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Involved laity and determined pastor rebuild St. Louis parish

by Joan Barthel



Fr. Gerald Kleba (Roland Martir)

ST. LOUIS -- When Fr. Gerald Kleba volunteered to take over as pastor of St. Cronan Parish 10 years ago, he walked into a devastated parish. Its former pastor, Joe Ross, was a pedophile. Even though he had pleaded guilty to kissing a boy in confession, and had been arrested twice on other charges of sexual misconduct, the St. Louis archdiocese had shuffled him from parish to parish until he was sent to St. Cronan, where he was pastor for 11 years.

“Oh God, the anger of the people here!” Kleba recalled. “I never knew what a hornet’s nest I was getting into. People were angry at Joe Ross, angry at the archbishop for sending him here, angry at me because they couldn’t trust that the archdiocese wasn’t screwing them again.”

The people were not only angry, but resentful. They had wanted to hire a rota of priests for one year, while they collectively considered the next step.

“Coming here was the greatest humbling experience of my life,” Kleba said. “The first week, I was told to just sit in a pew in the middle of the church until the people could do a blessing over me and welcome me into being their pastor. I felt very second-rate.”

A devastated parish will either drift into irrelevance, or it will pick up the pieces and try to put itself back together. St. Cronan shows how a parish with a determined pastor and an involved laity can not only survive a pedophile priest, but can rebuild itself into what the pastor calls “the church of the future.”

It begins with the brochure at the church’s front door: “All are welcome: young, old; gay, straight; rich, poor; Catholic or not.” At Sunday Mass, a lesbian couple and their children walk up the aisle and offer the gifts. At the Eucharist, people surround the altar. They do not simply say amen; in a climate invigorated with the adrenaline of the Second Vatican Council, the pastor opens his arms: *Let the church say amen.*

Kleba, who prefers to be called Gerry -- “I’m not much into clericalism”-- stresses lay leadership. “There’s a high level of shared responsibility and equality here, and since I encourage it, people give more of themselves. For several years I didn’t even write a reflection in the bulletin, because I didn’t want people to feel that this is the pastor’s thing.”

He lives in a pleasant, old-fashioned house next to the small church, a modest red-brick building that has no funds for air-conditioning in the city’s scalding summers. “Raising money takes a major effort,” Gerry said. “Many people here don’t believe in the diocesan church. They don’t want to contribute to a seminary that doesn’t take women.”

It’s a mostly white parish in a district that’s mostly black, and it has a high percentage of professionals: teachers and social workers, some doctors and lawyers, a circuit court judge. “It’s a very complex group of people,” longtime parishioner Tom Mullen said. “They’re thinkers, which always gets you in trouble.”

At 70, Gerry’s had both a knee and a hip replacement, but he rides his bike and swims at the Y. He takes piano lessons, paints landscapes, and has written three books: *The People Parish: A Model of Church Where People Flourish*, *Joseph Remembered: The Father of Jesus* and *Why Go to Mass?* He’s donated 225 pints of blood and has pestered other people into doing the same. “Other priests ask for money,” a parishioner said. “Gerry asks for blood.”

He always wanted to be a priest. In eighth grade, he had to write an essay on “Why a Religious Vocation Appeals to Me.” That was in 1955, when the Catholic church and its schoolteachers described the priesthood in uncomplicated, sentimental terms. “I believe it is the simplest, surest and shortest way to heaven,” he wrote. He won third prize.

Beginning with the seminary, he knew it would not be simple. “It was boot camp -- belittling, dictatorial and non-intellectual, but it was the only way to get to the priesthood.” He was ordained in 1967, setting out on a priestly path that has taken him from a country parish to the University of Notre Dame to the suburbs to the inner city, where he confronted racism, including his own. “I had known only a few black people in my life, and I was scared. I was afraid of people standing on street corners, afraid to knock on neighbors’ doors.” He was yelled at: “Get your white ass out of this neighborhood!” A black parishioner told him how her son, walking in a white section of the city, had stopped at a church to go to confession. “For your penance,” the priest told him, “never set foot in this church again.”

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By 2004, two years into his pastorate at St. Cronan, the pastoral

team consisted of Gerry, a gay man and a nun. "A woman and a gay man as copastors bring authenticity to who they are," he said. "They are people baptized in the priesthood of Christ Jesus. The Catholic church can violate people's rights as much as, say, the Chinese Communist Party."

But Archbishop Raymond Burke had come to town in 2003. He made national headlines by declaring that he would deny Communion to any pro-choice Catholic politician, and that any Catholic who voted for such a candidate would be guilty of serious sin. And he set about cracking down on St. Cronan, with special focus on the nun, Charity Sr. Louise Lears.

Known as a compassionate, faith-filled woman, Lears taught a college class in the spirituality of nonviolence and helped set up the Center for Victims of Torture and War Trauma. In November 2007, she attended the ordination of two women in the Roman Catholic Womenpriests movement at a synagogue that had always had good relations with St. Cronan. Other Catholics had attended the ordination, but a videotape singled Lears out. In December, she received from Burke, by messenger, a canonical admonition, informing her that she was suspected of having committed a grave violation of church teachings and law.

Soon afterward, Gerry was summoned to the archbishop's house. Burke pointed out the priest's shortcomings, but basically his message boiled down to: Fire Lears.

"Archbishop," Gerry said, "I urge you to call Sister Louise and invite her to come here and speak with you personally, rather than have couriers and canon lawyers and juridical hearings. In terms of the Gospel, if your sister or brother has anything against you, leave your gift at the altar and go to that person and be reconciled, then take your gift to the altar."

"Well, if she is willing to come and be reconciled, of course," Burke said.

"Archbishop," Gerry said, "listen again. The Gospel says you go and be reconciled -- it doesn't say anything about the other person. I'm not telling you how things will proceed with Sister -- I'm only saying that if you talk, something wonderful might happen."

They did not talk. On June 26, 2008, Burke signed an interdict against the nun, accusing her of publicly inciting "animosity or hatred" toward him and the pope. He banished her from ministry in St. Louis and barred her from receiving the sacraments.

On Aug. 10, 2008, St. Cronan held a farewell Mass for her. She packed up her books and her calico cat and moved to Baltimore.

A week later, Burke celebrated his farewell Mass at the cathedral. He moved to Rome, where he became a cardinal and the head of the Vatican's Supreme Court -- the very office that would hear any appeal from Lears and her canon lawyers.

That December, Gerry was told he had nonsmoker's lung cancer, stage four, incurable. While he remained St. Cronan's pastor, he moved back to his boyhood home to stay with his sister.

People worried that St. Cronan might be closed. Most Sundays, the little church was only half-filled. Many people had left because of Ross, many more because of the treatment of Lears. Now, in Gerry's absence -- nearly a year -- a group of parishioners met to figure out: What do we do now? An obvious need was for priests to say Mass, so the parish secretary, a Jesuit who sings in the choir, and other volunteers set out to enlist men who would approve of progressive liturgy and inclusive language. Most Sundays, a priest was available, but once, when the visiting priest could be there for only one of the two Masses, a laywoman led a Communion service. The liturgy committee talked: Should there be only one Mass on Sundays, not two?

People tried to keep things humming, but by the spring of 2009, the parish council had to hire a pastoral associate to pick up the slack. Her job ranged from the simple to the special: seeing to the bread, wine and linens for the liturgies; pre-baptismal conferences with new parents; and, in general, keeping communication open among all the volunteers. To maintain neighborhood outreach, the social justice committee organized a Community Building Day: Men and women hit the streets to paint, repair fences and broken steps, and do simple carpentry work. Another team planned a major auction, to be held in the large auditorium of a nearby church; that event netted \$31,000, a financial godsend.

Gerry had 12 months of chemotherapy and the tumors didn't go away, but he wasn't dead either. He got a second opinion and learned the diagnosis was a mistake: He never had lung cancer, but a white blood cell disorder. Even without treatment, he could live with it for 20 or 30 years.

Buoyed by this news, he invited the new archbishop, Robert Carlson, to come to St. Cronan. Not all parishioners were happy with the invitation. Although Carlson had not been in St. Louis at the time of Ross, he represented the hierarchical church that had sent a known pedophile to them. Before the archbishop came to celebrate Eucharist, they wanted to clear the air.

On May 1, 2010, Gerry and a dozen parishioners met with the archbishop at his house. A member of the parish council described the experiences people had had with the temperamental Ross. "We saw his anger and his lack of cooperation, but that did not indicate to us that there was a deeper problem."

"He would ask kids to the rectory, then up to his room to have a beer," another woman said. One girl later told her mother that when she went into the private reconciliation room, he had her sit on his lap. "Children relate to the image of the Good Shepherd," the woman continued. "The Good Shepherd protects. Now the sacraments are destroyed for our children. My son said to me, 'Being a priest is worse than being a garbage collector.'" She began to cry.

"It goes beyond Joe Ross," a man said. "It's systemic." He said that a priest had abused him, and the check that the St. Louis archdiocese sent to reimburse him for therapy was drawn on a bank in Iowa. "That's a form of secrecy," he said, looking intently at the archbishop. "I pray you can be a cure for this disease."

"We've just scratched the surface," Carlson said. "We've begun a journey. What's the next step? I don't know. When I was ordained 40 years ago, I had all the answers."

?He was put in our parish without our full knowledge,? a woman said, ?and he was removed without explanation. That encouraged a feeling of mistrust.?

?The archdiocese did not handle this well,? Carlson said. ?On behalf of the church, I apologize.?

Six weeks later, when Carlson came to St. Cronan to celebrate Mass, he spoke privately with the family of a girl who said Ross had abused her when she was 10. Some people were unhappy that he had not apologized publicly; other parishioners thought that just having the archbishop come where no archbishop had come for years was in itself an apology.

Gerry had a positive take on the archbishop?s visit: ?Actions speak louder than words.?

At the barbecue after Mass, the archbishop drank beer from a bottle and stood in line at the makeshift buffet table in Gerry?s garage to fix his own plate from the array of grilled bratwurst, hamburgers and hot dogs, chocolate cake and cherry pie. No special place had been reserved for him; he found a seat and chatted with people around him. One man offered to join him in the evenings when the archbishop walks his dogs.

Gerry was smiling. ?All these years, I kept thinking, I just want some *harmony* here. Now I think we?ve turned a vital corner. St. Cronan?s is going to flourish. It?s a new day. The sun will shine again.?

[Joan Barthel is a freelance writer in St. Louis.]

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