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Woman in same-sex relationship denied Communion at mother's funeral

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NCR Today

GAITHERSBURG, Md. -- Just two days after Maryland's Legislature passed a bill to legalize same-sex marriage, a Gaithersburg priest reportedly denied Communion to Barbara Johnson, a former Catholic school teacher, during her mother's funeral Mass because Johnson is a lesbian living in a same-sex relationship.

In response to the controversy that erupted over Saturday's incident, the Archdiocese of Washington, in which the Gaithersburg parish is located, said, "Any issues regarding the suitability of an individual to receive Communion should be addressed by the priest with that person in a private, pastoral setting."

The priest who reportedly refused Communion to Johnson was Fr. Marcel Guarnizo, a parochial vicar at St. John Neumann Church in Gaithersburg, a city in Montgomery County about 25 miles northwest of Washington, D.C.

In an interview Monday with WUSA-TV, the Washington-area NBC affiliate, Johnson said she was "shocked" by the priest's denial of Communion when she approached to receive the sacrament near the end of her mother's funeral Mass.

Shortly after that, she said, when she came up to give a closing eulogy, Guarnizo left the altar; afterward, he declined to accompany her mother's body to a cemetery a few miles away in Aspen Hill. Johnson said she was told he had become ill.

Johnson expressed appreciation for the archdiocesan statement criticizing Guarnizo's action but said at some critical life moments, "we don't get a do-over."

The archdiocese said it "will handle this as a personnel issue" with Guarnizo. Archdiocesan spokeswoman Chieko Noguchi declined to comment beyond the archdiocese's prepared statement.

Last summer, Guarnizo led an anti-abortion rally with a prayer of exorcism outside the Germantown abortion clinic of LeRoy Carhart, who is known nationally for his willingness to conduct late-term abortions.

Here is the full text of the archdiocese's statement Monday regarding the funeral Mass incident:

In matters of faith and morals, the church has the responsibility of teaching and of bringing the light of the Gospel message to the circumstances of our day. When questions arise about whether or not an individual should present themselves for Communion, it is not the policy of the Archdiocese of Washington to publicly reprimand the person. Any issues regarding the suitability of an individual to receive Communion should be addressed by the priest with that person in a private, pastoral setting.

The archdiocese is looking into the incident at a funeral Mass that was celebrated by Fr. Marcel Guarnizo and will handle this as a personnel issue.

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[Jerry Filteau is *NCR*'s Washington correspondent.]

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