

What role did parish firings, pastor's temperament play in Bend controversy?

Dan Morris-Young | Feb. 28, 2014

Bend controversy

Bend, Ore.

Editor's note: This is Part 5 of a five-part series on the dispute between a pastor and his bishop in St. Francis of Assisi Parish in Bend, Ore. Removed from his post last October, Fr. James Radloff filed an appeal, but his request was denied by the Vatican, as the Congregation for Clergy sided with Baker, Ore., Bishop Liam Cary. Dated Jan. 31 and made public in Bend Feb. 14, the decision allows Cary to keep secret the reason for the ouster and permits a continued bar on Radloff's public ministry. According to Radloff's canonical adviser, Fr. Thomas Faucher, Radloff received a letter from Cary Wednesday, Feb. 26. It was dated Feb. 21. No details were available to the press. Read [Part 1 here](#)[1], [Part 2 here](#)[2], [Part 3 here](#)[3] and [Part 4 here](#)[4].

The personality of Fr. James Radloff as well as the termination of some St. Francis of Assisi Parish employees continue to be flashpoints in discussions of why the priest might have been removed as pastor.

Letters in Bend's major newspaper, *The Bulletin*, and posts on the [NCR website](#) [5] have alternatively chastised and lauded Radloff for staffing changes.

In separate interviews, two parishioners claimed Radloff terminated five employees with no warning not long after assuming reins of the parish, giving them an hour to vacate, in one case eliminating income for a family of six.

Others argue that staff changes were needed. Parishioner Donna Hodson said bluntly Feb. 8, "True, it's hard to let people go, but the people he let go needed to be let go. How do you fire someone kindly?"

Thirty-year parishioner Ken Roberts said, "Radloff was very impulsive and made a lot of decisions without regard for the consequences. He dismissed a lot of good people from the staff when he arrived which alienated many. Some of those are returning under the new regime which is very heartening and it is because Fr. Julian (Cassar) is reaching out to them and trying to heal our community which has been in some kind of turmoil for the last several years."

Cassar, who had been rector of St. Francis de Sales Cathedral in Baker City, Ore. was appointed to assume leadership of St. Francis of Assisi effective Oct. 17, 2013. While the cathedral is located in Baker City, the chancery is in Bend.

Dennis Peters became a member of a parish personnel board established early on by Radloff. The parishioner noted that Radloff insisted on the creation of job descriptions and performance plans for employees as well as volunteers "so it would be clear what was expected of them."

While Peters said he was not familiar with all of the staff changes, he said he was familiar with one case in which an employee was asked to improve. "I thought this person was given every chance, even having tenure extended. Corrections were made, but in the end this employee fell back into less than productive mode" and was terminated.

Fr. Thomas Faucher, canon lawyer for Radloff, told *NCR* that Radloff had "consulted extensively with Catholic Mutual Insurance Company and diocesan officials" about potential job terminations and "all the firings and the manner in which they were done were determined and confirmed by Catholic Mutual."

Peters said the personnel board was dissolved after Radloff's departure.

"I am definitely in Fr. Radloff's court," he said, "and I do not agree with the bishop's stance at all. It is not fair to the parishioners nor Fr. Radloff, whether you are pro or con. It is hard to be objective without knowing what really happened. I just wish we knew why that action was done and then we can move forward. I think that is the consensus of a lot of people."

A Eucharistic minister, Peters feels "there is just not the spark there that used to be" in the parish.

A pastor's personality

Asked what it was like to work with Radloff, Peters was complimentary, saying the priest was pleasant in workings of the personnel board, in Peters' ministry as a Eucharistic minister, and in one-on-one dealings.

Others, however, describe Radloff as short-fused, blunt, and unpredictable.

Even Radloff supporters concede the priest could have a hard edge. Some, like Hodson, viewed his occasional bluntness as "someone who wants to get it right."

Others were hurt by Radloff, some coming to prefer not to work with him.

Fr. Saul Alba-Infante, for example, requested a transfer from St. Francis. In a brief Feb. 6 phone call, Alba-Infante told *NCR* he found Radloff "very difficult to work with," calling his time there at times "a nightmare."

Now associate pastor at St. Mary Parish in Hood River, Ore., Alba-Infante said he would continue the interview Feb. 10, and that he would notify Baker, Ore., Bishop Liam Cary of his intent. "I am not afraid to talk," he said. Consequent phone messages and emails to the parish for Alba-Infante had not been acknowledged as of this story's filing.

(Several voice messages and emails requesting interviews and information from diocesan officials have not been acknowledged. Bishop's Assistant Peggy Buselli spoke briefly with *NCR* Feb. 21 and said she would alert Cary of an interview request. An email was sent to her listing about a dozen questions for Cary.)

Another priest who has known Radloff for most of his 20 years of ordination attributed part of the former pastor's "directness" to his being a Chicago native.

Fr. Leo Weckerle, a retired priest of the diocese who knows "Fr. Radloff very well," praised him as "extremely hard working, a great priest" but added, "He can be somewhat precocious at times and can think with this mouth, and that can get him into trouble."

One parishioner who insisted on anonymity told *NCR* Radloff had been "extraordinarily rude and condescending" when the two spoke about a communications misunderstanding, yet added: "In spite of my personal experiences, I hope Fr. Radloff will be allowed to function as a priest somewhere again in the future. It would be a very sad thing to lose a priest who clearly has the ability to connect with some people. I just wish he would work on being more empathetic, and more kind."

Asked about what one person called Radloff's "mercurial" nature, the priest's canon law adviser, Fr. Thomas Faucher, responded in a Feb. 20 email:

"Fr. Jim Radloff is a cancer survivor, with members of his family who have died of cancer. There is a well-known connection between cancer and stress. Fr. Radloff has had a counselor for many years whom he sees on a regular basis, helping him deal with the pressures and stress of his role as a parish priest. Periodic evaluations have shown that he has no ongoing psychological issues beyond the cancer-related stress problems. He has often said that he will continue to use counseling for his overall health."

In a Feb. 6 interview in Bend, long-time parishioner Wilma Hens said Radloff "could appear rude or arrogant when he was not coping well." She attributed the pastor's periodic irritability to myriad demands on him, notably when he was the only priest at the parish.

To underscore her point, Hens later forwarded a July 2012 email written to her by Radloff after she had made a request for his help on a project: "I cannot do it. I have not had a day off in over two months. I have up to seven emergency anointings a day on top of all the other responsibilities of being the only priest assigned to this parish. One anointing at 1:30 a.m. The stress is so bad it is harming my health. My migraine headaches have gotten so bad that the bishop is aware of them and he has stepped in to help me with Masses and confessions at the camps and at the parish. I have quit as director of youth ministry for the diocese and I am in serious discernment about my future ability to serve in this present assignment. I am sorry I have not been able to get back to you. This topic is beyond what I am capable of doing anything about at this time."

Parishioner Mike Cleavenger sees Radloff as "definitely passionate" more than temperamental. The retired law enforcement and child protective services professional countered that during six months of calling on fellow parishioners as part of his parish stewardship commitment, he had "heard a litany of complaints" from disenfranchised parishioners about Radloff predecessors' interpersonal and public behaviors.

"I have not heard from one person who feels this should have happened or needed to happen," he said at the time of Radloff's removal. "I am sure there are, but the ones who have talked to me are very devastated."

"The cloak of secrecy and the lack of transparency are very upsetting," he added.

Cleavenger and his wife are part of the informal group of Radloff supporters who have been meeting Friday evenings. Members have written numerous letters to Cary, to the U.S. papal nuncio in Washington, D.C., to the head of the U.S. bishops' conference, to St. Francis pastor Cassar, and even to Pope Francis.

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