

NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: FLATIRON

## ***NEIGHBORHOOD REPORT: FLATIRON; A Liberal Parish, Not-So-Liberal Pastor, Trouble***

By Jesse McKinley

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When the Jesuit officials who run the Church of St. Francis Xavier on West 16th Street had to pick a new pastor last year, they were well aware that they would have to choose carefully. The parish has long been one of the city's most iconclastic, sponsoring adult education programs and support groups for people with H.I.V. and AIDS that reflect the liberal attitudes of many parishioners.

The new priest, the Rev. Louis P. Sogliuzzo, 52, was selected in part because of his experience at a parish in Berkeley, Calif., and at Jesuit retreats, Jesuit officials said.

"One of the reasons Lou was chosen was we didn't think he was conservative, not liturgically or theologically," said the Rev. Thomas Smith, assistant to the Jesuit Provincial, the Rev. Ken Gavin, the highest ranking Jesuit official in the New York region.

But now a growing chorus of complaints about Father Sogliuzzo's handling of the church has led Father Gavin to take the unusual step of appointing an outside observer who will make recommendations to Father Gavin early next year. Though the Jesuit order runs the parish, the Archdiocese of New York has final say over it. No one from the Archdiocese was available for comment.

"We're not 100 percent sure what the damage has been," Father Smith said. "There's been a lot of misinformation. I'm sure Lou has some made some mistakes. And I'm sure some parishioners have been pretty awful in what they've said." He added, "It's just a

really terrible situation."

The conflict comes at a time when some in the Xavier community -- and the Roman Catholic Church as a whole -- see a push toward stricter adherence to tradition.

For example, one of the early points of contention at Xavier was Father Sogliuzzo's policy of forbidding lay people to speak from the pulpit on Sundays, which had been allowed in the past.

Father Sogliuzzo did not return repeated calls for comment last week, but addressed this issue in an interview last month.

"Some people seem to think I'm sort of mole sent by the cardinal to drag them back to the 1950's," he said with a laugh. "But we do have a worship tradition of over 2,000 years and a dignity to uphold."

Father Sogliuzzo's critics are being cautious about how they present their case. In a letter signed by 30 church members that appeared Nov. 6 in Catholic New York, a weekly published by the Archdiocese, the priest's critics emphasized that Xavier is not "a radical parish gone out of control."

Those involved in the dispute over Father Sogliuzzo's leadership said the complaints to Jesuit authorities were made last month, after the priest asked Sister Honora Nicholson, a popular nun who had overseen the church's adult conversion program, to resign. On Oct. 31, Tom Sanger, a pastoral associate, resigned to protest her ouster.

In perhaps the most public display of discontent, some 800 parishioners filled the pews on Oct. 26 for a meeting with Father Sogliuzzo. But several people who were there said that what had started out as a civil discussion eventually led to shouting.

"I thought it was going to be a dialogue," said Michael T. Hewitt, a lawyer. "There was this expectation there would be answers, but there weren't."

In a letter to the parish in last Sunday's church bulletin, Father Sogliuzzo acknowledged that the problems facing the congregation were serious.

"There is much work for all of us," the priest wrote. "But this work is more about the future that God holds for us than about the past out of which we are trying to extricate ourselves." JESSE MCKINLEY