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Vatican reverses priest suspension, but it's complicated

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NCR Today

Although the Vatican has reversed the suspension of a Belleville, Ill., pastor, Fr. William Rowe, the priest's situation remains unchanged, at least for a while. Bishop Edward Braxton disciplined Rowe for his practice of adding personal reflections and inserting explanatory comments as he celebrated Mass. Until the issues are clarified, Rowe said he will continue his volunteer work at a Catholic school where he teaches religion and helps out in the lunchroom and in an after-school program. "I'm going to take the high road and just see what happens," Rowe, 73, told *NCR*.

In April, Braxton removed Rowe as pastor of the 400-member St. Mary's parish in Mt. Carmel, Ill., in the far eastern section of the Belleville diocese. Braxton took away Rowe's faculties to say Mass and administer sacraments. He also placed Rowe under suspension, which means no other bishop may receive him as an active priest. With the advice of a canon lawyer, Rowe appealed to the Vatican Congregation of the Clergy, which issued a decision in extraordinarily short order. In late September, Cardinal Mauro Piacenza, prefect of the congregation, agreed with Braxton on two counts, removing Rowe from the parish and withdrawing his faculties.

"The liturgical texts themselves are ... a rich source of spiritual nourishment for the faithful. Any departure from these liturgical norms and the approved liturgical texts constitutes an injury to ... the life of the Church," Piacenza said. But he did not uphold the suspension, saying Braxton had not gone through the proper canonical procedure.

Rowe said Braxton informed him he intends to appeal the reversal of the suspension. Until that appeal is settled, Rowe said he has no intention of seeking to be accepted in another diocese but would consider that option if Braxton's appeal is rejected.

Accompanying the Vatican decision was a letter to Rowe from Msgr. Antonio Nen, an undersecretary of the congregation, implying the suspension could be easily removed "when you shall have acknowledged your error and formally promise to dispose yourself to adhere to the rites and rubrics of the sacred liturgy set down by the lawful ecclesiastical authorities."

Rowe said he would have no problem apologizing "to anyone I may have offended, but I am determined to obey what Vatican II said about helping Sacred Scripture and the doctrines of the faith make sense to the people."

He said this is something he has been doing at Mass for about 20 years through his additions and occasional comments, so he is not likely to pledge to adhere rigidly to the rubrics. "It's the only way I can pray honestly," he said.

He believes, he said, that great numbers of priests routinely do what he does at Mass, at least to some extent, "so I feel kind of strange bearing the brunt on something that is so common."

Rowe is a retired Air Force chaplain who survives on his military pension and refuses to accept any salary from the diocese. He was reportedly well-liked by his parishioners in Mt. Carmel and respected by his fellow priests. His disagreement with the bishop over his improvisations during Mass reportedly goes back many years. It came to a head last fall when preparations were under way for the new Mass translation. Braxton told Belleville priests he would tolerate no deviations from the new format and personally informed Rowe he would be no exception. At the time, Rowe offered his resignation as pastor, but reconsidered when he heard nothing formal from Braxton for several months. Braxton formally ousted Rowe from the church in the spring and appointed a new pastor. Rowe complied and began his volunteer, non-ministerial work at a school in the area.

After his removal, the Southern Illinois Association of Priests issued a press release signed by 16 priest members, declaring full support for Rowe "in his efforts to continue his pastoral leadership."

The association, the release stated, "believes that the punishment for these slight additions to the ritual is irrationally disproportionate to the supposed crime." The priests said Rowe believes his "creative embellishments make the Eucharist more meaningful to the people and more honest to his own prayer." They cited his reputation among the laity for "service, humility, commitment, kindness and leadership."

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