than one fifth the land mass of Baker.

Radloff's overview of reaction to Vasa's leaving: "There is a wide spectrum from those who are seeking what they hope will be a less oppressive bishop and those who have a fear of the unknown -- of what kind of bishop they might get -- to those who are sad he is leaving before finishing the necessary task of getting the Church where it should be -- which it seems that some of these have been blessed with a vision of what this must be."

Radloff said Vasa "showed me again and again proof of his ability to listen to others."

"I was very invigorated by Bishop Vasa's open-door policy," Radloff said, "because the clarity this opportunity afforded me helped me to understand where he was coming from even if I did not agree with him."

"I was always amazed and impressed by how much he listened to the advice given by the Council of Priests," Radloff added. "It was also my belief that he appreciated my outspokenness at these meetings. As I grew to know him better I came to understand that I had nothing to fear by sharing anything with him. In fact, the bishop's opening remarks for many of the meetings included the disclaimer that the priests had nothing to fear in sharing their thoughts and that he encouraged them to do so. This is frequently found in the Council of Priests Minutes."

At the same time, Radloff noted, Vasa could be "quick to form an opinion that might circumvent him hearing everything you might want to say."
Vasa made headlines early last year when he declared that St. Charles Medical Center in Bend may no longer call itself Catholic.

In joint statement issued with hospital officials, Vasa stated: "It would be misleading for me to allow St. Charles Bend to be acknowledged as Catholic in name while I am certain that some important tenets of the ethical and religious directives (of the U.S. bishops' conference) are no longer being observed."

At issue among other things was tubal ligation which eliminates a woman's fertility.

According to Bill Danaher, who has been a lay Catholic chaplain at St. Charles for 24 years, "The question comes up commonly about how do we do things differently now, and the answer is that nothing has changed. We are not owned and operated by the church, but we strongly hold onto and are proud of our Catholic heritage."

"When the decision was announced last year, the CEO called me at home and emphasized that it was the bishop walking away from us, and not the other way around," the full-time chaplain said.

Vasa also drew national attention in 2006 when he suggested the church examine if pro-choice Catholic politicians are in heresy.

"I think there is suitable reason to consider the possibility that there is a right-to-murder heresy," Vasa told Catholic News Service, adding that the concept "could extend to other Catholics who believe that it would be OK to be pro-choice and Catholic."

[Dan Morris-Young is an *NCR* contributor.]

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