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San Francisco's largest gay parish to get new pastors

by Nicholas Sciarappa by Thomas C. Fox

The newly appointed pastor of San Francisco's largest gay parish, Most Holy Redeemer Catholic Church in The Castro District, says he has no marching orders and comes only to "be present, to be pleasant, and to love of the people of God."

"I've been a city pastor [and] a rural pastor; I've worked on campuses," said Precious Blood Fr. Jack McClure, 69, who is currently retired and living in Liberty, Mo. "I love music and liturgy and think this will be a great match."

McClure will join Precious Blood Fr. Matthew Link, associate pastor at St. Hilary Catholic Parish in Tiburon, Calif., at the parish July 1. McClure and Link see themselves working as a pastoral team.

One of McClure's former parishioners at St. Charles Parish in Gladstone, Mo., Tony Lehr, described McClure as a "a very good listener and a good organizer."

"He would accept anyone. ... He could accommodate people who were very strict and people from the other side," Lehr said. "He could walk into a room of bikers or grandmothers and he could have a great, meaningful conversation with either group."

"He definitely was not a 'yes man' for the bishop," Lehr said. "He always put his parish first with whatever was thrown at him. He looked out for his parish well."

Shari Reilly worked with McClure at St. Thomas Aquinas Parish in Ames, Iowa, where she was the campus minister for social ministries and he was associate pastor. The parish serves Iowa State University.

"He has a breadth of experience that is unusual in a Catholic church," Reilly told *NCR*. "I would characterize Fr. Jack as a very open-minded person. A very compassionate person. He wants the church to

have wide-open doors. ... He has strong vision as far as direction in a new situation. He has a natural instinct for leadership."

After the San Francisco archdiocese announced its annual clergy appointments Wednesday, some local Catholics expressed concerns that Most Holy Redeemer's pastor, Brian Costello, who came to the parish in 2012, was being pushed out to bring in more conservative priests.

Costello says this is not the case. Rather, he said, he requested a move in August.

"It just didn't work out. I did the best I could. My best was just not good enough for a lot of people here," he said. "There are real challenges here, and the truth is I just didn't have the gifts to meet those challenges."

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"This is not the archbishop coming after me and bringing in some archconservatives from Kansas City, although I suspect some people might see it that way," Costello said.

Costello will become pastor of Our Lady of Loretto Catholic Church in Novato, Calif. "It's a larger parish and it has a school," he said. "I've been a teacher for 25 years and look forward to being in a parish with an elementary school."

Most Holy Redeemer parish, long known for its active gay ministries and rich liturgies, is a relatively small parish with some 400 members, although it draws Catholics each Sunday from around the Bay area.

It describes itself as "an inclusive Catholic community -- embracing all people of good faith ... regardless of their background, gender, race, social status or sexual orientation."

San Francisco's archbishop, Salvatore Cordileone, chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Subcommittee for the Promotion and Defense of Marriage, has visited the parish, met with staff and served food in its soup kitchen.

The Precious Blood Fathers have had an outreach to the LGBT community since 2007. They say the ministry was developed to foster dialogue, reconciliation and justice with people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender.

McClure said when Link learned in January that Most Holy Redeemer would be looking for a pastor, he approached McClure and suggested they apply as a team. Eventually, the men met with Auxiliary Bishop William Justice, who heads pastoral ministry for the archdiocese.

"That interview went well. We got along fine," McClure said. He said he is eager to work with Link and to live and work in San Francisco.

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