

## Traditions Collide in a Chelsea Parish

By Jesse McKinley

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In the 1940's, a priest at the Church of St. Francis Xavier in Chelsea won fame with his crusade against mob control of the city's waterfront. In the 1980's, another Xavier priest risked formal censure by criticizing the Archdiocese's treatment of gay Catholics.

Now, Xavier faces a new battle, but this time it is an internal struggle, as the newest pastor and some of his parishioners clash over the church's progressive tradition and the question of who should set the parish's agenda.

The dissident parishioners criticize the pastor as heavy-handed and autocratic, accusing him of trying to reverse a trend toward giving parishioners a greater voice in church affairs. And they are outraged at his dismissal of a popular nun, whose leading role in church services was lauded by many parishioners but upset some of the church's more traditional members. The dissidents have called on the pastor, the Rev. Louis P. Sogliuzzo, to resign.

"We want him to go," said Michael T. Hewitt, a leading opponent. "There's no question that that's a must for things to move forward at this church."

The pastor's supporters, who are predominantly more traditional Roman Catholics, see Father Sogliuzzo's actions as an attempt to restore some order and decorum to the church's mission of worship and service.

Father Sogliuzzo declined to comment for this article, but in an interview in October he said: "The issue is really this: Is there room for a pastor at this church? There are expectations that there's a certain egalitarianism here, and that's good and I respect that."

But the church is not a democracy.'

Theological scholars say conflicts like the one at St. Francis Xavier are becoming more common as Catholics raised after Vatican II and the social revolutions of the 1960's collide with those who support the recent conservative tilt in the church.

Peter J. Awn, professor of religion at Columbia University and a former Jesuit priest, said that Xavier is a prime battleground because of its Chelsea locale, which is home to a diverse mix of gay men, young professionals and a more traditionally conservative Latino and Eastern European population. He said Father Sogliuzzo's appointment may have been an attempt to bring an independent-minded parish more in line with church hierarchy. "They know exactly who they were putting in," Professor Awn said.

The Jesuit officials who run Xavier are so concerned about the rift that in November they took the rare step of naming a special observer to evaluate the problem. He is expected to report back to his superiors with recommendations this month. (While the church is under the general authority of the Archdiocese, it is run directly by the Jesuit order, which operates a number of parish churches throughout the country.)

The feud erupted as the church, at 30 West 16th Street, was celebrating its 150th anniversary -- a history marked by crusades and progressive stances that today's parishioners cite with pride. In 1945, the Rev. John M. Corridan took up the fight against organized crime on the city's piers, a mission that earned him the nickname "the waterfront priest" and a cinematic gloss in the film "On the Waterfront" (as played by Karl Malden).

Some 42 years later, a Xavier pastor, the Rev. Michael E. Donahue, openly criticized the Archdiocese's decision in 1987 to ban a Mass for homosexual Catholics at the church. He lost that battle, but the church today maintains an open acceptance of gay worshipers and runs AIDS support groups.

Both Father Sogliuzzo's supporters and his detractors say they were impressed by the pastor's intellect and eloquence when he took over the parish in October 1996. "I think Lou is very intelligent and very caring," said Brian Hamilton, a therapist and an opponent of the pastor, "but I think he's made a couple of very bad mistakes."

Both sides also agree that Father Sogliuzzo, who had previously run a Jesuit retreat program in Morristown, N.J., but never a parish, arrived at a church whose liturgical customs diverged from the norm. During Sunday Mass, for example, Sister Honora Nicholson had periodically been allowed to speak from the altar on spiritual issues after the priest's homily. Her speeches, called "reflections," were extremely popular, but her

participation disturbed some parishioners who were used to a standard Catholic liturgy.

Soon after his appointment, Father Sogliuzzo put an end to Sister Nicholson's reflections, a decision that alienated even some of the most devout parishioners.

"Honora is an extraordinarily gifted woman," said Sister Mary Claire Ryan, another nun who worships at St. Francis Xavier. "She led because she listened to the people and prayed with the people."

Then, in June, a parishioner wrote to Father Sogliuzzo questioning his handling of the church's finances. In a letter written in response, the pastor called the parishioner "insensitive and disrespectful" and suggested that the writer find another church.

Critics said the two incidents indicated an authoritarian leadership style that was not in keeping with Xavier's traditions. "This was collaborative ministry," said Thomas Sanger, a pastoral assistant at the church who resigned in November. "Lou wanted something else."

For his part, Father Sogliuzzo expressed concern about the spread of "gossip and accusations" and said a "lack of trust" between him and some members of the staff was hurting the church. In October, after several attempts at reconciliation, he asked for Sister Nicholson's resignation.

A week later, more than 200 angry parishioners gathered at a nearby church and voted to ask for Father Sogliuzzo's resignation. Another meeting called by Father Sogliuzzo and attended by about 900 people degenerated into a shouting match in the pews after the pastor left without responding to questions.

A majority of the nine-member Pastoral Council, the church's main advisory group, also called for Father Sogliuzzo's resignation.

"We were getting bombarded with letters and phone calls," said the Rev. Thomas Smith, the assistant to the Rev. Kenneth Gavin, the Provincial in charge of Jesuits in the region. "And the one common thread was, 'Please intervene and help us somehow.' "

Father Smith said that many of the staff conflicts faced by Father Sogliuzzo predated his tenure at the church. The previous pastor, the Rev. Vincent Sullivan, served only two years at the church before requesting a transfer.

"They didn't want to allow him to be a pastor in the traditional sense," Father Smith said of Father Sullivan. "Father Lou went in and found the same situation."

Angie Cruz, the former chairwoman of the Pastoral Council who resigned in early

November, said she believes there is a silent majority that supports Father Sogliuzzo. "It seemed to be a very inclusive church, but somehow we don't want to include the pastor," she said. "I believe in collaboration but I also believe in leadership."

Joseph Zwilling, a spokesman for the New York Archdiocese, said that John Cardinal O'Connor had approved Father Sogliuzzo's appointment but that the diocese was taking a "hands-off approach" to the situation at St. Francis Xavier. "We want to see if the situation can be resolved on a more local level," Mr. Zwilling said.

Despite the problems, the church is filled to capacity every Sunday by Catholics drawn to the church's warm nave and welcoming congregation. But while some drop money in the collection baskets and greet Father Sogliuzzo at the church's door after Mass, others withhold their donations and assemble at the bottom of the church stairs to talk of their hope for the new year: that Father Sogliuzzo will find another home.

Despite the confusion at the church, many say that some good may well come out of it. "It has been a very dark time, and I've been very depressed," said Dr. Jacqueline C. Perez, an internist and a member of the church choir. "But only recently I'm beginning to see that healing is going on. As angry and hurt as people are, they are still coming to sing."

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