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Oakland bishop retracts statement, meets lay leaders

by Monica Clark

OAKLAND, CALIF. ? Bishop Salvatore Cordileone has published an apology for an official statement posted in late June on the Oakland, Calif., diocesan Web site regarding a series of events at St Joseph the Worker Parish in Berkeley, including the pastor's decision to evict the pastor emeritus from the rectory.

In a new statement on the Web site, Cordileone said the original one "was not meant in any way to point fingers, assign blame or impugn anyone's reputation. To the extent that this may have happened to anyone involved in this matter, and to the extent that the statement may have gone beyond what would be appropriate, I apologize and express my regrets."

Among other things, the original statement alleged that the retired pastor, Fr. George Crespino, had failed "to observe the necessary steps to insure the valid and licit celebration of the sacraments" and had refused "to discontinue certain irregularities in the celebration of the sacraments."

Crespino, who was not contacted by any diocesan official before the allegations were posted, told NCR the statement was "filled with misstatements, questionable assertions, and, in some cases, lies."

The first diocesan statement was posted after parishioners confronted Cordileone during his pastoral visit to the Berkeley parish, June 18-19. They wanted a meeting with him to discuss their concerns because earlier efforts, including letters and petitions by more than 200 parishioners, had yielded no response

They are seeking the transfer of Fr. John Direen because of numerous administrative decisions he has made since becoming pastor two years ago. They say his actions, including the removal of Crespino in May and the dissolution of the parish and finance councils in March, have been seriously detrimental to parish life. (Just prior to the bishop's visit in June, Direen formed new parish and finance councils.)

The group also objects to what they believe are Direen's efforts to limit participation of El Consejo Latino

(the Spanish-speaking advisory council) and his turning of the parish's primary meeting space into a religious gifts store without any parish consultation.

Eight parishioners from the Salvemos/Rescue St. Joseph the Worker Committee, formed after Crespin was told to leave the parish, met with Cordileone on July 25 to reiterate their concerns about Direen. They asked for a new pastor and for the removal of the offending statement.

Cordileone met separately with Crespin, who has moved to St. Cornelius Parish in Richmond, on the same day.

A few days later, the bishop's apology replaced the statement on the diocesan Web site. It was also printed as the bishop's column in the Aug. 8 edition of the diocesan newspaper, *The Catholic Voice* (www.catholicvoiceoakland.org).

The original statement had also accused Crespin, who served as diocesan chancellor under Bishop John Cummins, of speaking publicly against Direen.

In his new statement, Cordileone said he appreciated Crespin's "affirmation that he has never made a public statement disparaging a fellow priest, and I apologize for an official diocesan statement indicating otherwise."

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Crespin, in a June letter to fellow priests about the original Web site statement, said he may not have "as rigid an approach to sacramental ministry as the current pastor," but that he deeply resented "the questioning of the validity of the sacraments that I celebrated."

The Salvemos/Rescue St. Joseph the Worker group has told Cordileone they are considering his request, following their July meeting, to work with Direen on the leadership and communication problems they identified. To start, they have asked for a diocesan audit of parish finances along with an assessment of current parish ministries.

In an article in the Aug. 8 *Catholic Voice*, Direen said he is "walking softly" to avoid getting in the way of the bishop's work with the group and expressed his willingness to meet with the eight parishioners "to continue the discussion."

According to the same article, Cordileone said, "I always prefer to try to work things out with the pastor," adding that he had never removed a pastor, although he did not rule out the possibility.

The Salvemos/Rescue St. Joseph planning group of about 45 parishioners, which meets weekly, said they will continue their Sunday morning demonstrations in front of the church. These demonstrations began during the bishop's parish visit in June.

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