

# Two noted Jesuit parishes under scrutiny: spats involve new pastor, annoyed cardinal.

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NEW YORK--Outside investigators have been called in to deal with conflicts at two of the nation's most vibrant and progressive Jesuit,run parishes: the 150-year-old St. Francis Xavier in the Chelsea district of lower Manhattan and the 210-year-old Holy Trinity in the Georgetown district of Washington.

Although the conflicts are different --one internal, pitting some vocal and outspoken parishioners against a new pastor; the other external, pitting archdiocesan officials against parish leaders --they have in common colliding visions of church causing serious disruptions in normal parish operations.

At St. Francis Xavier the outside investigator is Jesuit Fr. Gerry Blaszczak, a "visitor" in Jesuit lingo, who arrived in mid-November for a seven-week stay. His charge is to seek resolution to an impasse between Jesuit Fr. Louis Sogliuzzo, a first-time pastor, and contentious members of his flock. In recent weeks, contributions have dwindled to less than half the \$8,300 a week required to meet the parish budget.

At Holy Trinity, investigators are three archdiocesan officials commissioned by Cardinal James Hickey to ensure that the parish is in compliance with church teaching and liturgical norms. The officials, including the archdiocesan vicar general, Bishop William Lori, and the chancellor, Msgr. Bernard Gerhardt, conducted a series of interviews on Nov. 19, 20 and 21 with priests, paid staff members and parish volunteers. The investigation, planned by Hickey since early June, was a follow-up to a nine-page letter citing deviations.

Hickey sent the letter to Holy Trinity's pastor, Jesuit Fr. Lawrence Madden, on June 9, directing him to make "systematic efforts to correct the doctrinal, disciplinary and pastoral problems cited here." Madden declined to speak with NCR.

The recent interviews at Holy Trinity were tape-recorded by officials conducting the investigation. The officials required those they interviewed to take an oath promising to give truthful testimony.

An NCR telephone call to Hickey's office produced no response.

The story of events at the two parishes, derived from documents and interviews, is as follows:

Trouble brewing at the New York church between Sogliuzzo, parishioners and members of the parish staff became public in October after Sogliuzzo asked a key staff member, Mercy Sr. Honora Nicholson, to resign from her post, effective Dec. 31.

Emergency meetings

Nicholson, who headed the parish programs dealing with Christian initiation and AIDS spiritual support, refused to resign and was fired in early October. Parishioners held a series of emergency meetings in October and November. Hundreds attended a heated parish-wide meeting on Oct. 26, where many parishioners called for the pastor's resignation and few spoke in his support. NCR was unable to reach Sogliuzzo by press time.

Jesuits have found themselves on different sides at times during the dispute. According to a statement released in September by Jesuit Fr. John Buicki, long-time staff member, Sogliuzzo told Bucki that that he intended to petition Jesuit superiors to have Bucki reassigned. In his statement, Bucki said Sogliuzzo subsequently expressed hope that they could work together.

Another Jesuit, Fr. William P. Cain, spoke in defense of Nicholson, the fired staff member, at the Oct. 26 meeting, according to a recent article in the archdiocesan newspaper Catholic New York. Cain is a script writer for "Nothing Sacred," the ABC television series about a Catholic parish.

Opponents have denounced Sogliuzzo for suggesting that a member of the parish find "another spiritual home" after she complained about parish finances. They also complained that parish money was being spent without the finance committee's approval and that Sogliuzzo had placed another staff member, Tom Sanger, on probation. Sanger, who oversees adult education, Hispanic ministry and social concerns, has resigned effective Dec. 31. Another staff member, Kathy Duffy, has also resigned.

"Actually, what started this is someone told us 'We are the church,'" Lucy Knopf, a member of an ad hoc media committee convened since the troubles began, told NCR. "We take that seriously."

Sogliuzzo told The New York Times that parishioners' mistrust was "due to an anti-authoritarian bent at the parish. The issue is really this," he said. "Is there room for a pastor at this church?" Sogliuzzo added that, while he respected "a certain egalitarianism" operating in the parish, "the church is not a democracy."

Although the opposition to Sogliuzzo is strong and vocal, a source who asked to remain anonymous said the pastor has a few outspoken supporters who feel he is being viciously attacked. Additionally, the source said, a significant number of parishioners are concerned about Sogliuzzo's style but want to be sure he is treated fairly.

Maureen Crowe, a parish council member, said she regards Sogliuzzo as "a very fair person and a very good person" who has been misjudged. Crowe said she thinks staff problems at Xavier predate Sogliuzzo's arrival and needed to be confronted. "I think he has to be given a chance," she said. "I think he's what we need. My concern is the damage done to the church and the community" by the conflict.

Those opposing the pastor have urged parishioners to temporarily withhold donations to the parish. Mike Hewitt, a lawyer and member of the media committee, said efforts are underway to set up an escrow account.

The church is widely known for inclusiveness and social outreach and, according to leaders, has grown considerably in the past couple of years. The 800 to 900 who regularly attend Sunday Masses include feminists, gays and lesbians and divorced Catholics who say they have felt welcome at the church.

Parish outreach includes a shelter for homeless people. Language is inclusive and women have been invited to preach. (After a process of "theological discernment," that practice was stopped just before Sogliuzzo arrived a year ago, parishioners said, in an effort to bring the parish in conformity to canonical norms. They said women still give "reflections" after the homily.)

Hewitt said the conflict had been misrepresented in the press as a liberal-conservative fight. He and others said the deeper issue is concern for the way people have been treated, a struggle over justice for Nicholson, and Sogliuzzo's apparent discomfort with the active roles laity generally assume in church administration.

Andrew Pessari said he was among parishioners who had been concerned from the time Sogliuzzo arrived on the scene in August 1996 that the new pastor intended to change the parish.

### Collections drop

In recent weeks, collections have been down considerably from the budgeted weekly amount. For example, on Nov. 16, the parish took in \$3,700 compared to a budgeted amount of \$8,300, according to the parish bulletin.

In response to appeals from parishioners for help, Jesuit Fr. Kenneth J. Gavin, provincial for the Society of Jesus in New York, appointed Blaszczyk to work with parishioners, staff, committee members and Sogliuzzo to seek resolution. It is an intervention that Gavin's assistant described as "very unusual." Blaszczyk arrived at the parish in mid-November and is expected to remain through the end of the year.

In a telephone interview with NCR, Fr. Thomas Smith, the provincial's executive assistant, said, "We were getting many requests for the provincial to somehow intervene to resolve the situation, and this was Fr. Gavin's way of answering that request."

Although there have been violations of liturgical norms at the parish--for example, previously allowing women to preach--Gavin and a spokesman for the New York archdiocese said independently that Sogliuzzo had not been given directives to bring the parish into line. "Fr. Lou Sogliuzzo was assigned to be the pastor at Xavier parish, and to be the best pastor he could possibly be," Gavin told NCR. "There was no hidden agenda."

Joseph Zwilling, archdiocesan spokesman, said he knew of no specific directives to Sogliuzzo regarding Xavier. "It's assumed that if you're going to be a pastor, you're going to follow the rules," he said.

Smith said other Jesuits had declined the position at Xavier before Sogliuzzo had agreed to take it. "A number of them felt they not capable of going into that kind of pastoral situation," Smith said. "Xavier is known to be a very progressive parish. It's run in a different way from a lot of other parishes."

Nicholson, the staff member who was fired, said she had been "the most outspoken staff person" in confronting Sogliuzzo when she disagreed with his decisions or style. "It was a very difficult year," she said.

"One of the things I feel is an issue here is that priests need to be prepared for this kind of ministry," she said. "Collaborative style is not something people are trained for. It's a whole new model. We can't just assume that people are trained to do that." Sogliuzzo "larks a great line," she said. "If you

were to ask him, 'Do you believe in collaboration,' he would say 'Absolutely,' but he doesn't know how to do it."

Nicholson said she had appealed her dismissal to an archdiocesan grievance board and had received word that her case would be heard.

At Holy Trinity church in Georgetown, a large, diverse and vibrant parish that has 4,000 members and regularly draws large crowds to Saturday evening and Sunday Masses, the conflicts are with the hierarchy.

The influential church, the subject of a 1996 book *Catholics in Crisis* by Jim Naughton, is widely known to be progressive, both liturgically and socially. The parish regularly contributes 10 percent of ordinary income to social causes. (Last year, after a major brouhaha? parish leaders decided to exclude tithing income from a \$5 million capital campaign for building expansion. Some parishioners left because of the decision.) The parish includes a contingent of staunch conservatives who monitor parish activities.

Hickey's nine-page letter of June 9, prompted by reports on the parish, refers to conversations going back to February between the pastor and archdiocesan officials related to "problematic" events on Unity day in January. At ecumenical services to mark that event, two Protestant ministers were allowed to distribute and receive Communion. Madden, as pastor? along with two other priests who conducted the service--Jesuit Frs. Paul J. McCarren and Douglas F. Peduti--were required to make a public apology, printed in the parish bulletin, for what Hickey described as a "serious breach of the church's Eucharistic faith and discipline."

Holy Trinity "is a vital and vibrant parish community," Hickey wrote. "I recognize its many strengths in the areas of liturgy, music, preaching, social concerns and education" as well as the "creativity, enthusiasm and generosity" of its people. "I'm sure you will agree," he said, "a healthy parish is rooted firmly in the life of the larger church.... Dissent is neither an authentic theological source nor a font of spirituality."

Hickey said Holy Trinity is not to be considered an "experimental" parish. "I do not sanction an 'elastic' approach to church discipline, namely small incremental violations of church discipline that aim at a gradual shift in church praxis," he wrote. He went on to denounce a series of "abuses." Among them, he said, were the 1997 Ash Wednesday service, presided over by a woman who also preached; lay presiders at reconciliation services; lay persons preaching at Mass; modifying scripture readings, Mass texts and hymns texts to make them more gender inclusive; and drawing readings from the more gender-neutral Canadian lectionary instead of the official U.S. lectionary. Hickey said the practice of allowing laity to preach at vespers services was also to stop, even though it is not specifically forbidden by church teaching.

Citing "vocal dissent against the church's teaching ... on the ordination of women in the parish, Hickey urged Madden to strive to help parishioners accept the church's "authentic and authoritative teaching."

Hickey told Madden in his letter that he plans to review the report of the official visitors and then, in early 1998, "make a determination about the future leadership needs" of the parish, "both clerical and lay. If the problems cited here are not effectively addressed, I am prepared to bring about necessary changes, but I pray that will not be necessary," he said.

Interviews with staff and active parishioners, including those who head various committees, were just

ending as NCR went to press. Those involved in the process who spoke to NCR said the tape recordings and oath-taking were generally regarded to be harassment and intimidation.

### Unusual methods

Fr. James Coriden, canon lawyer in Washington? said the only model for such a methodology might be the marriage tribunal, where conversations are sometimes taped and people giving testimony are asked to take an oath. The methods struck him as "highly unusual" in the context of a parish dispute. "I'm puzzled by it," he said.

"The bishop has a responsibility to make a pastoral visitation once every five years, and there aren't any elaborate guidelines for that," Coriden said. "He has a wide range of authority to investigate whatever he thinks needs investigating. The canons do say he can bring others with him. But it says nothing about tape recorded conversations or oaths or anything of that sort."

Bill Breidenbach, an active parishioner who was not interviewed by church officials although he had asked to be, said, "I'm concerned and hopeful. Our pastor's view is that all the cardinal required in his letter has been done. The parish is in conformity with the wishes of the cardinal. We expect things will come out all right, and Bishop Lori and the cardinal will not have any problem with us." He added: "Our pastor is great. Our priests are great. Many people would be very upset if the bishop were to throw our pastor out."

Breidenbach said only a handful of Holy Trinity parishioners are conservatives. One of those, Terrence J. Boyle, a retired lawyer, operates a Web site detailing complaints about Holy Trinity that go back more than two decades. Boyle said in a telephone interview that he attends a daily Tridentine Mass and goes to Holy Trinity on Sundays.

Despite his concerns about the parish, Boyle says on his Internet home page that he hopes archdiocesan officials will tread lightly. "Holy Trinity Parish is extraordinary and even its strongest critics hope and pray that whatever steps are taken by the archdiocese to correct its wrongs (and there are many things wrong) will be ... carried out so as not to demoralize the good Catholics of this parish or diminish the wonderful outpouring of Christian charity," he wrote.

"Archdiocesan officials should also not assume that even the conservative and traditional parishioners at Holy Trinity would necessarily side with chancery officials in a dispute with parish leadership. Many at Holy Trinity may feel their parish leadership to be gravely wrong, but still feel that it is THEIR parish's leadership."

Web sites exist dealing with the situation at each church. For St. Francis Xavier:  
[members.aol.com/sfxinnyc/rift.html](http://members.aol.com/sfxinnyc/rift.html)

For Holy Trinity: [www.the-hermes.net/tboyle/University/H\\_T\\_Conflict.html](http://www.the-hermes.net/tboyle/University/H_T_Conflict.html)