

California Newman community upset after bishop moves services to nearby parish

Monica Clark | Sep. 27, 2013
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A decision by Sacramento Bishop Jaime Soto to move liturgical services from the Newman Center chapel at the University of California here to the nearby St. James Parish has distressed a group of longtime members of the Newman community who fear they are being dismissed as partners in campus ministry.

Their dismay focuses on the bishop's announcement that Newman will no longer be the center of liturgical life on campus and that as nonstudents, they will not be allowed to assume any liturgical roles at the 5 p.m. Sunday Mass at St. James, which is to be led exclusively by UC Davis students. They say the decision works to minimize their involvement in other aspects of Newman life.

A group of university students involved at Newman also have expressed concern about the potential negative consequences of the bishop's decision.

In an Aug. 26 letter to the Newman community, Soto said he was "moving the Newman Center Ministry in a new direction," including eliminating the three Sunday Masses at the Newman Chapel and designating the 5 p.m. Sunday Mass in the parish as a student-led liturgy.

He said the change will help "transform student ministry" so it is "clearly focused on the resident and commuter students" at UC Davis and two other state universities in the diocese as called for in the diocese's new strategic plan.

Stunned by the decision, which they say did not include prior discussion with the Newman community, 58 adults signed a letter to Soto sent Sept. 11, three days after the final Sunday Mass was celebrated in the Newman chapel. The roles they shared with students at the Newman liturgies, they told the bishop, enabled the students to see that "their own faith is supported by our example -- intellectuals who are life-long dedicated Catholics."

They also reiterated their belief that the Newman Center is as an important bridge "between the academic world and the world of faith," one that provides a "Catholic voice to the entire University" while focusing on students with support for their intellectual and spiritual development. They asked the bishop to keep at least one Sunday Mass in the center's chapel.

In his letter last month, Soto said the chapel will become Newman Hall, "a center of pastoral activity for student events, programs and services." That change will take place Sunday, when he blesses the building before leading a procession from the center to St. James Church for the 5 p.m. liturgy.

Deacon Clark Goecker, who recently completed 10 years as Newman's director, told *NCR* the student-led liturgical ministries, from lector and eucharistic minister to choir member and sacristan, help prepare the students "to be leaders in parish life upon graduation."

This sentiment was echoed by Kevin Eckery, diocesan spokesperson: "Parishes are the centerpiece of Catholic experience. Newman Centers are not meant to be parishes. The students' experience at St. James will help transition them into parish life."

But some in the Newman community fear the university students will get lost in the 3,000-family parish that serves Catholics throughout the city.

Amanda Calzada, a UC Davis student and campus ambassador for Catholic Relief Services, also wrote a letter to Soto signed by 67 students, alumni and faculty.

"Yes, there are benefits in the Newman Center joining Saint James parish," she wrote, "but the students cannot simply dissolve into the large parish of non-student adult parishioners and families, for this majority is not as available to help and mentor students ... who know that the older adults who attend Newman Chapel Masses are trustworthy resources and living statements of Catholicism. It is this presence that encourages students to live as Catholics by choice because it illustrates genuine care for the students."

Goecker said the diocese no longer had a priest available to say three Sunday Masses at Newman, and the 170-seat chapel could not hold all the worshippers for a single liturgy. So it was practical, he said, to move the Mass to the parish, about six blocks away. Many of the students live closer to the church than to the Newman chapel, he added, and many of them already attend Mass at the parish. He also said a significant number of parishioners work at the university.

He said he sympathizes with those upset by the move. "I understand the hurt, especially in those who have made Newman their home."

Retired Professor Kevin Roddy, an active Newman member since 1967, said he believes strongly in Newman's mission on the university campus.

"The idea was not to promote a center in competition with the local parish, but one with a very specific role, embodying forms of worship and social activities appropriate to the intellectual nature of academia," he told *NCR*.

For example, he said, the UC Davis Newman Center had sponsored a Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults program specifically for students and academic staff in which issues of faith and modern scientific, social and humanistic developments were addressed.

"The same rite at St. James was much more traditional, with more emphasis on dogma. Students were free to choose either program," he said.

All parties to the situation agree on one thing: The appointment of Stan Cordero as associate director of Newman Center Ministry in the diocese is a positive development. Cordero, who spent 20 years as director of youth and young adult ministry in the diocese of Santa Rosa, moved to Sacramento in August.

He has met with many in the Newman community, both students and faculty, since the changes were announced. In their letter to Soto, the nonstudent Newman members said they supported Cordero and had offered him "our talents to further the mission of Newman."

Goecker said he believes that mission will be enhanced by the expected expansion of programs specifically for students. "We'll do more outside of Mass to bring them in," he said. "We expect to see far more activity with more space and a new director."

Newman activities during the university's Welcome Week included an on-campus Mass and an open house and ice cream social.

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