

Pastor Resigns From a Divided Chelsea Parish

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The pastor of a Roman Catholic church in Chelsea who became the focus of a bitter parish conflict by seeking to mute some of its independent-minded, progressive traditions resigned yesterday after 15 months, likening himself to a man who had caught a bus for Detroit but wound up in Kansas City.

"Caught in division after division, this community has witnessed its energy and its spirit being sapped of strength," the Rev. Louis P. Sogliuzzo said in a letter to parishioners of the Church of St. Francis Xavier, at 30 West 16th Street. "I have become convinced that my leaving, drastic as this step might seem, is necessary in order to call this community back to living as one."

The 150-year-old, Jesuit-run church has long been known for progressive stances. Its leaders fought mob control of the waterfront in the 1940's and criticized the archdiocese's ban on Masses for gay Catholics in the 1980's. Today, it accepts gay worshipers, runs AIDS support groups and has often diverged from liturgical norms; a popular nun, for example, was allowed to speak occasionally from the altar at Masses after the priest's homily.

After his appointment in October 1996, Father Sogliuzzo put an end to the occasional addresses of the nun, Sister Honora Nicholson, and later asked for her resignation. Last June, after a parishioner questioned his handling of the church's finances, he called the parishioner "insensitive and disrespectful" and suggested that he find another church.

The pastor's supporters saw his actions as an effort to restore order and decorum to the church's mission of worship and service. But critics called him autocratic and out of step

with the parish's independent traditions. Some began withholding weekly contributions, and many, including a majority of the nine-member pastoral council, the church's main advisory group, called for his resignation.

Father Sogliuzzo, expressing concern about "gossip" and "lack of trust," said in an interview in October: "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."

In some ways, the conflict at St. Francis Xavier appeared to reflect deeper divisions of American Catholics, many of whom have challenged conservative teachings of Rome on liturgical matters and on abortion, birth control, homosexuality, the ordination of women, the celibacy of priests and other issues.

Yesterday, the New York Province of the Society of Jesus named the Rev. Edward J. Coughlin, a retreat director in Rhinebeck, N.Y., as administrator of St. Francis. Father Sogliuzzo thanked supporters in a bulletin distributed at Masses, but acknowledged that the conflict had become destructive. He alluded to "these past, terribly painful months" and said he had stepped down.

"Harry Emerson Fosdick tells the story of a man who boarded a bus with the full intention and desire of going to Detroit," he said. "But when he arrived at the destination, he found himself not in Detroit but in Kansas City. He had caught the wrong bus. It seems to me that that has been our story this past year. People on the whole desire good things and find themselves somewhere else altogether."

Kathy Duffy, a parishioner for many years who had opposed Father Sogliuzzo, said last night that his resignation "was a necessary step for the parish to come back together," and added, "It's sad that it had to happen, but we're hopeful that we can move forward now, and perhaps the community is better off for the experience of knowing what they almost lost."

She said that the "Friends of Xavier Fund," into which disgruntled parishioners had placed their withheld contributions, totaled \$22,000, and that it would soon be turned over to the church.

Ms. Duffy, a former staff worker at the church, said that most parishioners knew very little about Father Coughlin, who is to succeed Father Sogliuzzo as administrator, but not as pastor, next Sunday, in what is expected to be a temporary appointment pending the selection of a new pastor.

But Ms. Duffy said that she and other members of the parish had met Father Coughlin at

retreats at the Lindwood Spirituality Center in Rhinebeck. "He's a nice guy, laid-back, a good listener," she said. "Hopefully we'll listen and he'll listen. We expect a better relationship."

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