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Gay Catholic barred from ministry still faithful, hopeful

by Jamie Manson

Grace on the Margins

When a debilitating back injury rendered Nicholas Coppola housebound and unable to work, he was desperate to restore his sense of self-worth. He found new sense of purpose at his local parish, St. Anthony's, a Jesuit apostolate in the Long Island, N.Y., town of Oceanside.

Coppola started his volunteer ministry by working with a group of parishioners whose circumstances he understood well: those who were too ill to leave home. As a eucharistic minister, he offered weekly visits to homebound members of his community, offering them Communion and companionship.

St. Anthony's, Coppola said, provided "a place to use the gifts God gave me."

His devotion to the parish continued to expand, and eventually he was serving as a catechist, lector, fundraiser and altar server. The entire time, Coppola was out to his parish as a gay man and regularly attended Mass with his partner, David.

When the couple married in October of last year, members of the parish participated in the celebration. The couple went on their honeymoon in January, returning in time for Mass on Martin Luther King Jr. Day weekend.

"We heard a great sermon about justice and equality," Coppola said. But right after the liturgy, he was summoned to pastor's office. Jesuit Fr. Nicholas Lombardi had some bad news.

He informed Coppola that Bishop William Murphy of the Rockville Centre diocese had received an anonymous letter complaining about his parish involvement.

"The problem is he is a homosexual. He was recently married to another man. He does not hide this or

keep it silent," the letter stated.

Bishop Robert Brennan, one of Rockville Centre's auxiliary bishops, faxed the letter to Lombardi, explaining, "While not on a witch hunt, I know it would be of concern to you if a catechist were, in fact, 'married' as described."

Lombardi "had no choice, he had to remove me," Coppola told the press outside the diocesan offices in Rockville Centre, later noting Lombardi took this action "with a heavy heart."

Coppola wrote to Murphy twice requesting a meeting, but received no response. He did meet with Brennan on two occasions. But in the end, the auxiliary bishop told him, "My hands are tied." The hierarchy considers same-sex marriage a public statement against official church teaching.

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Coppola went to the diocesan headquarters Thursday to deliver a petition with more than 18,500 signatures. The petition, created by Faithful America, asked Murphy to allow Coppola to resume his volunteering at St. Anthony's and to "make it clear that faithful gay and lesbian Catholics are welcome to participate fully in parish life in your diocese."

Francis McGuinness, associate risk manager for the Rockville Centre diocese, met Coppola in the vestibule of the diocesan building. McGuinness took the printed pages of signatures but did not invite Coppola inside, claiming that Murphy, Brennan, and the diocesan communications officer were not in the office. McGuinness told Coppola and members of the media he did not know where they were or when they would return.

Coppola asked McGuinness to pass on his invitation for further dialogue with the bishops.

Within hours of receiving the petition, the diocese issued a statement, saying in part, "The Catholic Church recognizes that all persons share equally in the dignity of being human ... This does not however justify the creation of a new definition for marriage."

"This is not an isolated incident," Ross Murray told the press gathered outside the diocesan offices. In his post as director of news and faith initiatives for GLAAD, an advocacy group for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community, Murray has heard numerous stories of Catholics "denied the sacraments and removed from jobs." It was GLAAD that first broke Coppola's story last week.

Also speaking briefly at the press conference was Dominic Sheahan-Stahl, a Catholic from Michigan who was disinvited from offering the keynote address at the graduation ceremony for Sacred Heart Academy, his alma mater. Bishop Joseph Cistone of the Saginaw diocese forced the school to rescind the invitation after Sheahan-Stahl posted pictures of his engagement to his longtime partner.

Sheahan-Stahl later addressed the graduating class at an alternative ceremony, called the "Graduation for All: Live Through Love," organized by the students of Sacred Heart Academy.

It's the same kind of support that Coppola has received as well.

"The best part about telling my story is that it has reminded me that I'm not alone," Coppola told the press Thursday. "I have been given so many words and signs of support and love by my fellow parishioners at St. Anthony's Parish.

"Today, I get to share a sign of that visible support with the diocese," he said. "I hope that today, Bishop Murphy and the diocese of Rockville Centre will understand the depth of support Catholics have for their lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender friends and family."

Coppola also wants the bishops to recognize that thousands of gays and lesbians are active in their parishes and call the Roman Catholic Church home.

"There is a tremendous disconnect between the hierarchy and the people in the pews" on the issue of the inclusion of gays and lesbians, he said.

When asked how he will feel if Murphy fails to respond to the petitions, Coppola insisted he will remain hopeful and continue to attend Mass at St. Anthony's.

"They can strip away my duties, but they cannot remove me from my community," he said.

In addition to the Faithful America petition, Coppola has started his own petition at change.org, encouraging Cardinal Timothy Dolan to act on his highly publicized statements to George Stephanopoulos on Easter morning. In the ABC News interview, Dolan said while the institutional church is "doing its best" to be pastoral to gays and lesbians, the hierarchy has "to listen to people."

In the petition, Coppola invites Dolan to "break bread ... so he can see that we're just like any other American Catholic family."

"Jesuits tell us that love is best expressed in deeds," Coppola said. "I think this could really soften hearts."

Such an event would not be without precedent. Last year, Austrian Cardinal Christoph Schönborn made headlines when he met with Florian Stangl, an openly gay man elected to his parish council by an overwhelming majority. When the pastor learned that Stangl was in a civil union with his male partner, he refused to ratify Stangl's election.

Stangl asked to speak to Cardinal Schönborn. To the surprise of many, the cardinal invited him and his partner to lunch. After the meeting, Schönborn said he was "deeply impressed by [Stangl's] faithful disposition, his humility, and the way in which he lives his commitment to service," and made it possible for him to stay on the council.

Coppola remains hopeful that he, too, will have an outcome that affirming, perhaps even healing.

"This hurts so many people," Coppola told me tearfully after the press event. "This is not about me. I'm concerned about our young people. We have a responsibility to the next generation, to making sure they not only have a place in our society, but a place in our faith and our houses of worship."

Coppola remains deeply committed to maintaining his own place in his parish. Given the love he has been shown by his parishioners and pastor, he believes leaving would only exacerbate the pain already being felt by the community.

"St. Anthony's was, is, and will continue to be a welcoming parish," he said.

[Jamie L. Manson received her Master of Divinity degree from Yale Divinity School, where she studied Catholic theology and sexual ethics. Her *NCR* columns have won numerous awards, most recently second prize for Commentary of the Year from Religion Newswriters (RNA).]

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